

# David O. Russell's *American Hustle*: Nearly everybody gets a free pass

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*Directed by David O. Russell; written by Russell and Eric Singer*

David O. Russell's new movie *American Hustle* is loosely based on the "Abscam" sting operation conducted by the FBI in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which led to the conviction of one US senator, six members of the House of Representatives and the mayor of Camden, New Jersey.

The FBI's codename for the operation was a contraction of "Arab scam," because of the presence of an agent posing as an "Arab sheikh" offering bribes to the various politicians in exchange for political favors. After complaints by Arab-American organizations, FBI officials claimed Abscam was short for "Abdul scam," after the name of the fictitious company the bureau created for the operation.

The film is the seventh feature Russell has directed since his 1994 debut *Spanking the Monkey*, a story about incest and loneliness. The screwball comedy *Flirting with Disaster* (1996) was followed by the commercial success of *Three Kings* (1999), which dealt with the Persian Gulf War. Russell amusingly tackled the hucksterism that pervades American life in *I Heart Huckabees* (2004) and the economic and social disenfranchisement of a working class community in New England in *The Fighter* (2010). His last movie *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012) was an off-beat, but rather tepid comedy-drama centering on emotional dysfunction.

Overall, Russell's work has been characterized by a genuine perceptiveness about individual behavior, a liberal sensibility and an advocacy of tolerating difference. He pokes fun at various institutions, including the military (*Three Kings*) and corporate America (*I Heart Huckabees*). *The Fighter* was his most socially engaged and therefore most moving and concrete film.

Taking as its general framework the Abscam affair, *American Hustle* opens on April 28, 1978 with a notice that "Some of this may actually be true."

Christian Bale plays career con artist Irving Rosenfeld, based on the real-life Melvin Weinberg who, under the aegis of the FBI, coaxed seven members of Congress into accepting bribes. Irving is at New York's exclusive Plaza Hotel preparing himself for the sting. He carefully glues a clump of false hair onto his comb-over. This vision of lower middle class sleaze

believes that "people want to be conned."

We learn that after being busted by the FBI for various shenanigans, Rosenfeld and his partner and lover, the glamorous Sydney Prosser (Amy Adams) have been co-opted by undercover FBI agent Richie DiMaso (the seriously permed Bradley Cooper). The latter plans to use Irving to entrap New Jersey mayor Carmine Polito (Jeremy Renner, sporting an imposing pompadour, is meant to represent Angelo Errichetti, former mayor of Camden, New Jersey), known as "the working man's friend."

A flashback reveals that Irving at one time legally operated a string of dry-cleaning stores, but also fenced stolen art and further enriched himself by guaranteeing bogus loans to desperate people. ("Did you ever have to find a way to survive and you knew your choices were bad?") At a party he meets Sydney, a hard-luck woman from Albuquerque, New Mexico, who specializes in masquerading as an English aristocrat. Their mutual attraction is fueled by similar methods of survival ... and their love of Duke Ellington. "My dream," Sydney sadly explains in a voice-over, "was to become anything other than what I was." Irving was her ticket.

The scheming duo's ventures are complicated by Irving's marriage to the unstable, calculating Rosalyn (the marvelous Jennifer Lawrence), whose son Rosenfeld has adopted. Irving describes her as "the Picasso of passive-aggressive karate. I was her mark."

Irving and Sydney's deal with DiMaso involves using one of Irving's friends to pose as a wealthy Arab sheikh looking for investments. Polito is the target as he is campaigning to revive gambling in economically depressed Atlantic City. Polito does not fall for the first sting, but Irving befriends him, earning his trust to better set him up. In the process, the conman becomes genuinely fond and respectful of the mayor, ascribing to him sincere motives about helping his suffering constituents.

Ensnared, Polito introduces a faux sheikh now impersonated by a Mexican-American FBI agent (Michael Peña) to criminal big shots. Several members of Congress are surreptitiously videotaped accepting bribes. DiMaso, at odds with his nay-saying supervisor at the bureau, Stoddard Thorsen (Louis C.K.), sees the operation as a way to move up the agency ladder. Robert DeNiro makes an uncredited cameo as Mafia

kingpin Victor Tellegio, second in command to Meyer Lansky. Eventually, the relatively pure of heart land on their feet, and naked self-interest is punished.

A good portion of *American Hustle*'s time and energy is spent on the Irving/Sydney/Rosalyn love triangle. Bale, as an overweight, balding confidence man is convincing, as is his skill and muse Adams. Lawrence is captivating, stealing scenes with an unbalanced emotionalism and humorous quirkiness. Cooper has less ease in executing his erratic manic explosions. Renner is a smooth operator as the New Jersey mayor. Russell is able to create odd-ball characters that are human, sympathetic and peculiarly American.

The filmmakers, however, tend to skim the surface of the events themselves, concentrating instead on recreating the mere look of the times. Getting the outfits, hairstyles and pop hits of the era right seems to carry more weight here than delving into the significance of the FBI's operation and its social-historical context.

Acknowledging that the heart of his movie is not the Abscam affair, Russell claims he primarily wanted to explore how people negotiate hard times: "The economy at that time was in a very bad place. It was a different set of circumstances; interest rates were so high you couldn't even get a loan unless it was at 15 percent to 20 percent. That creates an environment where it would be rather easy in some ways to entrap people, by offering them money from a special investor from a foreign land. Who do you become when you're trying to survive those times? This was also in a time that was more innocent, a time when things were slower, more analog."

In answering the question, "Who do you become when you're trying to survive?" Russell apparently fails to see that who you *become* depends on who you *are* to begin with.

Again, according to Russell, "everybody in the movie is hustling. They're hustling in a couple of senses: either in trying to get by and make something happen in a conning way, or in how we all kind of somehow have to use white lies or emotional stories that we tell ourselves to get through our everyday lives. ... I think someone who is trying to take care of a community hustles everyday."

Frankly, this sort of thinking is considerably too amorphous a groundwork for a serious film. If everyone has his or her reasons, why make a film at all? Why not simply announce that the universe is unfolding as it should and leave it at that? The elements of criticism (of the FBI, of the Mafia!) and protest are conspicuously missing. If Russell is simply in the business of presenting amusing, quirky personalities, who are all doing their best ... well, one loses interest after a while.

"Everybody is hustling." But the "everybody" the director focuses on are con artists, corrupt politicians, criminal lowlifes and FBI agents. Not to moralize, but what does Russell expect?

For the mass of the working population, on the other hand, things were different. They were obliged to fight.

The same period as Abscam witnessed the bitter strike by

160,000 coal miners from West Virginia to southern Illinois, for example, which lasted from December 6, 1977 to March 19, 1978—a strike spearheaded by the rank and file in opposition to the national leadership of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). The combative miners ignored the invoking of the national emergency provision of the Taft-Hartley Act by the Carter administration.

The strike frightened the ruling elite and hastened the counteroffensive against the working class that began in earnest with Jimmy Carter's appointment of Paul Volcker as head of the Federal Reserve and the Chrysler bailout, which entailed major concessions from auto workers, both in 1979.

The Abscam scandal provided a glimpse into the unbridled corruption in Congress and both capitalist parties, as well as the anti-democratic operations of the FBI. Illegal searches and break-ins directed by top officials of the bureau had been a common practice for decades. No doubt as well, the purging of a number of Pennsylvania and New Jersey Democrats, as corrupt as they were, was part of a general shift to the right in the political establishment.

Russell aspires to present a quasi-social panorama, but without any genuine appreciation of the dynamics involved nor a consistent, deep-going concern for the fate of the oppressed. His relatively timid liberalism reduces him to stumbling through this presentation of tough times, incapable of envisioning a social explosion and therefore elevating "hustling" to a virtue.

In general, unfortunately, Russell's films at this point do not go beyond wishing people—and American society—well. Toward the end of *American Hustle*, mention is made of the fact that none of the big money people were caught, but the reference is a fleeting one. Ultimately, everyone is given a pass, except an FBI opportunist who does not "hustle" for the right reasons.



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