

Name of Project: ****

Writers: **** & ****

Reader: Elan Gamaker

Overview

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Potentially interesting look at Namibian sub-cultures via police

Good use of local settings

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Unconvincing dialogue

Weak scene construction

Leering, prurient and misogynistic

Not engaging

No clear theme

No appealing characters

Analysis

**** is, in many ways, two different stories. On the one hand, it's a look into local life, fractured masculinity, the violence endemic to post-Apartheid Namibia as a legacy of that institution, the terrible treatment of indigenous people and women, and large-scale corruption. It is also, on a more simple level, a cop story (police procedural).

It is the first aspect of the story that, for me, is its most potentially interesting aspect even if the script, in its current form, is still somewhere from a full realisation of this. While, as a South African, I can relate to certain aspects of the Namibian life portrayed – corruption, racial intolerance, violence against women, etc. – there are many aspects, such as tribal and linguistic peccadilloes with which I am entirely unfamiliar. It was in the depiction of these details that the script was most revelatory for me, and therefore the most engaging. Unfortunately, these details are too rare, or too often sketched rather than fully depicted, to sustain this engagement, and then the rather less interesting generic aspects of the cop story take over. In order for the script to fully engage, and for the story to work on an international level, I feel it is crucial that the cop elements are suppressed in favour of the social details.

This is logical for two reasons. Firstly, the cop/investigation aspect of the story is poorly researched. There are barely any plausible situations or interesting details in the course of the investigation. The entire 'case' is unappealing, transparent, predictable and not suspenseful. This could be a case of not fully fleshing out this side

of the story, something the writers are planning for later drafts, but I doubt this part of the script will ever be as potentially interesting as the naturalistic aspects of it. Secondly, there is little in the detective story that feels fresh or new. In fact, only the interactions I mentioned above, cultural and social misunderstandings, that provide any meaningful or engaging tension (there is little or no tension in the detective story, which feels contrived).

To use the film *Fargo* (Joel Coen, 1996) as an example, **** would work better, in my opinion, as an analysis of a people and a system rather than as a cop story which, at best, reminded me of an episode of *CSI* or *Law and Order*: derivative and televisual, with no character arcs and little attempt at characterisation and emotional turning-points. In *Fargo*, a crime has been committed and a police detective is on the case. But this scenario is merely the backdrop for what is first and foremost an analysis of the people of northern Minnesota: largely 'nice', uneducated folk forced indoors by hostile weather and American capitalism. If you watch *Fargo*, you'll see that the actual solving of the case is almost entirely inconsequential: it is solved on the shifting hunch of a heavily pregnant cop and the loose tongue of one of the criminals. Instead, the bulk of the film plays out as a critique, often very humorous, of certain people and their way of living, speaking and acting. This was what made *Fargo* such a tremendous and memorable (and successful) film: it brought a new spin on a familiar tale by giving us something we hadn't seen before. As it called itself, it was a "homespun murder story".

****, equally, has the potential to be a homespun murder story, Namibian style, but only if the writers have the courage of their convictions: to construct a uniquely Namibian tale where the police aspect is part of an accurate and original depiction of life, rather than the other way around.

This being said, a lot more needs to be done to make the story engaging and even palatable. I found it very difficult to read at times because there were no characters with whom I could relate or for whom I should care. What's more, it depiction of violence, particularly against women, felt leering, prurient and misogynistic. Surely this cannot be the point? Films that depict violence against women must handle their subject matter in a way that expresses the plausibility of such events (for these events, sadly, do happen every day), while making sure that they do not become a vehicle for the exploitative depiction of the crimes they are putatively decrying. The script, in my opinion, falls woefully short of the mark, and to see an accurate adaptation of it on screen would provide an ugly, repellent film rather than one that pulls no punches in its depiction of the brutality of – specifically Namibian – society. I do hope and sense that this is not the intention of the writers,

and it is why I feel a focus on the social dimension of the story, and the concomitant fleshing out of characters in order to express a political subtext, would prevent this slide into exploitation.

Ultimately, the writers need to decide whether they want the film to be a social-realist drama with the cop genre as a vessel for expressing political viewpoints on the state of Namibia today, or instead whether they want it to be a gritty cop drama where these naturalistic elements are merely part of the scenery. I would suggest the former option will bear more fruit, largely because the latter option offers less in the way of originality and, it seems, would be more elusive to the writers given what has been presented. In many ways the ideal would of course be a script that possesses *both* aspects: a cop drama about everyday life, and a social document that deals with the police and its culture. This approach would require tremendous balance and detail. With the script in its current form I feel this balance would be very difficult to achieve without first favouring one or the other option and then refining the elements of the other.