

## Kevin Spacey makes `Casino Jack' a winner - Pasadena Star-News

Written by Administrator

Friday, 17 December 2010 00:04 -

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A film about a lobbyist may not sound entertaining, but with a dynamic performance by Kevin Spacey and some freewheeling direction by George Hickenlooper, "Casino Jack" is a lot of fun.

If the name Jack Abramoff rings a bell, you might remember him as the "super lobbyist," who along with his equally unsavory buddies was convicted in 2006 of three federal felony counts relating to defrauding American Indian tribes and the corruption of public officials.

His relationship with former House speaker Tom DeLay led to the congressman's downfall and that of other Washington figures including two White House officials.

It's a complicated story, but Hickenlooper ("Factory Girl") manages to get in enough of the facts while keeping the story rolling. A lot of credit has to go to Spacey's Abramoff, who was released from prison earlier this month. In the actor's hands, the lobbyist comes off as a spectacularly weird guy, which he may be anyway. Raised in Beverly Hills, he tried his hand at being a Hollywood producer in the 1980s. His only success was "Red Scorpion" (1988) with Dolph Lundgren.

Kind of an entertainer in his own right, Abramoff does impressions (Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan) to amuse clients and colleagues. A staunch Republican and supporter of Israel, by 1990s he was pals with DeLay and lobbying on K Street. Washington is like Hollywood, only without the pretty faces, Abramoff tells a crony.

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Casino Jack

R:

pervasive language, some violence, brief nudity.

Starring: Kevin Spacey, Barry Pepper, Kelly Preston, Jon Lovitz.

Director: George Hickenlooper.

Running time: 1 hr. 48 min.

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Playing: Edwards University Town Center 6, Irvine; Landmark Regent, Westwood; Laemmle Playhouse 7, Pasadena; Laemmle Monica 4, Santa Monica; Laemmle Sunset 5, West Hollywood.

In a nutshell: Fabulous performance by Spacey in a provocative film.

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He teams up with Michael Scanlon (Barry Pepper). The two wheel and deal, often seemingly ready to go bust one minute, only to reap a windfall the next. In the early 2000s, when Abramoff had access to the White House, they bilked Indian tribes out of millions of dollars. At times the pair even set up fake competing lobby interests in order to convince the tribes that they were in trouble and needed Abramoff and Scanlon's expertise.

You would think that was enough. But they try to acquire an offshore casino operation owned by a Greek mobster (Daniel Kash) with the help of a friend (Jon Lovitz) who they think is dopey but clean, only to find out too late that he has his own mob connections. As Abramoff and Scanlon juggle the two enterprises, things start to fall apart. And a pair of panties figures in their downfall.

Hickenlooper, though, doesn't play judge. He lets the audience decide about Abramoff, who interestingly seems to be sincere about his philanthropy and a loving husband to his wife (Kelly Preston). How the lobbyist saw himself is a fascinating question. In some ways, he's even a surprisingly likable figure.

The opening sequence shows Abramoff delivering a lengthy monologue/pep talk - "I'm Jack Abramoff, and I work out every day" - to himself in the mirror, and at that point Spacey has you hooked.

"Casino Jack" is often pretty funny. That is if you don't think too much about how lobbying reflects on our political system and that the joke may be on us. While it's a bit uneven at times - that's partly the nature of the story - being too slick would have worked against the movie. To their credit, Hickenlooper and Spacey, whose company produced the film, have given us something to both laugh at and think about.

Two sad notes about the film. Director Hickenlooper died in October at age 47 from an

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accidental overdose of painkiller. Character actor Maury Chaykin, who plays a hitman in "Casino Jack," passed away in July at age 61 of kidney disease.

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