



Richard Gere
and Julie Delpy
in *The Hoax*

Committed

Richard Gere as the liar who just wouldn't quit

THE HOAX: Directed by Lasse Hallström. Written by William Wheeler, based upon the book by Clifford Irving. Cinematography, Oliver Stapleton. Music, Carter Burwell. Starring Richard Gere, Alfred Molina, Hope Davis, Marcia Gay Harden, Julie Delpy and Stanley Tucci. Miramax Films, 2007. R. 115 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

Richard Gere has a lot of nerve. For years, Gere has been showing up to work in essentially the same set of clothes, as if merely looking good in them entitled him to a career. Few actors perform with such smug disregard for the variety and challenges of their profession, let alone commit themselves to a single persona: the brooding, prickly, successful (or soon to be successful) alpha male. Exceptions to this rule, like the classic *Days of Heaven* and the popular *An Officer and a Gentleman*, showed a hungrier side to Gere, but he's settled into portrayals of white-collar man-prizes for the better part of two decades now. He's so perfected the perfectly dull capitalist winner that, to my mind, he's been daring us to abandon him. Which makes Gere's phenomenal performance in *The Hoax* all the more frustrating and beguiling.

Directed by Lasse Hallström, who emerged from Swedish cinema with *My Life as a Dog* and followed with *Chocolat* and *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*, *The Hoax* is about the real-life Clifford Irving (Gere), a natural-born storyteller who engineered a massive literary fraud. In 1970, following the rejection of his novel, Irving claimed (and forged the documents to support) a professional relationship with Howard Hughes, who was then as well-known as Bill Gates, Jr., but as reclusive as J.D. Salinger. Claiming to be Hughes's biographer, Irving wrote and McGraw-Hill published an "authorized" version of the billionaire's life, an act so audaciously, impossibly inventive it would demand admiration were the whole thing not so criminal.

By himself, Gere propels the film like few actors can — I thought I saw DeNiro in a few of Gere's outbursts — but *The Hoax* also rewards us with several fine supporting performances, notably by Alfred Molina as Dick Susskind, Irving's best friend and researcher. Molina, who can play dark and tormented with ease, is refreshing as the sweet and slightly dopey sidekick. He's the conscience Irving doesn't have. You can almost see Dick's tail wagging as he follows Irving from one place to the next, but when Irving kicks him one time too many, you know that Irving is done for. People are defined by how they treat the weak, a fact Irving can't appreciate until it's too late. Similarly, Irving's wife Edith (Marcia Gay Harden) pays a terrible price for supporting him. Irving's fraud even scorches his agent, Andrea Tate (Hope Davis), who really should have known better.

But somehow, we're pulling for Irving all along. That's the magic of *The Hoax*: Irving is so good at lying that any hint of a method is absent. Lying is who he is. It's what he does. Do we blame a victim of Tourette's or get him help? *The Hoax* is about a lie that's so improbable it's believable, a lie that gets better with each telling until the liar can't turn it off, not even to the faces of the people he loves. There are some odd angles to *The Hoax* — including, strangely, more wigs than Westminster Palace, even a case of wig-upon-wig — and as Irving unravels, you'll sense a nod to *A Beautiful Mind*. I'm still confused about Irving's motivation, a matter on which *The Hoax* essentially is a vacuum. But Gere's performance is so uninhibited, so crackling with electricity, that you almost don't notice how wafer-thin the plot feels at times. Gere is a massive steadying force in *The Hoax*. This isn't your mother's Richard Gere, and all of us should be thankful for that.

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