



# The BIG three

A Hollywood producer describes what's essential for a screenplay to be successful

By David Kohner Zuckerman

**A** common question I hear from screenwriters is, "How come so many bad movies are being made?" Hoping they don't mean one of mine, what I tell them is that if there were an absolute formula for script success, every movie would be a hit. It's one reason why I think famed screenwriter William Goldman once said that, in Hollywood, "Nobody knows nothing."

That being said, as a producer with 15 years of biz experience, what I've come to believe is that scripts usually sell in the long run because either a) there's a star attached, or b) someone else wants it. The question for screenwriters then becomes how to get one to the point where either can happen. I think there are three biggies that are essential for screenplay success:

**1 Likability.** Readers need to really like your story's hero, and most actors need to love your hero because they want to be liked by people watching their movies. Many writers think a likable protagonist is a moral one, à la Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, or a flawed one doing great things, such as Erin Brockovich. Not so.

Creating a truly likable hero isn't easy, and defining why we like certain people is akin to explaining why chocolate tastes good. But what I believe helps create the feeling for the reader is hero empathy. Tony Soprano is a philandering, amoral mob boss who kills people. Yet we like him (at least some of the time) because he's usually reacting to

something bad being done to him or his clique—just as Marlon Brando's character does in *The Godfather*. Further, we relate because Tony's own mother tried to snuff him, he's raising two kids with a wife who disapproves of him, and he's in therapy. In *Gran Torino*, Walt Kowalski is a semi-racist curmudgeon, but we grow to like him because he's very ill, has just lost his wife, gets his beloved car stolen, and then defends to the death minorities he's been disparaging. And let's not forget likable, beer-bellied Homer Simpson, a pretty unintelligent, self-serving character who belches. But because he has to contend with his prankster son, Bart, and an evil boss, we can see ourselves in his shoes.

**2 Stakes.** For a script to work, it has to feel like something crucial is at hand. Every romantic comedy is about whether or not the hero will marry her soulmate, something we readily identify with. Kidnap movies, too, have obvious high stakes and tend to succeed. Just look at the recent hit *Taken*. Who among us wouldn't want to kick butt the way Liam Neeson did after finding out his daughter was in the hands of sex traders?

But the stakes don't always have to be huge for us to buy into a hero's predicament, as long as the writer sells his dilemma. In *I Love You, Man*, the lead actor's "problem" is that he's about to marry his dream girl, but he doesn't have any male friends. On the surface this doesn't seem catastrophic, but we buy into the tale because we can all relate to a nice guy who's so busy with his relationship and work that he's forgotten about being a "guy." Plus, it's funny.

**3 Tone.** "What's the tone?" means "What's the genre?," which translates to "Who's the audience?"

Each big studio makes about a dozen movies a year, and to grab millions and millions of potential "eyeballs" for each film, they have to promote their product in such a way that the average person will immediately get what they're trying to sell. We're talking marketing on a huge scale, and it's done with titles and movie posters. You won't take your grandmother to see *Zack and Miri Make a Porno*, because the story is embedded in the title. And your recently dumped friend won't go see the latest "rom-com," because the poster depicts two people about to kiss. But many others will.

When I was cutting my teeth in this field, a cousin of mine said, "Don't try to reinvent the chair." Make sure your script fits into an existing, proven genre, with a tone that is consistent and not mixed. *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle* and *Dude, Where's My Car?* weren't award-winners, but they were positioned well for financial success because they were evidently billed as stoner comedies for a specific audience.

Now, go out and catch a star.

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