

ASPEN — When the calls comes in, it's not a publicist telling me I have just 10 minutes, or that the interview needs to be delayed. It's Kevin Spacey himself, that dry, haughty, well-modulated tone instantly recognizable, and when I express surprise that a movie star of his stature is dialing the phone for himself, Spacey tells me: "That's because I'm not mainly a film star. I'm a stage actor."

True enough. While he has spent time on Hollywood's top rung, winning Academy Awards for "The Usual Suspects" and "American Beauty," both in the '90s, and has hung onto a lower branch of late, with appearances in "Austin Powers in Goldmember" and "Superman Returns," Spacey has devoted himself largely to the theater. For seven years, he has been artistic director of London's Old Vic Theatre Company, a position he took with the intention of reviving a troupe with a nearly 200-year history. At the Old Vic, Spacey, who has lived in London since 2002, has directed, starred in plays old (Shakespeare's "Richard II") and more recent ("Inherit the Wind," David Mamet's "Speed-the-Plow"), and brought in such talent as Sam Mendes, Spacey's "American Beauty" director, and Robert Altman. He is currently gearing up to play the title character in Shakespeare's "Richard II," at the Old Vic and in Brooklyn, with Mendes directing.

Still, Spacey has a love for the movies, an affection that he makes clear in his latest film, "Casino Jack." Spacey plays the real-life lobbyist Jack Abramoff, who was imprisoned after pleading guilty to charges relating to defrauding American Indian tribes. Despite the serious messages in "Casino Jack" about greed and American-style corruption, the film, directed by the late George Hickenlooper, has an ample strain of humor running through it. Much of the comedy comes from the spot-on impersonations Spacey does throughout the film of famous screen characters: Marlon Brando's Vito Corleone from "The Godfather," Jack Nicholson's Col. Jessup from "A Few Good Men."

The most effective and coherent impersonation is also probably the most obscure. Toward the end of "Casino Jack," Spacey does Al Pacino's Arthur Kirkland, the disillusioned attorney at the center of "And Justice For All." Diving into Pacino's courtroom rant, Spacey's words — "You're out of order! The whole trial is out of order!" — neatly reflects the theme of "Casino Jack."

For Spacey, who has frequently brought out his impersonations on TV shows and at awards ceremonies, the opportunity to do his Godfather wasn't just a chance to have some fun on-screen. It was also a way to connect to his character. Abramoff, whose greed and criminal power-plays led to the resignation of Rep. Tom DeLay, the former House Majority Leader, could easily have been portrayed as a one-dimensional symbol of modern-day influence peddling.

"But what I found interesting is all the contradictions and complications," said Spacey, speaking

Written by Administrator

Sunday, 26 December 2010 02:20 -

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from New York, of Abramoff. "At the end of the day, it's not so black-and-white. His love of film, his constant quoting of movie lines, he dabbled in filmmaking — I found that, given all the circumstances of what he was doing, it was another side of him."

Spacey is not the only one to find the Abramoff saga worthy of examination. Preceding "Casino Jack" in theaters by a matter of months was Alex Gibney's documentary, "Casino Jack and the United States of Money."

To get the fullest picture of Abramoff, Spacey actually went to meet the former lobbyist in the flesh, a year and a half ago, while Abramoff was incarcerated in a federal prison near Washington, D.C. Prior to the meeting, Spacey purposefully kept himself uninformed about the Abramoff scandal which, at its core, involved peddling influence with Congressmen to Indian tribes in the casino business, for tens of millions of dollars.

"I could figure out what was true and what was myth, what was lazy reporting," the 51-year-old Spacey said of jumping at the chance to meet with Abramoff. "I had no perception of him beforehand. I didn't want other people's commentary or opinions. None of the reporting highlighted that he was in love with show business, did impressions."

In addition, the meeting demonstrated that Spacey would not have been Abramoff's first choice to portray him: "He was bitterly disappointed it wasn't George Clooney," Spacey said.

"Casino Jack" hardly goes easy on Abramoff; it's doubtful any viewer will come away thinking of Abramoff as a misunderstood soul. There is no effort to explain away his behavior, and Spacey, who is up for a Golden Globe award for best actor for the performance, doesn't spare in portraying him as a greedy, lying, manipulative bully. The film does suggest that the American system of democracy is horribly rigged, and that Abramoff was one cog in a bigger machine — but also that Abramoff never hesitated to spin things to his benefit.

But the script, sometimes heavy-handedly, also captures Abramoff's better side — his devotion to his children, his sincere Jewish faith, his intention to use his ill-gotten money for charitable purposes. Spacey's performance buys in fully to the idea of Abramoff as something more than a heel.

"My job as an actor is not to judge the people I play," he said. "My job is to put myself in their shoes and present a fully rounded person, not a one-note caricature. Which is what he became in the media. You do that with the tone of creating a human, and people can judge for themselves what kind of character he is."

While "Casino Jack" is a supremely uneven film, mixing as it does comedy and outrage, real-life scandal and Hollywood impersonations. The measured performance by Spacey, and the cartoonish work by Jon Lovitz, portraying an Abramoff crony, seem to come from different movies. The slippery tone of the film might have been unavoidable, though, given how Spacey viewed the project.

"You tell people you're going to make a movie about lobbyists, and you can hear the yawning start," he said of the decision to put a comedic slant on "Casino Jack."

But one thing the film does effectively is shine a light, no matter how overheated it gets, on the dire situation that exists in American politics. As much of a blunt force as Abramoff may be, one never gets the sense that, if only Abramoff were handled properly, the system would be fixed.

"George Hickenlooper and I had a mutual fascination with American politics, and a frustration with it, and a love for it," Spacey said. "We thought we might be able to portray the hypocrisy in the Abramoff case, and in lobbying. You can pretend you've cleaned up the industry. But you haven't. Until you change the whole lobbying system, I don't think the corruption will stop. There will be other Abramoffs."

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