

Script Savvy Analysis

TITLE: (withheld)

LOGLINE - When the Roman Empire is threatened from within and without, Aetius, a commoner but not a common man, fights to save it despite the risks to his life.

SYNOPSIS - Rome, 425 AD. Aetius, a former Roman, and Attila, lead an army of Huns to the gates of the city where the Roman Empress Placidia resides. Aetius demands Placidia pay his army in order to stave off an attack. Maximus and Felix, her advisors, are horrified and insist she not give in even though the Romans are outnumbered. A battle ensues. One young soldier, Ursus proves his bravery but the Romans are no match for the Huns.

Placidia agrees to pay off the Huns. She also agrees to make Aetius the General of the Roman army since he swears to protect Rome always. Placidia and Aetius have a history together, care for each other and this passion informs her decision. Maximus is appalled and jealous.

Meanwhile, intrigue in Africa causes Placidia to send a diplomatic envoy to try to quell the unrest. She sends Ursus, but her daughter Honoria sneaks aboard the ship too. When their efforts fail, Placidia meets with Boniface. Their meeting causes her to suspect Aetius' intentions. But Aetius proves himself loyal and they become lovers.

Time passes and Placidia's son Valentinian has taken his seat on the throne. He resents Aetius' power but is powerless to stop him. Valentinian needs Aetius because their enemies' armies are either afraid of, or loyal to, Aetius.

Meanwhile, Honoria, is jealous of her brother's power and tries to have Ursus kill him. Ursus refuses but another man takes up the task. That man is caught, and killed. Valentinian decides the best and safest way to deal with his sister is to marry her off to Maximus. But Honoria has other ideas. She sends a secret message to Attila offering herself in marriage and a dowry of half the Roman Empire. Attila accepts. Valentinian is livid. He has her "banished." But on the road the guards attempt to kill her. Ursus saves her.

But Attila still wants the empire. A war erupts and the cost of lives and treasure is great. Attila loses but doesn't die and the Empire is safe again for a while.

More time passes and Aetius announces that his daughter will marry Valentinian's son. This pushes Valentinian over the edge and he kills Aetius. Suddenly Valentinian, and Rome are on their own. Valentinian is no match for Maximus who kills him. And now, only Ursus and Maximus, stand between Rome and her enemies. But which of them is honorable enough and strong enough to save Rome from Gaiseric, the Vandal King? And at what cost?

ANALYSIS

FIRST PAGE IMPRESSION

It's a period piece. Could be interesting. Nice opening image. Already some tension with the ominous weather, the bloody prisoner and the arrogant Senator. Hooked.

TEN PAGE IMPRESSION

The author has done a beautiful job of re-creating ancient Rome. It feels authentic.

At this point, however, it should be clear who the protagonist is, but it is not. It might be Aetius, but it might not be. Maybe it's Placidia. There is plenty of intrigue and back-story that might need to wait until the author has set up the protagonist and his or her goal. At page ten, there are so many characters, it's weighing down the story. However, there is quite a bit of conflict in each scene, so that is interesting and dramatic. Curious to see where it goes.

PREMISE

The corrupting influence of absolute power is a tried and true premise. It's fleshed out here through several characters including Aetius, Ursus, Maximus, and Valentinian and to a lesser degree through Placidia and Honoria. The story would work better however if there were one strong lead that drove the story from start to finish. It's nice that the theme touches all the characters but currently the story is too diffuse to be as effective as it could be.

TITLE

One nice thing about the title is that it conveys the period precisely. It also conveys that it's a drama. If Aetius or Ursus were a stronger lead, the title might have more resonance.

PLOT

Currently the author has quite a bit of plot packed into the time period covered. The author has done plenty of research and it shows in the level of detail the author is able to bring to the story. The piece feels authentic and in fact would almost work better as a novel. The reason being is that in a novel each character would be allowed a full and complete story while the format of a screenplay requires a more laser like focus.

A screenplay requires a more specific structure than strict adherence to reality allows. The author has some wonderful characters here, but there is not one that truly fulfills the role of protagonist.

In a well crafted screenplay, by about page 12, the set up needs to be complete. We need to know who the protagonist is, what they want, who or what is stopping them and what will happen to them if they fail.

The goal can (and will) change at the end of Act I, but very early on, these things have to be clear to the audience.

In Michael Hague's Screenplay Mastery he states, "Something must happen to your hero one-fourth of the way through your screenplay that will transform the original desire into a specific, **visible goal with a clearly defined end point**. This is the scene where your story concept is defined, and your hero's outer motivation is revealed."

In this draft it's not clear what Aetius wants exactly. Maybe "To save Rome" but didn't he lead an army to her door and threaten to destroy Rome unless that army was paid? And "To save Rome" doesn't work as a "visible goal."

It's not clear what Ursus wants either. Again, it seems like "To save Rome" or maybe "To protect Placidia and Honoria" but just as in the previous example that doesn't serve as a visible goal.

Sometimes the best way to find the goal is to look to the end of the screenplay to see what the protagonist actually achieves. In this case, Aetius does not survive until the end of the story. This is a hint that either he is not the protagonist or that the goal was incorrect, since the story continued after he didn't. If Ursus is the protagonist, what does he achieve? He is offered the crown of the emperor. That is amazing - think where he came from and to end up being offered all the power in the empire. And then to turn it down! What a dilemma, what a journey! What a fantastic character arc.

In Ursus, the author has created a character who, by the end of the script, fulfills the role of protagonist absolutely perfectly. It's not a stretch to see that perhaps Ursus is the protagonist and Aetius is a mirror character. Ursus already models himself on Aetius only to discover that he is actually more honorable than Aetius. If Ursus is the lead, the author still needs to give this character a specific goal. The goal should drive Ursus (and the story) and it must be clear what will happen if he fails. Maybe his goal is simply, at first to become a professional soldier so that he has power. Or to have enough money to buy a specific sword or horse, or choose his own wife. Whatever the author comes up with it should be reflected in what he actually gets - or is offered - at the end.

This is simply a suggestion based on the characters the author has already created and the requirements of screenplay structure. If the author believes in Aetius as the lead, the same notes apply in that he must have a clearly defined, and visible goal. And in this case, when he dies the film must nearly be over.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Aetius - This is an interesting character. He's ruthless and dedicated. He's tender with Placidia but it seems he doesn't quite trust her. He seems to have a code of honor that puts Rome first and everything else second. Yet, when he kills Felix without a second thought, it's not clear how that puts Rome first. It's always nice to have complex, layered characters, but in order for them to work - for the audience to identify with them - it has to be clear what they want so we understand why they do what they do. Currently there are too many characters vying for the reader's attention and not a clear enough goal to make this character "pop."

Ursus - as stated this character has a great arc. He goes on a real journey that the audience would be able to relate to. If he becomes the protagonist with a strong goal, he will really stand out. Even if he is not the protagonist, he needs to have a clear goal so that he isn't merely reacting to circumstances.

Placidia - It's not clear why she had John killed. But doing so makes her seem ruthless - which is great. But then she constantly behaves weakly. She gives in to Aetius instead of trying to win by whatever means necessary including by trying to manipulate him. She's an Empress of Rome. She can be every bit of a match for Aetius. And if she's selfish and short-sighted, so much the better - for the screenplay (not for Rome!) The author can go much farther with her.

Maximus - He's somewhat underdeveloped right now and that's merely because he doesn't get the screen time a good antagonist needs. The author could ratchet up the tension if the audience sees Maximus' jealousy, scheming and thirst for power. Since he's in close proximity to the leads, this is where the actual threat of the story comes from. The Vandals, Huns, etc., are a different kind of threat. The story really needs to have one bad guy that the lead has to go up against.

Honorina - She's a great character with a very nice arc. She starts off rather petulant and immature but by the end she is truly transformed. Her rash decision to pledge herself to Attila is a great plot twist and fits her character perfectly.

DIALOGUE

The author often does a super job of creating dialogue that sounded authentic and "period." However, interspersed there were also lots of anachronisms that sounded out of place. Did they actually say "...son of a bitch!" (pg. 40) in ancient Rome? This reader is by no means an expert on how ancient Romans spoke, but it seems that more period epithets might work better. The author might want to read the screenplay for "Gladiator" to see how they handled this.

Also there was quite a bit of expositional dialogue and on the nose dialogue. (See the resources on how to handle this.)

WRITING ESSENTIALS

As stated, the author knows this world and did a superior job of recreating it on the page. This reader often felt transported in time. Once the structure works better in terms of being driven forward by an active protagonist, the writing will only improve.

MARKETABILITY

This is an expensive movie but "Gladiator" proves that great "sword and sandals" films will still be made and will still make a pile of money if all the pieces are in place. The first piece is a top-notch screenplay. People of all ages love romantic, epic stories like this, which means the demographics for making the investment back are there. If the screenplay is there. This script certainly has the potential to rank among the best. But it's not quite there yet for the reasons discussed under plot and character.

TYPOS/ MISC

There are lots of typos. Some are identified below but not nearly all of them.

In terms of formatting, take a look at David Trottier's "The Screenwriter's Bible" (see resources) for the most accepted screenplay formatting rules. But here are some quick examples:

Bold face type, underlines, and ALL CAPS dialogue, are not used in a spec script.

In a spec script, don't use "(Continued)" at the bottom of the page, or "CONTINUED:" at the top of the next page, even if the scene continues.

Strictly limit the use of parentheticals. Only use the ones that are absolutely necessary for clarity. Also character actions go in action lines, for example, page 2 "(holds out his chained wrists)." This belongs in an action line - even though it breaks up his dialogue, that's okay.

Only use caps for character names the first time the character is introduced not in the action lines later.

Don't include a title or a title sequence, that's the director's job. ☺

There should be a brief description/ action line after each scene heading. (See pg. 8, for example of missing action line.)

Pg. 1 - "His mail armor sickens out..." should be "sticks out"

4 - Did Felix go down on the field himself? If so then time has passed and it seems like that would be a new location - a sub-location. Also, if he said "As many as it takes..." why did he go himself? He's that brave?

6 - "...less nervous as he actually..." should be "than he actually..."

8 - "...are standing atop hill..." should be "are standing atop a hill..."

8 - "Tending to their Horses." should be "Tending to their horses." No caps for horses.

29 - There is no need to reintroduce Valentinian and Ursus.

35 - There is quite a bit of whispering in ears. It's distracting.

64 - Honoria just committed treason. It's tough to believe Valentinian would allow her to live even though she's his sister.

70 - Great twist that Honoria promised herself and half of Valentinian's land to Attila!

CONTEST SCORES

Writing Essentials = 6

Dialogue = 7

Characters = 8

Plot = 7

Originality = 7

Marketability = 8

Total = 43

RESOURCES

The Screenwriter's Bible by David Trottier (format and overall scriptwriting guide)

Save the Cat by Blake Snyder - According to Blake, it's the last screenwriting book you'll ever need!

Making a Good Script Great by Linda Seger (for good scripts that need tweaking)

Creating Unforgettable Characters by Linda Seger (for characterization)

Creating Characters: Let Them Whisper Their Secrets by Marisa D'Vari (for avoiding expositional dialogue)

Professional screenplays of produced films are available free online at www.simplyscripts.com or www.script-o-rama.com.

Other On-line resources:

<http://www.scriptwritersnetwork.org/swn/index.php?page=feature-script-format>
(lots great screenwriting tips)

<http://www.oscars.org/nicholl/format.html>

<http://www.screenplaymastery.com/structure.htm>

Article on the importance of the first ten pages:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/insight/first_ten_pages.shtml