

Hollywood, Etc.: Former agent, director conspire on spy story

by David_Elliott

In an orderly hotel suite, two formally polite men in neatly conservative attire are ready to talk. This is your debriefing on "Breach." It goes down easy: no sweat, no wires, no bad guys. The good guys are Billy Ray, 37, director of "Breach," and Eric O'Neill, 33, one of the movie's two main subjects.

O'Neill was the sly young FBI agent whose key role in a sting led to the arrest of his boss, Robert Hanssen, who was for many damaging years a spy for Russia. Hanssen is the truly leading role for Chris Cooper, though Ray does for actor Ryan Phillippe (as O'Neill) what he did for Hayden Christensen in his prior thriller of identity and lies, "Shattered Glass" - hoisting him from hottie status.

SPY STORY - Former FBI agent and sting barb Eric O'Neill (right) came to San Diego with director Billy Ray (left) to talk about 'Breach.' CNS Photo by John Gastaldo.
With due credit to actors, "Breach" is reality-based and without FBI support would have been DBA (dead before arrival). With almost FBI tonality, Ray spells it out:

"Certain things the FBI was never going to give me, but those things I never really needed. Like, what damage Hanssen actually caused over the years. What was really in his drops? I know it was bad, and dangerous.

"But they declassified Eric for me, which was crucial, and opened access to people who'd worked with Hanssen. We walked the real halls of the FBI, invaluable for my director of photography and others."

On cue, O'Neill chimes in about his role in life, inevitably whittled and buffed for the movie:

"I concluded the case and left the bureau, after five years. They'd let you tell your immediate family what happened, though Hanssen's trial had not yet begun or been declassified. During the sting, of course, I couldn't tell even my wife.

"But I later told my brother, David, an aspiring screenwriter in L.A. David said, 'This is a movie.' I thought he was nuts, because I was still in the bureau. He introduced me to two guys who became writers on the project, and while that was going on, I left the FBI."

The best green light was the FBI affidavit on the case. It was, says O'Neill, "the most comprehensive and revealing affidavit the FBI has ever put out. It reads like a Tom Clancy novel, laying out the history better than

any book on Hanssen. I knew we could move ahead, but when I asked permission, they said no. Then a week later, Hanssen pled guilty and I didn't have to take the witness stand as a witness, so I got permission."

A draft called "The Eleventh Hour" brought in Ray, a veteran writer whose direction of "Shattered Glass" drew praise. A huge fan of "All the President's Men," Ray launched "a total rewrite" because ...

"I just wanted to tell the best story I could. That's the god you are always kneeling before. The god of story. I wasn't going to put something in that's not true to the spirit of it, but I didn't mind compositing characters or time. I knew the FBI would let me know if we were out of bounds. There was only one thing they didn't want me to include, which was fair."

The quietly reserved O'Neill found Phillippe, a rising star, a just fine sub for himself.

"The crew was funny," he relates, "trying to compare me and Ryan. Like, when Ryan and I ordered the exact same thing for lunch, that was very prophetic for them!"

"All I wanted was not to be embarrassed. I know it's a movie, not my biography. What more pressure could you put on an actor than say: 'Be this person all the time and, by the way: There he is!' Ryan's best compliment came from my wife, Juliana. We were on set when Ryan did a scene with Caroline (Dhavernas) as Juliana, and my wife said, 'Did you tell him that? He just said and did something only you do.' Somehow, Ryan had just picked it up."

The movie pivots on O'Neill and Hanssen psyching and foxing each other. An odd bond grows, based partly on Catholicism. Cooper is so strong that, recalls Ray, "he was steamrolling Ryan. So Ryan came to me and said, 'I want to punch back more.' And he really did, just small things, but stuff that Eric had done in life."

All are in awe of Cooper, whom Ray calls "the nicest, most gentle guy in the world, but when you make a movie with him, well, he did three or four things a day that made us think: Did you see that? So locked-in and nuanced, odd but authentic. When he did it, I'd look at Ryan, and we both knew how great this guy was, but Ryan stepped up to it. I think the combination of 'Crash,' 'Flags of Our Fathers' and our movie, I hope, is making people realize his talent."

Ray loved the mental waltz by which Hanssen and O'Neill used religion to prod and sucker each other. He feels, "I understand it because, though I didn't grow up Catholic, a guilt-driven religion does ring a bell with me. ... Really, the movie is about how Hanssen made O'Neill reevaluate everything; his faith, the FBI, his marriage."

So, what was that like in life, Eric?

"There were points when I respected him, and there were a few moments early when I was shaky about his guilt. It didn't seem we were finding anything. I thought maybe I wasn't the right person to draw him out. He wasn't a spy to me until we found something, that's just the American way, and it didn't matter that he was often a jerk as a boss."

O'Neill thought of quitting but realized that could unravel the investigation, and "the biggest part of the case for me was not stuff like stealing his Palm Pilot for a while. It was in figuring out how to make him talk to me. Hey, that's why I was picked. The analysts are smart, they have big psych degrees, so they put us in a small office and we got bored and began talking guy-to-guy."

He found out "Hanssen loved the role of mentor, loved teaching, and his favorite topics were computers, Catholicism and counterintelligence. Three things I knew about. He loved being the Cold War dinosaur, teaching me, thinking he controlled me. We felt he might try to recruit me, even introduce me to his Russian handlers. They (the bureau) would have loved to turn me into a double agent."

So, who really was Bob Hanssen? For the young guy who really buzzed the sting, the oddness was that "Hanssen preached patriotism, but was also really into Russia. He loved the Soviet Union, too!"

Ray feels that "he had a big ego to be flattered. He was an analyst, but was never in the field for us. He wanted to seem very important, thought of himself as James Bond, ran around with guns in his car trunk."

"The Russians were very smart. They treated him like Bond, let him do all this action stuff on the sly, and whenever they sent him a message with 'you,' they capitalized the Y. They really played him."

Ray is comfy that his tough little drama uses its limits well, for "if we'd spent a hundred million, we'd have a very different animal. We got \$25 million, a huge step up for me from 'Shattered Glass,' under \$6 million. But this is a range I like; I don't need the \$100 million movie, and I'm not a multiple-explosion guy."

As to why Hanssen played his amazing double game, Ray feels, "If I can't prove the why, I don't want to state it. The actions matter. You can kick the why around, but what matters is what he did and the effect he had, which was no doubt awful. Hanssen himself said the why doesn't matter."

Ray now moves on to a post-Katrina story of storm survivors. O'Neill is practicing law in Washington. Stay tuned for future debriefings.

Hollywood, Etc.: Former agent, director conspire on spy story by David_Elliott