

Disgraced Washington lobbyist Jack Abramoff was a real-life scenery chewer — a self-justifying, egomaniacal, vituperative mover and shaker.

Which makes him the perfect character for the Kevin Spacey treatment.

In the opening minutes of the late George Hickenlooper's "Casino Jack," a beleaguered Abramoff (Spacey in a Golden Globe-nominated performance) stares

into a courthouse restroom mirror and gives himself an angry pep talk.

He rails against the mediocrity of contemporary culture and congratulates himself on being one of those rugged individualists who rise above the pack.

His fury and conviction are awesome. But by this time Abramoff is playing to an audience of one.

His nervous associate Michael Scanlon (Barry Pepper, oozing fear and manic energy) has turned state's evidence, telling prosecutors all about how the pair bilked American Indian-operated casinos and bribed members of Congress. Abramoff's powerful friends are playing duck-and-cover in an attempt to disassociate themselves. The chickens are coming home to roost.

"Casino Jack" is simultaneously an acting pig-out, a satire of ruthless self-interest and an indictment of a casually corrupt era in Washington politics. (Tom DeLay is a character here. 'Nuff said.)

Told largely in flashback, Norman Snider's screenplay zips between Abramoff's high-rolling past and his current situation, which will lead to a prison term for fraud and corruption.

Abramoff was a confounding mix of contradictions. A pious Jew and family man (Kelly Preston

'Casino Jack': Actors go all-in to make Abramoff tale a winner | 3 stars - Kansas City Star

Written by Administrator

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is the Missus), he sponsored an exclusive Hebrew academy; he was also venal and vindictive. Ruthlessly pragmatic in most matters, he was a movie geek who could flawlessly imitate his favorite stars.

Spacey is having fun here.

So is Jon Lovitz as a sleazeball mattress mogul sucked into Abramoff's scheme to take over a floating casino that results in at least one murder.

The biggest drawback with "Casino Jack" (not to be confused with the similarly titled documentary released last fall) lies with Hickenlooper's uneasy grasp of comedy. This director's best work was in Hollywood-themed documentaries, especially the Emmy-winning "Hearts of Darkness," about the making of "Apocalypse Now."

But Hickenlooper, who died last fall at age 47 of an apparent drug overdose, was on less sure footing with fiction. "Casino Jack" is often sarcastic and subversive. It will leave you seething with indignation.

But it's rarely genuinely funny — a real crime considering the possibilities.

(Opens today at the Tivoli.)

'Casino Jack' □□□

Rated R Time: 1:48

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GOLDEN GLOBES

Nicole Kidman is nominated for best actress/drama, and Kevin Spacey is up for best actor/comedy or musical. The Golden Globes air at 7 p.m. Sunday on NBC. Look for coverage that night on KansasCity.com and in Monday's FYI.

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