

For Kevin Spacey, a Reviled Lobbyist Is No Mere Villain - New York Times

Written by Administrator
Wednesday, 15 December 2010 17:28 -

But in the spring of 2009 the director [George Hickenlooper](#) ("[Factory Girl](#)") wrote on his Facebook page that

[Kevin Spacey](#) would be the right actor to play the disgraced lobbyist [Jack Abramoff](#) in his new film, "[Casino Jack.](#)"

A mutual friend saw that post and pointed it out to Dana Brunetti, Mr. Spacey's producing partner, via a Facebook message.

"So I friended George," Mr. Brunetti said. "And he friended me back, and we started talking back and forth." They looped in Mr. Spacey, and Mr. Hickenlooper eventually flew to London to see him. He got the part.

"I think it probably would've been somebody else if that connection hadn't been made and George hadn't posted that status update," Mr. Brunetti said. "Casino Jack" opens Friday in New York and Los Angeles.

Mr. Spacey and Mr. Brunetti, partners in [the production company Trigger Street](#) , have been telling that Facebook casting story with the caveat that, oh yes, they helped produce one of this season's major awards contenders, "The Social Network," about the founding of Facebook.

"The irony of that is not lost on me," Mr. Spacey said over lunch recently in a Midtown restaurant, though it's less irony, perhaps, than good fortune. On Tuesday he was nominated for a Golden Globe as best actor in a comedy or musical for "Casino Jack." There's scarcely any singing, but he does play Mr. Abramoff as a larger-than-life figure whose intensity veers from the moralizing to the comical.

"We didn't want to make a movie that was only interesting to people in the Beltway," Mr. Spacey said. "George always said, 'I don't want to make a boring movie about Washington, I want to make "[Goodfellas](#)" in D.C.' "

To prepare, Mr. Spacey and Mr. Hickenlooper spent six hours with Mr. Abramoff — nicknamed "Casino Jack" for the multimillion-dollar dealings with Indian casinos that eventually led to his downfall — at a federal penitentiary in Cumberland, Md. "He was very open,

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answered lots and lots of questions,” Mr. Spacey said. “The scope of the conversation was very broad — very charming, very funny. I could absolutely understand how he was as successful as he was.”

In Mr. Spacey’s characterization Mr. Abramoff is less a villain than an exemplar of the corrupt Washington lobbying system. “I think he was portrayed as a villain and did some bad things,” Mr. Spacey said. “Maybe nobody did it as big as he did it because he was quite a personality.” But, he added, “if you’re in an industry in which this is acceptable behavior — we’re selling votes, we’re selling access — I think there is a level of hypocrisy that we tried to illustrate.”

That comes through in a scene late in the film that imagines what would have happened if Mr. Abramoff had told the unvarnished truth to a panel of senators, many of whom he’d also lobbied for, investigating him. Mr. Spacey said he and Mr. Hickenlooper got the idea after their prison visit, when Mr. Abramoff told them, “If I had known I was going to go to jail, I would have never taken the Fifth.”

Mr. Spacey’s promotion of the film — not to be confused with [Alex Gibney](#)’s documentary, “[Casino Jack and the United States of Money](#)” — took on added importance when [Mr. Hickenlooper died unexpectedly](#) in October at the age of 47.

“It’s just incredibly sad,” Mr. Spacey said.

“If you look at his career,” he added, “he absolutely only did things he absolutely believed in. He wasn’t just trying to get credits, and as a result he didn’t work as often as some other directors, and that’s the sad thing, is that this movie, people were really responding to and really starting to talk about George as a filmmaker in ways that I don’t think had happened before for him. And I know he died knowing that.”

Mr. Spacey said that he and Mr. Hickenlooper had hoped to do other projects together, and that they had worked closely on “Casino Jack,” which Mr. Brunetti also produced.

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Mr. Spacey suggested [Jon Lovitz](#) for the part of an unscrupulous mattress salesman turned casino financier. The men have known each other for more than 25 years, since Mr. Spacey was a student at Juilliard, and Mr. Lovitz was starting out as a comedian. Both were regulars at an Upper West Side restaurant, Café Central, that was an entertainment industry hangout. (

[Bruce Willis](#)

and

[John Goodman](#)

were the bartenders, Mr. Spacey said.) Though they'd never worked together before, Mr. Spacey does a pitch-perfect impression of Mr. Lovitz, and in the film he imitates

[Ronald Reagan](#)

,
[Walter Matthau](#)

,
[Bill Clinton](#)

and Dolph Lundgren, though only the latter was taken from Mr. Abramoff's repertory.

"After the second take I just said, 'Well, you're the best actor I've ever worked with,'" Mr. Lovitz said in a telephone interview. "It's like playing tennis with someone better than you: they feed you the ball perfect."

Mr. Spacey, 51, started out as a stand-up, and in person he's still effortlessly funny, articulate and slightly profane. For nearly the past decade, he has led [the Old Vic Theater in London](#), where he lives. He took the job after he won his second Academy Award, for

["American Beauty,"](#)

in 2000.

In 1999 he did a much-praised run as Hickey in ["The Iceman Cometh"](#) on Broadway and the West End, and it reinvigorated his passion for the stage. "I just thought, I've basically been focused on this, seeing if I could carve out a film career for myself for about 12 years," Mr. Spacey said. "And the truth is it went better than I could have hoped. But I thought, I don't think I want to chase this dream for another 10 years."

His attention-getting tenure at the Old Vic, where he is artistic director, [has drawn mixed reviews](#) but produced

successes like

["The Philadelphia Story"](#)

in 2005 and

[Neil Simon](#)

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's "

[Prisoner of Second Avenue](#)

" this summer. (His position there officially began in 2004, but Mr. Spacey said he began working with the theater as a consultant and fund-raiser in 2000.) Next year he is to play Richard III in a production directed by

[Sam Mendes](#)

for the Bridge Project, the popular collaboration between the Old Vic and the

[Brooklyn Academy of Music](#)

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Meanwhile Mr. Spacey has been choosy about his film roles, doing mostly small parts (with the exception of Lex Luthor in ["Superman Returns"](#)) as Mr. Brunetti runs Trigger Street (["21,"](#) "Recount" on

[HBO](#)

). Mr. Spacey said "Casino Jack" appealed to him in part because he is a politics buff; during the interview he was gleeful about taping

[an appearance on Bill O'Reilly's program on Fox News](#)

that day.

The timing and experience of "Casino Jack" seem to have rekindled his enthusiasm for more film projects. Though in a 2006 interview Mr. Spacey said he planned to stay in the job at the Old Vic for another decade, he now says this film represents his return to Hollywood.

"I'll believe it when I see it," Mr. Brunetti said.

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