



Aaron Eckhart in *Thank You for Smoking*

THE DEVIL GETS THE BEST LINES

Thank You for Smoking

review by M. Faust

You can't not love Nick Naylor. Just like the Mafiosi of *The Sopranos* and *Goodfellas* and *The Godfather*, we know that he's the bad guy, the scum of the earth, the scum that scum wipe off the bottom of their shoes. If there isn't a law against doing what he does, there should be. But he does it so well, with such wit and grace, that you can't help but marvel at his skills and enjoy watching them exercised.

Nick, the main character of *Thank You For Smoking*, is a spokesman for the Academy of Tobacco Studies, a lobbying group for the tobacco industry. When a TV talk show does a program on the effects of marketing cigarettes to children, Nick is the guy you book to present the Other Side of the Story.

Some people in this position would merely be sacrificial lambs, thrown to the wolves to give the public a face to be despised and promptly forgotten. But Nick is not the type to act chastened and apologetic. With a little fast talk and a lot of sleight of hand, he can convince viewers that restrictions on the tobacco industry are not only grievously unconstitutional (which is to say, unconstitutional in a way that people care about, as opposed to things like the usurpation of executive power that the American public can't seem to take as a serious threat) but contrary to the best interests of the cancer-stricken teenager the health lobby is using to cudgel him.

Adapted from the comic novel by Christopher Buckley (son of William F.) and directed by Jason Reitman (son of Ivan), *Thank You For Smoking* isn't a movie about smoking, or about political or industrial corruption or immorality. It's about spin, the process of turning any situation to your advantage. It's about bullshit and the joy to be found in slinging it properly.

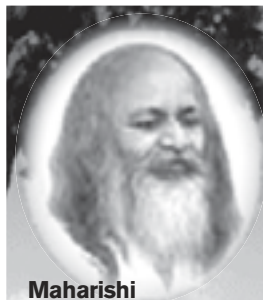
Nick is played by Aaron Eckhart, who has been around for most of a decade without quite becoming a star. (You may recall him as the star of Neil LaBute's scabrous *In the Company of Men*. Or you may remember him as Julia Robert's supportive boyfriend in *Erin Brockovich*,

though if so this may not be the film for you.) Like Bruce Campbell, he's almost too good-looking, the kind of golden boy you either dislike or refuse to take seriously. But his looks work in his favor here: We can accept that he would be charming enough to succeed at his job (with people less intelligent than ourselves, of course).

There isn't much plot to *Thank You For Smoking*, which mostly follows Nick as he makes lemonade from the lemons of public health policy and investigative journalism. Eckhart gets the lion's share of laugh lines, of which there are so many that Reitman doesn't feel the need to hit you over the head with them. (My favorite: When his young son asks for help writing a homework assignment on why American government is the best government in the world, Nick offhandedly answers, "Because of our endless appeals system.")

Other characters, none of them to be taken any too seriously and all played with great relish, include Maria Bello and David Koechner as Nick's equivalents in the liquor and gun industries (they meet for regular lunches during which they compare notes on being merchants of death); Robert Duvall as an elderly tobacco tycoon (a veteran of Korea, he regrets having shot so many Chinese, not realizing they would turn out to be the big market of the 21st century); Sam Elliott as a "Marlboro Man" type dying of cancer; William H. Macy as a senator who wants to put a skull-and-crossbones logo on every pack of cigarettes; J. K. Simmons as Nick's blustering boss; and Rob Lowe as a Hollywood superagent who helps concoct a campaign to get cigarettes back into movies.

As satire, *Thank You for Smoking* has less in common with, say, *Network* than with Robert Zemeckis' hilarious *Used Cars*, which starred Kurt Russell as a different kind of bullshit artist. It doesn't tell us anything we don't already know, nor does it make us see the world in a different light. But for a little while it lets us laugh at the chutzpah of people we know we should be outraged by. AV



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