

## Stocks and Stoned: "The Wolf of Wall Street"

Written by Mike Schulz

Sunday, 29 December 2013 20:20

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### **THE WOLF OF WALL STREET**

*The Wolf of Wall Street* is Martin Scorsese's three-hour black comedy about the grotesquely indulgent life of felonious stock trader Jordan Belfort, and Leonardo DiCaprio gives a ferociously alert performance as the title character, even when, in a scene of perfectly executed physical slapstick, a Quaalude high gone wrong leaves him nearly, and hilariously, immobile. The movie is filled with memorable set pieces and blisteringly profane dialogue, and several supporting actors – Kyle Chandler and Matthew McConaughey especially – are in utterly spectacular form. There's filmmaking energy, even bravado, on display in just about every scene. And after dozens of releases in a career spanning more than four decades, it's the first Scorsese picture that I've ever actively hated.

That, at least, was my initial feeling upon leaving the auditorium three nights ago, and that feeling has only grown in vehemence in the days since. While actually watching *The Wolf of Wall Street* though, I felt less hatred toward the film than a concentrated dislike. Telling of Belfort's meteoric rise – and, almost incidentally, his fall from "grace" – in a late-'80s world of fraudulent stock tips and shady investment deals, Scorsese's latest spends its first two hours reveling in the ludicrously grand excesses of Jordan and his company's cohorts: the cars, the clothes, the homes, the whores, the blow, and the other trappings essential to Wall Street tyros living in service to the almighty dollar. And while it seemed to me that, during these hours, Scorsese's comedy was just one note being pounded on a piano over and over ("Look at what funny douchebags these guys are!"), there was at least some vigor behind the presentational sameness. Based on Belfort's bestselling memoir, Terence Winter's script featured some sharp,

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biting humor – particularly in the scene that found Jonah Hill (playing Belfort's chief ally Donnie Azoff) making a dismaying argument in favor of marrying his first cousin – and Scorsese elicited a terrific portrayal from McConaughey, whose (unfortunately) cameo-sized role wholly demonstrated the enticing, ephemeral allure of a life lived

*sans*

moral compass.

Plus, there were plenty of additional perks: a lucid storytelling structure that showed, in easily digestible brushstrokes, the upward (downward?) trajectory of Belfort's tiny Long Island brokerage firm; Cristin Miloti's sweet, empathetic turn as Belfort's sensible first wife Teresa; the hints of forthcoming, juicy retribution when Chandler's incorruptible FBI agent Patrick Denham, with an aw-shucks grin, listened to Belfort's practiced BS aboard the man's yacht. Through it all, though, I kept finding myself getting more and more restless waiting for a *point*. Maybe one wasn't needed for the significant portion of viewers who hooted their approval every time Belfort and company swindled suckers over the phone, or made manic shows of their copious spending habits, or enjoyed booze-, drug-, and sex-fueled office parties seemingly hosted by Caligula himself. But for the rest of us – and we appeared to be just as significant a percentage – the early laughter slowly but unmistakably soured. Why was no attention being paid, in any real way, to points of view beyond those of the movie's young, straight, rich, white, male assholes? (How do the female traders at Belfort's firm feel about the ceaseless parade of hookers seen routinely servicing the staff?) Why was the film so long when so many of its scenes – such as the one in which Belfort's money-crazed second wife (Margot Robbie) accidentally walks in on a gay bacchanal taking place in her living room – serve no function beyond generically "deviant" titillation? Couldn't at least a few of them have been axed? Why were we being presented with a protagonist who was not only criminally lacking in self-awareness, but whose cash-guzzling exploits the director glorifies, even celebrates, to the point of absurdity? Why, in short, why was Scorsese bothering to make a movie about Jordan Belfort at all? (No one makes a three-hour comedy, after all, without also having Something to Say.)



I would like to report that the answer came in hour three, after the FBI began pressuring Belfort and his pals to turn on one another and (to borrow a cliché uttered by Belfort's father, played here by Rob Reiner) the chickens finally come home to roost. Yet *The Wolf of Wall Street's* final third – excepting that admittedly riotous sequence with the 'ludes – is actually its most maddening one. Partly this is because the already wildly heightened emotionalism turns irrevocably piercing and shrill; forced to up the ante on their characters' desperate mental states, DiCaprio, Hill, Robbie, and others are given no choice but to aim for higher and higher (and more and more unconvincing) states of panicked hysteria. Partly it's because, when all is said and done, you realize that Belfort just isn't

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*interesting*

enough for any of the climactic legal and ethical consequences to have much effect. He has a brief brush with mortality during a tumultuous oceanic expedition but, despite a quick detour toward the straight and narrow, he never really learns anything, and never gains enough strength of character to suggest what was conceivably lost amidst his consequence-free existence.

But mostly, at least for my time and money, it's because Scorsese and Winter appear so firmly on the side of Belfort – or perhaps merely on the side of DiCaprio and his unquestionable screen charisma – that they find it necessary to implicate *us* in his downfall, and with that, in the implied downfall of America. Aboard that yacht, Belfort tells Denham that while the FBI man may detest him, he also secretly envies his wealth and status, a theory that Scorsese and Winter underline during the agent's sad ride home on a subway train. (At what should be his greatest moment of victory, Denham stares with regret at the poor, equally disenfranchised souls he's surrounded by.) And not to give away the kicker, but the movie's final shot – although set in New Zealand and not the United States – is an obvious condemnation of the American sucker-class, those clueless potential investors who, the filmmakers imply, are the reason that monsters such as Jordan Belfort exist. After continually goading us with the comic horrors of heedless consumption, the film, in its final scenes, turns depressingly moralistic, as though it were saying, "You're to blame for our current financial crisis, because you want money just as badly as these bastards did." (Way to kill the party, Marty.) According to *The Wolf of Wall Street*, we're all shit, and deserve what we've gotten. The movie may be an indictment, but by insistently demanding our laughter and subsequently chiding us for it, it's also a total crock.

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