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Analyst: LSTS86

Ranking: 45th Percentile

# MIDDLEMAN ASSASSINATION SQUAD

Comedy

Feature

88 Pages

by Dengxian Cao

**RATING**

**PASS**

45TH PERCENTILE

Percentiles are based on historical data of scores given out by this analyst.

For increased consistency, we calculate a project's pass/consider/recommend rating by using the scores input by the analyst and their history of scoring. Approximately 3% of projects receive a recommend and ~20% of projects receive a consider.

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## OPENING THOUGHTS

Middleman Assassination Squad is a comedic feature-length screenplay that follows Luo Qiao, a businessman who becomes embroiled in a scandal after he attempts to have a rival killed to expedite a construction deal. While the script is built on a compelling concept, it runs into a few issues with its plotting, dialogue, and characters. Additionally, the script reads more like a crime-drama story despite being presented as a comedy with some strong satirical moments. Adjusting the tone and refining the weaker elements would allow Middleman Assassination Squad to live up to the exciting idea at the heart of the story.

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## CHARACTERS

An area of the script that could use a bit of refining is the characters, particularly the protagonist, Luo Qiao. He has many of the pieces needed for a strong protagonist as he is crafty and willing to bend the rules to get what he wants. He also cares about his family and friends deeply but ultimately becomes blindsided by greed and fear. One issue with Luo Qiao is that despite all these details, he is largely an inactive protagonist for significant portions of the story, especially during the second act. Once Luo Qiao decides that he's willing to kill Yao Jiancheng, he goes through a series of middlemen that ultimately take him away from the spotlight. Luo Qiao goes to his right-hand man, Fang Gang who goes to Fang Yuan who then goes to Yang Tianxiang who finds Fan Si. This creates the squad of middlemen that the title refers to but leads the audience further and further far away from Luo Qiao and his relationship with his wife (arguably the most important relationship in the script). A lot of Luo Qiao's actions are intercut with the action of the middlemen but most of what Luo Qiao is doing can be considered passive. For example, when we finally get to Fan Si, we spend multiple pages away from Luo Qiao only to check in on him while he's hiding out at the Duty Free City. This happens again when Yao Jiancheng finds out about the assassination and is trying to figure out who set the whole thing up. Luo Qiao spends his time panicking and praying for Yao Jiancheng's downfall instead of doing something that would directly drive the action forward. Finding ways to spend more time with Luo Qiao in the middle of the script, and making him have more of a real effect on the actions of the middlemen would go a long way in making him a stronger protagonist.

One of the stronger supporting characters is Jiang Fang. She is smart, capable, and willing to do what it takes to keep her family together. She also has a stronger moral compass than her husband which makes her easy to get behind. Her relationship with Luo Qiao grounds him and makes him feel much more human, especially when compared to the middlemen and Yao Jiancheng. Speaking of Yao

Jiancheng, I wish we had a bit more understanding of who he is outside of his business dealings. The audience gets the moment with Yao Jiancheng and his mother, but beyond that, we have no idea if he has a family or if he's a permanent bachelor. Does Yao Jiancheng have anything to lose besides his own life? Giving us some more details about Yao Jiancheng would make him a more well-rounded character and a more formidable foe overall.

A big issue that takes away from the characters is the over-description of their facial expressions and their eyes. In almost every scene, there is an extensive amount of detail given, for example, "a dangerous glint flickers in Luo Qiao's eyes", "her face a mix of trepidation and resolve" or "eyes narrowing at the photos, a storm brewing in his gaze". While there are moments where lines like these should be used to emphasize a pivotal emotional turn or reveal, if every scene has this level of detail, all their expressions become flat and a bit distracting, ultimately slowing the pace of the story. Being a bit more selective about this level of facial and eye expression would help make reading the script easier and make the audience more aware of important emotional beats the characters are experiencing.

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## PLOT

One of the weaker areas of Middleman Assassination Squad comes in its plotting. An issue that the script runs into is that it's set up as a comedy where Luo Qiao gets into comedic misadventures because of his business dealings — but very few funny misadventures actually take place in the story. The audience gets one funny moment where Luo Qiao follows Yao Jiancheng around, waiting to kill him with a wrench until he is spotted but beyond that Luo Qiao spends a lot of time calling people, waiting for other people to contact him, or driving around in his BMW to far off locations. This ties back to Luo Qiao being a more passive protagonist. Giving Luo Qiao more agency and getting him more mixed up in the attempted killing would open up space for more funny scenarios.

One plot point I loved was the reveal that Fan Si was willing to turn on Luo Qiao for more money. It's quite a surprising twist that adds a lot of momentum and depth to the script. This beat works quite well because earlier we get the scene where Fan Si is desperately trying to find work while staying on the straight and narrow. Because the audience sees how badly he needs to money, his choice to side with Yao Jiancheng comes as a shock (in the best way possible).

Another issue the script bumps into is that there is no real face-off between the protagonist and the

antagonist. Luo Qiao is willing to have Yao Jiancheng killed and Yao Jiancheng is willing to get to police and others involved to find who wants him dead yet both men ever truly sit down face to face. Even after multiple court cases, the men never get to argue or berate one another directly. The script feels as though it is building to this pivotal moment but the moment never comes. Giving these men a chance to "battle it out" in one way or another would do a lot to make the plot more rewarding.

I wanted to add one small note about some of the descriptions in the scenes. Currently, when introduced to a new scene or location, the first line often refers to the sunlight in the space. Multiple times a new scene will start with something like "the sunlight slices through casting stripes", "sunlight bathes the room" or "sunlight pours through the windows, painting the room in warm hues". While there is nothing wrong with describing the sunlight in a space or on an object, the overuse of these images tends to make locations and the story feel repetitive, which slows down the pace of the script and makes it more difficult to read. Finding other ways to introduce locations or simply starting on an action within the space would help make these introductions and transitions more dynamic.

One thing I wasn't sure about was why Luo Qiao was so worried about Yao Jiancheng on page 56? Luo Qiao thinks he sees Yao Jiancheng earlier at the bridge but time has passed and he hasn't seen or heard any extra news about Yao Jiancheng that the audience knows about. This makes Luo Qiao's sudden panic seem a bit out of the blue. Giving him a nightmare or having news filter through that he may not actually be dead before he prays for help would make the fear Luo Qiao feels more earned.

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## STRUCTURE

The structure here generally works. There is a clear beginning, middle and end that all take the plot forward. While the pacing of the three acts aren't always as fast as they should be, those issues are more related to the characters and the plotting. One structural change I'd like to suggest is cutting down the amount of times Luo Qiao has to go to court. Currently, Luo Qiao goes to court three times, but in those three times he doesn't change or learn anything until he is finally sent to prison. Giving Luo Qiao more time before he's sent to jail where he can get into more trouble would make the end of the script feel a bit more energetic and gives an opportunity to foreshadow his downfall with more

hijinks.

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## DIALOGUE

There are two major issues facing the dialogue in Middleman Assassination Squad, one is that a few pivotal conversations feel very short and abrupt when they should be longer and more complex, the other is that there aren't enough banter and jokes between characters for the script to be considered a comedy. An example of the former is the conversation between Officer Sun and Yao Jiancheng on page 59. The officer makes a declarative sentence, "We think there's more to this. Hidden Factors" but he never ask Yao Jiancheng any hard questions after he said he allowed someone else (Fan Si) to profit off of a fake assassination. This conversation is set up to be a compelling questioning that can dig into corruption and how the wealthy get to skirt around the law yet nothing new comes out of it. Something similar happens with Luo Qiao and Jiang Fang's conversations on pages 62 and 84. On page 84, it is the first time we see the couple together since Luo Qiao has been sent to prison but the conversation is so short it doesn't give us a lot of insight into what the characters are feeling. What has Luo Qiao learned in his time apart from his wife? How have they both changed? Do they still love each other? Giving us more details here would help the conversation feel more impactful.

Adding more jokes and banter between the characters would do a lot to shift the tone of the script towards comedic rather than dramatic. This would work especially well with Luo Qiao and Fang Gang, Yao Jiancheng and his guards as well as many of the various supporting characters.

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## CONCEPT

The concept for the story is very strong but the script itself doesn't necessarily match what is being pitched. The script's current longline reads — "A shrewd businessman Luo Qiao becomes embroiled in a perilous scheme to eliminate a competitor, only to embark on a journey of redemption and self discovery amidst a whirlwind of comedic misadventures." While the first half of the longline rings true,

the second half of the longline, specifically his journey of redemption and self discovery only takes place in the last 8 pages or so. Showing Luo Qiao as being more conflicted about his choice to have his enemy killed and having him fail to stop the plan he set in motion in the second act would bring the story much closer to the actual longline.

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## FINAL THOUGHTS

Middleman Assassination Squad has the bones necessary to hold up a great comedic caper that dives into the endless cycle of corruption in the infrastructure business. With a bit of adjusting to the plotting, characters and dialogue the script can live up to its fun longline.

# MIDDLEMAN ASSASSINATION SQUAD

**VIRTUALLY PERFECT**  
98th - 100th Percentile

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**EXCELLENT**  
85th - 97th Percentile

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**GOOD**  
50th - 84th Percentile

Concept  
64th Percentile

Structure  
50th Percentile

**IMPROVE**  
0th - 49th Percentile

Overall  
Impression  
41st Percentile

Plot  
45th Percentile

Characters  
39th Percentile

Dialogue  
41st Percentile

## **RATING**

**PASS**

45TH PERCENTILE

### ABOUT STORY ANALYST LSTS86

I'm a screenwriter who has worked as a reader and development assistant for Schemers Entertainment and Atchity Productions reading scripts, offering notes, creating pitch decks, and researching up-and-coming writers and directors.

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