

SCREENPLAY GURUS

TITLE: X
LOCALE: Dangerous pre WWII Düsseldorf, bomb pocked London
WRITER(S): X
PERIOD: 1938 - circa 1960
FORM: Screenplay
GENRE: WWII Holocaust/Refugee Drama
BUDGET: High
PAGES: 114
DRAFT DATE: NA
COVERAGE DATE: 2/18/19
PREPARED BY: TS

COMMENTS

OVERALL

X is a well written, heartbreaking and ultimately uplifting story. The characters lift off the page to touch us. The script comments on how xenophobia and anti-Semitism thrive even in an enlightened, protective society dedicated to freedom. Indifference, even from a Park Warden who stands by as a girl is beaten, is soul numbing, and intolerance can mean death.

The fast-paced script challenges us by juxtaposing evil: A German soldier killing Jews with a bullet is only a matter of degrees from an English bureaucrat who performs his nationalistic duty with excessive racist zeal.

The story counterbalances horror with courageous deeds by those who refuse to allow the stripping of their humanity. There is a heart of hope always beating in the darkest hour, the script tells us, and a mother's unshakeable love is stronger than any twisted ideal. Comparisons to contemporary society are inevitable... and spot on.

Let's take a look at how to improve the script in the next draft.

+++++

STORY

Good work, Writer. This is a compelling page-turner. The script is well constructed and economical with nary an ounce of fat. This inspired-by-true-events story is about people, particularly a mother and daughter, not what surrounds and oppresses them. This story could easily overlay any humanitarian crisis, past or present, where families separate through political means. Well done.

The scriptwriting basics are present and solid. There are few tweaks to make.

We understand the need for a potent hook in the first few pages. On page 1, Tovah is shot down like a dog. It's partially repeated on page 31. We suggest dropping Tovah's "death" on page one and keeping the continuity of rounding up the men, shooting the women and transporting intact with her revival in the grave. Or splitting it in two: Part One, she's shot and appears dead, up to being tossed on a truck, an interstitial scene with Nina, Part Two, Tovah is dumped into the grave, saved and escapes.

The flow is a bit better. It's not as jarring as the upfront death followed by the park incident. Right now, shooting Tovah on page one feels a bit tacked on. Placing it later also allows for a more gradual build of the horrors to come.

The park incident should be expanded a bit. It's a good hook. Perhaps a very young Aryan child spots Nina and turns her into the crowd of older kids who pummel Nina. Alternatively, an innocent young Aryan blithely plays with Nina and is spotted by an older sibling who forces the younger sib to deliver the first blow to Nina. Either one serves two functions: a microcosm of the larger brutality infesting Germany, and how it spread; explaining how the ring of kids came to beat Nina. Of course, change the SUPER to "November 1938"

We're off to an effective start with Kristallnacht - the premiere party of the 'Final Solution.' The Writer created a wonderful transition to England from Düsseldorf. We cut from ravenous flames burning the Jews out to the Parson's welcoming hearth. The Writer uses this simple device with great effectiveness to show us fire, common in both countries, has the power to either destroy or comfort. Good or evil. Good work.

The script has a few too many coincidences: Tovah and Nina near each other in the Tube; Nina spots the cake at the bakery; Tovah finding the letter; Sam finding Nina; Eichler finding Henrik; Nina bumping into Purcell; the Man with info about Nina.

Of these, the Tube needs a rethink. Tovah could be in the Tube while Nina hunkers down in a doorway after she cannot find Sam. Tovah still searches faces in the Tube. Nina in peril as bombs fall on London streets creates greater tension. Perhaps the doorway is just above Tovah's position in the Tube below. We buy Sam and Nina's reunion, and Eichler recognizing Henrik. The Man gives false info. This works to shatter Tovah; so close yet so far.

Two coincidences are a bit problematic as major plot turns pivot on them.

A suggestion for the letter: What if Gertrude shoves it in Tovah's face as proof the little ingrate Nina disobeyed the no-German-in-the-house rule? Alternatively, George says he has two letters, the one from Frieda and one Nina finished and asked him to post but he has not gotten around to – with all that is going on. Tovah reads Nina's letter and clocks Gertrude.

The bakery robbery does not require motivation by Nina seeing the cake from the bus. What if local gossip says the bakery prospers? Sam believes there will be lots of cash to steal and picks it as a target. One of Sam's gang (or anyone really) could spot Frank handling a lot of money and tells Sam. Someone else cluing Sam makes the situation less coincidental and more random. The cake could be inside when they burgle, and Nina spots it. Then Sam makes noise.

The idea of Tovah highlighting the cake as a beacon for Nina on her birthday is a good one. A brief scene showing Tovah's disappointment at the end of the day when it does not attract Nina could be a greater impetus for the monologue on page 105. We suggest adding a brief action prior to the monologue where a sad Tovah takes the cake from the closed bakery's window and says, "Happy birthday, Nina."

The script could use shades of gray. We have more on this in Characters.

The train station scene is heartbreaking. Gran Tovah is heartwarming. Both Nina and Tovah's journeys are daunting, filled with dread and tension. Setting a Boar mother (who, like Tovah, protects her children) on Tovah after her flight from the human animals is a great juxtaposition. The convergence of the multiple threats – bombs and Purcell – at the climax is well done. Solid work.

STRUCTURE

The crosscutting between Nina and Tovah's journeys in short scenes works well and keeps the pace up. The script reads fast. The Writer entering scenes late and leaving early abets the pace.

Except for the suggestion to move the cutting down of Tovah from page one, the structure is also solid. Good work.

CHARACTERS

The lead characters are rich and complex. They are active protagonists. Within the story's context, Tovah and Nina's have flaws that garner sympathy. They also have courage and strength. Nina's "Go to Hell" is terrific. The Writer breathed life into these characters and made them real. Good work. That said, some of the other characters could use a bit more complexity, less black and white. Without some depth, characters become stereotypes or tropes.

Eichler is portrayed as a typical rabid dog Nazi. The mark on his face is reminiscent of 'the mark of the devil'. The skin flaw is an opportunity to underscore the source of his evil – an internal scar. It's easy to project this imperfection makes him less attractive to women. He could have low self-image and anger the Nazis exploit. Eichler faces a death sentence for his "intolerable" sexuality. Is he a homosexual or an opportunist?

Antagonists like Eichler pitched as evil solely because they are a Nazi leads to a less than compelling character. It's why they are a Nazi and what they desire that makes them a fully fleshed-out character. Antagonists have more than bad traits. A balance awakens a reader's sympathy and makes the antagonist real and understandable. Every villain needs some justification.

What if Eichler showed the tiniest bit of vulnerability? It could be dialogue to the Male Prostitute along the lines "Does my face frighten you?" "My face is hideous, is it not?" He could also silently take the Prostitute's hand and move it to caress the mark. This action mirrors Gertrude's strange cheek stroke of Nina.

Taking the same idea to the Baines: These two are a piece of work. They take Nina to be their maid and sex slave for the witchy Gertrude. There's an opportunity when George responds to Nina's question, He just stares at her a moment before closing the door on her unanswered question. This is a good response begging for a bit more to add complexity. The Writer's instincts are good. George should not say something on the spot but a sub textual answer could come later.

As it stands, these two (predominantly Gertrude) are merely repugnant. Same reasoning: It's why they are repugnant and what they desire that fleshes them out. The abuse of Nina points to serious issues between the couple and specifically within Gertrude. Is it a sexless marriage of convenience? Are they barren? Did George lose interest, or is he too old? Did they lose a child? Is Gertrude gay? The loss of a child is a good parallel to Tovah.

The Writer should rethink the use of "sexual perversity" as issues for both Eichler and Gertrude. Couldn't Eichler approach a female prostitute with the same vulnerability? He would still jeopardize his position, particularly with a Jewish prostitute.

What Gertrude does is shocking and potent. We note the abuse of female children by female adults is statistically low. The link leads to info about this type of pedophilia: http://saratso.org/pdf/Faller_C_K-1987-Women_Who_Sexually_Abuse_Children.pdf

Sometimes the motivation is "male coerced." What if George secretly watches? We recommend keeping it but giving Gertrude a line that allows for sympathy when she and Nina are in the tub. History of sexual abuse is a reason women perpetrate. "That's how I washed my mum when I was your age." "That's how I washed my Da when I was your age." Or something far cleverer the Writer finds either in the link or imagination.

On Eichler and Gertrude, correlating sexuality with evil or repugnancy is reductive. It sends a message. In a way, homosexuality is presented as what evil people do. There's also Marcel who turns into a nasty rapist. There is a theory of Toxic Themes where writers add an unwanted theme. An example is BRAVEHEART. Gibson is determined to shed the shackles of English rule and lead his people in revolt. His real motivation is toxic – revenge for the death of his beloved, not quite a lofty ideal. We suggest the Writer seriously ponder their choices.

Purcell is in good shape. He's a typical, powerless, minor bureaucrat with too much sway who's caught up in the patriotic fervor of the times. Thank you for killing him. We could get a glimpse of humanity. Maybe he feeds pigeons, has a sweet tooth or takes in stray dogs (a good counterpoint to taking in refugees). Maybe he is obsessed with keeping his uniform clean and spotless. Or something cleverer the Writer concocts.

The Parsons, Celia and Rachel are well drawn.

Good work with the characters. We suggest the Writer make a deep pass on the Characters to add a bit more gray – complexity – and to assure there is clarity in the way they're portrayed.

PLOT LOGIC

How is Tovah pulled from the sea? The Writer cuts from falling overboard to a hospital bed and talk about her ordeal. The cut is economical, but what if the ship scene ended with a Sailor's (O.S.) "Man overboard." This would at least fix the ship as saving her.

TONE

The tone is realistically grim with notes of hope and a few bits of humor. Good work.

CRAFT

The script is written well. The Writer has voice:

... like a sick domino trick

She hates that she has to lie, but keeps a brave face.

...smoking and joking like it's a family picnic

...a silent plea to a God she never believed in.

These are good Actions for actors to sink their fangs into. However, there are a few too many which: makes them less special; are not always needed with simple action to impart; creates a denser script with less white space that feels a bit overwritten. There is music and magic in the Writer's voice. We suggest peppering the script with these deeper Actions. It's a matter of balance between clarity and showmanship.

Overall, the Actions could use a bit of a trim. For example, on page 2 there are three paragraphs describing Nina's recovery from the beating.

The victim is a skinny 8 year-old, NINA HUBER. Her dark,

braided hair sticks to her bloody cheek as she trembles and crawls...searching for something in the gravel.

She finds scattered rosehips and collects the little orange bulbs with shaky hands. Placing them in her coat pocket, she scans the ground until she finds her doll, LULU.

Brushing the grit off her precious doll, she hobbles away with tear tracks etched on her dirty face.

The victim is NINA HUBER (8). Her dark braided hair sticks to a bloodied cheek. Nina's too skinny body trembles as she crawls... searching for something.

Her hand shakes as she gathers orange rosehips, and finds her precious doll, LULU. She brushes grit from Lulu and hobbles away with tears etched on her dirty face.

There are some Actions that do not follow 'Show, don't tell.' The women have been searching for hours. This is an un-filmable. What is the effect of searching for hours? The women's eyes droop; weary from a long search in vain.

We suggest not using questions in Actions. How can she fit her child's life into one tiny appointed space? She crams the totality of her child's young life into the tiny appointed space. Or the simpler: She crams Nina's clothes into the tiny suitcase. Remember, balance.

It's late July, 1939. Make it SUPER: "Late July 1939"

Pg 12, SERIES OF SHOTS = should be a montage
Pg 38, INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT (DREAM)

On page 66,

"DREAM SEQUENCE (TOVAH'S DREAM)

And then you just tell us what she sees and experiences. At the end of the dream or fantasy or flashback, just do:

END DREAM"

The Writer should be aware the rights to "Hansel and Gretel" might be expensive.

We recommend a pass to tighten the script Actions as noted, rewrite un-filmables, fix typos and formatting issues.

DIALOGUE

The dialogue is in good shape. Though direct and clear, it could use a bit more subtext.

KLAUS

Do you realize the position I'm in? I'm breaking the law by allowing you to work for me. I'm risking everything for you.

KLAUS

My family is precious. I will not put that at risk.

FRIEDA

They refuse to serve us now! I've been coming here for years.
Aacchh.

FRIEDA

For years, they took my Jew money. For years. Aacchh

There's a lot of necessary exposition that could be a bit subtler. The links lead to tips on how to write around exposition: <http://letsschmooze.blogspot.com/2015/02/four-secrets-for-better-exposition.html> .<https://www.whatascript.com/movie-dialogue.html>

We recommend a pass to pump up the dialogue, add subtext and rewrite exposition.

MARKETABILITY

There have been many films centered on the Holocaust, from SCHIDLER'S LIST, THE PIANIST and THE BOY IN THE STRIPED PAJAMAS to LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL and SOPHIE'S CHOICE. However, films exploring the inherently riveting topic of this heinous genocide peaked in the late Nineties. It's as if Spielberg's 1993 masterpiece was the ultimate statement – one that would be difficult to surpass. Or the world just moved on to tackle contemporary history. World War Two ended seventy years ago. It becomes less distinct with each passing year. The flip side: the Holocaust is the ultimate cautionary tale that should be heard in every corner of today's world.

While the resurgence of historical films is a plus, the scope of this historical story is a greater minus. This is a huge budget film with expensive CGI of burning Düsseldorf, wartime London, bombing of London, period cars, trains, boats and wardrobe, a large cast plus settings across Europe. This all equals \$100M +.

This is a prestige film with juicy roles to make actors salivate. However, it's unlikely a major studio will buy a story with this great a financial risk penned by an unknown writer. If optioned or purchased, a seasoned writer will rewrite. Lightning does strike, and a good story like this one could find interest. When tightened, the script is a good Spec.

TITLE

It's serviceable. Perhaps something more active: FLIGHT FROM DEATH, FLIGHT FROM TYRANNY.

CONCLUSION

Good work, Writer. The script has haunting images, heart and soul, horror, joy and ultimately hope. The script requires sanding of rough edges. We recommend the Writer concentrate on tightening the script, fleshing out the secondary characters, amping up the dialogue with greater subtext and more subtlety in the exposition.

The bones, sinew and muscles of the script are in place and vital. Place the flesh on it. Thank you for the opportunity to read the script.

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	7
THEME	9
STORYTELLING	9
ORIGINALITY	7
STRUCTURE	9
PLOT	8
CHARACTERIZATION	9
DIALOGUE	9
STYLE	7
CONCEPT	9
MARKETABILITY/COMMERCIAL APPEAL	7
TOTAL POINTS	90

SCRIPT: **CONSIDER**
WRITER: **RECOMMEND**

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.

www.screenplaygurus.com

guru@screenplaygurus.com