

Foolproof

A PERFECT HEIST: WILLIAM PHILLIPS'S



SAM: KRISTEN BOOTH



KEVIN: RYAN REYNOLDS

Proof

BY CHRISTOPHER HEARD

IT'S GETTING DOWN TO THE WIRE

for sophomore writer/director William Phillips and his heist film *Foolproof*. On this hot summer afternoon he is huddled over editing and mixing equipment in the Tattersol Casablanca Studios in Toronto. But if this is a tense, stress-filled situation, you would never know it by looking at Phillips. He is enthusiastic, smiles constantly and is obviously having the time of his life putting together his second feature, which seems to have turned out

exactly as he had hoped it would. "I don't think I could have asked or hoped for this whole process to have gone any better," says Phillips. "Sure there were minor delays here and there, and minor tensions every now and then, but this whole experience was just a lot of...fun."

One of the most tried and true of the movie sub-genres is the heist film. However, historically, it's also one of the hardest to pull off (so to speak) simply because the genre requires very good writing,

a very good cast to give believable performances and very, very good direction all coming together with a synergy that is quite rare. When asked if he was a fan of the genre, Phillips said, "No, not really. But what interests me about the heist film is that the people in these films are rarely judged as right or wrong. It is always the goal, the objective, which is the focus. But you have to think every once in awhile that these people are actually criminals. The audience has to reckon with that fact as they are cheering for them to succeed."

The Canadian film industry has produced the occasional heist movie of note—Yves Simoneau's stylish *Pouvoir intime* (1986) comes to mind—and if you include the films made during the buccaneer days of the tax-shelter films, we can lay claim to a very good heist movie in Daryl Duke's 1978 thriller *Silent Partner*. But *Foolproof* has a cool precision about it reminiscent of the excellent but somewhat overlooked *The Anderson Tapes*, directed by Sidney Lumet and starring Sean Connery and Dyan Cannon, which is about a gang of thieves who rob an entire ritzy New York apartment building.

When you study the genre of heist films, there are two things that make a huge difference: the believability of the essentials of the story and the actors who are selling you that believability. Take a look at a couple of recent examples: Neil Jordan's *The Good Thief* and Steven Soderbergh's *Ocean's Eleven*. *The Good Thief*, which works, has a heist that is just tough enough to add suspense to the proceedings but not virtually impossible to fathom, and it has solid actors at the top of their form such as Nick Nolte and Tcheky Karyo. But *Ocean's Eleven* doesn't work. While both of the films are remakes (*The Good Thief* is essentially a remake of Jean-Pierre Melville's *Bob le flambeur* [1955] and Soderbergh's a remake of the Rat Pack original [1960] of the same name), Soderbergh went the Hollywood route and packed the cast with marquee-busting egos like Julia Roberts, Brad Pitt, George Clooney and Matt Damon. Then he put them into a robbery that is so ridiculously unlikely that you would expect to see its like in a Spider-Man cartoon only to have the heist come off without a hitch. By contrast, Phillips constructed his heist story so that an average member of the audience watching the film might think, "Yes, this could happen."

Foolproof was written and directed by Phillips, who, in a few short years, has become one of the most interesting filmmakers working in Canada today. He scored a critical success with his debut outing, *Treed Murray* (2001), a dark comedy/psychological thriller with a social conscience that took place in one location, up a tree

in a deserted park. What that film lacked in sets and effects was more than made up for with terrific writing and a resourcefulness in filmmaking style. With *Foolproof*, Phillips had more of those two elusive commodities in filmmaking—money and time—than he did on *Treed Murray*. "Sure, there was more money and time," said Phillips, "but there was also a lot more stuff to do. There were stunts, action sequences and effects, stuff that I had never had to deal with before." But "having more time allowed me to reflect both backwards and forwards so I could make sure that every detail was hit the way it had to be hit to make the story work."

Foolproof started as a small germ of an idea in Phillips's mind seven or eight years ago when he heard about a couple of guys who had been arrested and tried for criminal conspiracy after they planned a robbery on a Brinks armoured car that was never actually carried out. "Conspiracy is against the law," said Phillips. "That is perfectly understandable. But on a more fundamental level, I found it interesting that it could be considered unlawful to think through a criminal act. It struck me as a bit ambiguous. Is it a crime to stand in line in a bank and look around at the security cameras and wonder, 'how could I get through this?' At what point does this make me a criminal?" Phillips wrote the screenplay originally as a show script to help him get into the Canadian Film Centre. "It caught the attention of Alliance Atlantis when I was making *Treed Murray*," remembered Phillips. "I was hopeful at first but then we went back and forth and there were some personnel changes at Alliance, so at one point, after several drafts, I just turned in the latest version and hoped for the best. Then, Alliance stepped up and said 'we like this script and want to make this movie' and it has been solidly behind me ever since."

A teaser trailer for *Foolproof* was shown with *The Matrix Reloaded* in May resulting in two million moviegoers in Canada having an early look at the film. The words "commercial" or "popcorn movie" have been used to describe *Foolproof*—terms that cause Phillips to bristle somewhat. "Does commercial mean that I hope people will enjoy the film, that it will be a crowd pleaser? If it does, then yes, this is a commercial film. But call it what you want, this movie is meant to be fun. It is meant to be a smart, fun ride, with hopefully a few subtle little messages snuck in along the way." And because *Foolproof* is a thriller, it wouldn't do Mr. Phillips and his team much of a service if I were to disclose the plot twists; but here is an idea of what it is about. Three friends Kevin (Ryan Reynolds), Samantha (Kristen Booth) and Rob (Joris Jarsky) are somewhat socially awkward but



RYAN REYNOLDS, DAVID SUCHET and JORIS JARSKY

technologically superior members of a club they call "Foolproof." To amuse themselves, they plan robberies on their computer, but they're not just juvenile fantasy

heists. These are meticulously planned high-tech robberies that could actually work in practical application, although they never intend to carry them out even if they did have the stones to try. When Leo (David Suchet), a cutthroat gangster, gets his hands on one of their plans, and finds out just how good these three really are, he blackmails them into actually carrying out a multi-million dollar robbery. Kevin, Sam and Rob have no choice—they need a foolproof plan to pull off Leo's heist and, ultimately, to get out alive.

Foolproof, however, is actually a lot more than just a fancy heist movie when you peel back a few layers. It's about the transition from youth to adulthood, a time when the shocking realization hits you that you are not infallible. It's also about the trust between friends and how the only way we get through difficult times is to completely trust those closest to us and allow them to rely on us with the same faith. "Character is defined and strengthened in times of crisis," said Phillips.

None of the above would hold up without a good cast selling the story and Phillips has scored himself a terrific cast. Headed by the young Canadian actor Ryan Reynolds, the film's cast is filled out with the likes of Suchet, and Booth, Jarsky and *Treed Murray* lead David Hewlitt. Vancouver native Reynolds started acting as a teenager, ended up in a few locally shot television movies, then could not find work for a few years before a friend talked him into going to Los Angeles. There Reynolds promptly won a role on *Two Guys and a Girl*, a sitcom, followed shortly by the lead in the gross-out comedy *National Lampoon's Van Wilder* (2002). Of *Foolproof* Reynolds says, "I've been waiting my whole life to do a movie like this. It's thrilling, exciting and full of action but grounded at the same time."

Reynolds plays Kevin, the enigmatic leader of the gang of misfits. "The thing I really liked about playing this guy

was that he was likable," said Reynolds. "Likable but still bound by hubris and his own pride. I love getting into characters like this, ones that have more than just one layer. This guy had 10 layers, from funny and playful to utterly lost and confused." Of his star, director Phillips says, "Ryan really could end up as big as Tom Hanks. He has charisma all over the place and can play the nice guy, the asshole, the funny guy and the guy lacking in self-esteem and he can do it all within the same character. You don't see that kind of natural range very often."

For veteran British actor David Suchet, *Foolproof* presented him with a different opportunity. "It has been a long time since I was able to play such a nice, juicy bad guy," said Suchet. "My character is called Leo the Touch because he has the Midas touch. He is one of the top criminals and he has never been caught. Playing someone lethal is always appealing to an actor." Suchet is perhaps best known for his 13-year stint playing Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot on PBS but has also starred in countless Hollywood films including the recent remake of *The In-Laws*, which also co-starred Reynolds. "It was actually through Ryan that I was exposed to David Suchet," said Phillips. "Ryan had just worked with him and was raving about him. He suggested I talk to him about the role of Leo, and David turned out to be one of the most prepared, studious actors I have ever worked with. He was wonderful."

Now that the five-year-plus journey from concept to script to shooting to editing is complete, Alliance Atlantis is excited enough about *Foolproof* to put some real marketing muscle and resources behind the film to give it every chance of drawing the audiences it deserves. *Foolproof* producer, the veteran Bill House, told me, "We don't really have a mainstream here, so everyone is forced to the fringes. With *Foolproof* we made something that could be called a mainstream film because its appeal is broad." For Phillips the trip has been a fun-filled, fulfilling ride, and one that he knows he is lucky to have pulled off.

But luck only goes so far in describing what William Phillips has pulled off with *Foolproof*. Before he got lucky, he had to sweat over a screenplay for five years until it was as tight as he could make it, cast the film with a perfect ensemble of actors, direct it with an individualistic style and bring it all together in the editing room, on time, for its long predetermined release date of October 3. Lucky? Sure. The harder William Phillips works, the more talent he displays, the luckier he seems to get.

Christopher Heard is a broadcaster and author of several film books.



"I'VE BEEN WAITING MY WHOLE LIFE TO DO A MOVIE LIKE THIS." • RYAN REYNOLDS