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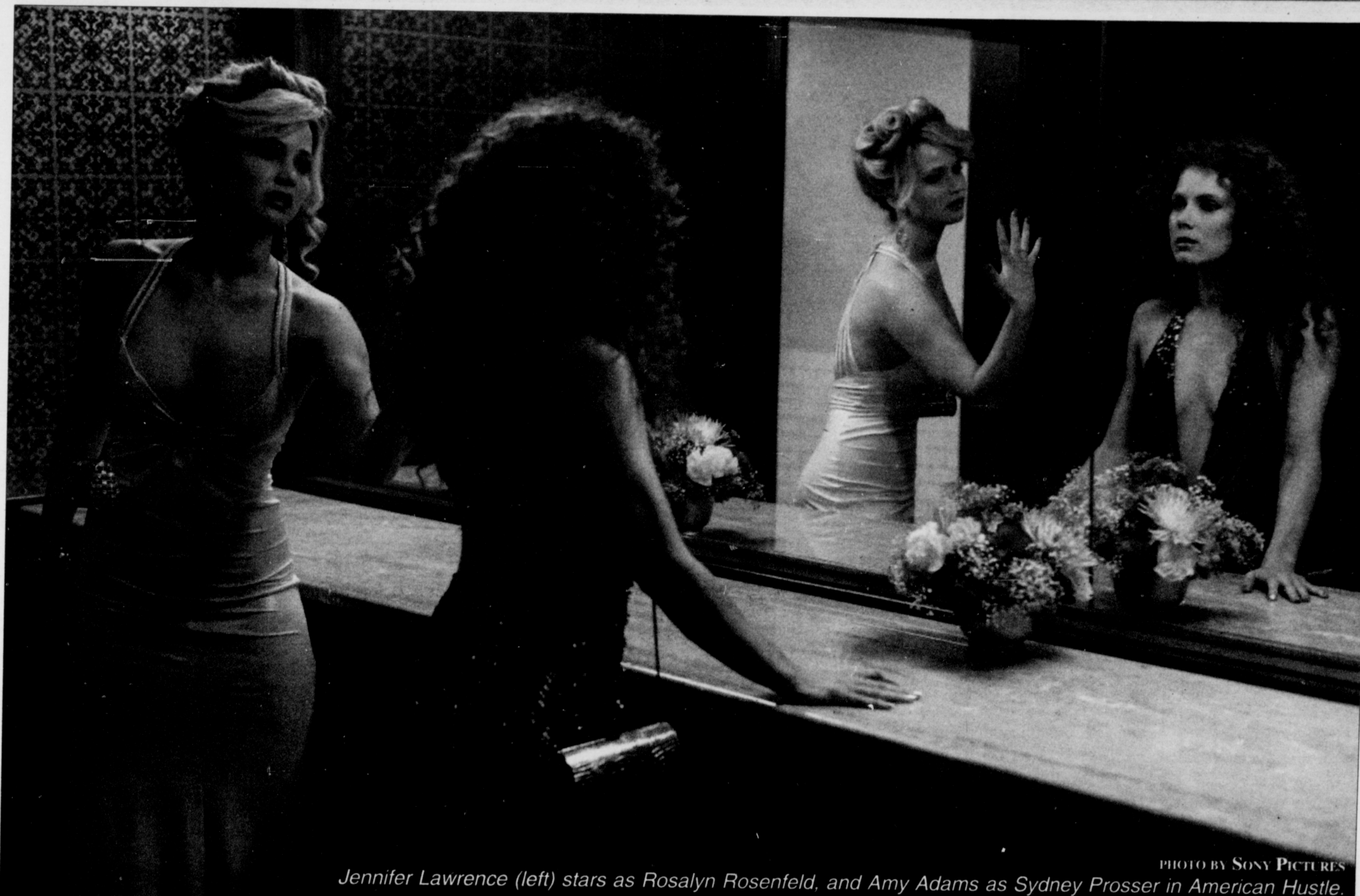


PHOTO BY SONY PICTURES
Jennifer Lawrence (left) stars as Rosalyn Rosenfeld, and Amy Adams as Sydney Prosser in American Hustle.

Exactly Right

OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY JUDGE
DARLEEN ORTEGA



'American Hustle' delivers on laughs, characters and fashions

BY DARLEEN ORTEGA

Director David O. Russell has, in previous films, shown a talent for capturing scenes of interpersonal chaos; he clearly finds people endlessly fascinating and knows how to capture explosions of a kind more commonly experienced than those you'd see in a typical war or violent crime movie.

It is, to my mind, a problematic gift; the opportunity to watch someone display mad acting skills may not feel like enough reason to subject audiences to family dysfunction or mental illness, especially for those of us whose families already give us access to more than we can tolerate for free. Russell's films are al-

ways watchable, but his last two derailed a bit; "The Fighter" set up a very perceptive story about persistent and destructive family dynamics and then solved them too easily, and "Silver Linings Playbook" exploited its insights about mental illness by devolving into a romantic story that suggested that crazy can be downright cute.

Finally, though, Russell has found exactly the right balance. "American Hustle" is a positively rollicking blend of comedy, outrageous characters and fashions, an entertaining sort-of-true crime story, and some very astute observations about what motivates human behavior and about American society. It's

destined for my list of the best films of 2013.

The story is built out of the elements of "Abscam," a famously outlandish FBI sting operation from the 1970s, in which a small-time con man helped the feds take down a cadre of corrupt politicians with an elaborate scheme involving a fake Arab sheik.

"Some of this actually happened," the film asserts early on -- but Russell and his co-writer are not aiming for a strictly historical account. For them, the guts of that story serve as a vehicle for exploring the idea of the con as a ubiquitous aspect of American society. In this story, everyone is scamming everyone else,

including themselves.

No one understands this better than Irving Rosenfeld (Christian Bale, packing an additional 50 pounds for the role). As portrayed here, Irving is a successful con man because he has made a study of dissembling and can see it happening all around him. He works every angle with the care and confidence of a professional, and he understands the importance of noticing what people want to believe, and of keeping his operation small.

Irving has achieved modest success with this method, assisted by his girl-

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