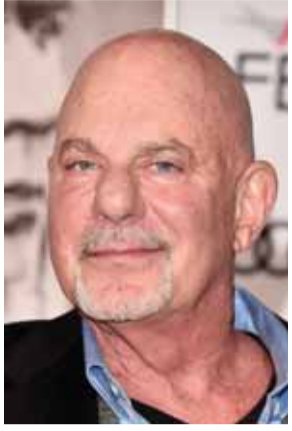


Lifestyle | Music & Movies

Rob Cohen cooks up perfect storm in 'Hurricane Heist'



In this file photo director Rob Cohen attends the screening of 'Hostiles' at AFI FEST 2017 Presented By Audi at TCL Chinese Theatre in Hollywood, California. — AFP

This year, the US Federal Reserve will shred an estimated 5.6 billion damaged, out-of-date or just a plain grotty banknotes worth a combined \$175 billion and send them to be incinerated. Money gets trashed regularly and mostly no one notices—but what if a powerful hurricane and a gang of sophisticated thieves happened to be headed right towards where it's kept? That's the premise of "The Hurricane Heist," the latest release from veteran director Rob Cohen, the creator of the megabucks "Fast and Furious" franchise.

"A shoot-out is no longer just a shoot-out, a chase is no longer just a chase. Any of the tropes of action films suddenly have to be reinterpreted by taking place in 140 mph winds and driving rain," the 68-year-old told AFP. "It just seemed like, what a delicious challenge to be able to create a hurricane itself, but to create an action film within it." "The Hurricane Heist" stars Toby Kebbell ("Kong: Skull Island") as Will Rutledge, a government meteorologist tracking Hurricane Tammy, the fiercest storm in US history, headed for coastal Alabama.

As the locals evacuate, the US mint in the fictional town of Gulfport race against time to shred \$600 million in old bills before Tammy hits—but a gang of tech-savvy robbers have other ideas.

Extreme weather is a nightmare all too real for Cohen, who remembers a particularly terrifying storm when he was growing up in the small commuter town of Cornwall, an hour's drive north of New York City. "We got hit with a hurricane somewhere in the 1950s and all I remember is the power going out and trees falling. You hear the trees snapping and falling, and those banshee winds howling," he recalls.

'Hunkering down'

"We were on the edge of that storm, not even in the brunt of it, but I remember I was like six or seven years old, just hunkering down, worried that a tree was going to crush the house with me in it." After graduating from Harvard, Cohen got his break in Hollywood as a reader for agent Mike Medavoy. One day, he plucked a neglected script out of the slush pile and promised Medavoy it was "the great American screenplay and... will make an award-winning, major-cast, major-director film."

After some next-level nagging, Medavoy agreed to try to sell the screenplay but warned that if there were no takers, Cohen would be fired. Universal bought it and it went on to win seven Oscars, including best director and picture, and Cohen has been known ever since as "the kid who found 'The Sting.'" This intuition has fuelled much

of his work, balanced with an aptitude for innovative special effects that has seen him firing cars out of moving trains and placing his cameramen on go-karts.

Creating the storm of the century on camera is the kind of challenge the director of high-octane blockbusters such as "xXx" and "Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story" relishes. An early pioneer with computer-aided animation, Cohen abandoned CGI in favor of practical effects to show farmhouses destroyed, trucks whipped into the air and a 20-foot tsunami crash into a garden center. Meanwhile he used LED plates on the windows of cars to transform the red tower roofs and stucco buildings of Sofia, Bulgaria, where the shoot took place in the summer of 2016, into the bucolic Deep South, with its checkered drapes and picturesque coastline.

Crushing rain

"I find that an audience has a real sense of when you dump 44,000 gallons of water on a team of stuntmen, and when you pull them on wires and add the fake water later," Cohen said. "There are just a million tells that tell you this isn't real. Computers don't handle chaos well." Kebbell and Maggie Grace ("Lost," "Twilight: Breaking Dawn"), who plays US treasury agent Casey

Corbyn, endured pummeling by crushing rain, 100 mile-per-hour gusts of wind and routine 16-hour days on set. You don't have to look particularly hard to find the subtext in all this chaos, for "The Hurricane Heist" is a movie that wears its ecology message very much on its sleeve.

Kebbell's Will explains at one point that the increasing frequency and severity of hurricanes is caused by global warming and that "all due deference to Donald Trump, there is man-made climate change." Cohen, it turns out, has vitriol to spare for Trump, who has described climate change as a Chinese hoax and appointed climate change skeptic Scott Pruitt to head the Environmental Protection Agency. "There's probably not a human being that hates Donald Trump more than me. I have found a dark side of myself that I have never experienced, because I just dream of how he can be tortured and suffer," he says. "I hate him, I hate everything he stands for, including on climate change. He's in the pocket of the oil industry, he doesn't want to hear that fossil fuels may in fact be poisoning the whole Earth." "The Hurricane Heist" was released in North America on Friday. — AFP

Movie star Sharlto Copley and the other Black Panther

There's a new "Black Panther" in town, but this one is not much given to serving humanity, improving racial representation or hollering "Wakanda Forever" whenever his onesie gets created. La Pantera Negra, it turns out, is the ruthless, Beatles-loving Mexican cartel kingpin in "Gringo," a comedy crime caper starring David Oyelowo, Joel Edgerton, Charlize Theron and Sharlto Copley. "People were saying, 'Are you worried that you called the villain Black Panther?'" Seriously, we made the movie like two years ago and I



Actor Sharlto Copley signs autographs during the world premiere of 'Gringo' from Amazon Studios and STX Films at Regal LA Live Stadium 14 in Los Angeles, California. — AFP

pushes Theron and Edgerton to be more rude and despicable than they've ever been on screen before—and bear in mind Theron has an Oscar for playing a serial killer in "Monster" (2003). "Charlize has some of my favorite lines in the film and it's kind of fun to see her and Joel, who are such likeable people and actors normally, just have a bit of fun," says Copley.

The South African actor burst onto the scene with an acclaimed performance as Wikus van de Merwe in 2009 sci-fi thriller "District 9," before taking on Howling Mad Murdock in "The A-Team" (2010). He was Agent Kruger in "Elysium" (2013) and King Stefan in "Maleficent" (2014), as well as the eponymous CGI robot in "Chappie" (2015). "I like projects that push the envelope and do something different. Those projects may or may not pay off from a financial or audience point of view," he says.

"But I prefer doing that than something that will just go down the middle, that will just be like people watch it and forget about it." Copley never bases his many diverse characters on specific individuals, but he borrows—consciously or otherwise, he says—from aspects of acquaintances' personalities. "In this case I do know a couple of mercenary guys and special forces guys and have a sense of that world, I guess," he reveals. Copley also had a starring role in Ilya Naishuller's low-budget Russian-American sci-fi actioner "Hardcore Henry" (2016), a live-action movie about a cyborg soldier that looks more like a photo-real shoot-'em-up video game.

Media empire

"It was a grueling, difficult shoot but I certainly bonded with the director incredibly—we're very close friends now—and made some great friendships with some of the team in Russia and the stunt guys," he says. "It was unlike any film I've ever done. For everybody, it was difficult. You're talking about an action film where you have to make the action look good from one camera angle." Copley began directing and acting in his own short films at the age of 12, going on to study speech and drama at Trinity College, London.

With a talent for the business of entertainment to match his acting prowess, he became one of the youngest senior executives in the history of South African television as the founder of ETV at 24. Over the last 17 years, he has been responsible for co-founding and managing a media empire taking in a film production company, visual effects house and talent agency.

In front of the camera, Copley finds himself about to film the most complex, dramatic role of his life as Ted Kaczynski, alias The Unabomber, who carried out 16 bombings across America from 1978-1995. Then he makes his feature directorial debut working from his own script in socially-conscious comedy "Sapien Safari," starring as an alien naturalist called Riblik, a kind of intergalactic Steve Irwin. "I'm just keeping it all under wraps at the moment but I'm extremely excited about that," he tells AFP. "I'm definitely doing something you've never seen before in your life." "Gringo" hit US theaters on Friday. — AFP

was like, 'Um, no,'" laughs Copley, 44.

"And even if we were, it's still funny to me. I mean, what? Do we not laugh at anything anymore?" "Gringo"—part comedy, part white-knuckle actioner—follows businessman Harold Soyinka (Oyelowo) as he finds himself crossing the line from law-abiding citizen to wanted criminal. The mild-mannered pharmaceutical executive takes a business trip from Chicago to Mexico with his cutthroat bosses Richard (Edgerton) and Elaine, played by a deliciously Cruella de Vil-esque Theron.

There are numerous twists and turns along the way to Harold sounding the alarm that he has been abducted—and coming face-to-face with the Black Panther. Rather than pay a \$5 million ransom, Richard dispatches his mercenary-turned-humanitarian brother Mitch, played by Copley, to extract Harold. "It seemed to me to be a great set-up for a comedic character—a guy who is a former mercenary and is now trying to turn his life around in Haiti by helping people in need," Copley told AFP. "And then he gets drawn into this whole mess, kind of like an alcoholic going back into a bar." "Gringo" is helmed by Edgerton's brother Nash, who made his feature-length directorial debut in 2008 with the acclaimed Australian thriller "The Square."

Rude and despicable

Production began in March 2016 in a subdued, gray Chicago before cast and crew pumped up the color palette in Mexico City and Veracruz. The director

LISA BONET SAYS BILL COSBY GAVE OFF A 'SINISTER' ENERGY

Lisa Bonet has broken her silence about her former TV father Bill Cosby, saying she isn't surprised he's facing sexual misconduct allegations and claiming he gave off a "sinister" energy. Bonet says in an interview with Net-a-Porter's Porter magazine that she wasn't aware of any inappropriate behavior by Cosby on "The Cosby Show" and "A Different World," though she sensed "darkness."

"There was just energy. And that type of sinister, shadow energy cannot be concealed," she says. Cosby faces a retrial on charges he drugged and molested a woman in 2004. Prosecutors describe him as a serial predator. Bonet and Cosby clashed over her starring in the R-rated "Angel Heart." Asked about Cosby's current situation, she says she "just leave(s) all that to karma and justice." — AP



In this file photo, Lisa Bonet arrives at the Vanity Fair Oscar Party in Beverly Hills, Calif. — AP

J.Lo and A-Rod help Bronx kids live the American real estate dream

To amass a fortune in real estate, despite New York's crazy housing prices: that is the challenge thrown down by singer Jennifer Lopez and her boyfriend Alex Rodriguez to kids from the Bronx, the city's poorest borough. Around 50 young students from the Bronx, most of them black or Latino, have been selected for "Project Destined," a scheme designed to teach them the ins and outs of financing and real estate and sponsored by J.Lo and A-Rod—as the retired baseball superstar Rodriguez is known.



Jennifer Lopez and Alex Rodriguez at an event for the television series World Of Dance in West Hollywood. — Reuters

The youths underwent intense instruction from lawyers, bankers, mortgage companies and realtors, but the course will not be just theoretical. The student team that comes up with the best business plan will have the chance to buy a building worth \$1.5 million in the Bronx and develop it. In this real estate mecca, its skyline in constant flux and whose most famous alumnus Donald Trump is now in the White House, good contacts can open unimaginable doors. That was the philosophy of the project's two founders, Fred Greene and Cedric Bobo, both of them successful black businessmen who wanted to pass on their knowledge and experience to kids from humble backgrounds.

"What we are doing here is giving kids a chance to work with us almost like apprentices," said Bobo. "Kids come in, analyze properties, we then buy them and we share a portion of the profits." "We want to put owners and stakeholders in the communities where they live, work and play. If we do that, we do a lot," said Bobo, an experienced investment banker for the Carlyle Group, one of the power houses of Wall Street. Before moving to the Bronx, where more than 35 percent of the population live in poverty, the program ran in Detroit, Memphis and Miami, helping young people from poorer backgrounds learn the ropes of business.

Escaping the ghetto

At Yankee stadium in the Bronx, the students split up into six teams—lay out their business strategies to a panel of experts that includes Jonathan Gray, head of the Blackstone Group, and Lopez, the mega-star singer who herself grew up in the Bronx but who is selling her Manhattan penthouse apartment for \$27 million. The winning team will be the one with the most persuasive strategy that secures the greatest profit. The winners will then become minority shareholders in the development and receive some of the earnings from the property, helping pay their university tuition as long as they stay enrolled in the project and take part in more courses online.

In a pre-training session, Rodriguez chats with participants on an impressive balcony overlooking Times Square. "Real estate is a way out of the hood," he says. "For real estate is the one game where you can get rich ... it doesn't matter if you don't have any money and it doesn't matter what market, you can go buy real estate all over the world with no money." —AFP



In this file photo, Kristen Wiig, a cast member in 'Downsizing,' poses at a special screening of the film in Los Angeles. — AP

Kristen Wiig cast as Wonder Woman villain Cheetah

Kristen Wiig will play a villain in the next "Wonder Woman" film. Director Patty Jenkins announced on Twitter Friday that Wiig will star as Wonder Woman rival Cheetah in the superhero sequel. Jenkins said in her post that she "can't wait to finally work with one of my favorites" and is very excited by what they have planned.

Star Gal Gadot welcomed Wiig to the cast in a follow-up post and added, "This is going to be WONDERful." Jenkins reportedly became the highest-paid female filmmaker in history when she signed on to direct the sequel to the 2017 blockbuster "Wonder Woman." No title has been announced for the film, which is scheduled to hit theaters in December next year. — AP



File photo shows Keanu Reeves carries a firearm in a dramatic scene of 'John Wick.' — AP

Hollywood condemns NRA while dramatically increasing gun violence in entertainment

Hollywood declared war on American gun culture in 2013 with a public service announcement calling for stricter gun control in the wake of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. Now the industry is back on the attack in the wake of the Feb. 14 high school shooting in Parkland, Florida. Stars including Oprah Winfrey, George Clooney and the cast of ABC's "Modern Family" support this month's March for Our Lives rally for stricter gun legislation. Yet a study by the Parents Television Council shows that portrayals of gun violence on television have increased dramatically in recent years, even in shows deemed appropriate for children.

The entertainment industry's love of gunplay and hatred for firearms muddles, if not negates, Hollywood's role in a constructive conversation on the Second Amendment. That 2013 public service announcements looks tame by current standards. Celebrities routinely dub the National Rifle Association a terrorist organization. Prominent actors such as Sally Field and Michael Keaton have blamed the NRA, Second Amendment advocates and Republicans for the 17 deaths at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School last month. Nonetheless, stars defend their gun-soaked content. Jennifer Lawrence deflected blame from her industry's handiwork during the New York City premiere of her R-rated spy thriller "Red Sparrow." — AP