

HOW PHILLY WORKS

*Philly Hustle: You Can't Make this S**t Up*

People in Hollywood are no dummies. When they want to make a film about a political corruption scandal, they know where to go.

Yes, our beloved Philadelphia inspired a movie that's being touted as an early Oscar favorite. It stars Bradley Cooper, Amy Adams, Christian Bale, Jeremy Renner and last year's Best Actress Oscar-winner Jennifer Lawrence. And is loosely based on an undercover FBI sting operation that landed a number of PA and N.J. politicians in jail. Rittenhouse Square's Barclay Hotel played a prominent role.

The movie is called *American Hustle*. And it opens in theaters today.

Frankly, we're a little disappointed the script doesn't stick to the real facts – which are pretty wild. So we thought we'd write a **HOW PHILLY WORKS** to explain what actually happened. Keep reading. There are no spoilers.

--December 20, 2013

Sounds vaguely familiar.

Maybe hearing the details will jog your memory. The scandal has a famous name: Abscam.

Ah...it's coming back to me. Strange name for an FBI operation...

"Abscam" is a contraction of "Abdul" and "scam." Convicted con-man/FBI informant Melvin Weinberg (played by Christian Bale) and undercover FBI agents (the Bradley Cooper character is a composite of them) conducted a sting operation (that's the "scam" part) by posing as representatives of two wealthy Arab sheiks operating through a phony company called Abdul Enterprises to make money in the U.S. The operation originally sought to recover stolen artwork but shifted course when the FBI learned of elected officials willing to take bribes for political favors.

Were there ever real "sheiks?"

No. "Sheiks" showed up on some videotapes taken by secret cameras, but "they" were played by several different FBI agents.

Videotapes?

Abscam dates back to 1978-1980 – long before the days of Blu-ray and YouTube.

Who took the bait?

Nineteen people were convicted, including a number of elected officials from this area: a U.S. Senator from New Jersey (Harrison "Pete" Williams, Jr.), three U.S. Congressmen (Michael "Ozzie" Myers, who represented a part of Philadelphia, Raymond Lederer, a once-state House member from



Philly whose Congressional district was in Northwestern PA, and N.J. U.S. Representative Frank Thompson), a mayor of Camden and also N.J. state Senator (Angelo Errichetti), and three Philadelphia City Council members (Council President George X. Schwartz, Council Majority Leader Harry Jannotti and Louis Johanson).

Guess it was pretty wild. Give me the details.

Abscam spawned lots of side stories involving sex, drugs and violence – far too many to describe here. We’ll give you a brief overview of the actual scandal, starting with the colorful mayor of Camden, Angelo Errichetti (who the Jeremy Renner character is based on). He and a N.J. Casino Control Commission official were convicted of taking \$125,000 after promising to help Abdul Enterprises get a casino license in just-open-for-gambling Atlantic City. He was sentenced to six years in prison for bribery and conspiracy.

What about Williams and Thompson?

Both were convicted of bribery and conspiracy and sentenced to three years in jail. In Williams’ case, it was for promising to use his Senate power to facilitate the purchase of a dormant titanium mine in Virginia – in which (as it turned out) he had a financial interest. The connection to Abscam? He believed the sheik was willing to invest \$100,000. Thompson took a share of \$100,000 from the undercover FBI agents for agreeing to help with what they said were immigration problems.

Who got busted from PA?

Myers and Lederer were filmed accepting \$50,000 each in exchange for trying to ease the way for the fake sheiks to immigrate to the U.S. It was Myers who uttered the legendary words – “You’re going about this the right way...in this business, money talks and bulls**t walks” – as he stuffed cash into his pockets. The two Congressmen were also convicted on bribery and conspiracy and sentenced to three years in jail.

Dare I ask what took down the City Council members?

This is where the Barclay Hotel comes in. Council President Schwartz and Council Majority Leader Jannotti were secretly video and audio-taped inside the Barclay offering to help two men representing a sheik build a luxury hotel in Philly. Schwartz said he could introduce them to others in Council. For his \$30,000 take, Schwartz was convicted of racketeering and extortion and sentenced to a year and a day in jail. Jannotti got a sentence of six month for extortion. (He later came back into politics as a city Democratic ward leader.)

And Johanson?

Councilman Johanson was convicted of bribery and sentenced to three years in prison for taking part of the \$50,000 given to Myers.

I suppose many of those caught had a number of excuses for their behavior...

Some defendants claimed that *they* were actually doing a sting operation, and that the FBI had sabotaged the whole thing. Myers (backed up by his wife) said he was so drunk he couldn’t be held responsible. The most common defense was “entrapment.”



What is entrapment?

We'll take a definition directly from one of the Abscam-related federal court rulings: "Defendants argue that [the fictitious sheik] scenario induced them to participate in criminal events they otherwise would not have engaged in, simply because absent the Government's actions they would not have had the opportunity to do so - at least with this sheik." Most of the Abscam defendants continued to proclaim their innocence long after they were sentenced.

Tell me more about Weinberg.

According to a recent story in the U.K.'s *Telegraph*, Weinberg's life as a scammer got started when he sold footless socks to cold commuters who didn't have time to examine them. After moving on to more sophisticated schemes, he was finally arrested for running a fake investment firm in Western PA. Then he made an offer the FBI couldn't refuse: Keep me out of jail and I'll be your informant. Weinberg was paid \$150,000 for his role in Abscam.

Did he live happily ever after?

Interviewed by the *Chicago Tribune* in 1985, Weinberg said he was legit: "I've got scams going all the time—they're legal, though." He now lives in Florida and is still making money. He told the *Telegraph* that the production company behind *American Hustle* paid him \$250,000 for the rights to his story. And he got to meet Christian Bale. He did have one complaint about the movie: "I'm wearing a green jacket in one scene. I wouldn't be seen dead in a green jacket. Wise guys dress in dark clothes. It's just how you dress."

Was *American Hustle* filmed here?

No. According to the news service *Capitolwire*, Bradley Cooper (who hails from Philly) and Director David Russell reached out to state officials for \$4.5 million in tax credits to make the film here. Governor Corbett wouldn't meet with them. Apparently a deal was offered later, but it wasn't sweet enough. The movie was mostly filmed in Boston.

Abscam happened way back there. Are any of these crooked pols still around?

Errichetti just died last May. Most of the others are long gone. Old "Ozzie" Myers is still kicking though, and we'd love to know what he thinks of the movie.

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