

Searching for humanity in role of ruthless lobbyist's right-hand man

Actor **Barry Pepper** says he tries not to judge his characters, including political con artist **Michael Scanlon**

. In "Casino Jack," Pepper portrays the right-hand man to uber-lobbyist **Jack Abramoff**, who paid \$22 million in fines for

overbilling clients while his boss continues to serve prison time after collecting exorbitant fees from American Indian casinos.

To prepare for the role, Pepper studied e-mails that Scanlon turned over as part of his plea deal. "You see this vitriolic sewage from Scanlon and Abramoff," Pepper says, quoting a litany of profanity-laced insults unfit for publication. "Regardless of his morality, I tried to humanize Michael Scanlon."

Pepper gained valuable insight after speaking to Scanlon's former friends and co-workers. "That was helpful in understanding this guy who works as a \$10-an-hour lifeguard while raking in millions of dollars from these Native American casinos. He was this surfer dude who could talk the bone off a chicken. Friends who were double-crossed by him also say he had a ruthless streak. You take all that and try to find the truth, somewhere in the middle."

"Casino Jack," directed by **George Hickenlooper** shortly before his death in November at age 53, presents the 2008 corruption scandal as if it were screwball farce, complete with a repertoire of celebrity impressions performed by **Kevin Spacey**, who portrays Abramoff.

Pepper says the film re-enacts well-documented incidents with minimal embellishment. "This wild ride is all based on factual reporting about how Washington, D.C., operates. Nobody is contesting their involvement in this scandal, and that tells me that influence-peddling has only gotten worse since the Abramoff scandal broke. It's a cash cow."

Book goes behind the scenes at 'Burlesque'

"Burlesque" the movie bombed last month, but "Burlesque" the book offers fascinating behind-the-scenes insights about what it takes to make a high-end Hollywood-style

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extravaganza.

The picture book from Universe Publishing illustrates how the nightclub dancers' costumes, designed by **Michael Kaplan**, were crafted from Swarovski crystals, and **Christina Aguilera** wore high-heeled shoes custom-made by **Christian Louboutin**.

"Burlesque" also notes the diva doings of Aguilera's co-star Cher, who insisted on last-minute wardrobe changes, rewrote dialogue on set and waited until the last "nano-second" before recording her songs. Still, director Steve Antin writes, "I love her dearly."

Austrian filmmakers helm Italy's Oscar entry

Two Austrian filmmakers produced one of this year's most charming foreign language Oscar submissions - for Italy.

The country's 2010 Academy Award submission, "La Pivellina," takes place on the outskirts of Rome. Shot documentary style with nonprofessional actors, the film by co-directors **Tizza Covi** and

Rainer Frimmel

follows the adventures of an abandoned toddler who is taken in by circus performers, with standout performances from

Patrizia Gerardi

, half of a real-life dagger-throwing act, and 2-year-old

Asia Crippa.

Frimmel and Covi found the inspiration for "La Pivellina" while shooting their 2005 documentary "Babooska." "Making that film, about a young Italian circus girl, we realized how naturally most of our protagonists behaved in front of the camera," Frimmel says. "We decided to create a fictional story that would show this trailer camp in San Basilio from an unusual point of view, by introducing an alien element into this community. That's when we came up with the idea of the little girl."

Barry Pepper searches for humanity in characters - San Francisco Chronicle

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The tiny actress posed a number of challenges. For one thing, she kept unusual hours. "Asia would go to bed at 4 and sleep until the next afternoon, which obviously becomes quite a problem for scheduling when you're trying to shoot a movie. But Tizza gained Asia's confidence, and we changed her sleeping schedule." {sbox}

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