

# VANITY FAIR

## ***Arbitrage* Director Nicholas Jarecki on Bernie Madoff, Wall Street's “Cocaine Eyes,” and the Film’s V.F. Connection**

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The Sundance Film Festival has a reputation for slow-paced independent dramas, which is why when the rare, well-executed thriller pops up on the Park City premiere schedule, it generates a lot of buzz. This year, festival-goers were lucky enough to enjoy one such picture: the tense tale of a corrupt hedge-fund manager’s undoing, *Arbitrage*, from first-time feature director Nicholas Jarecki. Sure, we may be slightly biased—the film was inspired in part by the 2010 anthology *The Great Hangover: 21 Tales of the New Recession from the Pages of Vanity Fair*, and it features a cameo by V.F.’s editor, Graydon Carter—but you needn’t look further than early reviews to see that it has been impartially well received.

Acquired at Sundance by Lionsgate and Roadside Attractions, the film stars Richard Gere as a morally bankrupt billionaire, Susan Sarandon as his wife, and Brit Marling as his daughter and chief investment officer. This week, we spoke to

Jarecki about coming full circle with *Vanity Fair*, Wall Street “cocaine eyes,” and why he didn’t want to base Gere’s character on Bernie Madoff.

**Julie Miller: As the story goes, you were inspired to write *Arbitrage* because of a series of articles published by *Vanity Fair* called *The Great Hangover*.**

Nicholas Jarecki: Yes. I owe it all to Graydon!

**. . . who has a cameo in the film. At what point did he agree to participate?**

It happened at the last minute. I knew that we had a great cameo role. The characters are talking about [Graydon’s character] the whole movie. “Where is he? Is he coming? Is he coming?” The characters built him up so much that when he did walk in, we needed a great guy. We didn’t know who the hell it could be. Then finally one of our producers, Laura Bickford, who has been friends with Graydon for a long time, just said, “What about Graydon?” I said, “Oh my god, that would be full circle. If he can do it, let’s do it.” He was fantastic. He’s not a professional actor, but he has such an intimate knowledge of the [financial] world that he was just able to slide right into that suit—which, by the way, was his own suit.

**The movie is about a corrupt hedge-fund “ace,” Robert Miller, played by Richard Gere. At what point did you realize that you could sympathize with this type of character enough to tell his story fairly?**

I think that ultimately any effective drama or tragedy tries to put you as much as it can into the protagonist’s shoes. I loved films of the 70s with those antihero protagonists who you don’t know if you can get behind because their behavior is really questionable. Our character is in such a bind that he has to sell his company, or he is going to jail for 1,000 years and die in prison. His options are really limited. I didn’t want to do a Bernie Madoff story, because I had heard something Madoff said in jail: “Fuck my victims. I carried them for 25 years. Now ■ doing 125.” To me, those were just the words of a sociopath, and I thought that was too limited of a character.

**I noticed you did integrate one fascinating component of the Madoff situation into *Arbitrage*—that his seemingly naïve offspring worked for him. It’s interesting to see how family plays into Robert’s struggle between power and morality.**

Well, Aristotle was really my guiding teacher; 2,500 years ago he wrote a book called *Poetics*, where he outlined how you’re supposed to write a screenplay or a

stage play. He said that when you're dealing with a drama or a tragedy, you have to pick relationships that are very close because those are things that we understand, and when they get tested, it's the most painful. He said a brother killing a brother is something that really affects us. Here, you have a character like Brooke [Robert's daughter], who is beautiful, brilliant, capable, but a little bit sheltered, and she believes in what her father has told her. She believes in the mission, but she hasn't had to confront these hard realities.

**Your parents both worked in finance. How did that inform this story?**

They were traders, and I learned a lot from them. I used to own my own computer business, so a lot of the stuff comes from stuff I did. The scene in the restaurant where [Robert] does the deal on the menu—I actually did that to somebody once. It was definitely drawn from a lot of personal experience beyond the great Graydon collection.

**Did you speak with any current Wall Street traders?**

Well, Richard, Brit, and I went to the stock exchange and shadowed hedge-fund traders and talked to them. Richard, really intelligently, only asked them about their wives, families, and personal lives. That was so much smarter than asking them about currency arbitrage.

**What was the most surprising thing you discovered from talking to them?**

Richard described it really well—he described [them as having] kind of a “cocaine eye.” A lot of these guys operate off the drug of money, power, and success. I would add sex to that, because I think there is an erotic charge to it—a vitality, an energy, a sense of invincibility. I think after one too many deals, and if things go your way long enough, it's easy to forget how big of a role luck plays in everything. You could be wrong just as easily as you could be right. That's what happened to Robert Miller. He took liberties that he had no business taking.

If there's any cautionary element, that would be it. The film's not meant to be demoralizing or some stark political agitprop. It's meant to be a thriller and a fun experience. It provokes some questions like: What responsibilities do we have for each other, and what happens when greed overtakes that?

**After all of the research you did for *Arbitrage*, do you have a theory about men like Robert Miller and Bernie Madoff? Do you think there is some characteristic or brain chemistry that differentiates them from the rest of us?**

I don't think they are different from us at all. I think we all have the capability to go into these places, but circumstance is a big determinant. Anybody can do anything, and anybody is capable of anything. What intrigued me about this is that when I was writing, I was feeling out the characters in my head. So it must come from me. I asked myself what I would do in this situation, and the answers were a little frightening sometimes, but I tried to be as honest as I could.

**One last question—I know you've been to Sundance before as a producer, but how does that compare to coming as a writer/director?**

Doing anything on a movie at Sundance is great. I've been here in a [production assistant] capacity, sweeping up. Writing and directing your own film, for me, has been the best experience of my life. Robert Redford made a great personal sacrifice financially and with the time that he put into creating a very special forum to share ideas. And it was a delight to be here sharing mine.