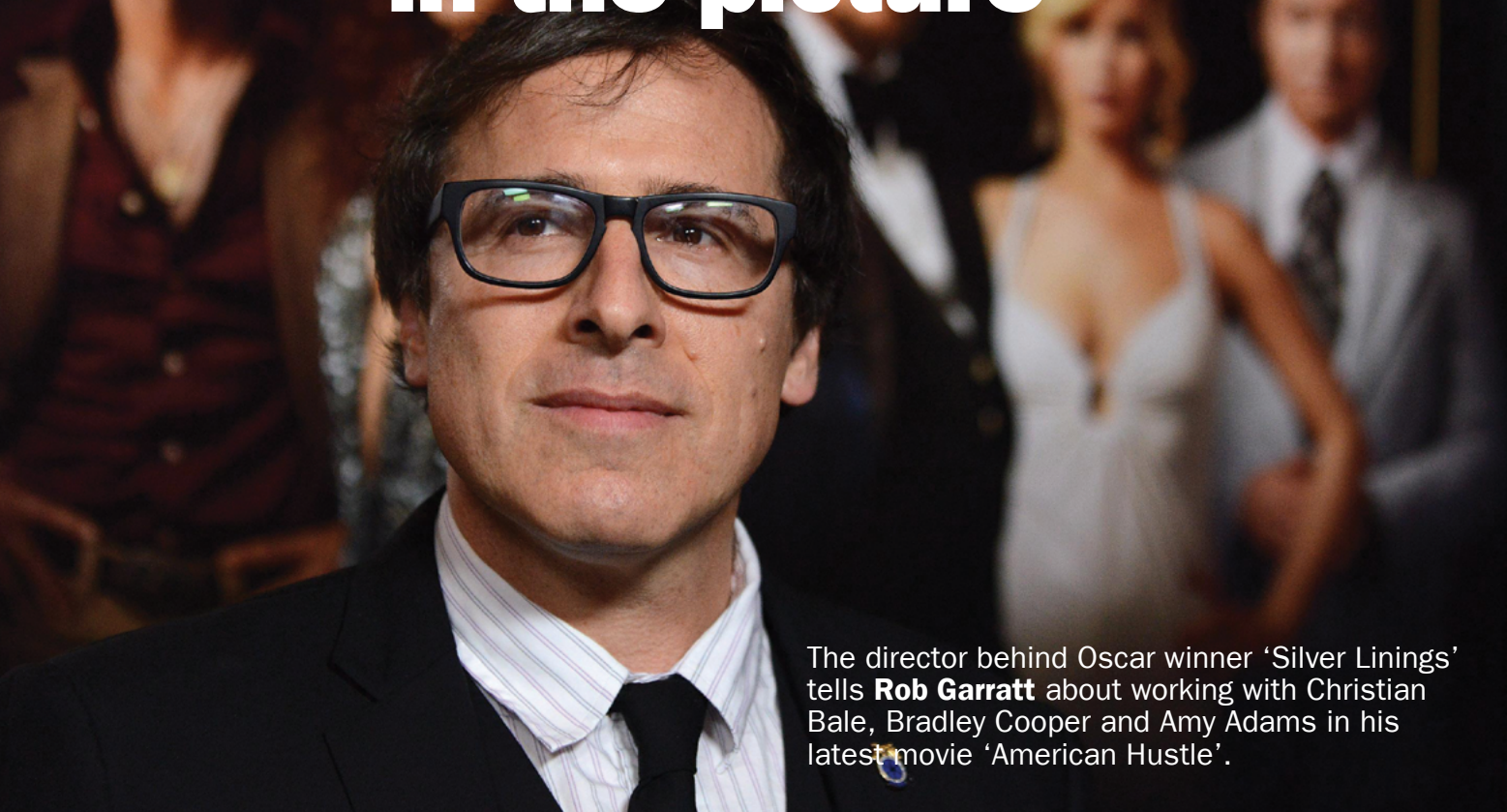


David O Russell: “I want to love everything in the picture”



The director behind Oscar winner ‘Silver Linings’ tells **Rob Garratt** about working with Christian Bale, Bradley Cooper and Amy Adams in his latest movie ‘American Hustle’.

David O Russell might be the hottest director in Hollywood right now. Coming out of a seven-year break from movies the New York director scored seven Oscar nominations (and two wins) with 2010’s ‘The Fighter’, then followed this with eight nominations (and one win) for last year’s ‘Silver Linings Playbook’. His latest, black crime comedy ‘American Hustle’, has already picked up seven Golden Globe nominations and was named the year’s best film by the New York Film Critics Circle, and is tipped to clear up at the Academy Awards. Each of the three movies is on the surface a genre flick – boxing movie, rom-com, real life crime – but to O Russell they form a conceptual triptych, the director returning from the long break since 2004’s ‘I Heart Huckabees’ with a new and more mature style and approach, a fresh focus on character and detail.

For ‘American Hustle’, a highly fictionalised take on the FBI’s botched Abscam sting operation of the late ’70s

and early ’80s, O Russell has assembled a stellar cast of familiar faces. Christian Bale and Amy Adams play a fiery con artist couple who are recruited by Bradley Cooper’s hyperactive government agent to help bring down politicians, including Jeremy Renner’s Mayor of Camden, New Jersey, and mobsters. Prior to the movie’s international premiere at the Dubai International Film Festival we sat down with O Russell, and found the 55-year-old to be every inch the NYC filmmaker; dressed in a three-piece suit and dark-rimmed glasses, at turns precise and intellectual, at others airy and artistic. But always the auteur is utterly in command of the conversation, much as he commands his actors on screen.

Following the tremendous success of your last two movies – ‘The Fighter’, and ‘Silver Linings Playbook’ – what was it that drew you to Eric Warren Singer’s script, and the Abscam story in general?

Eric wrote a wonderful script, Eric is

a terrific writer. I was drawn by the characters, I’m doing the thing I started to do which I think all my filmmaking and life has led me to and prepared me for. It’s really three movies deep now. Those characters are hard to find, and you usually need a doozy of a predicament. So ‘The Fighter’ is a doozy of a predicament, where it’s a mob of sisters, one half of the family opposed to the other half, the brother – it’s very interesting. And ‘Silver Linings’, a novel that was very personal, that I adapted because I have a son that I have raised that has those [mental health] issues. De Niro has also faced that in his family, so I adapted that to make it more personal. This, I just loved the characters, I’m from that area, the Abscam thing is a doozy of a predicament that I see as a way to serve these characters so that I can be with them. And see them in their bedrooms and how they love and how they aspire and try to survive – that’s why I wanted to make the movie. So I said if I can rewrite this as I’ve done these previous two movies,

then I would love to come do it with Eric's permission. I created the characters for each actor. I would go to their homes and speak to Christian [Bale], and what interested Christian and I thematically about the character [of Irving] was [that] the character is kind of like a director or an actor, he's kind of an artist, he's a very meticulous passionate person. Not simply a rip-off artist, that didn't really interest either of us, as much as him being a person who loves his women, loves his kid, he loves life, he loves Duke Ellington... there's a lot he loves about life.

Irving is very much the beating human heart of the movie.

Of course, it starts with Irving, that's why we start with him fixing his hair – which we saw again as a thematic thing, not just him doing his hair, it was a metaphor really for whatever everybody does. Everybody has to assume [an image] – you made your hair a certain way, you got those glasses, you got that jacket – you decide how you're going to present yourself. And sometimes you decide to change that, you think: I don't know who I want to be, or who I am. And meanwhile you're trying to read me, and read other people – that's what's interested us, that dynamic of people that change, and how they try to connect or discontent, and the passion in the middle of all that. Richie – the character of Bradley Cooper – Richie was almost enchanted by these two con artists [Irving and Sydney], he loved them, he wanted to be more like them. He was out in Brooklyn with his mum and with his fiancé [while] they had something magical going on. So he fell in love

with her and he wanted to learn what Irving did, because Irving was really cool. Irving had a confidence and a way, like a theatre director, or a painter or something.

You just said you worked on the script and built the characters with the cast. So you would go to Christian's, and Bradley's, and Amy's, and write their parts specifically for them?

Yes, I would go their homes and talk to them, and write what I believed was the best character for them. I wanted to deliver something that I feel is worthy of them and their time. And, I have to deliver on what I said to them: I said you're going to get to do a fantastic character, and I have to make that happen.

It an incredible cast, the majority of who you've directed before, but they are each very different talents – particularly Christian and Bradley. How did you approach working with each of them differently, and was there any competition between the two?

Everybody's very collaborative on these movies, they're all very generous spirited, but I think being around each other had a healthy competitiveness – for me too, in that we all wanted to do better, because we were all around each other. It was very exciting for us all to be together. So Jennifer [Lawrence] was excited to be with Christian who was excited to be with Amy, and Bradley to be with Christian and Jeremy, it was all very exciting – and then to have De Niro... So they're very

different in that Christian is sort of a creature who lives in his own way and inhabits people in this waking dream. He calls it a waking dream and that's what I aspire to do with every actor, is to have them sort of trance out, or go into [what] Jennifer calls a high; Bradley and I call it a trance, and you go into an altered place



I created the characters for each actor

where you become another person and we don't stop shooting until the mag of film – we shoot film, it was the last available Fuji film – runs out. So they get into a rhythm of doing the scene where you kind of forget that you're doing a scene. And that's what I look for.

And Bradley?

Bradley is... extremely passionate and very smart, and he works in a very different way. He's fearless, he'll try anything and do anything. We discovered these things... it was interesting for him because I think it's one of his first transformational roles, where he really became more different than he had on 'Silver Linings'. When we introduced him in 'Silver Linings' we came up [filming] his back, and he's talking to himself, muttering, and I wanted people to think "who is that?" And when we looked in his eyes, I wanted them to think who is that. They couldn't recognise him from the eyes, because it wasn't the Bradley Cooper they knew. So this picture he went even farther, he started to pick up traits. He knew someone in his family who chewed his tongue so he chewed his tongue as a nervous thing, and then set his jaw [which] gave him a weird look, and he started to hunch a little bit, and he walked different,



With Bradley Cooper

and we just fell in love with this guy Richie who has an innocence. He's kind of like a boy but a man who's innocent, and wants to do big things, but he's kind of naive. He's kind of sweet in a way, but he's also like a teenage boy, out there, so that was really... operatic in a way. I think of the film as a little more operatic. Christian said that when people go to sleep every night they get to live an opera, of all their emotions and desires, and so acting is a waking opera, and I feel like that's what we were doing with the music and the characters. So it's okay for me that they're big charters because I find that they're doing things that I relate to, in a bigger way.

How did Jeremy fit into it, as the new guy?

Jeremy's fantastic, because Jeremy's a very authentic person, who has the feel of a local Jersey guy even though he's not from there. I like casting against type. He is a very much more emotionally contained person in real life. He looked at me in the middle of production and said 'this person is the opposite of who I am.' This guy wears his heart on his sleeve. He's big, emotional, and open to everybody around him. And it was really wonderful to watch him do that. Because it was uncomfortable for him for about half the picture, I think – and he did it. And he sang! His 'Delilah – the song he picked, I had a different song – and 'Delilah' is the perfect song. I love seeing him sing passionately, warmly, I don't think he's been seen like this in

pictures. He usually plays a cold badass. This guy's got range – I love that's he's got that intensity, but he can also be warm, and sweet, just like Christian, the only collaboration that makes him so intense yet also warm and funny and vulnerable. I love working with him, to be the one who gets him to do that. I think that's... fucking romantic – he's romantic, and even with the way he looks, women find him sexy.

In the film much is made about the difference between the authentic and the fake, or "the con". Can a fake be as a good as the real thing, if you don't know it's a fake?

A painting can be...

And an experience, a perception...?

They get to be pretty close sometimes. For example, if I pretend to cry with you – and I'll tell actors this – I can actually start crying, that can happen to me, and I think that can happen to actors too. So that's why you must be careful. Kurt Vonnegut once said "you must be very careful what you pretend to be, because you will become who you pretend to be"[sic]. So that's where something you're pretending actually becomes real. So, when Irving is pretending to be the friend of the Mayor, he becomes the friend of the Mayor. And when Amy's pretending to like Bradley, there a period where she really likes him,

and it's kind of fucked up for her, and she is confused by that. So that's interesting to me. And I think when you go to work every day and you have to get through it and put on a persona with your relationships at

home and at work, sometimes your marriage is gliding by on survival mode until it finds that rhythm again or that passion again. It's a survival thing, you can't always be in the zone. So that's what interested me, and Christian, when we were in his backyard, how everybody has to do that. And you can wake up and say: I've been kidding myself, and that can be a bad thing. Or you can wake up and say: I tricked myself into writing

a screenplay, by aspiring to write for these actors. That's a good thing, I made myself do that.

You've just made three incredibly well-received movies in four years, following a seven year gap from your last picture...

The gap is what made it possible. I kind of got lost. I lost my feel for story, I was in my head too much, I went through a lot of stuff with my son who I had to help out, I got divorced... but it was human and good for me because I came back from a very raw, humble place which made me want to tell these stories about these people.

That made everything very clear to me. Probably getting older did too, you just get to it, and mean it. Mean it and love it. I want to love everything in the picture, I want to be exhilarated by it. Even if it's fucked up, I want there to be something beautiful in it. So [now] people get a sense of what I'm trying to do, they know now there's a thing that we're doing. Because they can point to now three other movies and go 'this is the kind of thing that he does'.

Over the past three movies you've worked with nearly all your lead actors more than once. Which of the 'American Hustle' cast are you most likely to work with again?

That's a good question for me to answer – I can't say that to all my children. I would be so lucky to work with any of them again and again, and I will aspire to write for them again and again, and have great loyalty to all of them. And it's a luxury – that's a problem I would like to have. When people say "well what if people don't know which character to like more, or which performer to like more?" I say: That's a problem I would like to have.



That's what's interested us, that dynamic of people that change



American Hustle opens **Jan 17**