

## Casino Jack

Just a few months ago, a major documentary film was released called “Casino Jack and the United States of Money” which outlined the stunning rise and abrupt fall of the Washington über-lobbyist Jack Abramoff (see my take in the “Reviews” section on this site). That film, made by documentarist Alex Gibney, gave a vigorous, warts and all, portrayal of this super-hustler of the Bush Era as he suborned officials and legislators, feathered his luxury nest, and offered a calamitous model of hard-ball politics.

Turns out that the Abramoff story was entertaining enough to trigger another telling, this time in a fiction film called “Casino Jack” (no originality there) and starring Kevin Spacey as smiling Jack. Here, however, the tenor of the film is sardonic wit and knowing snideness, confirming to audience members just how unbelievably crass our political process has become. Call it a comedy of bad manners.

Spacey, as a matter of fact, looks nothing like the real Abramoff, but it hardly matters (especially to viewers outside Washington, who have little sense of the man as a public figure) because, while the real Jack was coarse and fat, the actor is cool and slim. However, Spacey is also appropriately oily and smooth, the very picture of a well-dressed slimeball who could say just the right things to a beleaguered Congressman or a cowed bureaucrat. The one time the film tries to duplicate the actual Abramoff is the image everybody remembers, when the man is under indictment, with his (semi-famous) black flat-brim fedora and pinched double-breasted coat. The costumers place Spacey in the same wardrobe, but, frankly, other than evoking the original, it mainly looks silly.

Abramoff’s partner in lobbying crime, Michael Scanlon, is the principal featured figure, and he is played (by a wired Barry Pepper) as a significantly hyper, even manic character, apparently paralleling the real life Scanlon. Thus, Spacey offers a becalmed Ying that fits nicely with Pepper’s frenzied Yang.

The film, directed by George Hickenlooper, who died before its release) is smart and cynical and somewhat surprising in one respect: the script is full of actors playing real-life characters still in or around the world of Washington. Another recent Washington-based movie, “Fair Game,” (see my review on this site) also incorporated some real figures in its true-life story of Valerie Plame, but it fudged many of them, particularly those involved with intelligence. “Casino Jack” names names and renders real scandal-tinged people and Washington players, like notorious Rep. Tom Delay, indicted Rep. Bob Ney, Sen. John McCain, Abramoff colleague Kevin Ring, conservative icons Grover Norquist, Karl Rove, and Ralph Reed, Post journalist Susan Schmidt, *inter alia*.

Even with the attempts at human accuracy, “Casino Jack” does not aim at anything like a documentary feel. It aims to be a crackling, tart exposé, and it achieves it only half-way (the script is by Norman Snider). Sometimes incidents happen too fast, with too little explication, and some of the encroaching pressures on the harried lobbyists just seem like flapdoodle.

Still, Washington insiders should get a kick out of “Casino Jack,” though they will look in vain for a film featuring the physical Washington. The bulk of the movie was shot

in Toronto, with only the occasional establishing shot (a restaurant façade here, the Washington Monument here).

*(The film runs 108 min. and is rated "R" for language.)*