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High Life

(Canada) An Equinoxe Films release of a Shoreline Entertainment/Pathway Films presentation of a Triptych Media production, in association with Buffalo Gal Pictures. (International sales: Shoreline, Los Angeles.) Produced by Robin Cass, Gary Yates. Executive producers, Anna Stratton, Morris Ruskin. Co-producers, Liz Jarvis, Avi Federgreen. Directed by Gary Yates. Screenplay, Lee MacDougall, based on his play.

Dick...Timothy Olyphant
Bug...Stephen Eric McIntyre
Donnie...Joe Anderson
Billy...Rossif Sutherland
Alma...Brittany Scobie
Jeremy...Mark McKinney
Ken...Ernesto Griffiths
Lynn...Kelly Wolfman
Jamie...Turk Scatliff
Bank manager...Ross McMillan
Moondog...Michael Bell
Alex...Sarah Constible

By **[DEREK ELLEY](#)**

After the disappointment of his second feature, “Niagara Motel,” Canuck director Gary Yates bounces back with another ensemble comedy of hopeless losers in “High Life,” which boasts the same preciseness of script and ongoing inventiveness as his 2004 debut, “Seven Times Lucky.” Headlined by terrific playing from Timothy Olyphant (“Deadwood”) and Stephen Eric McIntyre as the leaders of bunch of wannabe bank robbers whose brains are over-fried by substance abuse, pic lasts a mere 78 minutes but packs in more incident and twists than many movies 10 times its budget. Further fest play, and critical support, could launch this into modest distribution.

In almost “Reservoir Dogs” fashion — one of many tips of the hat to Tarantino throughout the movie — film opens with a shootout in the streets of an unnamed Canadian city (actually Winnipeg) and a voiceover by Dick (Olyphant) reminiscing in a giant non-sequitur, “For as long as I could remember, I’d always wanted to be a lawyer.” Well, yeah.

Cut to three days earlier and Dick, a hospital janitor, is phoned by his former cellmate, Bug (McIntyre), who's fresh out of jail and hungry for some drugs. After getting Dick fired as soon as they meet, Bug has trouble even adjusting to the present day: it's 1983, and he's never even seen an ATM. "It's all Duran Duran," sympathizes Dick. "Everyone's on f***in' blow now."

But Dick has an idea for a quick score, and recruits the half-mad Donnie (Joe Anderson), a nervy pickpocket, and the next day a compulsive womanizer, Billy (Rossif Sutherland), he gets to know at a rehab meeting. Dick's idea is to rob an ATM from the inside, by posing as a repair man. But when Thursday arrives, everything goes wrong from the off, with twists and turns that lead back to the opening shootout and a final act that's a clever balancing act between genuine tragedy and black humor.

Given its smoothly cinematic staging, it initially comes as a surprise that the screenplay is from a legit source — Lee MacDougall's prize-winning 1996 play, first performed stateside in 1999, which the author himself adapted. But as the well-honed dialogue develops its own absurdist, morphine-filled logic, and the four leads their own volatile, hair-trigger relationships, the legit origins become less surprising.

Olyphant, almost unrecognizable beneath shaggy '80s locks, and McIntyre, aces as the whacked-out, psychopathic Bug, dominate the going, though Sutherland's smooth lothario — the only one of the four who hasn't seen the inside of a jail — slowly emerges as the weirdest, in many respects, of the whole group. Sarah Constible, as Donnie's cousin Alex, a security guard who becomes involved in the bungled heist by chance, is also strong among the small supporting cast.

Lensed in cold, wintry colors by Michael Marshall, pic makes plentiful use of closeups, placing full emphasis on the dialogue and facial expressions. But with its admirably tight running time, ever-shifting plot and lived-in perfs, there's no sense of stylistic tics distracting auds' attention.

Camera (color), Michael Marshall; editor, Jeff Warren; music, Jonathan Goldsmith; production designer, Deanne Rohde; art director, Larry Spittle; costumes, Maureen Petkau; sound (Dolby Digital), Leon Johnson; assistant director, David Antoniuk; casting, Heidi Levitt. Reviewed at CinemaxX Potsdamer Platz 2, Berlin, Jan. 17, 2009. (In Berlin Film Festival, Panorama.) Running time: 78 MIN.

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