

# GREAT ARTISTS STEAL



BY Devin Leonard  
PHOTOGRAPH BY Djeneba Aduayom

Certain things are expected in a good heist show—and the Netflix hit *Lupin* does those things with style. It also has an extra *je ne sais quoi*, in the person of French star Omar Sy

**I**N THE FIRST EPISODE OF *LUPIN*, THE breakout Netflix heist series, Assane Diop, a talented and charming Parisian thief, orchestrates a plot to steal a diamond necklace being sold in a charity auction at the Louvre. Once worn by Marie Antoinette, it's known as the Queen's Necklace. In preparation for the job, Diop finagles a position as a maintenance worker, enabling him to familiarize himself with the museum's security system. He persuades three obstreperous members of a local loan-sharking crew to do the actual thievery—while at the same time crafting a second false identity for himself. He plans to attend the auction as a wealthy tech mogul and outbid all comers for the necklace.

The heist inevitably goes awry. The thugs try to double-cross Diop, but then he'd always planned to hoodwink them. He permits his accomplices to run off with a counterfeit version of the necklace and into the arms of the gendarmes. Diop slips the real item into a wastebasket, which he later returns to empty in his janitorial guise. Wouldn't you know it? The Queen's Necklace is still there. Diop deposits it in a trash bag, and off he strides past the museum's unsuspecting guards and into the Parisian night.

It was that final twist that clinched it for Omar Sy, the French movie star who portrays Diop, when he read the script. "I thought that was really punk," Sy recalls. "Just having the Queen's Necklace in a trash bag was really cool."

*Lupin*, which premiered in January, was watched by 76 million households in its first four weeks, making it the second-most-successful debut ever for an original Netflix show, after only *Bridgerton*. Following a global publicity campaign, it returned on June 11 with five new episodes in which Diop uses everything from wardrobe changes to martial arts mastery to elude his adversaries as they close in on him. The reviews of *Lupin Part 2* have been laudatory, even if critics caution viewers not to overthink the show, and a third installment is on the way.

Like many heist films and shows, *Lupin* frequently requires a willful suspension of disbelief—and then some. But just as Sy's character constantly diverts people's attention from his larcenous doings with his ploys, the audience is beguiled by the chic Parisian sets, haute production, and riveting orchestral soundtrack. Then there's Sy, whose presence makes even the most *incroyable* moments worth watching. "His smile lets him—how do you say it in English?—get away with murder," says Ludovic Bernard, who directed two new *Lupin* episodes.

*Lupin* arrived just in time for Netflix Inc. Last year, as the pandemic settled over the world, it added a remarkable 37 million new subscribers, ►



◀ bringing its total to 204 million. But in April the company revealed it had added only 4 million more in the first quarter of 2021, 2 million shy of its own projections. Netflix shares tumbled 11% in after-hours trading that day. Still, the company had something it could use to divert investors' attention: a hit show from, of all places, France.

**T**HE MAKING OF *LUPIN* BEGAN SEVERAL years ago when executives at Gaumont SA, one of France's largest film and television producers, asked Sy a question every actor dreams of one day fielding: Were there any characters he might be interested in playing?

Sy was a proven box-office draw in France. He'd won the coveted César Award for his role in the 2011 hit *Intouchables* as a hoodlum-turned-caregiver who forges an unlikely friendship with a rich White quadriplegic who needs some bucking up. (It was later remade in the U.S. as *The Upside*, with Kevin Hart and Bryan Cranston.) Sy became so well-known in France that he moved his family to Los Angeles in 2012, hoping to give his five children a chance to grow up in relative anonymity. He landed supporting roles in American franchise fare such as 2014's *X-Men: Days of Future Past* and the following year's *Jurassic World*. But as Gaumont's solicitation indicated, the big roles for him were still in France.

For Sy, the answer to the question from Gaumont was obvious: He wanted to play Arsène Lupin, the top-hatted thief created by the belle époque mystery writer Maurice Leblanc to appeal to fans of England's Sherlock Holmes. Lupin was a mischievous Gallic Robin Hood who delighted in relieving the wealthy of their riches. He was such a master of disguise that in one story he passed himself off as the chief inspector investigating his own crimes. "Unlike the Sherlock Holmes stories, which have a foothold in reality, the Arsène Lupin stories are really burlesques," says Otto Penzler, owner of the Mysterious Bookshop in New York and editor by his own count of more than 70 anthologies of such fare. "They're parodies of mystery and crime fiction."

Parodies or not, Leblanc's books are beloved in France and have been devoured by generations of young people. What appealed to Sy was the chance to play a suave action movie character. If he were English, he would've insisted on James Bond. As a Frenchman, he would settle for Lupin.

Serendipitously, Gaumont was already developing a show about a new version of Leblanc's hero. The ground was well-trod: There had been a popular French TV series about Lupin in the 1970s and a 2004 Lupin film with supernatural elements. Heist

films are remade more often than those of most other genres. Among successful American films, consider 2001's *Ocean's Eleven* (the first version, starring Frank Sinatra, was released in 1960) and 2003's *The Italian Job* (from a 1969 British film starring Michael Caine).

Sy signed on to star in the project and also as executive producer. But he wasn't satisfied with the draft scripts for the show. Then Netflix brought in George Kay as showrunner. Kay, a veteran British TV writer who'd worked on *Criminal*, a police procedural simultaneously produced in the U.K., France, Germany, and Spain, had no sentimental attachment to the old Lupin. "Coming from England, I just wanted to go fresh," Kay says.



◊ Sy as Diop, disguised as a janitor, in the Louvre. Something's up.

Every heist movie requires a protagonist with a credible criminal résumé. That's pretty much Rule No.1 of the genre, and Kay's reimagining of the Lupin character satisfied it. He proposed a show about Assane Diop, a character who, like Sy, is of West African descent. Diop is inspired by Leblanc's creation but not based on him. Like the old master crook, Diop excels at cloaking his identity and sneaking in and out of heavily fortified buildings.

Diop, however, often uses his race to penetrate the upper levels of White France society. After all, who would suspect a lowly immigrant janitor, to say nothing of a tech support guy or a hotel food service worker, to name a few of Diop's other identities, of being a heist master? The protagonist of *Lupin* routinely uses such casual bigotry to his advantage. "That became a theme in the show—the invisibility of some people in society," Kay says. (Sy, on the other hand, sees *Lupin* as more of a commentary on class prejudice than on racism. "They are the same disease," the actor says.)

Rule No.2 of the heist genre: The audience must be able to relate to the chief criminal. So for all of Diop's smoothness as a lawbreaker, Kay

also made Sy's character a dad who has difficulty at times connecting with his teenage son, who lives with his mother, Diop's ex-girlfriend, Claire, played by Ludivine Sagnier. Diop and Claire enjoy a generally warm relationship, but he frequently tries her patience when his clandestine activities cause him to neglect his fatherly duties.

Diop keeps telling Claire he's going to change, and Sy insists his character means it. "He's trying really hard," the actor says. "Even if it's almost impossible, it's something he really wants to do." Speaking on her own character's behalf, Sagnier is doubtful. "Well, according to my experience as a woman," the actress says, "when a man promises to a woman he's going to change, usually he won't. I think Claire must be aware of that."

They're both right. Diop is an updated version of the typical heist protagonist: a basically good man who believes he can go legit after pulling one more job. But Kay says the audience doesn't want Diop to be an angel. "We like his unreliability, the good intentions mixed with the bad," he says. "We really want him to keep failing at those good intentions so we can enjoy the adventures that come with it."

Rule No.3: The heist cannot entirely be about the money. Why does the recently paroled Danny Ocean, as portrayed by George Clooney in the *Ocean's Eleven* remake, concoct the simultaneous robberies of three Las Vegas casinos when he's likely to end up behind bars again if something goes amiss? He's trying to win back the heart of his ex-wife, Tess, played by Julia Roberts.

Diop, too, is doing it all for a greater good. He's seeking to avenge his late father, Babakar Diop, who committed suicide (or did he?) after being wrongfully accused of theft by a wealthy Parisian businessman as part of a conspiracy. It's a plot that involves the Queen's Necklace, insurance fraud, a false confession, and, well, the less seriously one takes *Lupin*, the better. By giving Diop a motivation transcending financial gain, however convoluted the backstory, Kay satisfied this requirement of the genre.

Rule No.4: The heists themselves must be challenging enough that the audience cheers for them to succeed. But unlike a heist movie, which typically revolves around a single caper, there had to be some retrofitting of the genre for the Netflix era. Sy says he and Kay agreed there should be at least one heist per episode in *Lupin*, and sometimes more. The scenes often mirror those of Leblanc's books so as not to slight fans of the real Lupin, but Kay also lifted from classic heist films that he adores (sidebar).

There's the Team Heist at the Louvre, climaxing with Diop's hapless accomplices smashing their ▶

## NICKING THE CLASSICS

A SELECTION OF GREAT HEIST FILMS, ACCORDING TO THE CREATORS OF *LUPIN*

### ● *THE KILLING* (1956)

Director: Stanley Kubrick



*Lupin* showrunner George Kay cites this tale of a team of hoodlums who rob a racetrack as one of his influences. The legendary auteur's noirer-than-noir take helped solidify the genre's tropes: the mastermind with one last job to pull, the seemingly impossible plan, and the accomplices whose conflicting motives threaten to unravel the scheme.

### ● *THE LADYKILLERS* (1955)

Director: Alexander Mackendrick



Kay says the post-World War II comedies of England's Ealing Studios helped him establish the jocular tone of the Netflix show. This one, with a cast led by Alec Guinness and Peter Sellers, concerns a band of bank robbers whose plans are confounded by their elderly landlady. "It's all about finding the right kind of wit," he says.

### ● *SNATCH* (2000)

Director: Guy Ritchie



This manically paced movie about the aftermath of a diamond heist set a new standard for modern crime movies. It's gratuitously violent, sidesplittingly funny, and breathtakingly stylish—usually all at the same time. "The film is just perfect, perfect, perfect from A to Zed," says Ludovic Bernard, who directed two episodes of *Lupin Part 2*.

### ● *OCEAN'S ELEVEN* (2001)

Director: Steven Soderbergh



Bernard also gives a nod to this remake of a 1960 Rat Pack classic. This version of the film doesn't just steal from the original; it surpasses it with an impeccable cast, hypnotic cinematography, and a reimagined script. "It's so classy," says Bernard, "even though I love the original."

◀ getaway car through a street-level skylight and into the museum. In a subsequent episode there's a Jailbreak Heist, in which Diop sneaks into prison by switching places in the visitation room with another West African inmate—and then busting out by faking his own death. Sy's character also pulls a Crook Posing as a Cop Heist, using his smile—the one that lets him get away with murder—to persuade an elderly woman to entrust him with her diamonds, which she laughs about purchasing for nothing from the poor locals in the Belgian Congo. “You want to mix up the scale of the twists and the scale of the kind of canvas of what you're playing with,” Kay says. “So, having done the Louvre, sometimes you want to do quite a small crime.”

Rule No.5: Heist perpetrators must rely on their brains rather than their sidearms to get the job done. This, says Sy, was the one thing he insisted on when it came to his character's escapades. “We want him to be a gentleman thief,” the actor says. “So we have to be very clear about that. No using guns. No using violence. No fights.” If Diop were to show a vicious side, he would likely lose the audience's sympathy, which wouldn't bode well for viewership. When backed in a corner, though, as he often is in the newer episodes, Diop is more than capable of subjecting his antagonists to a Bond-worthy thumping.

That leaves Rule No.6—perhaps the most important of all. To deliver the requisite character development and thrills, the heist must spin out of control. Kay refers to this as the heist within the heist, and the challenge is to get the audience to go along. “We all know the heist,” Kay says. “We all want to root for it to go right. What we kind of fall for every time is that we're relying on it going wrong to find out the interesting stuff. So how entertaining can you make it?”

That's why Kay has Diop's henchmen turn on him at the Louvre. It's also why, having broken into jail, he's threatened by drug-dealing inmates intent on collecting a payment incurred by the crook with whom he traded places. These obstacles, however, turn out to be integral to Diop's success. That's the beauty of the heist within a heist. “It must go wrong in order to go right,” Kay says.

**F**ILMING OF *LUPIN* BEGAN IN LATE 2019, then shut down because of Covid. But like that reliable heist trope—the caper going wrong to go right—the series benefited from the pandemic. By summer, when Gaumont was able to resume work on *Lupin*, Paris was eerily quiet. The cast and crew had the run of the town. “We had the license to go everywhere,” Sagnier says. “We were really lucky.”

At the same time, people around the world were looking for diversion. This was a boon for streaming services, especially Netflix, which, thanks to pre-pandemic production, had plenty of new shows, some of them setting viewership records. *The Queen's Gambit*, about a young woman's unlikely ascent to chess stardom, was watched by 62 million households in the four weeks following its October premiere. *Bridgerton*, concerning the travails of racially diverse aristocrats in an alternative version of early 19th century London, followed in December and drew 82 million in the same amount of time.

By early this year, Netflix was feeling the effects of the global production slowdown. In an April letter to shareholders, the company said it didn't have enough new shows to keep people signing up at the expected clip. Industry observers agreed. “There was nothing to watch this quarter,” Michael Nathanson, a senior research analyst at MoffettNathanson LLC, told Bloomberg News the same month.

Almost nothing, that is. Netflix had *Lupin*. It didn't quite do *Bridgerton* numbers, but it wasn't far off. And this was especially impressive because, unlike *Bridgerton* and *The Queen's Gambit*, which were in English, *Lupin* was a French-language show. It became the first to crack the streaming service's top 10 U.S. shows. “It's just another proof that great stories travel everywhere,” says Damien Couvreur, director of original French series at Netflix.

Netflix was also quick to point out that just as *The Queen's Gambit* moved sales of chess sets, *Lupin* spurred sales of *Lupin* books in French-speaking countries. There was also interest from American book purchasers. “We've been selling so many copies,” says the Mysterious Bookshop's Penzler.

Best of all for Netflix, *Lupin's* success made it possible for the company to put a sunny spin on its April earnings call, which was otherwise clouded by some bad tidings. Yes, the pandemic-fueled hypergrowth was waning, Netflix's leaders acknowledged. But they pointed to *Lupin* as validating their strategy of developing shows outside of Hollywood that could not only do well in their home markets but also become global hits.

“This quarter our biggest new series in the world was *Lupin* from France,” boasted Greg Peters, Netflix's chief operating officer. “And the show wasn't like a watered-down French show. It was a very French show.” In other words, Peters was essentially saying, pay no attention to our short-term stumble; Netflix's global domination scheme is working. Arsène Lupin might have said, “*Pas mal.*” **B**