Scam artist

reviewed by Steve A. Vineberg in the February 8, 2003 issue

In Steven Spielberg's *Catch Me If You Can*, Leonardo DiCaprio plays Frank Abagnale, the real-life con man whose exploits--posing as an airline pilot, an ER doctor, a lawyer and a college professor--had a nutty, playful, romantic quality. His highly enjoyable, hard-boiled memoir (written with Stan Redding), the source for Jeff Nathanson's screenplay, suggests that Abagnale was as much motivated by the theatrical and erotic satisfactions of his deceit as by financial gain.

Abagnale was high-school age when he began his illicit career in the early 1960s, passing as a series of men a decade older. The baby-faced DiCaprio, who can still play much younger than he is, is the perfect choice for the role of this risk-adoring, permanently turned-on scam artist. You can believe that he decides to pass as a pilot after glimpsing flyboys in their impeccably starched uniforms smiling down on their nubile groupies. When he romances a wide-eyed southern nurse (the charming Amy Adams), he has the blissed-out look of a kid whose private genie has just made his most fervent wish come true. DiCaprio's Frank is one lucky Lothario.

Beginning with an ingenious animated credits sequence designed by Kuntzel Deygas and wittily scored by John Williams, *Catch Me If You Can* presents itself as a cat-and-mouse comedy that matches Frank's quick-wittedness against the stick-to-it-iveness of a dogged, meticulous federal agent, Carl Hanratty (Tom Hanks), who hunts him down. It's the sort of material Alec Guinness might have starred in at Britain's Ealing Studios in the early '50s, in a breezy, disposable, 90-minute feature.

Spielberg's movie, though, weighs in at 140 minutes, and instead of the low-key, homemade look you might expect, it has self-consciously "classic" period cinematography by Spielberg's favorite collaborator, Janusz Kaminski. The movie is schizoid. It wants to be a lark--and for the most part audiences, cued by the Dreamworks publicity campaign, appear to be taking it as just that. But Spielberg is also after more serious game; perhaps at this stage in his career, after taking on the Nazis, the battlefields of World War II, and Stanley Kubrick, he's no longer interested in or maybe capable of producing a lighthearted entertainment.

In Spielberg's treatment, Frank picks up his deceptive skills from his father (Christopher Walken), though they haven't been much use to his father. He's a financial flop whose beautiful French wife (Nathalie Baye) leaves him for another man. Spielberg and Nathanson ask us to see Frank's behavior as a far-flung effort to achieve what his father couldn't, as well as a way of constructing a fairy tale that, in his schoolboy vision, he somehow hopes will end in his father's solvency and his parents' reconciliation. Hanratty is a secondary father figure: stern, pragmatic, righteous--everything Frank Sr. isn't. And according to the movie, in his heart of hearts Frank Jr. wants the G-man to catch him.

The psychological side of the movie doesn't work, but you can't shake it off, because Christopher Walken is splendid as the elder Abagnale. Walken has walked through so many ironic tough-guy performances in the past 20 years that we tend to forget how much depth his acting can have when he's handed the right part. (If you're fortunate enough to have seen him perform Chekhov on stage--especially as Vershinin in *Three Sisters* or Astrov in *Uncle Vanya*--then you're less likely to forget.) He plays Frank Sr. as a crippled romantic, increasingly desperate, inescapably poignant. The filmmakers see in Frank Sr.'s descent and his son's inability to accept the truth about him a story--part Eugene O'Neill, part Arthur Miller--about the disintegration of the American family. Though you can't buy the story, there's enough feeling in the scenes between Walken and DiCaprio to keep it in your head.

Spielberg didn't do Hanks any favors by casting him as a glumly devoted gumshoe with no visible sense of humor. The joke in the story is that Hanratty winds up putting Abagnale on the FBI payroll so his expertise can be used to catch criminals just like him. (The real Abagnale founded a secure documents corporation.) But the joke falls flat, because Hanratty isn't appreciative of Frank's cleverness; he goes after his target with a mix of compulsiveness and irritation.

Here again Spielberg's serious intentions trump his entertainer's instincts: if he wants Hanratty to serve as Frank's "good" father, the one who aims to keep him on the straight and narrow, then Spielberg can't really applaud the young thief's high-flying mischievousness, even enjoy it secretly. This relationship falls victim to the movie's confused intentions.