

'Hustlers' Is a Nuanced and Thrilling Portrait of Scheming Strippers

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You could say that the song choice is on the nose. The first glimpse of Jennifer Lopez you get in *Hustlers* is set to the low tones of Fiona Apple's "Criminal." The camera holds on her as she does a pole dance. It's sexy, yes, but designed to show off her strength. There are men there throwing money in her direction, but director Lorene Scafaria lets them blend into the background. Instead only one gaze matters: that of Constance Wu's Dorothy/Destiny, a fellow stripper who is captivated by Lopez's Ramona. In her eyes there's a mix of love, admiration and fear.

Based on the *New York* magazine story "[The Hustlers at Scores](#)," *Hustlers*, which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival, manages to provide all the joyous, ladies-night-out vibes you might expect from a film that features Cardi B in a supporting role, while also being a sensitive saga of friendship and a treatise on the economy of women's bodies. It's raucous and funny, but also extremely tender from the get-go.

Set during the boom period leading up to the economic crash of 2008 and the bust period that followed, *Hustlers* centers around Ramona and Destiny. The former, a seasoned dancer, takes the younger under her wing when times are good, teaching her how to work the pole and how to get the most out of the Wall Street types that frequent the Manhattan venue where they work. When the market crashes, desperation seeps in. In 2013, strip clubs aren't what they were, but Ramona has a plan to continue boosting her income: Fishing for clients at upscale bars, giving them a little something to dull their senses, and charging their credit cards when they're incapacitated. Destiny, now a single mother, joins in on her scheme. It works, until it doesn't.

Scafaria frames her narrative with an interview between Destiny and a journalist played by Julia Stiles. The trope at first feels like an uneasy addition, taking the action momentarily away from the nightlife scenes where the movie thrives, but it eventually blossoms into necessary tension, allowing another perspective to illuminate the drama.

Perhaps one of the reasons that *Hustlers* feels like such a breath of fresh air is that it's so easy to picture how wrong it could go. There's the version that passes judgement on its characters for their choice of profession; there's the other that's only interested in the lurid details of their crimes; there's a third that wants its audience to have a good time at the expense of nuance, the "go girl" version.

Scafaria avoids all of that. There's little nudity, but she doesn't deny the sex appeal of the situations she's putting on screen. But she re-contextualizes the way women's bodies are looked at by almost completely ignoring the men in the room. Far from the sexposition popularized by the likes of *The Sopranos* and countless other TV shows and movies over the years, Scafaria's camera adopts the perspective of the women in the club, admiring the strength and athleticism of the work. Her gaze, aided by cinematographer Todd Banhazl subtle work, deftly acknowledges

the power dynamics at play, and how those can shift over the course of a single evening, but she refuses to belittle her protagonists even at their lowest points.

The magic of *Hustlers* also lies in the ingenious casting. Lopez has found her ultimate role in Ramona, who thrives on a specific alchemy of savvy and delusion. The shot of her, lounging in a giant fur coat, smoking a cigarette on the roof, will go down as one of the defining images of her career, but her performance is more than just braggadocio. Lopez makes it clear that Ramona's walking a metaphorical tightrope to maintain the glamorous life she has cultivated, and every so often allows the audience to see what Ramona is like when the armor falls away.

She's matched excellently by Wu, as the neophyte who eventually becomes Ramona's equal. Wu's work on the TV series *Fresh Off the Boat* and in last year's mega-successful *Crazy Rich Asians* indicates that she knows how to land a punchline, but here she gets a richer canvas, where she wavers between wryness, exhaustion, and affinity for the person who becomes her business partner and close friend. Their scamming foursome is rounded out by *True Jackson, VP*'s Keke Palmer and *Riverdale*'s Lili Reinhart, both of whom are allowed both vulnerability and great visual jokes.

But you want to know how Cardi B fares, right? Scafaria wisely kept some of the most talked about cast members, acting newcomers like Cardi B and *Lizzo*, to the first section of the movie. The music stars -- along with performers like *Transparent*'s Trace Lysette and dancer Mette Towley -- infuse those happier days with energy and joy. Yes, Cardi is just as fun to watch as you might expect. And while you can't shake the feeling that she's sort of playing herself, she fits seamlessly into the crew Scafaria has assembled.

Hustlers is a careful movie -- not in its storytelling, which is thrilling, but in its attention to detail. The low-cut jeans, bandage dresses, and music cues plunge viewers back into an era that's not so far in the past but feels strangely worlds away. It's definitely funny to hear the sound of "it's Britney, bitch" on a soundtrack, but also transporting. When all the pieces of *Hustlers* come together, you're left realizing just how full an experience this film is. It's a holistic look at an industry, made from a place of respect, that feels like both a party and a well-argued dissertation on American striving.