

American Hustle (2013)

Rated PG. Running time: 2 hour 18 min.

Our Advisories Violence 3; Language 0; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

*The getting of treasures by a lying tongue
is a fleeting vapor and a snare of death.*

Proverbs 21:6

*A scoundrel and a villain
goes around with crooked speech,
winking the eyes, shuffling the feet,
pointing the fingers,
with perverted mind devising evil,
continually sowing discord;
on such a one calamity will descend suddenly;
in a moment, damage beyond repair.*

Proverbs 6:12-15

The film is loosely based on the Abscam scandal back in the late 70s, an elaborate FBI sting operation using a fake Arab sheik that brought down numerous politicians and mobsters. Employing a bit more fiction than usual, director/co-writer (with Eric Singer) David O. Russell places at the very beginning of the film a title card "Some of this actually happened," probably more accurate than the usual "Based on a true story." The director of last year's delightful *Silver Linings Playbook*, has given us perhaps the best con artist film since 1973's king of the genre *The Sting*—and there have been some very good ones since then—see *The Grifters*; *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*; *House of Games*; *Catch Me If You Can*: and the Broadway musical beloved by many, *The Music Man*.

Like most con artist films, the plot is complicated, in this case starting with and coming back several times to a scene in which two guys and a woman are in a hotel room with what we later learn is the Mayor of Camden, NJ, who angrily gets up and walks out of the room when one of the men pushes a briefcase toward him. The two men, surprised that the politician didn't rise to the bait, argue, and then one of them reluctantly chases after their quarry. Catching up with the Mayor, our man is able to patch up the relationship for the project they had been considering.

In a series of flashbacks we see con artists Irving Rosenfeld and Sydney Prosser (Christian Bale and Amy Adams), caught in a scam by FBI agent Richie DiMaso (Bradley Cooper). He forces them to work with him in a sting operation to bring down Camden, N.J., Mayor Carmine Polito (Jeremy Renner) and a number of bribe-taking US Representatives and Senators. Either work with me, or spend a lot of years in prison. What choice do they have?

Irving and Sydney had met at a pool party. Even though he is married and has a stepson whom he adores, Irving is attracted to Sydney, especially when they discover that they both are passionate about the music of Duke Ellington. Sydney, working as a grifter, had adopted a faux-British accent, calling herself "Lady Edith Greensly," a Londoner allegedly on familiar terms with bankers. Irving's ambition had been more than owning his several dry cleaning stores, so he had embarked on conning people out of their money for a "sure thing" investment, plus, on the side, selling forged art works (one that we see in his shabby gallery looks like a Rembrandt).

We soon discover that the FBI agent himself has become a con artist, so obsessed is he in getting the bad guys—he employs the same methods as the scammers in entrapping his prey. Richie is so driven by his plan, one that is extremely expensive, that when his superior refuses some of his

requests, he beats the man up. Only the intervention of a higher authority saves DiMaso's career and his project. In contrast, we see Irving beginning to have qualms about the scheme because he is developing a liking for Mayor Polito. The latter really does care for his constituents. He takes no bribes, lives in a comfortable old house and not a mansion, and enjoys moving among and helping his people. He wants to bring back to life the once vibrant Atlantic City casinos so that jobs will be created for his people. The money for the project is to come from the sheik that Irving and Sydney introduce him to—actually the phony Arab is a Mexican. The money promised by Irving and Sydney is to be passed on to the US Senators and Representatives that Polito knows, who in turn will see that the "sheik" can jump the line and become a U.S. citizen. Hidden FBI cameras will record every transaction.

There is also a subplot involving Irving and his off-the-wall, chain-smoking wife Rosalyn (Jennifer Lawrence), so unpredictable that an off camera Irving says of her, "She was the Picasso of passive-aggressive karate." Of course, when Irving partners with Sydney, Rosalyn is upset, and—well, you will have to see for yourself this actress's wonderful versatility that has impressed so many critics and viewers. If she ever gets tired of her athletic roles in such films as *The Hunger Games* and *X-Men*, Jennifer Lawrence can make it big in comedies as well.

And before closing I want to mention too that seeing Robert De Niro for his 10-minute scene of a Florida mobster attracted by Richie's elaborate scheme is another of the great treats this film offers. Funny, suspenseful, and conducive to the discussion of issues ethics and trust, the film contains some of the best performances of the year. How everything works out in the end involves an even bigger scam, but this one we probably can applaud with few or no qualms of conscience.

The full review with discussion questions will be included in the January 2014 issue of Visual Parables, scheduled for

posting early that month. To subscribe to the publication go to the Store. A year's subscription will gain you access not just to this issue (which has far more features in it than just film reviews and guides), but also to issues as far back as Summer 2006.