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MIDDLEMAN ASSASSINATION SQUAD

Comedy

| Feature |

96 Pages

by Dengxian Cao

RATING

PASS

37TH PERCENTILE

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

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OPENING THOUGHTS

Middleman Assassin Squad is an entertaining action comedy with a complicated protagonist and a fun premise. Keep working to heighten the jokes and other funny moments, find ways to develop the central relationships, and keep providing cultural context for an international audience.

CHARACTERS

A middle management type like Luo Qiao is a perfect protagonist for this type of movie. Crime stories (from classic noir to modern action movies) often make use of meek, white-collar men, turning them into unlikely criminals. You do a good job showing how desperate Luo Qiao is for money, and how much he wants to make his (and his wife's) life better. Keep finding ways to complicate the relationship between Luo Qiao and Jiang Fang. What is their dynamic like? Do they conform to traditional gender roles, with Luo Qiao taking on the masculine, dominant role in their marriage. Or does Luo sometimes feel emasculated by Jiang, and he wants to prove his masculine bonafides? There almost seems to be a MacBeth / Lady MacBeth dynamic between them, and I wonder if you could explore that in more detail.

Be sure to concentrate on Luo Qiao's psychological transformation over the course of the script. We know he will eventually get his comeuppance, and by the midpoint of Act 2 he should be terrified of the legal and extralegal consequences of what he has done. But it's also important to show how much fun Luo Qiao immediately has after his rival (and the rest of his peers) think he is a cold blooded killer. He's someone who has never been respected as a tough guy. He's a paper pusher, a meek money guy who other men don't physically respect. So, when he initially devises the scam (to threaten Yao Jianchang), maybe he plays into the tropes of what he thinks a tough guy criminal should act like.

I'm not sure if you're familiar with the show *Breaking Bad*. It's about a cancer-stricken high school teacher who becomes a powerful drug dealer. Soon, this character tries to embody the tough guy persona of what he thinks a drug dealer should act like. In doing so, he unleashes a dark part of his personality that he's never engaged before. See if Luo Qiao can show some of this transformation, at first pretending to be the guy he wants to be, and ultimately realizing he's more like this guy (a tough, badass criminal) than he ever new he was.

Perhaps Jiang Fang is more attracted to this "tough guy" persona her husband is playing than she ever was attracted to her husband's "real" personality. I kept waiting for the terms of their marriage to

change, for them to have a more exciting, sexual spark than they did in their previous "law abiding" life. Some of that is already in the script, but I think you can heighten it and make it more explicit.

Yao Jianchang is a really fun antagonist. Keep showing how he is the opposite (successful, full of charisma, comfortable in his own skin, etc) of Luo Qiao in every way. Luo hates Yao with every fiber of his being, but it's also important to show how jealous he is of him. The more Luo attempts to morph into Yao (by replacing him, ruining his career, etc.) the more we will see Luo transforming into everything he hates.

Keep defining the supporting characters in as much depth as possible. This is a comedy, so don't be afraid to go a bit broad. Comedy is so culturally specific, so I don't know how helpful detailed notes on specific jokes will be for you. American comedic sensibilities are probably pretty different from Chinese comedic sensibilities. I would just focus on creating characters that play into the archetypes of the world you are exploring. For instance, this story takes place amongst real estate developers. So what are the types of people who go into that type of work? How can you heighten their foibles and satirize that world? In America, we have lots of reality shows (*Selling Sunset*, *Million Dollar Listing*, etc.) that depict the heightened ridiculousness of the world. I wonder if you can look to those examples (or perhaps there are Chinese equivalents of those shows) for ideas on how to go bigger and broader with the character jokes.

PLOT

This is the classic heist plot gone wrong, and it's clear you have a great working knowledge of the genre. I kept thinking of classic noirs like *Double Indemnity* and more modern examples like *Fargo*. It's both entertaining and cringe-inducing to watch a scheme go so terribly wrong.

Because this is a comedy as much as it is an action movie, make sure to heighten the physical, comedic moments in the script. The more you can have Luo Qiao debasing himself physically and psychologically, the funnier it will be for the audience. So, early in Act 2 he should be on top of the world. He thinks his scheme has gone off without a hitch, his wife is finally attracted to him, he's about to become a very rich man and Yao is going to be defeated. Right at that apex of Luo's victory, *everything* should start to go wrong. So keep focusing on creating setpieces (long sequences of physical action and comedy) that can heighten Luo's debasement. It's almost like a classic *Roadrunner and Coyote* cartoon. Just when the coyote thinks he's caught the roadrunner, an anvil falls on his head. We want to see a bunch of different types of anvils fall on Luo's head.

STRUCTURE

Keep heightening the action as much as possible until Luo and his accomplices get arrested. Right now, the story slows down at what should be the structural climactic moment of the script, turning into a courtroom drama. Narratively, we want to see Luo get punished by the court, but watching lawyers argue about Luo's guilt or innocence isn't the funniest way to resolve the story. What ridiculous things could happen in a courtroom? Keep integrating and heightening the comedy even during this section of the script.

And then the third act is unexpectedly contemplative, with Luo actually internalizing what he has done and trying to become a better man. Again, this might be a cultural difference between Chinese and American comedies. But it's important in American comedies that the tone doesn't get too sentimental. We want our heroes to change, but we don't want to feel like *we are* learning a lesson. So see if you can add a couple of punchlines or ironic moments to the relatively sincere third act.

DIALOGUE

The dialogue is well-written, and you get through a lot of complicated story with a minimum of clunky exposition. Keep working to define the characters' voices. Right now, most of the characters seem to speak in a similar manner. Be sure to show that variables like age, gender, regional background, occupation, socio-economic status, and personality inform the way each character speaks. So much of comedy is seeing a heightened reflection of our reality in a way that is both familiar and slightly distorted. Which parts of society do you want to satirize? Make sure your characters' voices and dialogue reflects your personal, unique comic sensibility.

CONCEPT

This is a fun concept, and you are able to talk about real life dramatic situations (professional jealousy, personal discontentment, ambition, masculine ideals, etc) in an intriguing way. The more specific you are with the concept, the more you can summarize what you want to say in this script in a succinct way, the easier it will be for readers to understand the themes.

If you are trying to sell this story internationally (and by writing the script in English, I'm assuming you are), you might need to do a little hand holding for your non-Chinese audience. Err on the side of explaining a bit more (about how social class is very different in China than it is in the US or Europe, how the justice system is different, how the real estate market is different). Providing a bit more context will go a long way in making sure audiences are understanding both the themes and the tone.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This is a funny script that has a relatable (if hapless) protagonist and a lot of comic potential. Keep getting even more detailed (about the characters, their relationships, Luo's rags to riches back to rags arc, and the cultural satire).

MIDDLEMAN ASSASSINATION SQUAD

VIRTUALLY PERFECT
98th - 100th Percentile

EXCELLENT
85th - 97th Percentile

GOOD
50th - 84th Percentile

IMPROVE
0th - 49th Percentile

-

-

-

Overall
Impression
37th Percentile

Concept
43rd Percentile

Plot
40th Percentile

Structure
36th Percentile

Characters
36th Percentile

Dialogue
35th Percentile

RATING

PASS

37TH PERCENTILE

ABOUT STORY ANALYST RB63

I am a professional comedy writer who's written and developed several original pilots with various production companies. I've also written pitch decks, one-sheets, show bibles and other scripts. My work has been seen on UCB Digital, Funny or Die, Fusion and MTV.

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