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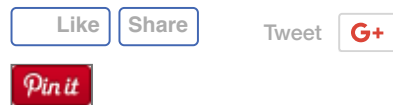


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THE HOAX

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By *Erica Abeel* ([Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93)) Mar 29, 2007



Reviews

Based on Clifford Irving's book about his own exploits, *The Hoax* relates how he sold a phony "autobiography" of Howard Hughes to McGraw Hill, almost pulling off one of the great media scams in memory. Pacey and entertaining, it's anchored by a zesty turn from Richard Gere, and it deftly evokes, through music and news clips, the early '70s of Nixon and anti-war protests, when Irving made his devil's pact. The film might have felt dated--who, after all, still knows about Irving? --yet talks to us today because of striking parallels between Nixon-era lies and political unrest and our current brand of disinformation. Miramax, though, may have a marketing challenge on its hands in presenting a scurrilous swindler we almost--but can't quite--root for.

According to William Wheeler's screenplay, the idea to write a fraudulent "as told to" about Howard Hughes was born of a high-living writer's sweaty desperation, after McGraw Hill dumped the novel he submitted. Almost as a childish boast, Irving announces he's working on the book of the century--then must scramble to deliver. He convinces his publisher, chilly Andrea Tate (Hope Davis), that the reclusive Hughes, who hasn't been in contact with the press in 15 years, has tapped him to co-author his memoir.

Aided by his sidekick, the writer Dick Suskind (Alfred Molina), Irving filches the tell-all notes of dotty old Noah Dietrich (Eli Wallach), formerly Hughes' chief of staff, weaving them into own account. We wait, of course, for the whole scam to collapse in on itself. But for a time Irving keeps ahead, *Catch Me If You Can*-style, of his justifiably suspicious publishers: He produces forged handwriting samples from "Howard," which fool the handwriting experts; arranges for Suskind to place bogus phone calls from Hughes; and finally goads the publisher into forking over a cool

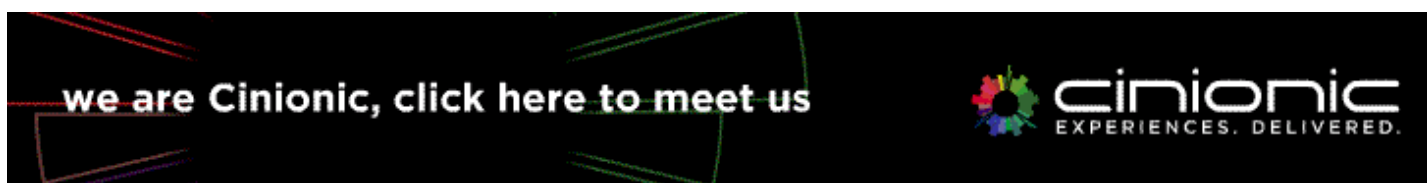
million to Hughes for his story--money which Irving's wife Edith (Marcia Gay Harden) deposits into a Swiss bank account. In the amped-up third act, events become scrambled and hard to follow, as Irving starts to hallucinate his own punishment, while in the larger world Nixon is poised to break into Watergate.

The Hoax certainly surpasses the lame *The Shipping News*--but too bad that director Lasse Hallström has succumbed to that hyper, fast-forward style of filmmaking currently in vogue, which assumes that viewers all suffer from Attention Deficit Disorder. I mean, slow down, guys! Nor does the script ever really plumb the mysterious heart of one man's hubris: What made Irving imagine he could get away with it? How did he sleep at night? What was he thinking?

Raising the glamour quotient, the action is seasoned with news clips of the handsome, elusive Hughes, radiating power from unknown parts. At times you root for Irving as the little guy pitting his wits against Goliath. And Hallström deftly lampoons the McGraw Hill crowd, led by Stanley Tucci, their faces a comical battleground for suspicion warring with greed. Best of all, Gere has poured himself into the persona of womanizing, magnetic Clifford Irving (even resembling him physically), pumped by the need to improvise and stay ahead of the pack gaining ground behind him. Redeeming himself after the dreadful *Bee Season*, Gere delivers a savory portrait of an unsavory figure.

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