

COVERAGE SAMPLE - Conor Kyle

TITLE: Move That Body

AUTHOR: Paul W. Downs & Lucia Aniello

GENRE: Dark Comedy

ANALYST: Conor Kyle

PERIOD: Modern

LOCALE: Miami

SERVICE: Development

DATE: 8/19/2016

LOGLINE: Five friends rent a beach house in Miami for a bachelorette weekend and accidentally kill a male stripper.

SYNOPSIS:

JESS - a young politician - answers phones at her dingy D.C. campaign office. She is interrupted by a call from her best friend (and former college roommate) ALICE, with whom she discusses plans for Jess's upcoming bachelorette party in Miami. Jess is busy with work, and has no time to chat. At home, Jess relaxes with her fiancé, PETER. She admits that she's not looking forward to the upcoming weekend, on account of her argumentative and rambunctious friend group. The girls reunite with FRANKIE and BLAIR at the Miami airport, and they're all introduced to Jess's other best friend (and her former Australian homestay host) KIWI. Alice is jealous of Kiwi's self-described "best friend" status with Jess, and things are slightly tense between them. The ladies arrive at their Miami beach house, and meet their neighbors - LEA and PIETRO - who creep them out with their swinger vibes. Frankie procures some cocaine, and after some insistence from Alice, Jess agrees to snort some with everyone in the bathroom of a club.

Back at the house, a stripper named SCOTTIE arrives, and begins to give Jess a lap dance. Alice accidentally kills him by leaping onto him and knocking his head into a sharp corner. The ladies all panic. Kiwi wants to call the police, but Jess shoots the idea down because the scandal would ruin her political campaign. They decide instead to restage the accident so as to mitigate their culpability in Scottie's death, cleaning up the blood, flushing the drugs, and purchasing a burner phone with which to call a relative for legal counsel. Meanwhile, Peter - at his own, very tame bachelor party - calls Jess on the phone. She accidentally leads him to believe that she has cheated on him, and that their marriage is in urgent jeopardy. He embarks on a long road trip to Miami to confront her.

The ladies are advised by Blair's lawyer relative that they will all serve jail time if their crime is discovered, and even more for tampering with evidence. Jess laments the end of her life as she knows it, and resolves to instead dispose of the body and hide the crime entirely. The ladies successfully hide the corpse through several close calls with neighbors and incidental observers. They dump Scottie's body in the ocean, but panic when they notice that it has washed back up on the shore.

While attempting to think of a new solution to dispose of the corpse, a COP arrives, and seemingly tries to molest Frankie until she knocks him unconscious. Frankie correctly identifies the cop as the stripper that the group originally ordered. They stow him in a bedroom, now postulating as to the identity of the man they killed. The group falls into argument, blaming each other for their awful situation. Jess blows up at Alice, citing her overbearing and aggravating nature as a key reason for their drifting apart. Alice reciprocates by accusing Jess of being a bad friend. She storms off, and Jess goes upstairs to clean up and prepare to turn herself in to the police.

Two DETECTIVES arrive - FRAZIER and RUIZ - and inquire about the dead man's iPhone, which they've tracked to the house. The detectives explain that this man isn't a stripper, and in fact is a bank robber on the run - and they go on to interrogate the group about the whereabouts of a bag of money Scottie brought with him. Frankie sees on a TV news report that Frazier and Ruiz are also criminals, on the run from the same robbery. The phony cops tie up Frankie, Blair, and Alice and berate the girls, desperate to locate Scottie's money. A showdown between Jess, Frazier, and Ruiz ensues, ending when Alice gets ahold of a gun and shoots Frazier. Alice and Jess apologize and make up, promising that they'll always be best friends. Ruiz survives his injuries and manages to pull a gun on Jess, when Peter's car crashes through the wall, killing him. Peter and Jess make up, and reassure one another that their marriage will proceed. The ladies are cleared of charges and hailed as heroes for defeating the criminals.

DEVELOPMENT COMMENTS

Premise:

"Move That Body" nestles into the "group of friends hide-the-crime" dark comedy subgenre, among films like "Very Bad Things" and "Weekend at Bernie's." This might even be one of the essential cornerstones of the dark comedy as a whole, with classic examples dating back to 1944's "Arsenic and Old Lace," among many other British-style farces. "Move that Body" is female-driven, which does differentiate the dynamics slightly from these often more testosterone-fueled stories.

"Move that Body" is a decent take on this kind of plot, and does have a lot of potential. While we've seen scripts filled with similar situations before, it all works: it's hard to not relate to the sheer panic that ensues when good people make such a grievous, life-altering mistake in a split second. Through its main "A" story and two subplots related to friendship and loyalty, the premise is simple, familiar, and solid.

Unfortunately, despite the strength of the setup, "Move that Body" lacks either the spark of wit or originality which could cause it to rise above its familiar trappings. Through some sitcommy characterization, a lack of effective jokes throughout, and a thematically jarring conclusion, the reader will provide notes below on these issues - and more - which are worth addressing in subsequent drafts.

First Twenty Pages:

In the first twenty pages of the script, the nature of the main characters, their world, and their conflict must all be set up effectively. The script establishes these points fairly quickly – Jess is a busybody politician who makes no time for her now-distant best friend, Alice. She has a lovely fiancé, and she confides in him that she's dreading her upcoming bachelorette party on account of tensions with members of her college friend-group. The girls all meet up in the airport, and we see tension bubbling between Jess, Alice, and her Australian friend Kiwi. All of this tells us that the film will thematically revolve around the idea of true friendships. Which ones are worth holding onto, and how much can they be tested before fracturing? All of this essential framework is established quickly. While Peter does shortly thereafter become relegated to his road-trip C-story (reminiscent of Ben Stiller's whacky cross-country journey in "There's Something about Mary"), this is acceptable because his presence sets an effective ticking clock for Jess's goal, and raises the stakes for her criminal escapades.

Structure:

The film captures the panicked intensity of its main dramatic situation through an "all-in-one-night" structure typical of this subgenre, and seen in films like "The Hangover" and "Superbad." Structurally, there are few issues. In our first act, we meet Jess, her friends, and get a sense of the conflict between them. Scottie is killed on page 26, launching us into Act 2 - a series of scenes in which the girls attempt to hide or dispose of the body and all of the evidence of their crime. In our final act, Jess resigns herself to failure after a nasty fight with Alice, laying all of their issues out in the open. The real bad guys enter, and the girls must work together to defeat them, apologizing and making up in the end. It's a simple story, with a small cast of characters, and almost entirely confined to the beach house.

Character:

Characterization is where the script's biggest problems lie. Most of the characters - besides Alice and Kiwi - are either overbaked or underbaked. Jess -- our protagonist -- is a hardworking politician, but that's about all there is to her personality. She is something of a blank slate. She's not terribly unique, and has no compelling quirks or flaws. Because of all of this, she serves more as an audience surrogate than a fully-realized character. When a primary focus of the film is her emotional arc and relationship with her best friend, it's a shame that the secondary characters are much more distinct and interesting than Jess is.

That said, Jess's friends come across as somewhat cartoonish in their simplicity. Frankie is a hippie liberal activist type, and Blair is a frosty Republican businesswoman. Instead of feeling organic, these characters are so defined by these traits that many of their lines wouldn't be out of

place in a multicam sitcom. “I thought you'd be too busy destroying the middle class with sub-prime loans,” says Frankie to Blair upon first meeting her at the airport. While the line between funny and realistic is tricky to walk in a dark comedy, dialog like this comes across as on-the-nose, and makes them both feel like caricatures. In this reader’s opinion, it could greatly service the script to cut these characters entirely, and focus instead on the existing tension between Jess, Alice, and Kiwi. This would not only afford each character more “page real-estate” to develop and be funny on their own, and would more neatly frame the movie as one about their relationship. Which, really, it is.

Dialogue:

The dialogue carries the story, and does have a few genuinely funny lines. The writers here do have a real sense of timing, which tells this reader that subsequent punched-up drafts of the script will be significantly funnier and more effective from a dialogue standpoint.

Exposition, however, is often a bit too blatant. “This is it: your bachelorette weekend. I’ve been dreaming of this moment since the first day of freshman year,” says Alice, meeting Jess before their flight. Moments like this contain information that could easily be shown instead of told.

The script also unfortunately features a few “ticker-tape” scenes - several consecutive pages containing nothing but dialogue. A notable standout is the big confrontation between Jess and Alice on pages 79-83. While this is a moment of high conflict, a feature screenplay needs to have these scenes broken up by action - to emphasize key moments, create a sense of timing, and if nothing else, at least break up the visual monotony of the page.

Setting, Pacing, Tone and Transitions:

The settings and locations all work. The action is largely confined to the beach house, but we definitely leave enough to avoid feeling claustrophobic.

The pacing works quite well, and even the cutaways to Peter’s cross-country journey effectively break up the action on the beach.

In this script, we also get a glimpse of the writers’ voice on the page - which manifests mainly through occasional snippy asides and unfilmables. Some of these are cute and effective, some feel awkward, and as if the writers are trying a bit too hard. “She talks on a landline (lol),” they tell us on page one. While it’s great to spice up action lines, the script occasionally lays it on too thick, and muddies its own intention. “Let’s roll bbs!” [sic] says Alice on page 9. “28, activist, young Janeane Garofalo, uses Tom’s of Maine deodorant” is how we meet Frankie on page 6, the implications of which this reader can only guess.

The transitions are mostly smooth and seamless.

General Notes:

The conclusion of the story exists in odd and jarring juxtaposition to the rest of the script, and indeed, to reality. “You ladies are incredibly lucky. And because you killed a dangerous criminal, I’m going to speak to the mayor about giving you a key to the city,” a policeman tells the ladies after the story’s violent conclusion. Why would a cop be so tactless as to propose this to a group of traumatized victims? And also, does this kind of thing happen at all for such an incident? This seems like something out of a Looney Toon to this reader, and clashes with the (somewhat) more realistic world the rest of the story has established.

Even though Scottie ended up being an evil criminal in the end, Jess and her friends still conspired to hide all evidence of their blatant manslaughter. They don’t just get away scot-free, they are hailed as heroes, with a feel-good conclusion that ends in a romcom-type choreographed dance sequence. While it’s not necessary that stories like this have a clear “moral,” as long as the script itself seems self-aware of the message that it’s sending, “Move that Body” seems to almost outright celebrate criminal irresponsibility and cowardice. The fact that the whole incident seems to have simply brought the group closer together and fixed their differences - through murder and mayhem - is even more disturbing.

This reader would guess that all of this is unintentional, which is the problem. Since the entire *world* of the film seems to forgive and celebrate Jess’s actions, it leaves us with the feeling that murder is alright as long as the victim ends up being bad in the end. It’s worth noting that this feeling might not sit well with audiences. Either re-framing the ending as some kind of satire of modern entitlement and irresponsibility, or perhaps implying any kind of comeuppance for the protagonists of “Move that Body” might help amend this issue in future drafts.