

Dancaster's Pardon – feedback

I can see why this script did well on AS and in other competitions. The writing is proficient and the tone is lively. The writer has a unique “voice.” The script’s setting is interesting and described in vivid and lovingly-researched detail.

I love a good historical epic, and was prepared to love this one. However, I believe that the script suffers from deep and fundamental problems.

Good writing can’t compensate for a weak story, and this story has many weaknesses.

Dancaster, our hero, faces a number of discrete challenges but lacks an overall goal, or even a clear “want” or “need” until he meets Lucy on page 44. (I want to know what a hero’s “want” is by page 10.)

Dancaster doesn’t need to overcome a series of increasingly challenging obstacles that keep him from his (here undefined) goal; there are no rising stakes.

Dancaster faces a couple of antagonists, but no actual villain. Great villains make great movies, and this script suffers from the lack of one. Dancaster’s confrontations with the two antagonists don’t drive the plot, and are almost irrelevant to the plot.

Dancaster is a ladies’ man and a good archer, but that’s about all that can be said for him for most of the story. He’s not heroic enough to be a hero nor roguish enough to be a likeable rogue. He sleeps with other men’s wives – including his best friend’s wife. He kills men for unclear reasons. He’s a passive prisoner for much of the second act. Many of his actions/decisions seem illogical.

The structure and pacing of the script are weak. There are a series of minor dramatic questions, but not a major one that will carry through the end of the script until around page 47. And after some of the dramatic questions are answered, there are gaps until the next one arises, killing any suspense and the forward momentum of the story.

At 130 pages, the script far too long. It’s epic in length but not epic in scope; this is really a small, personal story in a period setting. It feels almost European, and not in a good way.

The obscure events and people portrayed do not appear to have lasting significance. Nothing much happens for long stretches of the script and many scenes neither advance the plot nor reveal character in any significant way.

Too much of the script feels like history channel docudrama, with big chunks of description that read like encyclopedia entries.

The dialogue is a reasonable compromise between modern and archaic, but some of the lines are unclear, and some are on the nose. Only a few are memorable.

Major AS notes from a previous draft have not been adequately addressed. For example,

-- What is this story about, beyond wanting to be with one's true love? Can there be a larger thematic or political dimension to Dancaaster's motivations?

- Can the characters of Dancaaster and Lucy – and the relationship between them – have more defined arcs that more clearly lay out what they mean to each other and why?

- Can Dancaaster's adventures and ultimate mission take on larger thematic significance?

- Can the final battle and subsequent ransom attempt be condensed, so that the film ends sooner after the climactic battle, and the outcome of the ransom effort feels more surprising and satisfying?

Some specifics:

Pg. 1. Nice opening image. Note that sluglines are missing dashes throughout.

I'm not totally against the use of "we," but I think it's overused here.

Why were the clothes rustling if they weren't wearing them?

I don't understand Dancaaster's first line. Is he agreeing or disagreeing about the earth moving?

2. How did D get dressed and away from Katie in the minute or so it took the horsemen to reach him?

How did Clifford know that D was sleeping with Katie BEFORE he saw her horse in the woods when he went to arrest D? (And he also said he wasn't there to arrest D. So why WAS he there? And why did D assume Clifford was looking for him?)

3. Why didn't D answer when he was wrongly accused?

What does "your reputation is secure" mean?

4. You raise the dramatic question of whether D will get hanged for poaching.

6-9. D/Wayne scene is long, talky, and dull. We don't see or learn WHY Wayne considers D his best friend.

9. Overlong descriptions, and what's being described isn't that interesting. This is an issue throughout the script.

12. No need to describe sets in such detail. Leave it up to the set designer.

14. Even with Wayne's permission, having D sleep with Wayne's wife feels sleazy.

15-16. Herald's announcement and the response are over-long and dull.

17. History lesson at bottom of page is un-filmable and unnecessary.

17. You resolve the dramatic question of whether D will get hanged for poaching. Now you're left without a dramatic question until pg 38, so it feels like just vamping for time.

18. HUGELY over-long description.

19. Baker's line about hell is good.

27. Katie's interest in seeing Guines seems like just an excuse to get her and D outside the walls to that he can be captured. Not clear why anyone would indulge her in this dangerous whim.

29. Not clear to me why Anne left Wayne. Because she slept with D and then he wasn't hanged?? If so, why did this drive her into a nunnery?

34. We finally get a new dramatic question: will D be killed? But why should we care? Per above, D simply isn't all that interesting or attractive at this point.

35. D is somewhat heroic here, but it seems like he resents having to save Katie and he's nasty to her about it. Not very appealing...

37. I kinda liked Wayne, and he was the only person who really liked D. His death makes his earlier presence in the script seems pointless. Seems like both he and Anne could be cut to save a lot of pages and a subplot that goes nowhere.

38. New dramatic question: will D get out of prison?

41. Time jump of 20 months, killing all urgency in the story.

It appears that D has been doing nothing to try to escape during this time. He's just biding his time, which is dull. POW movies always involve attempts to escape, and that's what makes them interesting – how will they try to do it? Will they succeed?

44. We finally meet Lucy, the female lead. This seems late; I'd like to see her by pg. 30 at the latest.

46-47. Nice scene between John and Lucy. Now we have a new dramatic question of whether they will end up together. This is the main question that gets answered in the rest of the script, but it seems late to raise it.

49. Another history lesson, this one on medieval bath houses.

51. I like the shaving scene, but would it really work without soap?

58. History lesson on medieval clothes drying.

60. Satin sheets scene is fun, but I wasn't clear on the point of it. This kind of playful scene could be used to break the tension after a series of action scenes, but there hasn't been any action for a long time at this point.

64. I liked Lucy's "fuck" line, but I didn't understand "You are the only man who could make me want anyone but you."

It seems like a very dangerous decision for Lucy to simply leave the sergeant and move in with D.

67. D's going outside the walls seems like another dangerous whim that makes no sense and is there simply to drive the plot forward. If it's that easy for him to leave the site where the other prisoners are working, why didn't he escape months ago, hidden in a cart or whatever?

72. It seems that Lucy expects to find her father alive, but she also goes directly to his grave when he isn't in the house, and doesn't seem surprised that he's dead. Not clear if she's crazy or in denial or??

74. Lucy says the church didn't like her father's songs, but gives no hint of why. Not sure what the point is, other than to come up with SOME reason for her to take D outside the walls. Seems very contrived.

78. Seems very reckless for D to go BACK to the city when it seems he could easily escape from here.

81. It seems that Lucy doesn't care much for D if she won't move a few miles to another French city (ok, so it's run by the English, but per pg. 89 there are still many French people there) in order to be with him. Her father's dead, the sergeant is probably going to kill her when he finds she moved in with D, and she has a lousy job. What does she have to stay for?

90. I don't understand D's motivation for trying to take Guines with only 30 men. Why not tell the head of the English army about the city's weakness, and arrange a reward for this info in advance?

If his motivation is to "rescue" Lucy it seems like she didn't want to be "rescued" last time, so does he think she's going to change her mind if he shows up with 30 men? Or is he going to kidnap her? Or what?

At this point, D has no reason to know that Lucy is in trouble. When he left her on pg. 82, it seemed that she was fine.

91. New dramatic question: Will D take Guines and save Lucy?

93. Clifford, the only “villain” who’s been with us from the beginning, gets killed off 40 pages before the end and for no particular good reason. Also, D has just killed a knight ON HIS OWN SIDE, making him a traitor and his whole group complicit.

94. Not clear that D really has much of a plan for how he’s going to take the town. And later it seems that he succeeds for reasons of dumb luck. I’d like to see him smarter and more resourceful, learning things during his time in captivity that we see him use later.

96. Lucien rapes Lucy. So, in a major way, D has failed to save her.

(Also, having characters named Lucy and Lucien is confusing.)

97. “free ride”?

102. Un-filmable about Lucien’s past history with the sergeant.

104. How would Gilles know that the sergeant put Lucy in the dungeon? Might be good to see him learn this.

105. Another encyclopedia entry about medieval castle architecture.

106. Here, our “heroes” are slaughtering a bunch of unarmed captives, including women. And then D kills yet ANOTHER guy on his own side.

109. Over-written and novelistic scene in laundry room.

112-13. D’s victory is all too quick and easy. He didn’t have to work for it and sweat it. Again, seems like dumb luck.

116. D is selling out his own side for personal gain.

118. If there’s a point to the story it appears here: “can’t we all just get along?” But it’s a fleeting moment and not developed.

120. Not clear why D decides to go mano-a-mano with the sergeant at this point. The man isn’t threatening him or Lucy. Why does he even feel the need to confront him. What has the man really done to him? He was just doing his job.

122. Implication that D needed to kill the sergeant in order to kill Lucy’s “devils,” but I don’t really see the connection. It’s not clear that the sergeant ever treated her badly, until after she had clearly turned traitor, at which point she “deserved” to be put in the dungeon, and again he was just doing his job.

(It’s not clear, for example, that he sent Lucien to rape her. If he did, then that would make the killing seem more justified.)

125. Over-long and on-the-nose speech, stopping the action dead.

126. D finally accomplishes something, but seemingly as an afterthought.

In summary, I think this needs more than a page-one rewrite. It needs a page-one rethink, starting with the basic structure, logic, and character motivations.