

WRITING GOOD SCRIPTS FOR TV DRAMAS

What is Drama?

Drama is a specialist genre. Its characters and structures are recognisable by viewers. This recognition factor, a form of familiarity with other drama stories and situations, is an important ingredient in a successful script. Whilst all scripts aim for originality and creativity, most stories used in TV are often variations on a theme which has been written before. Sometimes, these stories can have a historical or mythical origin and increasingly in contemporary TV, stories which reach into this source of narrative are the most successful.

Drama scripts work well when they conform to their genre origins, and often refer to previous productions in that genre. For instance, not all bank robbery stories are the same, but they can contain elements which would be necessary for the story structure and flow to be believable - a bank with money in its safe, frightened bank tellers, hostages, robbers and police. What makes a robbery story different or more original than others, is the motives of the robbers and the reactions of all the characters to the drama of the situation. For example, if greed is the motive, the robbers will be seen in a particular way - selfish, whereas if they are robbing the bank because one of their daughters needs an operation which will save her life, then their motives may be seen in an another light.

So the key to the success of a script in this genre is the relationship between the characters and the action. In drama this is central to the construction of a story that 'works ' on screen.

Purpose of Drama

The purpose of drama is twofold - to entertain viewers and to send a message. The balance between these two objectives is the most critically discussed dimension of drama in TV. Often drama is used as a vehicle for social messages which are subsumed within the story. A good script will be able to transport the viewers to another dimension of time and place - an imaginary world which appears to be real, and at the same time presents ideas and concepts which the viewers will carry with them long after the TV show has ended.

What makes a good TV script for Drama?

A TV script is a blueprint for any TV programme, in a similar way that an architect' s plan is the blueprint for the construction of a building. The role of the script is to define as precisely as possible, the story of the drama - its structure, its rhythm and its emotional balance.

In the production of a TV programme, the script serves one principal function - to tell the story to those who will produce it in such a way that everyone who reads it will ' see ' the same programme and emotions in their minds' eye.

This means that when the director, actor, director of photography or set designer read the script, the same programme is imagined by them. It follows, therefore, that scripts which are simple and clear will be more successful in this complex process of being read by so many people with different roles in the production process.

At the initial stage, the script is also vital in attracting potential investors and producers, as well as the right cast and other artistic and technical persons who can contribute positively to the production.

Elements in Drama

The core script elements are:

- a quest (to find a missing person, seek a lifelong mate, get the money, etc.)
- suspense (a question mark over the success of the quest) ? action (in some proportion)
- conflict resolution

Action and conflict are often grouped together but they are not exactly the same. The difference can be most easily explained by saying that the drama in a story can be either external or internal.

The drama genre can tell its story internally, as a psychological drama, where the conflict between characters is often not as visible as overt action which can be easily shown. However, psychological dramas are particularly gripping for viewers because they explore the inner motives of characters and their relationship to each other.

Action, on the other hand, is visible and is usually between characters and the external world. This can be, as in the " Hercules " TV series, between the character and a series of threats to his life, and dangers which could prevent him from successfully achieving his quest. The " Hercules " scripts are successful because of the design of his character, and the added element of comedy. The combination of action and comedy makes him, as a character, interesting.

Characterisation

Characters are the driving forces of the story. The hero must be someone the viewer cares about - identifiable, susceptible and vulnerable. That makes him or her appealing and castable.

Characters exist in a moral universe, and will be given an allegiance to right or wrong as their core nature. A good script will avoid the cliché and stereotyping of characters as being only good or bad, because within the moral universe of the story there will be opportunities for choice and shades of grey in behaviour.

In order for characters to be true to their nature, the viewer must recognise that they have aspirations, a history and a future. A good drama script will reveal to us, steadily over the course of the story, the ideals of the characters, their beliefs, and origins. From this basis, we will accept more readily where they are going and what actions they do in order to reach their destination or goal.

It is also important to remember that this information is best revealed either by a character's response to a situation or what they say in that situation. Good dialogue which tells us about a character need not be less effective than actions which reveal character.

We should see characters grow and become more familiar over the course of the story. By the end of the story we will be able to accept their fate, whatever that might be, and connect that to the message of the drama. This growth of character is usually described as a journey along the story arc. This is known as a character arc. Over a span of time, motivated changes occur in the characters, forcing them to act and react in ways that are driven by dramatic events. As a result, the character changes by the end of the drama, but in a way that is consistent with how he or she was at the beginning.

For a TV series, character arcs are planned evolution of the characters and relationships in a series. That evolution is usually determined by the writer-producer after a series has been on the air and the relationships are still changing. Some characters may be targeted for romance, breakup, promotion or unemployment.

Structuring Drama for TV

In TV, act structure is defined by the story length, so it can be confusing for writers to think about the right act structure to build the story. The act breaks in TV are set up to accommodate commercial breaks, and each act should have enough story twists to keep a viewer interested in seeing how the story unfolds. It might help to think about a three-act structure as the building blocks to reach the beginning, middle and end.

Half-hour series

A half-hour show runs about 24 minutes when produced - to allow for commercials. It can carry a teaser of 30 to 60 seconds. It can be generally written in either two or three acts, with each about the same duration.

One-hour series scripts for a one-hour drama, which runs about 48 minutes, are generally broken down into about four acts, all of approximately equal duration, and totaling about 60 pages of script.

Telemovies

Telemovies are generally broken down into about seven acts. All are about equal length, totalling 90 pages for 90 minutes, or 110-120 pages for a 120-minute telemovie.

It is possible, when structuring a drama script, to draw a diagram of where the turning points occur, and what happens at each point. As a method for constructing scripts, this very basic and visual approach is helpful, enabling the writer to 'see' the story in a way which will translate effectively into images on the screen at a later stage.

One last word

So what makes a good TV script for drama? Taking into account all the pointers mentioned in this section, a good script must connect with the reader, and when translated into a TV programme, must connect with viewers. Every mood, every area of tension, every moment of joy and laughter, and whatever else we want to convey are fully transmitted to the reader or viewer. To do this well, the scriptwriter must have a good command of the language, using an elegant language that is in line with the character and circumstance of the story. A good TV script is one which has a compelling story to tell, uses words and language that are most appropriate for the character and context, no more no less.

What you have read in this section are just some guiding principles and they are not cast in stone. The important thing is to apply what is useful and create a superb script that will impress the reader, or the viewer when translated into visuals. If the reader or viewer gets your full message, you have achieved your dream or objective.