SCREENPLAY GURUS

SCRIPT NOTES

TITLE:	**X**
LOCALE:	Gritty New York City, Dusty New Mexico, Desert Town
WRITER(S):	X
PERIOD:	Present
FORM:	Screenplay
GENRE:	Crime/Dark Comedy/Fantasy
BUDGET:	Moderate
PAGES:	115
DRAFT DATE:	n/a
COVERAGE DATE:	8/1/18
PREPARED BY:	ML

COMMENTS

OVERALL

With a balance of dark comedy, serious criminal activity, and a surprise twist, X both entertains and enlightens as it comments on the numbing of an America under constant siege by violence and greed.

This is a well-crafted script that flips "The Wizard of Oz" on its ass. It's laugh out loud funny, real, and bloody as hell. The characters are well drawn, the dialogue, sharp.

Of course, all scripts can use some tightening. Let's see how to tackle it in this one.

STORY

"No Country For Old Men" meets "The Wizard of Oz."

X, a jerkwater town near the Mexican border where "Dreams Become Reality." Or so says the sign at the town line.

In this town, SAM MERCURIO, suffers from an affliction that's not revealed until the end. There is a patina of mystery surrounding the entire town whose characters are straight out Central Casting – tropes – Dumbfellas, a Fanboy Fantasy Asian woman, a foaming at the mouth Mexican assassin, a weak and greedy businessman and his tough, in-charge sister. We know what these characters want – coke and millions kept in a temporary bank that three numbskull brothers, the JONES FAMILY, literally take on their moving rig and, ill-advisedly, move it to an area called "The Circle of Snakes" while human vipers kill each other en masse to retrieve the bank's contents.

In three words, brilliant, brilliant and brilliant. Several times during the read, the Reader was confused and wondered why the story was so derivative, freewheeling and lacked some script basics, i.e. a strong central protagonist who drove the story. That's still an issue that's easily fixed, but first:

THE DREAM
Some may feel cheated by this deceit. There is a lot of subtext, we're certain, that drove the decision to make this a dream structure. Not all viewers or Readers will find the crumbs left on the trail by the Writer, for example, Emily who's called Em, as in Auntie Em, or correlate the allegory of "a nest of vipers" in the bank.

This Reader was surprised and initially did feel the story was a cheat. It wasn't until thought went into the crafting of the story that the Reader found the brilliance in the pages. Continued reflection finds more nuggets that strengthen the tale.

The Writer's misdirection works. The Reader completely bought into a standard crime story with the focus on a small town bank like in Tres Cruces, NM a la "Charley Varrick." The script also tips its hat to "El Dorado" and "Rio Bravo," "No Country for Old Men," "The Usual Suspects," and the sequel to "The Hot Rock," "Bank Shot" which also features the theft of a bank building.

The Writer channels these films as a way to underscore Sam's memories and make their point-of-view clear; fictional violence in films is not an indicator of the true effects of crime, and why is the world enamored with violence. As Joey says, "Maybe if we just wait long enough, they'll just kill each other." Too, there is a context for the corruption and ineffectiveness of law enforcement.

The Writer should be aware the script may have a polarizing effect with some understanding what the story means in a greater context and those believing it's a derivative pastiche of tired clichés and situations.

The Reader does not recommend changing the story. Stay with the dream. The twist is great, and it's not the same as gratuitous use as in TV's "Dallas" with Bobby dreaming the preceding seasons were a dream, or the phoniness of the use in "Inception."

There are some elements that can be tweaked to give the story more buoyancy without taking away the surprise. We'll look at these in Structure and Characters.

NUMBER OF CHARACTERS / LENGTH
In the script there are:
Townspeople
Dumbfellas
Mexicans and Gang: Diego and Eduardo
Winnie and Gang
The Chinaman
East Coast Mob and Gang
Sue Kay

This is a lot. Consider simplifying a bit, or encapsulating the characters. They're all great but, for example, The Chinaman is in and out of the story very quickly. There are plenty of others to kill the Jones Boys.

The Writer should shoot for 110 pages. There are a few other things that could be cut or trimmed and not hurt the story. Check the markup.

Sam and Emily have the same discussion three times. Twice is good, and have their second conversation be when she's leaving. Her talks with him should be more pointed, as if she's speaking to him from "beyond."

There are lengthy and sometimes redundant discussions between characters that can certainly be cut. Suggestions for cuts are in the markup.

The ridiculousness of these characters goes a long way to explaining, in retrospect, the dream. The ridiculousness meter is currently at a 9/10. Suggest turning it up to a 9.5.

Another crazy idea is to add one or two more surreal elements. For example, when Wyatt falls off the roof, and the Dumbfellas look, the body is missing. The Dumbellas, not knowledgeable about the desert, could pass this off as an animal getting the body. The Writer has a few good ones in The Chinaman's death by lightning, and the statement about not knowing it could rain so hard in the desert. A few more will add more resonance to rationalize the dream.

Think of "The Sixth Sense." All the things that happen lead to "Oh shit. That's what it meant." in retrospect when we find Willis is dead.

Consider adding a short scene with Cindy to see how Butch's death affects her.

The Writer has called this "Seven Days…" There's no sense of the passage of time in the story counting down the days to a shootout between all the factions. Suggestion to add a SUPER: "Day One," "Day Two," etc at seven points in the script. Perhaps even text: SUPER: "DAY ONE - The Bank" "DAY TWO - The Plan" "DAY THREE - The Heist" "DAY FOUR - The Chinaman" etc. A little Tarantino, but consider at least adding

day supers. The title should pay off in some way within the script. Why seven days? How do we know the days?

The Writer is masterful in giving away information, i.e. it's immediately obvious the how the Jones Boys will heist the bank. It's a bold move that lulls the Reader into a comfortable place then spinning into an entirely different direction.

The Reader feels a script must earn the ending, so the twist can't be the entire thing - the journey has to be worth it. In writing an entertaining story, the Writer has accomplished this with the caveat a bit more massaging is in order.

STRUCTURE

The script is well plotted but could use a little restructuring.

It was a surprise to find the Jones Boys disappearing for so long. As they began the story, and as they have extreme financial duress, it was thought Butch (who has a family) was our protagonist. It was another surprise they were killed.

In "Glengarry Glen Ross," the first character seen is Shel Levine. He's having a heated discussion with a hospital billing office about his very ill daughter's care. He doesn't have the money and she will be kicked out. Therefore, he's our protagonist among an ensemble because he must act to save his daughter. It's called a "nail in the head." We see a lot of other characters, but Shel has the biggest nail and he eventually robs the office.

The Jones' death and their place as faux-protagonists leads to a vacuum Sam must fill in. Recommend starting with Sam waking up from a dream, discussion with wife, off to diner then Jones Boys in truck. Sam must drive the action more. He's a tad passive and needs to step up to a greater degree. Serving coffee and a few words here and there about police procedure are not enough. The Inciting Incident should be Emily's departure. This underscores her death from cancer when she "left" him.

Consider that the script is filled with bad guys. The Sheriff is in their pocket. Harry is an old lion, Sue Kay is ineffectual. Who's the hero to drive the story, and for us to root for? (Joey is a poor substitute.) This is partially accomplished with the Flashback to NYC, but Sam retires (in the dream) to open a diner in X. Sam should take a more active role. Have him bump elbows with the wonderful cast of scumbags and heathens you've created. That Sam returns in the nick of time, under a hail of bullets is fine, but only if he's put in more sweat equity, leaves and has a change of heart. He's a tough NYC cop. Put him more forward in the story.

The rest of the structure sings. Great work.

CHARACTERS

First, they have great names: Plotter, and The Chinaman is a real hoot.

There's an appropriate amount of sympathy for the scumbags, many of whom are victims of their own greed and misdeeds.

Sam has been covered, but a recommendation he should be a bit more of an unreliable narrator to season his character. Be up front, start your story off by having him say he's a liar in a subtle way. That he can't be trusted. Just one line.

Or present him as truthful, and chip away at the facts, showing them to be nothing more than an actor, or a dreamer. Easy one here. After Em leaves, someone asks about her and Sam lies that she's fine and making them a nice dinner later.

Eduardo is another hoot. He froths at the mouth, yet turns little girly when he's used as a human shield. His "*El Diablo*" is hysterical.

Characterization, structure and story are not a concern to the Reader. Outstanding work. You can do anything in a dream (or is it a nightmare of the greedy and corrupt world in which we live), and the Writer does just that.

There's a running gag about shoes and fashion. Suggest broadening this, say a character shoots another and says to the dead victim, "Look what you did. Blood on my (expensive boots manufacturer)."

Also consider adding more traits to the characters. They are for the most part unique, but could be amped up a notch. What if Diego had a yappy Chihuahua he treasures or a parrot that kept squawking, "Matar a los hijos de puta!" (Kill the motherfuckers!)

PLOT LOGIC

The movement of the building to the flatbed seems a little easy. In the context of a dream it's okay, but needs a bit more tension. The building teeters, etc.

TONE

The Writer has skillfully created a precarious balance between comedy and tragedy.

CRAFT

The Writer has done an admirable job, but this is the area in need of improvement.

There is a move among Spec screenwriters to take advice from working writers like John August or to see a style in a famous screenwriter's script and copy it. Spec scripts are read by professionals and they demand a professionally written script. They demand sentences that have pronouns and articles and are well written.

Screenwriters like August do Spec writers a disservice by telling them to throw out the rules. While there's a germ of truth in that, Specs must be written in perfect English. The only reference a Spec writer should follow is Trottier's "Screenwriter's Bible."

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She sits up, sees SAM MECURRIO, fifties, pants and shoes on,
seated with a coffee, staring out the window.
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There is too much detail in this Action - too many things in a run on sentence. We don't care what he wears, we assume he's sitting.

She sits up and spots her husband, SAM MERCURIO (50s). He sips coffee and stares at the lifeless desert with a far away look in his eyes.

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Butch climbs over Buddy, tries to look at the building they just
passed. Notices it is raised on hydraulic jacks.
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As Yoda says, "There is no try, only do." What does "tries" in the sentence mean? Either Buddy does or he doesn't. Maybe it's a struggle. Don't add qualifiers. It lessens impact.

The bolded section is a comma splice or run on. The underlined sentence is missing a pronoun. The bold and underline is Passive Voice. Do not use is and are.

Butch climbs over Buddy to look at the building. It props on hydraulic jacks

Write only in Active Voice with the same verb forms:

NO: He **is racing** up the hill and **approaches** a windmill. He is winded. (Two verb forms, Passive Voice)
YES: Winded, he **races** up the hill and **approaches** a windmill. (One verb form, Active Voice)

Active Voice writing: https://plainlanguage.gov/resources/articles/dash-writing-tips/

Avoid adjectives and adverbs ending in 'ly' and 'ing',

Connect sentences with and, or, but. Use pronouns.

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Small diner, with a counter and a couple of tables
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Do not drop Articles, a, an, the. **A** small diner with a counter (no comma). And again, we know what a diner looks like. They have counters and tables.

Fifties Vibe: Tuck and Roll booths and chrome swivel seats. Use clever visual descriptions beyond the obvious.

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Butch makes an annoyed face at Buddy upon hearing about his dad
mentioned.
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This sentence is poorly written and does not follow, like many Actions, "Show, don't tell."

Annoyed, Butch's brow furrows. or Butch's brow furrows.

Don't need to mention Dad or hearing in the action. We know what he's reacting to.

The markup flags errors and highlights where a pronoun should be used and where sentences should be connected.

The script uses "sees" and "sits" a lot. Break it up by using synonyms. Or don't use them. There are few times an Action needs "sits."

For synonyms: https://www.thesaurus.com/

Do not use temporal qualifiers like starts, begins, suddenly. He begins to peel the banana = He peels a banana.

Consider that when a Reader scans a sentence that's missing something (pronouns or an article) the brain fills it in and any semblance of flow is destroyed. Same thing with a comma splice. The eye rests on the break of two thoughts separated by a comma when "and" creates a bridge and flow. "X" reads choppy and disjointed.

Readers paid to read are unlike Studio Readers who would make it maybe to page 10 due to the poor syntax and toss the script. That would be a damn shame because this is a damn fine story.

I'm going to be extremely obnoxious by using bold and multiple exclamations:

This is a great script that suffers due to very poor English usage. It's not a style, it's a mistake. Actions are about half the text. Many writers believe Actions are not important. They are.   Put your best foot forward!!!!!!!

The transitions to and from flashbacks is not properly formatted.

EXT. NEW YORK STREET, OUTSIDE WAREHOUSE EVENING (FLASHBACK)

Cold, snowy, blustery winter day.

EXT. NEW YORK CITY - WAREHOUSE – NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

A snowy, blustery winter day.

Blah, blah.

END FLASHBACK

Signs are formatted like this:

SIGN: "X   1"

Parentheticals have their place, but the Writer uses them a tad too much. They're flagged, but make a pass to delete as many as possible. There should be no Paranthetical that points out the obvious. Also, too many make for keyboard directing. Let the director and actor do their jobs.

Use (CONT'D) when dialogue breaks for an Action line or two. In Final Draft make it manual or else a (CONT'D) can be placed a page away.

The final transition to New York from X is a bit abrupt and needs more care and finesse.

Don't use the character's full names: SAM for SAM MERCURIO.

DIALOGUE

Superb. Natural, real, laugh out loud funny, poignant, telling. As characters are their words (and actions), dialogue is the writer's strongest suit. With a few tweaks and trims as noted, don't change a thing.

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SAM MECURRIO
And nothing strikes you odd?

SHERIFF TOM DURANT
(looking out)
Nope.
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Tom goes back to reading. (Tom buries in the paper.)

That one word (and the setup) says it all, and in a funny way considering what Sam is talking about. The Sheriff has Office Hours – funny.

MARKETABILITY

There's a built in audience for films like this. Adding comedy to serious criminal activity is not often undertaken and it is difficult. "The Nice Guys," "Snatch" and the Ocean's films come to mind.

With the right cast and director this script has the potential to be a big box office draw.

TITLE

The Spanish translation is "luck, fate or chance." The Reader suggests "Seven Days in El Sueño (dream)" works as well

MISCELLANEOUS

There are markups in spots that expressed concern about the direction of the script or a character. The Writer should regard them in a context of the Reader's first pass, and may consider them a place to reinforce the elements discussed in these Notes.

CONCLUSION

"X" is an entertaining and solid script in which the Writer has woven, with a deft hand, compelling social and political commentary. There are laughs aplenty, serious drama and gore to boot. All these disparate elements are a harmonious symphony led by a maestro who crafted a terrific script.

Clean up the Actions and this script will soar even higher.

A pleasure to read. Thanks for the opportunity.

SCREENPLAY GURUS' 11 POINT SCORING MATRIX

Scores: 0 – 10 points for each element, 110 total possible points

Pass: 0 – 75
Weak Consider: [1]   76 – 80
Consider: 81 – 90
Strong Consider: 91 – 100
Recommend: 101 – 110

Statistical Scores of submitted screenplays
Pass: 80%
Weak Consider: [1]   10%
Consider: 5%
Strong Consider: 3%
Recommend: 2%

PRESENTATION	4
THEME	9
STORYTELLING	9
ORGINALITY	9
STRUCTURE	7
PLOT	7
CHARACTERIZATION	8
DIALOGUE	9
STYLE	4
CONCEPT	9
MARKETABILITY/COMMERCIAL APPEAL	8
TOTAL POINTS	84

SCRIPT: **CONSIDER**
WRITER: **STRONG CONSIDER**

Presentation:
Is the script properly formatted, free of typos and misspellings? Does the writing use standard English conventions? Is the cover page attached with the author's name and contact information only? Is there white space? Are there lengthy blocks of dialogue and action?

Theme:
Is the theme stated and does the screenplay reinforce it throughout. Is the theme relevant or unique?

Storytelling:
How effectively has the author crafted the timeline of events? Is the story interesting or compelling? Is it relevant? Does the script serve the genre in which it's written? Does the story have a through line and respect it without unnecessary departures?

Originality:
Does the story twist well-worn conventions, or create a new one, without straining credibility? Where does the story fit into the four degrees: Totally Familiar; Familiar, Yet Different; Different, Yet Familiar; Totally Different (Familiar, Yet Different and Different, Yet Familiar are preferred).

Structure:
Does the script have and an Inciting Incident, proper Act Breaks, Rising Action, Complications and Obstacles, a well- identified Protagonist and Antagonist?

Plot:
How well has the author informed the audience why the story's events belong in the script, and what the story is meant to communicate?

Characterization:
Do the characters have dimension beyond cliché and trope? Are they real or relatable? Do they have flaws? Do the characters elicit empathy or sympathy?

Style:
Is the writing clear, economical, free of bloat and unnecessary description. Does the writer "Show, don't tell?" Are the descriptions visual and intriguing? Does the writer use Active Voice and Present Tense?

Concept:
Is it sound, interesting or compelling? Do Plot, Storytelling and Structure reinforce the concept?

Marketability/Commercial Appeal:
Where does the script fit in the marketplace? How likely is it to be made? How does it compare to similar films? How will audiences react?

1. AKA Consider With Revisions.

Thanks for submitting your screenplay to Screenplay Gurus! We hope the analysis gives you the info you need to make the script as good as it can be.

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