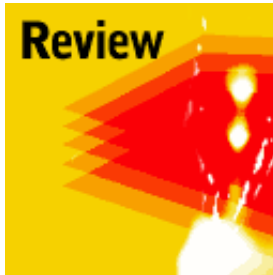


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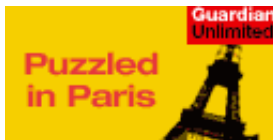


## With The Sting in its tail

A stylish new BBC drama celebrates the art of the conman and the return of a Sixties screen icon, writes Jay Rayner

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[The Observer](#)



The producer wasn't immediately convinced it was a good idea. The head of drama didn't insist upon his casting before green-lighting the show. But from the moment Robert Vaughn walks into focus, buttoning his pinstripe jacket on instinct, chin up, red handkerchief positioned just so in breast pocket, it becomes impossible to imagine Hustle, BBC1's new conman drama, without him. Vaughn is both icon and signifier, a reassuring presence that tells us we're in for a good time.

Yes, he has been a movie star. He won an Oscar nomination for his performance in *The Young Philadelphians*, was a vital part of *The Magnificent Seven*, appeared alongside Steve McQueen in *Bullitt*. But what really matters here is less his big-screen credits than his small-screen work. After all, Vaughn was the Man From U.N.C.L.E., his image forged in the weekly drollery of high-octane, rumbustious television drama. And that is exactly what *Hustle* wants and, on the evidence of the first episode, manages to be.

It is made by the same team that made *Spooks* and it shows. It was commissioned by the same department of the BBC that gave the go-ahead to *Spooks*, plus the Robson Green legal drama *Trust* and the marvellous *State of Play*. It shows - it is defiantly high-concept, tightly plotted, knowing stuff. In short, *Hustle* is a laugh; slick, glossy, and smart certainly, but a laugh all the same. Social realism it ain't.

The idea, a simple one-liner about a TV series following a group of con-artists performing the long con, came from Bharat Nalluri, a director on *Spooks*. 'It was around the time that the remake of *Ocean's Eleven* was in cinemas,' says *Hustle* producer Simon Crawford-Collins. 'We were all big fans of things like *Mission: Impossible* and *The Persuaders*. What we enjoyed about these series was that they were sheer entertainment and I think we've tended to get away from that on television.' Nalluri and Crawford-Collins took the idea to Jane Featherstone at Kudos Productions, which makes *Spooks*. She in turn gave it to Tony Jordan, a veteran TV drama writer, best known for his work on *EastEnders*, most notably for the Pinteresque two-handers for Dot and Ethel.

What Jordan has produced is a tight, televisual re-engineering of the great con movies like *The Sting* and Stephen Frears's *The Grifters*. 'The con is both an American tradition and a cinematic tradition,' says Gareth Neame, head of drama commissioning at the BBC. 'But I didn't feel I'd seen it on TV and that made the idea both familiar and unusual.' Indeed, at least in the first episode, Jordan makes a point of referencing the source material.

The main con in episode one draws heavily on the set-up for *The Sting* (and, curiously, on the computerised caper movie *Entrapment*). *The Sting* is referenced directly in dialogue, one

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character even assuming the name 'Mr Redford', as part of the narrative. And the violent denouement is a direct echo of scenes in *The Grifters*. 'We did it very consciously,' says Crawford-Collins. 'We owe a debt to films like *The Sting* and it just made sense to acknowledge that.' He admits, however, that using 'Mr Redford' wasn't cemented into the script until the read-through. 'It got such a huge laugh that we knew it had to stay,' he says.

But what really makes *Hustle* sing is the casting. At the heart of the crew, as Mickey 'Bricks' Stone, king of the long con, is the remarkable Adrian Lester, a near stranger to television. Lester has played Hamlet for Peter Brook and Henry V for Nicholas Hytner at the National, was cast as the American lead in Mike Nichols's *Primary Colors* (an immense achievement for a British actor) and has won Olivier awards for his performances in musicals like *Sweeney Todd*. But until *Hustle*, he had done only an hour and a half of British television, if you don't include some work as an extra at the Crossroads motel, while still a student.

'I've no idea why I've done so little,' Lester says. 'Parts didn't come up, opportunities didn't present themselves. And then a theatre job would happen and I'd be out for a year.' He only became available for *Hustle* because shooting moved back a few weeks. 'I just loved the scripts,' he says now. 'They are really clever and they don't let you know what will happen next. You've got the audience hooked into the idea of *The Sting* from the off.' That, he says, is the key to the appeal of something like *Hustle*. 'With a con movie or a heist movie, the audience knows exactly what they're going to get. They are there to watch you solve the problems and achieve the objective.'

I wonder out loud to Lester whether the very job of being an actor makes him ideally suited to the part of a conman. That, after all, is what actors do all the time, isn't it? Try to convince the audience they are somebody they are not? 'Yes, but it's a shared thing. The audience have agreed to suspend their disbelief. They are complicit in it. In the con, you are not telling your audience you are acting.' That said, he admits that, as a bored drama student, he would practise his craft out on the streets. 'What's fun is talking about something you know nothing about,' he says. 'I once pretended to be a dancer just to see if I could get away with it.'

The cast's education in the art of the con was rather more rigorous: they were given books to read on the American tradition, received lectures, were given demonstrations by magicians on the skills of misdirection. Marc Warren, last seen as the sleazy PR man Foy in *State of Play*, and here playing the scrappy young conman Danny, even bought a few card tricks from a magician while preparing for the part. 'He became scarily good at them,' says Lester.

But for both of them, the real bonus to appearing in the show was not the con lessons, but the presence of Vaughn as Albert Stroller, the roper, the guy who finds the con's victim and pulls him in. 'I thought I must have heard it wrong when they told me was going to be in it,' Warren says. 'I just couldn't believe it was him. I'd be working with a legend. I think it was on day two that I started badgering him for stories about Paul Newman and Steve McQueen.' Lester agrees: 'His presence just adds a level of pleasure. I mean, you're getting the Man From U.N.C.L.E. C'mon. How good is that?'

According to sources at the BBC, the production looked at a number of seventysomething men, 'but they were all too much like your dad or kindly uncle'. For his part, Gareth Neame insists that what was important 'was that Robert was right for the role, not that he was Robert Vaughn'. As Crawford-Collins says: 'Vaughn just had that twinkle and charm that we needed. I did worry that it might look a little too cheesy, but I soon realised he was perfect.'

Vaughn himself is spectacularly unforthcoming as to why he took the part, save that the job was in London. 'I've been on such terrible locations I swore that when I got round to having a choice of where

I went, I'd go for the good places.' And London, he says, is one of the good places. He lived here for a few years in the late Sixties, in Michael York's house, and he and his wife 'have lovely memories of the city'.

Does he see any similarities between this part and his role in The Man From U.N.C.L.E.? He shrugs. 'Somebody told me the character was like Napoleon Solo in his later years when he's gone over to the other side.' And then: 'Napoleon Solo comes across as a nice guy on screen and I did the same here. I tried to come across as a nice person. That's what viewers want. They want to like the person.'

Now he slips firmly into legend mode. Asked how it feels to be the last surviving member of The Magnificent Seven, following the death during the shooting of Hustle of Charles Bronson, he tells a long story about how he got his college buddy Jimmie Coburn into the film (Coburn's first big break), and follows it with another about Blake Edwards.

Has he ever been the victim of a con? 'The only con I've ever experienced is producers telling me somebody's going to be in a movie and when I get to the set they aren't there.' He falls silent again. Oh well. Maybe legends are allowed their caprices, especially ones with a few miles on the clock. And at least when everybody else turned up to the set, Robert Vaughn really was there as promised. Nobody, apart from the characters, was conned. And, as a result, the audience isn't likely to feel short-changed either.

- Hustle starts on BBC1, 9pm from 24 February

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