

Great Performances Drive Entertaining ‘American Hustle’

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on December 11, 2013 - 10:43am

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

As career con man Irving Rosenfeld (Christian Bale) introduces newly-undercover FBI agent Richie DiMaso (Bradley Cooper) to his world of criminal enterprise, he shows him a Rembrandt painting in a museum, revealing that it's a fake. Millions of people have seen and admired it, not realizing that it's not the original. Does it matter if they get the same artistic enjoyment out of it? David O. Russell's "American Hustle" is about that kind of superficial subterfuge, both in the fascinating story it tells and even in its filmmaking, as Russell clearly cribs from Martin Scorsese films like "GoodFellas" and "Casino" like a forger copying a Rembrandt. It is a wildly entertaining piece of work that features one of the best ensembles of the year. A crime film with very little violence, Russell's drama is a character-based movie that falls just short of the masterpieces it mimics but most audiences won't be able to tell the difference.

In many ways, "American Hustle" is the kind of movie con game that works largely through sheer cinematic force. In the first act, we're introduced to our three major players and all are given a chance to narrate and provide back story. This is not a piece with a simple protagonist. It is a patchwork of cons, crime, sex, and greed. It was originally called "American Bullshit" and I almost wished it had maintained that title since almost all of its characters are so completely full of it.



American Hustle

Photo credit: Sony Pictures

We first meet Irving, a con man who started off as a kid breaking windows in his small town to provide business for his glass repairman father.

Later in life, he’s still managing a series of dry cleaners but that’s just a front for his real game, the art of the con. When he meets the gorgeous Sydney Prosser (Amy Adams), he worries that she’ll pull away from his illegal underpinnings but she actually ups his game. She brings in leads looking for business loans, Irving promises them a big return on their initial investments, and they pay the \$5k fee, which they will never see again. And then they’re busted.

FBI agent Richie DiMaso brings in the pair and forces them undercover to help bust people of power who may be abusing it. Not only is DiMaso obsessed with bringing in a headline-grabbing case but he becomes infatuated with Sydney and the life they lead in this world of undercover hustling. The plan is to bust Atlantic City Mayor Carmine Polito (Jeremy Renner) and other local politicians when they accept bribes to help the new expansion of the gambling empire in their city. It doesn’t matter that Polito is an innocent man just trying to make a financial difference in his impoverished community. DiMaso is going to take him down. Which one is the hustler? The politician caught in a scam or the FBI agent who forces him into it?



American Hustle

Photo credit: Sony Pictures

While “American Hustle” could have hummed along with just those four characters, Russell beautifully paints the edges with great supporting work from Jennifer Lawrence as Irving’s wife Rosalyn, Louis C.K. as DiMaso’s annoyed superior at the FBI, Jack Huston as a mobster liaison to the criminal empire in Atlantic City, and one truly memorable cameo from a living legend. Even very small parts like those occupied by Michael Pena, Shea Wigham, and Elisabeth Rohm are well-performed.

As he has proven by winning Oscars for performances in his last two films, Russell is an expert at drawing engaging work from his ensemble. When we first see Bale, he is literally gluing fake hair to his head. His awful hairdo and notable weight gain help the actor find the heart of a man who is always trying to hide something. Rosenfeld is a fascinating guy in that he wants to play with the rich and powerful but also is so much more at home with the “average joe” like Polito, who becomes his friend even in the middle of the scam. He’s a blue collar guy forced to hustle in the world of the image-obsessed, which makes for a fascinating range of character beats. This is one of Bale’s best performances.



American Hustle

Photo credit: Sony Pictures

Honestly, there’s rarely a false beat performance-wise in “American Hustle.” Adams subtly plays her character’s need to be something other than what she is and the way Sydney uses her sexuality to get there. Lawrence almost steals the piece in just a few scenes, taking a part that could have been relatively mundane in the hands of another performer and making it hum. You’ll never hear “Live and Let Die” again and not think of her. Renner will be the underrated MVP, finding an emotional current to his character that makes it memorable. Cooper proves again that his career turn last year was no fluke. And any movie with Louis C.K. and Jack Huston in supporting roles is better for having them.

There are some structural issues early in “American Hustle.” Irving, Richie, and Sydney all get to narrate, leading to a slight feeling of being overwhelmed instead of interested in the story they’re telling, but when the true con – the story that became known as Abscam for those of you old enough to remember it – gets going, Russell’s film clicks. The film moves like a cat, pushed along by Russell’s great music choices, the performances he helped craft, and the undeniable influence of Scorsese hanging in the background like a forged piece of art.

“American Hustle” stars Christian Bale, Bradley Cooper, Amy Adams, Jeremy Renner, Jennifer Lawrence, Louis C.K., Jack Huston, Michael Pena, Shea Wigham, Alessandro Nivola, and Elisabeth Rohm. It was written by David O. Russell & Eric Singer and directed by Russell. It will open on December 20, 2013 and is rated R.



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By [BRIAN TALLERICO](#) [18]
Content Director
HollywoodChicago.com
brian@hollywoodchicago.com [17]

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