

## MINI SCRIPT IN DEPTH STUDIO STORY NOTES

Grade: 2.25 / Consider (subject to rewrites)

### Log Line:

An Arab is erroneously detained under rendition and when his plight to find justice fails, struggles with his desire to commit terrorism out of revenge.

### Overall / Premise:

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX is a raw, brutal, compelling political thriller that asks questions and forces one to think about the realities of the consequences of war. It is without dialogue, unsentimental, doesn't hold back on the grim details, and rife with didactic messages.

While the story is gripping, earnest, and clearly written with passion, the script itself suffers both from structural issues and the lack of narrowing in on one specific agenda. The overall premise could easily be explored in a feature, but with only 12 pages, there can be only one main message (maybe two) that carries the piece through.

Most everything that needs to be incorporated is already written however. A lot of fantastic material is already on the page – it just needs to be shaped, embellished at places, clarified in others, and the build of suspense more controlled.

### Synopsis:

Under a dark sky in present-day Romania, an anonymous hooded man is dragged into a dank and destitute prison. In graphic detail, he is brutally tortured in every imaginable way – beatings, water boarding, electro-shock, burning, rape – until there is barely anything left of him that resembles a man at all. When he is finally collected by an “official”, his chart (for TARIF HUSSEIN HADI) reads that he has been “erroneously rendered”.

Tarif, not satisfied with simply being released, takes his case against rendition all the way to the United States Supreme Court. Though hopeful, he loses his case on the basis of “national security”. He soon turns bitter and determined to find justice. Taking matters into his own hands, he stays in the country and learns to make an umbrella bomb. Though tortured with flashbacks of his days in captivity and happy memories of his family in Germany, he perseveres until the bomb is ready.

With stoic determination, he makes his way back to the Supreme Court and up the grand steps. Nervous, he fidgets with the umbrella, causing the Velcro strap to loosen and reveal the wiring underneath. Quick and resourceful, he hurls himself through the detector, distracting the guards before they discover the plot. He and the umbrella are miraculously cleared through, and he takes an ominous elevator ride up to the courthouse.

Before the elevator arrives at its destination, he opens the umbrella over his head and positions his hand on the switch. The doors part, Tarif steps out, and is frozen in place at the site of the TV monitors in front of him, running a story of new presidential candidate Senator Barack HUSSEIN Obama. Overcome with emotion and self-revelation, he steps back into the elevator and leaves the building, the black umbrella shielding him from the rain.

#### Plot /Story Development / Structure:

One of the main issues is that this script is not yet sure whether it’s a plot-driven piece (*The Bourne Identity*) or a character-driven piece (the Clooney portion of *Syriana*). The first half is clearly focused on plot with very little attachment to the character at all; by the second half we’re expected to sympathize with his plight but have been given too little time and insight into his emotional journey to care for him specifically and whether or not he succeeds. More details on this specifically are below.

The notes that immediately follow concern the script as it is currently written. After that, suggestions are provided on how altering the structure may better help meet your ends.

1) The main problem with the first act (the prison) is not that it is gratuitous (though some will definitely think so), it’s that it is alienating because the experience of watching these atrocious acts doesn’t give us any insight into the character whatsoever. For all the audience knows, he could be guilty of the most horrendous acts of terrorism ever committed. We never actually see him being interrogated and either refusing to comply, giving the “wrong” answer, fighting back, proclaiming his innocence, or begging for mercy. We are also not shown how he changes throughout his stay there. Does he become a stronger person or a weaker one? Angry or broken? In short, we know absolutely nothing about him, which gives us nothing to care about. It leaves the audience a bit alienated, which is only increased by the graphic nature of the images. If these images, however, were used to show how the character changes and deals with the circumstances, they would not come across as gratuitous, shocking as they are. And once you give a character a name, we assume that you want us to care about him on some level. Consider that whatever you establish here is going to set the tone for the rest of the

piece. If the audience doesn't start to care about the character now, it isn't going to suddenly start to in the third act. The reveal that he was "erroneously rendered" won't matter if the audience has been subjected to such disturbing images with no context that they have already emotionally detached themselves from what they are watching.

2) It will help to humanize him if the references to his family were made throughout. It's odd that they are not at the trial, and we never see him make the harrowing decision between going back to his life with his family, and choosing to blow up the court. The use of the crayon drawing is quite nice and it would be good to see it a third time – especially if it somehow changes from one time to the next, mirroring his emotional state.

3) One important fact that must be made clear is it would take YEARS for this case to get all the way to the Supreme Court. What has he been doing and how has he changed in the interim?

4) The moment in the shower work really well but is slightly undercut with the flashbacks that follow. We don't need to see the torture again to know what he's going through. Him being afraid of the water says so much and would be stronger on its own. Not only might it be overkill, the script is so short and we just saw those images two pages before. (This may not be true if the structure is altered. More on that further below.)

5) It is not clear exactly where in the chronology of the story that the airplane ride with the laptop occurred. Before the kidnap? On his way to the Supreme Court? And why is it important to place it where it is?

6) The "building the bomb" section feels too long. This may change with a different structure. As it is now, whether or not he makes the bomb is not what's pertinent – whether or not he goes through with it is. The tension is displaced and could be better used elsewhere; for instance, him considering the act of terrorism and being conflicted over taking the initial steps would feel more relevant to the point at the end.

7) Likewise, the tension of him getting through security at the Supreme Court doesn't hit the mark yet. First of all, while the idea of blowing it up is an interesting one, it is not the main premise of the movie (which, again, may change with a different structure). Secondly, we don't necessarily want him to succeed, even though getting caught may put him in even more dire straights than he was before. Thirdly, why don't the guards recognize him considering the high-profile nature of his trial? The tension may be better used, not on whether or not he gets in, but the fact that he knows the people inside. True, the court ruled against him. But perhaps one of the guards was sympathetic, or his counsel is inside, or there are Muslims working there as well. Otherwise it remains purely a political idea - and one we can't side with him on even if we do find him sympathetic.

8) The ending is not yet there for several reasons. We did not see Tarif conflicted either about what he was doing when he was making the bomb, about trying to get into the

building, or at any other moment. Being nervous about whether he will make it in is not the same thing. Then he suddenly becomes emotional and changes his mind when he sees the TV monitor refer to Barack HUSSEIN Obama. This moment is too quick, too easy, has had no build, and is confusing. With so little insight into how this whole experience has affected him inside (yes – we know he is tormented and angry), the tear-jerking moment comes across as cliché. However, if we know, for instance, he has been waiting for any single reason to be shown why he should not do this, the moment would take on deeper meaning. Or if it somehow snaps him out of his reverie and he realizes the monster he was about to become, it would hold more weight. But just seeing a candidate with a Muslim name is not enough. And the fact that they have the same middle name is too tenuous a reason for such a high-stakes incident. First of all, it may come across as shallow and as only pacifying him in this particular moment – it doesn't indicate a substantial change in him. What is he going to do the next time someone really pisses him off? Second of all, Obama is not a Muslim. His father was raised one, but turned atheist by the time he was born. Obama himself was baptized a Christian twenty years ago. It's not clear what the point is here.

9) The black umbrella seems to serve conflicting metaphors. At times it shelters him from the storm, at others it is a device for revenge that will by no means keep him safe. Ending on it is quite symbolic however, so consider carrying the image throughout. It is nicely used in the crayon drawing and maybe can be integrated in other ways as well. Did he always carry it with him for some reason (we could see it in photos)? Was one used to perform some kind of torture in the camp (rape scene perhaps)? Given that it is the title and the closing shot, layer it with as much meaning as possible.

#### NOW TO STRUCTURAL ISSUES...

10) This script is *so* short which is not a bad thing by any means, but it does mean you have to prioritize your agendas. Because it is not clear, the piece at times borders on melodrama and cliché. Is it a warning that such treatment of prisoners will turn even the good ones bad? Is it that such torture is unconscionable whether one is innocent or guilty? Is it that even after undergoing the most traumatic experience, one can overcome it and move on? Is it a scolding of American foreign policy and abuse of justice? Is it a story of the lack of humanity in us seen through the eyes of one man? Etc, etc. It may be a combination of all of these things on some level – but only ONE can be the main thrust of the plot in a script of this length. All the others must then serve that priority agenda, not detract or get in the way of it. Establish in clear terms what the main story arc is, then consider adjusting the structure accordingly as suggested below. What really needs to be decided is whether this is purely an intellectual film with a political message that does not seek any attachment to the character at all, or whether the aim is to humanize him and in this way make a much broader point by tugging at the audience's heartstrings.

11) There are three different acts here and each feels like a different movie:

- a. ACT ONE. This focuses on the brutality of torture, the injustice of rendition, and the lack of humanity shown in times of war. This could function as a short all on

its own as a character-driven piece chronicling a man's plight to survive his captivity (with the suggested rewrites above), and ending on the manila envelope.

- b. ACT TWO. This highlights the failure of justice, which is almost worse than the torture itself. This too could be its own short, with flashbacks to fill in the captivity.
- c. ACT THREE. This is a treatise on misguided revenge – or revenge that will serve no purpose because the people it is targeted against will not get its meaning, and it certainly won't instigate any immediate change in the system. In fact, it will probably make the treatment of suspected terrorists worse. Again, flashbacks could fill in the needed backstory.

These three would serve nicely as three acts to a feature, provided they were well integrated, but it is going to be extremely difficult to do it successfully in 12 pages and have each be as poignant and deep as they can.

12) With this in mind, there are several ways to alter the structure a bit so you can incorporate what each of the acts serves, but keep a through-line that is not jilted, flows better, has a clear agenda, humanizes the character, and still leaves the audience thinking. One possibility is to make the main plot of the film the third act. We see a man, clearly tormented over something, with the newspaper clippings, the bomb materials. We see him make the bomb, crumble in the shower. He takes a taxi to the courthouse. We see him conflicted about whether to go in, recognized by the people inside who treat him kindly. Watch him make it through, get in the elevator. Etc., etc. All of this is interspersed with flashbacks, broken up and inserted at relevant moments (the shower is a good one in this context, as opposed to how it is now where it is redundant). The flashbacks may initially seem disjointed, but as more and more come they begin to tell a story. They help build the tension as we realize why this man is planning to do this act. The flashbacks will also help make what he is doing more difficult, and will sell the ending when he finally feels that he no longer has to go through with it.

13) Another possibility is to have all the action take place at the trial. The flashbacks of the torture and the bomb-making would function in the same way as it progresses. Perhaps we at first assume he is only thinking of doing this then discover he already has the bomb on him, suspecting that things are not going to go in his favor. Maybe his family shows up to court and he has to decide what is more important – them or making his statement?

14) The point is to keep the plot itself simple so you can use the precious page time to make the political points that need to be made, build the suspense from beginning to end so the audience is on the edge of their seats, and leave them thinking about what's important (and not whether or not they "get it"). There are a myriad of ways this could play out and a lot of fantastic material already written to mine from. If you do decide to keep the structure as it is, see if any of the beginning notes can solve these issues on their own.

Characters:

It is easy to understand Tarif's motives intellectually, but without any emotional attachment to the character (partly due to the alienation in the beginning), it is difficult to see him as his own person. He is purely of symbol, but it seems part of the point here is to treat Muslims as humans, not as terrorists. If so, we need to identify with him as a fellow human-being with the same feelings, dreams, strengths, and weaknesses in all of us. This is hinted at with his family a bit, but it comes in too late and is not followed through. Take us more into his mind. The flashbacks are only important if we see how they affect him. That's why the shower scene is such a nice moment. More of that in the prison (vary it besides the "haunting eyes") since it sets everything up. You have room to embellish the writing a bit with descriptions of exactly what he is going through.

Dialogue:

The lack of dialogue is quite nice and relieves the audience from any distractions.

Marketability / Box Office Viability:

This has all the makings of a successful film festival entry. It is a good length, has a topical political message, is written with passion, is not fluffy but to the point, and will – unfortunately – probably be relevant for quite awhile.