

Kevin Spacey Comes Up Aces in 'Casino Jack'

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – The halls of the Capitol Building are paved with money. It takes a long time beyond civics class and history to realize that. Kevin Spacey illustrates that concept precisely playing “super lobbyist” and convicted larcenist Jack Abramoff in “Casino Jack.”

Jack Abramoff’s story is a typical eye glazer for the average news consumer, but his actions effect everyone all the time. It is his story as an arch conservative con man, spewing religion while at the same time robbing people blind. And it’s all legal because the guys he has in his pockets make the law.

Basically the story revolves around Abramoff and his partner Michael Scanlon (Barry Pepper), as they set up specific lobbying efforts on behalf of Native American casinos. They use these “retainers” from their clients to peddle influence with key people in Washington, including the new Speaker of the House, Tom Delay (Spencer Garrett). At the same time, they are looking to score in gaming themselves, as an off-shore casino out of Florida can easily sail beyond all laws and regulations.

Abramoff and Scanlon enlist the aid of a petty businessman, Adam Kidan (Jon Lovitz) to be their front man for the purchase of the off-shore gaming scheme. Kidan is a bit of a loose cannon, and butts heads with the criminal elements that control the gambling in the area. Now real organized crime is involved with the type of organized crime that Casino Jack practices.



Schemers: Barry Peppers as Michael Scalon and Kevin Spacey as Jack Abramoff in 'Casino Jack'

Photo Credit: © ATO Pictures

When the inevitable downfall occurs (touched off, naturally, by Scanlon's spurned wife), the house of cards that falls leads all the way up to George W. Bush (naturally, again). Abramoff is a good Republican, until of course he is caught.

Kevin Spacey, truly one of the finest screen actors working, embodies Jack Abramoff appropriately, with all the licentious greed, fake piety and snake oily salesmanship of the super lobbyist. His Abramoff is somewhat sympathetic, for he is pouring cash into a system that desires the power of money more than anything else, and the Republicans have made that an art form. From his opening "psych-up" speech, given to a mirror, to his fantasy closing argument – framed as an "opening" statement to a Senate subcommittee – Spacey is all gold (as in Oscar).

The supporting cast is superior, with comedian Jon Lovitz leading the way as Adam Kidan. He understands this character because he interprets it without malice, only greed and survival. He is attacked in the story with a ballpoint pen, and that becomes a very funny tool, and Lovitz plays it to the hilt. Barry Pepper, as Michael Scanlon, is simply becoming the go-to for precise character studies. His appetites as a pocket stuffer are legendary, all "dudes" and "bro." The scene where he knows he's caught and is practically spitting into the phone is one of the finest screen moments of the year.

George Hickenlooper is the director, known mostly for documentaries ("Hearts of Darkness") and his experiences with the truth-is-stranger-than-fiction realm make *Casino Jack* a must see. The corridors of power in this film are mostly emphasized for their lushness, or toys, or hypocrisy. His use of music, or an emphasis on a turn of phrase is succinct and brutally to the point. He keeps reminding us that this kind of corruption is present everyday, just don't get caught.

And what about our "government," our so-called "men of the people." They don't listen to you and me, they listen to the highest bidder. Every crisis of the last 10 years has been manipulated towards the wealthy persons who influence the governmental operations the most. Money to put down social programs, but light up oil wars.



That's the Ticket: Kevin Spacey and Jon Lovitz as Adam Kidan in 'Casino Jack'
Photo Credit: © ATO Pictures

What really becomes apparent in *Casino Jack* is that power is a vicious game, run by ruthless people. They don't have time for sanctimonious safety nets for the general citizenry, they have time for a certified check from a casino interest, a healthcare conglomerate and a war privatizer. A million dollars speak louder than words.

Where does that leave Jack Abramoff? He was released from jail last month, and through Spacey gives a mission statement at the end of the film. If these tenets are followed through, I suspect there will be a number of "powerful" people cowering under their desks like the greedy bastards they are.

"Casino Jack" continues its limited release in Chicago on December 31st. See local listings for theaters and showtimes. Featuring Kevin Spacey, Barry Pepper, Graham Greene, Jon Lovitz and Kelly Preston. Screenplay by Norman Snider, directed by George Hickenlooper. Rated "R".



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [16]
Senior Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [15]

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