

Movie review: 'Casino Jack' - Los Angeles Times

Written by Administrator

Thursday, 16 December 2010 17:32 -

Maybe in a few years the high-flying machinations of notorious Washington puppet-master [Jack Abramoff](#) and Michael Scanlon, his partner in crime, will be funny. But even with [Kevin Spacey](#) trying his carnival barker hardest in "[Casino Jack](#)," it still feels too painfully close to find much humor in Abramoff's now legendary, and illegal, lobbying efforts.

If a fast-talking manipulator of political egos wasn't hard enough to make appealing in the way of, say, [Michael Douglas](#)' "Wall Street" abuser, there were other problems facing this fictionally flip tale. The biggest? It was beaten to the punch line earlier this year by Alex Gibney's very fine [documentary](#), "Casino Jack and the United States of Money," which audiences didn't much want to see either. Coupled with the news reports earlier this month that Abramoff had completed his prison sentence at a Baltimore halfway house, it makes the film a little too déjà vu all over again.

Directed by [George Hickenlooper](#), who died from an accidental drug overdose at 47, just a few months before the film's release this week, "Casino Jack" uses some conventions more often employed by documentaries. It is in the documentary world that Hickenlooper arguably did some of his best work, most notably the 1992 Emmy-winning behind-the-scenes look at the star-crossed production of [Francis Ford Coppola](#)'s "Apocalypse Now."

Here, using documentary-style dialogue to deliver relatively straightforward explanations proves effective in filling in the complicated details of the wheeling and dealing Jack did with Indian casinos, thus his nickname. But at other times it can feel heavy-handed, for example when the word "lobbyist" is deconstructed on-screen like a Webster's definition and even Spacey's patter is not clever enough to elevate it beyond a gimmick.

Abramoff was many things, and the film tries to show us all of them. He was a family man, a devout Orthodox Jew and a philanthropist. But what he did best, and where Hickenlooper and screenwriter Norman Snider expend most of their energy, was in playing the political game of quid pro quo with other people's money. He is also portrayed as the ultimate narcissist and Spacey and the filmmakers set that up nicely by opening the film with Jack in full rant, preaching to the man in the mirror as he brushes his teeth with an intensity that should have left them bleeding.

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By the time we meet Jack, he's a powerhouse of influence trading, well known around the Beltway. Along with his sycophant-side kick Michael Scanlon ([Barry Pepper](#) , very believable as an oily slickster), they prove to be quite the fleet-footed, tap-dancing pair, one step ahead of being caught until they are. Pepper and Spacey try to get the chemistry of the partnership cooking so that when things combust you'll better understand, if not care, about the fallout. But too often the actors occupy the same space, but are not in the same place, the one where a believable human connection exists.

As the stakes get higher, the schemes get more desperate and the characters Jack rubs shoulders with are more of the admitted mobster types. But instead of ratcheting up in intensity, the filmmakers opt for comic relief in the form of [Jon Lovitz](#) . The "SNL" alum is there for a bizarre buffoonish turn as a friend of Jack with mob connections, a role that turns out to be as ill-fitting as the leisure wear he favors. Sometimes sarcasm isn't called for.

Other people spin in and out of Jack's orbit, most notably wife Pam ([Kelly Preston](#)) and Tom DeLay (Spencer Garrett), the former Bush-era House Majority leader recently convicted of money laundering.

But Jack is very much the sun in this world, and Spacey its caustic center, which is the actor's sweet spot (see "Swimming With Sharks," where he perfected that bite). Though the film is peppered with one-liners tailor-made for Spacey to sling with stinging effect, it doesn't so much leave you laughing as just weary, and wishing this weren't a true story at all.

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'Casino Jack'

MPAA rating: R for pervasive language, some violence and brief nudity

Running time: 1 hour, 48 minutes

Playing: In selected theaters

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