

Hustlers Review: Jennifer Lopez Dominates in a Quintessential American Story

By [Richard Lawson](#)

Lopez struts away with Lorene Scafaria's smart, sexy film about a pack of strippers running a very American scam.



There's a line at the very end of *Hustlers*, **Lorene Scafaria's** dazzling new film that had its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival on Saturday, that tidily sums up the movie. **Jennifer Lopez**, deep into some of the best acting work of her career, sighs and muses that America is a strip club; some people are the ones throwing the money around, and the rest are the dancers. It's a neat little encompassing of all the riot that's come before—clever, street-smart wise, and sad in a sweet, poetic way. It's delivered beautifully by Lopez, a film-closing button that perfectly distills the energy of the film and its ideas.

Hustlers—based on a *New York Magazine* article by **Jessica Pressler** about New York City strippers who drugged wealthy clients to rack up huge charges on their credit cards in the dizzying wake of the 2008 financial crisis—could easily have been a basic thing, a fabulous cast assembled to tell an engaging, risqué story of

grift and shiny wrongdoing. You know: lots of tee-heeing and titillation, as good times curdle into bad ones.

But Scafaria had a larger vision in mind in making her film. *Hustlers* is a movie about work, and women, and economy, neither forgiving of its protagonists' crimes nor those of the people they preyed upon. It's a bright stiletto stab toward equity, and in the process one of the best movies about American money in recent memory.

Constance Wu, raw and flinty, plays Destiny, a Queens native who earns a middling but not station-elevating income at a Manhattan strip club. When she meets Ramona, the veteran dancer played with coiling wit by Lopez, a new ambition emerges. Destiny's profession is an intensely transactional one—not just of cash, but of status, a constant and deliberate reminder of class and position. What Ramona sees is an opportunity to tip the scales of that transaction; soon, so does Destiny.

Why should it be the rapacious, hedonist Wall Street men, drunk on their ruinous control of things, who get to flit in and out of this arrangement forever in the black? There's a Robin Hood element to the crimes of *Hustlers*, even if it means that Destiny, Ramona, and their cohort employ are dangerous and quickly sapped of empathy. *Hustlers* presents a tricky moral equation, one that Scafaria contemplates with a graceful vigor.

Hustlers moves and moves and moves. It's a vibrant, muscular study in physics. Scafaria's staging and **Todd Banhazl's** cinematography rollicks along, both crisp and woozy. We feel the party of the film, but also never forget its dire gravity: there's a stunning (and surprising?) emotional core burning at the center of the film, like a sparking fuel cell. Scafaria jaunts forward and backward in time, lays out exposition and detail in a clamoring patter. Things still feel controlled, though; there's a purpose and method to this music-filled madness. For how fun *Hustlers* is, it also knows its own darkness.

I didn't expect this from the director of *The Meddler*, a sweet and gentle film that I dearly love. That was Scafaria's last effort behind the camera, and while it's a more than worthy showcase for her abundant talent, *Hustlers* rockets past it with mesmerizing exuberance. I've seen so many festival films this season that mistake daring camera work and kinetic fury for substance, but *Hustlers* does no such thing. It finds a fullness in the flair, affording these strippers turned crooks all the messy contours of real life while still rendering them in stunning, artful portrait.

At the center of all that is the complicated friendship shared by Destiny and Ramona, at once parasitic and genuine. Here's how people—women, in particular—might align themselves under oppressions both systemic and achingly particular. They're drawn to one another not solely out of desperate necessity, but because, quite simply, they enjoy one another's company. That spirit of war-trenches camaraderie is rife in *Hustlers*—the starry cast also includes *Riverdale*'s Lili Reinhart, Keke Palmer, and the musicians **Cardi B** and **Lizzo**. It's a true assemblage of avengers, women (all played beautifully) who seize and upend what could be a slowly crushing power dynamic.

But again, *Hustlers* does not excuse the wrongdoing, exactly. It instead seeks to understand it. Scafaria's film does that keenly, framing the narrative's internal consequence in fair proportion to all the bigger lawlessness that shapes the lives of its characters. Someone else would be doing this to these guys if they weren't, Ramona insists to her crew. She's tragically right about the practical realities of this sorry enterprise, and about how the difference between need and want blurs when one is doing so bitterly American a thing as looking out for oneself.

The men of the *Magic Mike* movies have a lot less on their minds, because their existence is mostly a lark. The meat market of *Hustlers* is inevitably more dire. Still, a good time is had. Scafaria's camera gazes and gazes, but never leers with anything less than awe. When Destiny first sees Ramona, doing an [eye-poppingly acrobatic routine to Fiona Apple's *Criminal*](#) (Lopez nails this so hard the room shakes), a heady desire passes through the room. But Scafaria carefully trains that ardency; we understand the complexity of Destiny's amazement, and how simple it is too.

Hustlers works really well on both of those levels, the base and the nearly profound. It's sexy on its own terms, guided by an intricate ethic. Yes, it is the cool stripper-robber movie with the awesome cast. But it's also a true movie for our era, teeming with the confusion and yearning and risk of life right now. It's a deeply humane film, one that finds celebration, and illumination, in the dark spaces where so many grind.