

Movie Review: "The Hoax"

by David_Elliott

"The Hoax" contains a mention of Shakespeare and, while never at the bard's level, might have made the old master smile. It's a paranoid party about what fools we mortals be.

'THE HOAX' - Richard Gere portrays writer Clifford Irving and Julie Delpy is Danish singer Nina Van Pallandt in the drama 'The Hoax.' CNS Photo courtesy of Ken Regan.

Richard Gere plays Clifford Irving, the handsome (like Gere), suave (like Gere), slightly oozy (like Gere) writer who nearly pulled off the top literary larceny in a perfect season (the Nixon '70s). Expatriate Irving, having primed himself with a book on an Ibizan art forger, sought to fake the autobiography of mentally otherworldly billionaire Howard Hughes. And Hughes was in bed (all except literally) with another master paranoid, Richard M. Nixon.

Irving never met Hughes, but faked letters and signatures for his whopper book and did tons of research that he embellished. As presses rolled, he was ousted from his plush deal by the dismissive drawl of old HH himself, speaking by phone on TV. Lasse Hallstrom's film treats the whole mad circus with whippy urgency, and its spiraling mischief (which Irving did for money, but also ego and the joy of the game) becomes deeper, darker, wilder.

The result is gonzo without Hunter S. Thompson, and Hughesian without Hughes (except in photos, newsreels and Irving's increasingly loopy fantasies). Mythomaniac Hughes, given a bear hug by Martin Scorsese's "The Aviator," tweaked charmingly by "Melvin and Howard," becomes a jigsaw puzzle almost worthy of Orson Welles (who used Irving in his "F for Fake").

Scripter William Wheeler slyly crunched Irving's vivid memoir, eliminating Irving's turf on Ibiza. Irving's sweaty theft of a Library of Congress tome is transferred to associate Richard Suskind (Alfred Molina) at the Pentagon. Irving's lucky windfall on Hughes man Noah Dietrich gets zipped into a silly cameo for Eli Wallach. But shaved corners and curlicues are, of course, emphatically in sync with the Irving and Hughes playbooks.

Suskind is often comic relief, even as he frantically realizes his pal has wandered off weirdly into a Hughes theme park. Marcia Gay Harden is Edith, Irving's wife and key banking link for the scam. She loved Cliff despite his robust itch for Danish sex doll Nina van Pallandt (Julie Delpy), who yearned to be a movie star (and was briefly, in Robert Altman's "The Long Goodbye").

In a fine moment, Gere agrees that movie stardom is shallow. It is, truly, a koan from Hollywood's leading Buddhist icon. But this performance is not a snicker. Gere not only looks like Irving, he also worms into his hustling charisma. As the hoax spirals, we root for him to pull off the lies to suited stiff, though Hope Davis is touchingly human as the McGraw-Hill editor he first cons.

With an exciting backup group led by Molina, a breathless story drawn from something like history, and Hallstrom's hip mastery of the revels, Gere tops even his recent work in "Chicago" and "Dr. T and the Women." No longer the pretty man of "Pretty Woman," he uses sweaty sags and no-sweat nerves in a major portrait of a cockeyed fabulist.

Along with funny bits like "Don't throw money at me!" and the swell helicopter gambit, there is prime meat. Irving hated Nixon and thought his book might even bring down Hughes' White House pal. Hughes squelched the book, but Irving's flamboyant fakery greased the Watergate paranoia that became Dick's Last Trick. Go figure.

RATINGS4 STARS - Excellent.3 STARS - Worthy.2 STARS - Mixed.1 STAR - Poor.0 - Forget It (a dog) A Miramax Films release. Director: Lasse Hallstrom. Writer: William Wheeler. Cast: Richard Gere, Alfred Molina, Hope Davis, Marcia Gay Harden, Stanley Tucci, Julie Delpy. Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes. Rated R. 3 1/2 stars.

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