

Don't bet on 'Casino Jack' to get you inside lobbyist Abramoff's head - Washington Post

Written by Administrator

Tuesday, 21 December 2010 17:17 -

It's one of those had-to-be-there moments. Although in all likelihood that encounter never happened, that scene in the film - which stars an excellent, energetic Kevin Spacey as the disgraced lobbyist - seems both all too plausible and head-spinningly surreal. In a sense, that's the problem with the whole movie, which lies halfway between poker-face documentary and broad

farce.

Spacey gives a magnetic performance, but George Hickenlooper's film is neither as factual as Alex Gibney's [nonfiction film](#) on the same subject, "[Casino Jack and the United States of Money](#)," nor as pedal-to-the-metal nuts as the source material would suggest it could be.

Even some dark subplots come off neither as shocking as they should be nor as comical as they could be. And this, despite the presence of comedian Jon Lovitz as a sleazy businessman Abramoff hires to run a floating casino and who ends up implicating Abramoff in a murder-for-hire scheme. The forced jauntiness of Jonathan Goldsmith's Burt Bacharach-style score signals that none of this is meant to be taken very seriously at the same time that the film tries, with a much heavier hand, to wring outrage over how Washington really works. Politicians are just puppets! Big money pulls the strings! Anyone can be bought, from Grover Norquist (Jeffrey R. Smith) to Tom DeLay (Spencer Garrett), and for a price ranging from tickets to "The Lion King" to a six-figure campaign donation!

Really? Tell us something we don't know.

But there's a bigger problem than the film's inability to strike the right tone, or audience fatigue resulting from the sense that this is merely a rehash of a well-worn scandal. Spacey's portrayal of Abramoff gets at the man's contradictions - his ostensibly devout Jewish faith next to an almost sociopathic blindness to his misdeeds - but it never even partly explains them.

What exactly makes this guy tick? Is it greed that motivates Casino Jack, as he was known, for his bilking of Indian casinos? Ego? Or is he a good man who just got carried away by a culture of corruption? Each theory is put forth, but none is given any real weight.

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Late in the film, after Abramoff is arrested and his former friends in power have abandoned him, DeLay takes his former golf buddy aside and says, "You've got a lot to answer for, Jack, and there's just so much I don't understand."

"Casino Jack" leaves its audience in the same quandary. In the end, much like its charismatic but inscrutable antihero, it ends up taking the Fifth.

Casino Jack r (108 minutes, at area theaters) is rated R for frequent obscenity, some violence, nudity and drug use.

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