

THE WHISTLE-BLOWER

Spec Pilot Script – BLACK LIST REVIEWS

By

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A NOTE ABOUT RATINGS: These are anonymous independent professional evaluations from well-regarded 'BLACK LIST readers. Because these are professional evaluations and not random readers the top Grade is 8. With two sixes, one eight, and two sevens – WHISTLE-BLOWER has an average rating of 6.9. – and will be featured on The Black List (a buyer's site) in months to come. There is nothing like third party validation. We went 5 for 5. This has been a passion project for years. Now onward and upward. --- W. S. Taub and W. S. Ritter (6/17)

REVIEW – #1 – OVERALL RATING - 6 -

Era

Present, 2010s, 2000s

Locations

New York City, Azerbaijan, Russia, France, Turkey, Middle East

Genre

Drama, Crime Drama, Political Drama, Mystery & Suspense, Crime Thriller, Political Thriller, Spy

Logline

A former Head Weapons Inspector for the United Nations, who experienced a public fall from grace for denying the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, is recruited by the organization to lead a Special Weapons Inspection Team and investigate a terrorist attack.

Strengths

The source inspiration and involvement of Scott Ritter lends the project enormous credibility with an insider's look at terrorism in the Middle East and surrounding countries. The writing is confident, assured, and knowledgeable about the subject matter, with scenes like Todd's lecture, and later, Todd and Kevin extracting soil samples from a believable attack site. Todd is crafted as a sympathetic character, starting with the harrowing teaser and the personal losses he sustained for whistle-blowing (and ultimately being correct). As a protagonist, his self-sacrifice, integrity, and innate desire to do what's right is heroic, and there's an effort to set-up the type of moral dilemmas he will face over the course of the series. Ismail, as the complete opposite, is a worthy antagonist whose diabolical, evil nature is fascinating, and at times, difficult to watch as he frames up a terrorist attack, brutally kills all of the witnesses, and is then revealed to be in charge of the rescue and investigation. The parallel storytelling allows the

audience to see Ismail's side and the fallout on Todd's end, and the plot shows potential when their stories cross. Todd also has contentious dynamics with other characters to explore in future episodes, like his "respect/hate" relationship with Ryan and clashes with Ismail.

Weaknesses

While the Writer's Draft is a great start, it could work on connecting some dots. It's a conscious choice to not show the actual whistle-blowing clearly and early on, but it might do more harm than good by leaving the audience in the dark and a step behind. It's also unclear why the formation of Todd's team is saved for future episodes with his allies only briefly shown. If anything, that seems more like the show than the confusing subplot of Kim and Joey, who Todd sends away and then curiously expects to see. Further, it's difficult to track the drives of the main characters on both inner and outer levels. What do Todd and Ismail ultimately want, why do they want it, and how does it connect back to the other characters introduced (like their families)? Certain scenes feel anticlimactic, such as Todd finally meeting Ismail, and how he goes from meeting him to finding out he's the perpetrator in ten pages. The ending doesn't feel like a twist or reveal either since Ryan put Todd in touch with Kevin. At times, the voice of the writing bleeds into the voices of the characters, specifically the staccato style of short sentences and cynical tone. A trim pass could be made to cut down on the "telling" rather than "showing" in the action description as well.

TV series potential:

Without seeing the whistle-blowing front and center, and it really being more a part of the protagonist's backstory, the title seems misleading compared to the main concept on the page. With revision though, THE WHISTLE-BLOWER could have a HOMELAND type of appeal with its comparable themes, subject matter, and international settings, characters, and storylines. Though it could be developed for a broadcast network, the show's graphic violence and language speaks more to cable or streaming. The involvement of a real-life figure is a solid piece for a creative package that could garner interest from high-level agents, managers, producers, directors, and buyers with further work done on the script. This includes potentially turning the last page into a properly fleshed out bible and making another polish for formatting, grammar, and typos.

REVIEW – #2 – OVERALL RATING – 8-

Era

Present-Day, Some Flashback

Locations

Manhattan, Azerbaijan, Istanbul

Genre

Drama, Political Drama, Mystery & Suspense, Wartime Espionage

Logline

Years after exposing an American weapons of mass destruction hoax by whistle-blowing, a former Head Weapons Inspector for the U.N., TODD FERGUSON, returns to the U.N. to lead a new and immediate inspection team aimed at avoiding bureaucratic lag, and investigates the aftermath of a gas attack in Azerbaijan — seemingly caused by Armenians.

Strengths

This is a well-written script. Narratively, it is propulsive, energetic and infused with surprise and intrigue. The writer does a good job of editorializing the vibe of the show's various locations. The description of Baku — "The coastal capital of Azerbaijan. Paris, Moscow, a dash of Istanbul and a whole lot of corruption." — stands as an example. The sequence in the barn featuring the three hooded Armenian boys is knockout — the stuff exciting (and excruciating) TV is made of. Ismail is a wonderfully drawn and watchable character — riddled with moral complexities. Gretta is also well-written. She comes across as intelligent and provides some nice, light sarcasm and humor to an otherwise heavier narrative. The dialogue, as a whole, reads as thoughtfully written and realistic.

Weaknesses

Todd, although structurally sound as a feasible protagonist, feels a bit unlikable in a way that doesn't feel interesting. In most of his scenes, he seems gruff, serious, short tempered, and quick to have the right answers... which is all fine, but outside of those states of being, there seems to be little in way of likability and texture. Perhaps if one or two of his more ornery moments (maybe the scene with Dean Butler) were given just a little more humor or cleverness to work with, instead of anger — it'd make Todd feel more approachable as a protagonist. Throughout the script, there feels like there might be one too many suggestions in Todd's backstory that he was "right all along" and that it "cost him dearly." Not a major note, but it might be good to remove one instance of those sentiments so as not to hit the audience over the head with the notion. On p. 54, it'd be best not to describe the idea of Ismail's dialogue as he's yelling at and threatening his troops. The actual dialogue should be written instead.

TV series potential:

Moderate. It is not hard to imagine that THE WHISTLE-BLOWER could be attractive to buyers. The premise is solid and unique enough to merit an audience, and the execution of this draft is of enough quality to probably get some attention from executives. Todd says it best on p. 47: "In this business if you want to live a long life, don't be predictable." This script succeeds in just that — not being predictable. The script also feels like it could feasibly land on both cable and

broadcast networks, without having to make huge adjustments to the pilot for either format. At a minimum, this draft can serve as an impressive sample for staffing.

REVIEW – #3 – OVERALL RATING -6-

Era

Present Day

Locations

Globetrotting

Genre

Drama, Political Drama, Mystery & Suspense, Political Thriller

Logline

The former head of a WMD Inspection Team turned whistleblower heads up a new team for the UN.

Strengths

This is an exciting and thought-provoking script which combines political drama and action thriller to put a fresh spin on both genres. From the film's opening moments, TODD is a character under siege, hardened by the events that have lead him to this point, and the constant pushback he faces from other characters helps to ratchet up the show's tension. The episode really gets going once Todd is actually out in the field doing his job, and the script's best sequence comes from his altercation with ISMAIL. This scene creates a remarkable amount of tension based on the audience's knowledge of the characters' backgrounds, and it's great that the episode gives the audience the information on Ismail's identity so it can build that tension in the scene. The script has a knack for making what could be stale political and diplomatic discussions feel urgent and exciting, and this could come in handy in a heightened political climate where audiences are consuming more news media than usual. The show ends on something of a cliffhanger, and it's unclear who (if anyone) Todd can trust going forward.

Weaknesses

Moments like Todd's standoff with Ismail give a strong sense of what the show could be, but in too many places the pace drags and the story has difficulty getting off the ground. For starters, it would help to have a clearer sense of what Todd's whistleblowing actually looked like and how his previous job fell apart for him. A few flashbacks and cutaways to his old team suggest this may be coming in the future, but that information would be better used here to get the audience up to speed on who this character is. Furthermore, the cutaways to characters like

SVETLANA feel more confusing than intriguing, and if their story lines aren't going to be broached in this episode the time could be better spent on the primary characters. Todd will be a very difficult character to relate to; while his surliness is certainly necessary for the story line, his utter lack of humor causes him to suck the life out of some of the scenes he's in. That hardline aggression also prevents him from forming any intriguing relationships with the other characters in the show.

TV series potential:

The show handles tension and interpersonal conflict well, and in its best moments it effectively marries the political drama and action thriller genres. Characters feel either unlikable or underdeveloped, however, which may prevent the audience from connecting with the show on an emotional level. Spending a little more time on Todd's backstory may resolve some of these issues, as well as help set the stage for the series to come.

REVIEW – #4 – OVERALL RATING -7-

Era

Present Day

Locations

New York; Bazu, Azerbaijan, Armenia

Genre

Drama, Political Drama, War Drama, Mystery & Suspense, Political Thriller

Logline

An American soldier and former whistle-blower, is assigned to team up a Weapons of Mass Destruction inspection after an Armenian town experiences a devastating chemical attack.

Strengths

There is a lot that works about THE WHISTLE-BLOWER. The pilot does a good job exploring the theme of morality and the weighing of the lesser of two evils. This is done particularly well upon Todd learning about the documents needed to prove the parties responsible for the chemical attack. Either Todd exposes the perpetrators and risks the lives of an innocent farmer and his wife, or he does nothing and their lives are spared. Additionally, Todd is a worthy protagonist filled with moral complexities and a clear character drive. His heightened ambition and commitment towards being a marine is grounded by the love he feels for his family. In the moment, letting Kim and his son go is the most selfless choice he can make given the push back he experienced as a result of whistle-blowing. The pilot does a particularly good job building

out the world of the series. The Ryan and Ismael story lines are fully fleshed out and service the central storyline well. Ryan and Todd's complicated rapport, makes the twist at the end all the more impactful. Lastly, the dialogue is consistently grounded and enforces the voices and points-of-view of it's characters.

Weaknesses

Though there is a lot that works about THE WHISTLE-BLOWER, a few modifications could help streamline the story. For instance, the set up at the top is a little convoluted. Among Ryan's emergency return, his divorce, his interview and his firing, there is a lot to unpack about his character making his storyline initially more difficult to track. It would read easier if it stuck to one or two of those things at the top, and subsequently revealed the remainder of the details later in the pilot. Next, while the chemical attack is a solid jumping off point to the story, it should be moved up in the script. Though set up is important, at the moment it takes a while to get to the compelling aspect of the story. Moving it up would sooner set the engine in motion. This modification would also simplify Ryan's exposition. Lastly, there are a few times throughout the script where Ismail is ordering his men and the dialogue is mentioned as happening in the scene descriptions. That dialogue should be written out. Because Ismail is such a compelling character, activating his dialogue would add further specificity to his character.

TV series potential:

This is a tricky one. Because the characters are interesting and the storyline is clear, THE WHISTLE-BLOWER could have a chance of selling within the current marketplace. The premise is also broad enough to appeal to both a broadcast and/or premium network, especially given the heightened state of our current political climate. The one aspect in question is the series sustainability. Is one chemical attack enough to drive story for an entire season(s)? THE WHISTLE-BLOWER could benefit from creating a series bible (beyond the final page). It should change it's questions to statements in order to prove a sustainable to arc to potential buyers. If season 2 takes place in South Sudan, will THE WHISTLE-BLOWER exist as an anthology? Or will the same characters be involved? Answers to these questions will give buyers the confidence they need to invest.

REVIEW – #5 – OVERALL RATING -7-

Era

Contemporary

Locations

NYC; Armenia; Azerbaijan

Genre

Drama, Political Drama, War Drama

Logline

Years after being excoriated in the public for revealing government wrongdoing, a whistleblower is appointed to lead a UN team of weapons inspectors and soon finds himself in the midst of a fraught international crisis.

Strengths

The macro view this script takes of politics is fascinating, particularly for how it explores these bigger conflicts through such a narrow perspective. Todd is a great character to anchor the series, one with an unflappable moral compass that's already been through the wringer by the time the show begins. Seeing him tested by the corrupt and corruptible around him will make for great drama as the series continues. Things really take off once Todd gets to Quandallar, especially as he interacts with Ismail and proves his mettle as someone to be taken seriously. The steps he takes to prevent being spied on—or worse—make for compelling TV and show how smart he is. It even manages to make the process of sample collection compelling, as it happens under such tense circumstances. And the script is unafraid to go dark, as in the sequence in which Ismail forces Armenian boys to attack a village against their will, in easily the most compelling, tense, and horrifying sequence of the episode. Seeing how Todd deals with his superiors back in the US and at the UN demonstrates the myriad forces at work in this show, and how difficult balancing all of them is going to be. There's a persistent sense of menace, especially with Ryan, whose cockiness subtly betrays his dubious character even before it's confirmed by the closing scene.

Weaknesses

The episode might benefit from moving Todd's creation and acceptance of the role earlier in the episode, only because the real meat of the story comes once he gets overseas. It's important to establish his backstory and his character, but much of that could come from the early days of this process and speed up the plot considerably, allowing the first episode more time to explore the richer material of the conflict in Armenia. It would also help with his team, who from the mini-bible that closes the script appear to be key players who deserve to be established in this first episode. Even just getting stronger descriptions and small character beats with each of them would help make them feel less perfunctory. Dialogue is sometimes clumsy and overly expository—clarity is preferable, of course, but especially after the opening pages the situation is clear and needn't be retread quite so frequently. The teaser might find a stronger moment to end on, as Todd's explosive response doesn't reveal much about either his character or the world at large that we haven't already gleaned from the teaser thus far. It's a moment that needs to draw audiences in—it may be as far as they're willing to go—and the

bigger a surprise or thematic point it can drop, the better chance the show has of picking up viewers.

TV series potential:

This is a complex, difficult show headed by the most fundamentally principled of characters. It's exactly the sort of thing that basic cable eats up, especially channels like FX, AMC, and even USA to a lesser extent. That willingness to wrestle with international relations in a serious, nuanced way will make it appealing for any network seeking intelligent material, and the execution largely fulfills the promise of its conceit. The early going spends a bit too much time on elements that are ultimately immaterial, at least in light of the later developments, but it's largely a mature, solid show with plenty of potential in the current landscape.

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