



Entry Type: Classic Notes (WeScreenplay)

Synopsis Included: No

Notes Date: February 21st, 2024

Analyst: 7X04V4

Ranking: 99th Percentile

TRADE SECRETS

Drama

Feature

110 Pages

by Michael Richards

TOP 1%
PLOT

TOP 1%
OVERALL IMPRESSION

TOP 1%
STRUCTURE

RATING
RECOMMEND
PLACED IN THE TOP 1%

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OPENING THOUGHTS

This business drama excavates an unusual slice of stock market history in which a Covid-induced, worldwide slowdown affected the price of oil. The financial machinations of a failing oil company and a predatory investment banker are overlaid with a generalized background tension arising from fear of infection and the accompanying lockdown. While the character types are somewhat standard for this genre, the tone and pace of the narrative are handled with aplomb so that the expected moral lesson is delivered.

CHARACTERS

This is the one area of this piece where there is still a decent margin for maximization. While characters like Reese, Stephane, Anja and Adam are well-grounded and have definable goals and weaknesses, other characters like Andrew, Sara, Justin and Rupert could use more detail and points of connection with the audience.

Though this is, for the most part, an ensemble piece, the de facto central character is Justin. Like Bud Fox in Wall Street, Justin is the (relatively) new guy and doesn't understand how people higher up use him in their financial games. He's presented as a frugal and caring husband and father-to-be. But it doesn't take much for him to temporarily put pregnant wife Sara on the back burner as he troubleshoots with Reese, Richie and Adam. While he obviously feels guilty at the hospital at the end, he doesn't really have a specific moment of realization that could demonstrate that he's learned a lesson about himself. He is suffering consequences of his inattention, but he doesn't yet realize why. Right now, wife Sara isn't a strong presence in the narrative. She's more of a representative of Justin's home-oriented concerns. Maybe she could be more self-aware as Covid sets in, so her fear has more space to set in. The viewer needs to put themselves in her place.

From the outset, Reese is presented as tough, as if she's overcompensating for being a woman in a male-dominated world of oil drilling. Like Justin, she has a picture of herself that she's loathe to let go of. While Justin may come up with the emergency oil storage idea, she immediately recognizes its brilliance and acts. Her selling the sculpture shows she's a realist, but how much does she really believe her propaganda about oil producers saving the world? It seems to be a bit of a retro idea, but maybe she and the other prominent woman in the office, Anja, could clash more. Anja is in the office to correct past financial shenanigans and, for that, she's about as welcome as a bad penny. It's unclear what the consequences of Anja's departure would be with the company's board. Would Reese be

forced to try to convince her to stay? Could she turn into a whistleblower?

With his inclusion in the opening sequence, Stephane is set up as the nominal antagonist in the piece. The revelation that his beloved ancestor was probably a slaver cements the role. But the character doesn't have much of a personality beyond his accumulated wealth and outward presentation. His betrayal of Reese would be more meaningful if there's more of a connection between the characters in 2000. It's good that the writer doesn't opt for a romantic angle, but something personal and intriguing needs to pose a question to the audience that will be answered (or, at least addressed) later on.

On a minor note, Vincent's appearance as Justin and Sara's neighbor is a surprise. If he was introduced at some point earlier, it doesn't make an impression.

PLOT

It seems that the issue at the center of this narrative isn't the relative morality of different actors in the plot. Instead, it seems to be an exposure of the uselessness of overlaying any moral framework on these activities at all. In the moment, it's near impossible to tell in the swirl of money moves who is acting admirably, who is double-crossing and who is being disingenuous. There's no point in declaring that "Greed is good" anymore because the insiders and the public know by now that greed is divorced from any consideration of good and evil. This is exemplified in Stephane's airy compound in Miami. The idea is to protect from Covid- to survive- well enough to continue being effectively greedy. That's why Stephane's moral argument for killing companies (also discussed in dialogue section) falls flat. In place of a moral overlay for events is a biological argument that the human brain cannot have enough of a grasp of what's happening to make considered decisions. Justin's solution for the tanking price of oil and company stock is clever, but is it useful in the long term? Likewise, Justin's inattention to messages from an ailing Sara isn't intended to be thoughtless, but it could still have irreparable consequences. In a world of quants, commodification is now dehumanized on all levels.

This writer has a particular ability to pick visuals that embody larger themes. These include the empty Moore sculpture stand at the office, the heavy watch Reese gifts Justin and the amenities at Stephane's Miami hideout. These link with the moral unmooring some of the characters experience as they confront fast-moving events. Also included are some funny moments to help explain concepts (similar to the interludes in *The Big Short*). The most effective of these is the social media crowdsourcing for a college student who must quickly find a way to accept delivery of thousands of gallons of crude (p94).

STRUCTURE

Piece opens in 2000 at the drilling platform of female-led Bright Dock Energy. Owner Reese Waverly pushes the envelope, both scaring and impressing French investor Stephane De Fenelon.

After this introduction to the main personalities, the script fast-forwards twenty years to the Covid lockdown during the height of uncertainty about the disease. Reese's sharp nephew, Justin, has joined the company and is eager to prove himself. His attention is divided, however, between an accelerating business crisis and fears for Sara's pregnancy should she contract Covid. When she does get it, her health deteriorates so rapidly that a neighbor has to get her medical attention. It might be useful to show a moment of recrimination from Sara towards Justin, even if it's brief. That could spark a realization that he's not exactly the man that he thought himself to be.

The final scenes of the piece are at the hospital, a place similar to the drilling platform in that the physical actions of humans have definable consequences. Except, this time, humans are donning masks instead of helmets.

DIALOGUE

Throughout the story, dialogue is used to add humor, make thematic points and just entertain. High points include Stephane's description of Justin as "the kind of kid who wears his seat belt on the school bus (p32)," Adam's pastry quip that ends the scene on p62, and Reese's funny-but-cutting "Go fuck yourself" to Justin on p67.

Vincent's line to Justin on top of p105 is confusing when he counts one thousand one and one thousand two. IN addition, Stephane's self-serving pep talk to his Miami minions doesn't quite hit the mark because it's too truthful. None of his worker bees is going to be moved by the idea of getting rid of economic chaff for the good of all. It's a wonder they don't roll their eyes at the idea or whisper snarkily to each other. The speech is meant to overcome any loyalty that would hinder the traders from enthusiastically destroying Reese, but the loyalty hasn't been established to exist beyond, perhaps, Andrew.

CONCEPT

In its slick presentation and subject matter, this piece is reminiscent of films like *The Social Network* and *Wolf of Wall Street*, but the added element of the Covid lockdown distinguishes it. The pandemic isn't exploited, but used instead to add existential angst and to expose how easily (and disastrously) human attention can be divided and priorities mismanaged. The deft use of this material not only places the narrative in a specific time period but also in a specific mindset that is still reverberating. There's a compelling "the other shoe has dropped" pall over what could otherwise have come across as a typical business titan clash. Now, the characters' competition over who has the biggest pile of cash feels like dancing on the deck of the Titanic.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Overall, this is an engaging, intelligent, well-structured finance drama that points to larger moral issues without seeming pedantic. The dialogue is character specific, but there could be more moments in which the audience gets a glimpse of the players' internal lives and thought processes.

TRADE SECRETS

VIRTUALLY PERFECT
98th - 100th Percentile

EXCELLENT
85th - 97th Percentile

GOOD
50th - 84th Percentile

IMPROVE
0th - 49th Percentile

Overall
Impression
100th Percentile

Characters
95th Percentile

-

-

Concept
99th Percentile

Plot
100th Percentile

Structure
99th Percentile

Dialogue
99th Percentile

RATING

RECOMMEND

PLACED IN THE TOP 1%

ABOUT STORY ANALYST 7X04V4

They have been an industry professional for many years, working for film/tv clients such as Village Roadshow, Netflix, Skydance Media, Imperative Entertainment and Global Road Entertainment as both a script evaluator and a book-to-film specialist. They have also done evaluations for contests such as Universal's Global Talent Development and Inclusion.

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