

## **Before the Devil Knows You're Dead**

What steroid is he on?—I mean film director Sidney Lumet, still active at 83 and, incidentally, still telling tough New York stories after all these years. His latest venture, *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead*, gives us two New York brothers who are so wrapped up in their own money problems that they decide to rob their elderly parent's store.

The quick plot line above sounds like he might be aiming at a black comedy, but it is clear early on that Lumet this time is not banking on the mordant but on the bleak. The scheming brothers are glaringly dysfunctional: Philip Seymour Hoffman is Andy, an embezzling accountant on the verge of getting caught, while Ethan Hawke is his hapless younger brother Hank, up to his ears in debt.

Andy's marriage is on the brink of crashing while his wife Gina (Marisa Tomei) is bedding his brother. The robbing of the suburban jewelry store of their parents (Albert Finney and Rosemary Harris) is supposed to be an easy hit (the folks are insured, after all), but, of course, everything goes wrong. Watching it all go wrong offers a classic example for the filmgoer of what the Germans call *Schadenfreude*, that gleeful joy at others' misfortune.

Hoffman is almost type cast as the soft-spoken, bottled-up control freak who is ready to go seismic, while Hawke is his opposite, the flailing whiner who can't control anything. They may not be much fun to watch, but they are effective at embodying the dogged losers they are supposed to be. Stealing the show in the late going is the crusty Finney, the shambling patriarch who knows he went wrong with his boys but who finds a way—an extreme way—to redeem himself if not his family.

Sidney Lumet, as ever, has a way with actors and a knack for catching New York places; it's too bad there are so few people in this picture that we truly care about.

*(This picture is rated "R" for sex/nude scenes and violence; 117 mins.)*

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