

Hollywood, Etc.: Gere tackles complex tale in 'The Hoax'

by David_Elliott

LOS ANGELES - "Richard Gere," explains a smiling Marcia Gay Harden, who plays Gere's wife in "The Hoax," is "a truly elegant man, especially off the set and in real life."

Over in his own hotel suite, Gere proves her right. The gentleman can't help it.

RICHARD GERE - Richard Gere portrays literary charlatan Clifford Irving in 'The Hoax.' CNS Photo courtesy of Ken Regan/Miramax Films While nursing a throat punished by a long press tour for the film, Gere is still Gere, like burnished bronze at 57. He wears a suavely black zip-up sweater that turtles his neck and is topped by a choppy crop of metal-gray hair.

Gere flourishes, decades after his acclaimed, sometimes nude Broadway performance in "Bent," many years since he gilded stardom by escorting Julia Roberts through "Pretty Woman," and a few years after praise and prizes came for his hoofing in "Chicago." The film musical put his name back in play as more than the world's most famous Methodist turned Buddhist ("not so great a stretch," he has said). Now he is '70s Howard Hughes memoir faker Clifford Irving in "The Hoax."

Its director, Lasse Hallstrom, calls working with Gere "the most fantastic time I've had with a male lead." They met via Hallstrom's wife, and past Gere co-star, Lena Olin. Without going through agents, the Swedish director ("My Life as a Dog") offered Bill Wheeler's canny script to Gere, who accepted pronto. He puts Hallstrom close to such now-gone masters as Robert Altman (for whom he Gered up in "Dr. T and the Women") and Akira Kurosawa ("Rhapsody in August").

"Like them, Lasse has," Gere says, measuring words as if decrypting them, "the ability to create an environment where people keep it real and human, allowing us the quirks that make us who we are. Even the Altman film was very scripted, yet had the illusion of being caught, improvised. This one was so firmly structured we just flew along with it."

"The Hoax" is a movie he is "delighted with, which, believe me, is not always true." Its back story was hazy to Gere until he had the script, then read Irving's post-jail book, "The Hoax." Smoothie Irving had conned his publisher (McGraw-Hill) into nearly putting out a brazen, tell-all "autobiography" of the reclusive billionaire, who squelched it by phone (and got Irving jail time) in a famous 1972 news conference.

"I do remember it," Gere says. "I had come to New York in 1970, after leaving school and doing a season in Provincetown and then at Seattle Rep. I was caught by how bizarre this was and what an elusive dream creature Hughes was. You may recall about a decade later they found the 'diary' of Hitler, another fake. But the Hughes caper was almost bigger than that."

Though "The Hoax" shows Irving's opus finally being burned, Gere has read the infamous work and is a fan:

"You should read it! Irving sells it online and it's really good. I don't know about the current legalities of it, but there's quality writing there. Cliff Irving is, most of all, a great raconteur.

"We shot mainly in New York for varied reasons, but we should have done much of it on Ibiza. That's where Irving held court for years. You see him in Orson Welles' 'F for Fake,' which captures that. Ibiza was like his ex-pat version of Hemingway's Havana. It had the rich, the poor, the drugged, the great art forger Elmyr de Hory, whom Irving wrote a book about, before Ibiza got overbuilt. Irving was a storyteller and Hughes became his ultimate salon story, his happening."

CHANNELING IRVING

Gere got his hair crinkled and waved, even insisted on the tiny, surgical bump-scar on Irving's nose. The true task was to act, imagine, Cliffordize Irving's interior, which became oddly umbilical with Hughes. Gere's analysis, with pauses:

"It all connected with his inner child. Emotionally, Irving was still a kid. ... One thing I like about the fake book is Irving talks a lot about how Hughes 'chose' him, though they never met. He felt he had somehow caught this famous guy's attention. ... He talks about how they were lonely kids who lost their dads as teens, both dreamers, constantly needing to keep on the move. It's intimate stuff, and well-written. His other books are more like throw-off B novels, sort of pulpy. He sent them all to me."

Curiously, neither Gere nor Hallstrom met Irving in person, though "I didn't want to meet him. We weren't doing a documentary. We had bigger game in our sights. We pushed it a bit, sort of like Irving did! We created a scene about him and his friend and hoax partner Richard Suskind (Alfred Molina) and the prostitutes."

Though Gere calls the story "essentially a sort of love story about Irving and Suskind, their deep friendship in this hoax," its core is Hughes, the flame of fame and fakery that Irving circles until it consumes him. How, in mighty HH's name, did Irving ever hope to get away with it?

Gere smiles, then coughs and pours himself a drink. Irving, he explains, mythologized himself through Hughes:

"Cliff aspired to literature, and the closest he came was the autobiography. He thought at some point it would all fall apart, and he'd just give the money back, then parlay that into another book about what happened. He thought the fraud, which had a lot of truth, would still stand on its own as good writing. And it does! But he was emotionally a kid, very naive."

What is the "bigger game" Gere mentioned? It is in Irving's having spilled (or tried to) the beans on Hughes' connection with then-President Richard Nixon. 'Round that hangs many a ribbon.

"I advised Miramax (Films) not to go the traditional route in selling this," recounts Gere. "It's not just one thing, about the hoax or Irving or Hughes. It's emotional and funny and very political. It resonates the whole theme of how lies pervade our world, now with Iraq and the war on terror, with top people clearly lying and causing deaths in the thousands.

"What could be more relevant? We premiered the movie at the Rome festival in October, and the politics came up very fast. Without prompting."

Indeed, the hoax scandal was probably a hot tip of a deep and dirty iceberg. "Irving was a Democrat," Gere explains, "and against the war (Vietnam). In his Hughes digging he stumbled on more than he expected. I wanted to be sure that what we posit on film is credible, that the Watergate break-in was prompted in part by White House need to find what the Democrats knew about Irving's Hughes' revelations on Nixon.

"Well, it's in (H.R.) Haldeman's book, and I believe in (Gordon) Liddy's book, also John Dean's. Nick Pileggi confirmed it to me with, 'Yeah, everyone knows this.' Irving even told our producer, 'When I was in Danbury prison, two guys, minor Watergate 'plumbers' who were sent there, came up to me and said, 'You're the reason we're in jail.' But they didn't blame Irving."

For Gere, a married (to actress Carey Lowell) man and father (son Homer, 7, named for Richard's dad), whose work against AIDS and for Tibet has remade his image, "The Hoax" is another commitment:

"The power of the film is in showing political and personal damage. As just a caper it's fun, but fairly thin. But you have Irving betraying his best friend to keep him in line. He lied a lot, including to his wife, which put him in a new level of hell. He became paranoid and was hallucinating and had a mad urge to double-down his bets.

"Here he is, stuck again in lies, can he get out of it? Yes he can! Until he couldn't. But it starts to worry us when we can't tell just how much is real, how much is in his head. There are reality-check moments, like

getting trapped in the stairwell with Dick, in a panic, and Dick says, 'I have to pee!' Who cannot identify?"

Though Irving has been jittery and faintly jeering about aspects of the film, Gere knows "The Hoax" may be his best. "This one is incredible," he avows proudly. "It could have been a cartoonish story or a dry bio-pic, but Lasse and Bill found just the right tone to keep it vital. And top talents came on board for small money, like Marcia Gay to play Edith Irving, and Stanley Tucci as a tough guy, and Julie Delpy with just a few scenes as Nina, Clifford's mistress.

"As an actor, you want to match that level of commitment. And you can't fake it."

Not even as a faker.

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