

## David O. Russell pulls off an 'American Hustle'



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### American Hustle

Rating:

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Briskly paced despite a two-hour plus running time, "American Hustle" is an absorbing, engrossing, often electrifying and relentlessly entertaining movie. A caper movie that easily ranks with "The Sting" or (the remake of) "Ocean's Eleven," it's also an evocative nostalgia trip with some perceptive observations on morality as seen from different vantage points.

The all-star cast, culled in part from Russell's last two movies, "The Fighter" and "Silver Linings Playbook," is a Who's Who of current Hollywood royalty, but to their credit all disappear entirely into their roles. Just as commendable, your first impression of most of the characters are frequently misleading in this story, with its own constantly shifting landscape.

Christian Bale, at least as radically de-glammed here as he was in his Oscar-winning role in Russell's "The Fighter," appears to be deliberately putting as much distance as possible between himself and Batman. Paunchy and sporting the mother of bad combovers, he is nearly unrecognizable as Irving Rosenfeld, a seventies conman dragged kicking and

screaming into the Abscam sting operation. Bale is a fine actor who has never seemed particularly comfortable as a movie star, and isn't always the most likeable screen presence in the world. He seems to be having a good time here, and it's infectious.

Amy Adams gives her finest performance to date as Sydney, Bale's seductive mistress and partner in crime. Alternately sexy and unyielding, this character is a complex variant on the classic femme fatale, and Adams gives her intelligence, depth and an unnervingly hard edge. Sydney, a former stripper who glides seamlessly into the role of an English noblewoman, is slippery and deceptive and altogether delicious to watch. Is she falling for Bradley Cooper's annoyingly unctuous FBI agent, or is it part of a larger scam?

As for him, Bradley Cooper does not have to sacrifice his matinee idol image to the same extent as Bale, but he does appear on camera in little pink curlers and that ought to be enough. In an intentional irony, Cooper's character is clearly willing to violate every standard of decency to entrap corrupt politicians, and his prime target is Jeremy Renner, heartbreakingly effective as a New Jersey mayor whose inherent decency is often at odds with his political ambition, but remains probably the most honorable character in the movie.

Jennifer Lawrence, who's also currently raking it in the franchise installment "The Hunger Games: Catching Fire," is initially unrecognizable as Irving's rescue puppy wife, and a loose cannon who keeps the plot, and most of the characters, off-balance from beginning to end. Her character is an absolute idiot who thinks she's the smart one, and a pathologically self-centered monster, who like most truly self-centered people, thinks she's giving and generous. Lawrence gets both the pathos and comedy here, and plays both to the hilt.

The same can be said of Russell. Directing from his own screenplay, co-written with Eric Singer, he seamlessly shifts tone here, going from comedy to outright menace (witness a superb cameo by Robert De Niro) without skipping a beat. A playful disclaimer as the movie opens tells us that "some of this actually happened," and it's fair to say that nostalgia is more the point here than historical accuracy. The dialogue is often the sort of snappy patter you'd expect in vintage screwball comedies and that's just fine. The plot is continuously surprising. You never know what to expect next, you can't wait, and more often than not you'll be wrong. .

Russell and his director of photography Linus Sandgren ("Promised Land") have shot this movie on film, some of it on 16 millimeter, which helps give it a distinct seventies vibe, as

much as the vintage soundtrack (largely disco-free) or the shots of people smoking in government offices.

There's virtually nothing to dislike here. David O. Russell is rapidly emerging as one of our most exciting directors, and here he has a smart script and an A-list cast doing great work. An absolute pleasure to watch, "American Hustle" is pretty much the best movie of the year.

**“American Hustle” will have advance screenings Thursday, December 19th, at The Regal Cinemas Clifton Park Stadium 10 & RPX at 7:00 PM and 10:10 PM, The Regal Cinemas Colonie Center Stadium 13 and The Regal Cinemas Crossgates Stadium 18 & IMAX at 7:00 PM and 10:15 PM, The Regal Cinemas East Greenbush 8 at 7:00 PM and 9:50 PM, the Spectrum 7 on Delaware Avenue in Albany at 7:00 PM and 9:40 PM and the Rotterdam Square Cinema at 7:00 PM. Regular schedules will commence December 20th. “American Hustle” will also be playing at the Bow Tie Cinemas Movieland in Schenectady beginning December 20th.**