

Reader's Report

Script: *Brothers*
Genre: Comedy Crime Drama
Locations: Average American City
Draft: First Draft
Reader: Taylor Moorey

Writer: Noah El Saadani
Format: Theatrical Feature
Circa: Present Day
Date of Draft: No Date
Date of Read: Jan. 27, 2023

Logline: A burnout petty crook enrages a local loan shark and seeks help from his estranged brother, a successful investment banker. Together, they must reconcile, while under pressure from a violent criminal.

Synopsis:

Mike is a successful investment banker with a wife, Helen, and son, Billy, and he's just received a major promotion to handle the account of a single VIP client for his firm. Rick is a burnout petty criminal, constantly late on his rent and in debt for \$10,000 to a local loan shark, Calan. After being fired from Burger King, Rick gambles away his sorrows – along with the money to pay back Calan. Rick has just two weeks to come up with the money, and on advice from his elderly landlady, Ms. Derby, he skips town to go find Mike... and steal the money from him.

When Rick arrives, Mike welcomes him with apparent feelings of guilt – and the revelation that they are fraternal twin brothers. Meanwhile, Helen is skeptical because of the stories of Rick's past drug-addiction. Billy, twelve, is frequently bullied at school and desperate for positive attention due to his parents' busy schedule. He's immediately excited to meet his uncle and bonds with him over video games. Mike begins working with the new VIP, Nathan Nitay, a construction magnate, who needs to move money to a special account for an upcoming project in France. Meanwhile, Rick, under guise of looking for employment with Mike's firm, attempts to scope out potential weaknesses and sources of money that he could take without raising alarm.

After some bonding, Mike and Rick are at each other's throats about their father's inheritance and their mysterious falling-out some twenty years previous. Meanwhile, Ms. Derby accidentally gives up information as to Rick's whereabouts when Calan and his goons break into her apartment, looking for him. Calan murders Ms. Derby and leaves to track down Rick.

When Billy comes home with a black eye, he refuses to open up to his parents, believing they don't care about him and his troubles. Rick teaches Billy to fight back against his bullies. Calan reveals himself to Rick and lures him outside by threatening Mike and his family. Calan's goons beat Rick severely, who then resolves to steal the money he owes from Mike, unaware he's stealing from Nitay.

The next day, Billy is suspended from school for fighting and Helen blames Rick for Billy's increasingly troublesome behaviour. In an explosive moment, Rick reveals that it was Mike who had a drug problem, resulting from the immense pressure put on him by their father. Before Mike could be caught scoring drugs from a friend, Rick took the blame. Their father kicked Rick out of the house and disinherited him.

Mike and Rick part ways yet again. When Nitay interrogates Mike about the missing money, however, Rick owns up to the theft and the four of them track down Calan to retrieve the stolen cash. In a climactic fight, Helen drives Rick's van through Calan's hideout, Mike and Rick beat Calan and his men, Rick takes the fall, and Mike recovers Nitay's money.

Six years later, a divorced Mike picks up Rick on his release from prison, their relationship restored.

Notes:

Positive:

"Brothers" is an endearing script with heart, an original voice, a lot of humour, and something to say about family and forgiveness. From the very opening, I see what could be a cliché – the ubiquitous turning off an a phone alarm is turned on its head via the contrast between banker, Mike, and his burnout twin brother, Rick. Mike gets up at 6am, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, gets dressed in fine, professional clothes, makes breakfast for his loving family, and gets to work on time at his personal office at an investment banking firm. Meanwhile, Rick ignores his alarm, gets up late, brushes his teeth with a toothbrush missing so many bristles, it's "more like a smooth plank", sprints out of his apartment, blows off his landlady and distinguishes himself at work by flipping off his co-worker who covered for his lateness, in front of customers. Through clever pre-laps and dialogue reversals, as seen on page 4 and 5, characters separated by time and space almost respond to one another: "When am I ever late?" / "Not now Ms. Derby! I'm late!" Throughout the script, I discover the ways in which Mike and Rick are so incredibly different, from the way they speak, Rick's copious use of swearing, to the way they see the world, themselves, and each other. Each primary character, and even some of the secondary characters, has a clear and distinct voice, personality, and quirks. Calan's casual cruelty are tempered with a relaxed, flamboyant, and outwardly friendly demeanor, that hides a darkness, and, when needed, an explosive temper.

Even though action description will not translate literally on-screen, there are lines that are pure joy to read, like "Everything has a place, and everything is in it's place" and other little gems can be found scattered throughout. This gives a sense of Noah's voice, along with fun dialogue exchanges like on page 24 when Rick explains the concept of fraternal twins to his nephew, Billy. Ms. Derby is a quick favourite, and I feel real disappointment when this whip-smart character, reminiscent of Blind Al from Deadpool, is murdered by the loan shark, Calan. I get a sense of a history, and it's enough to tease Ms. Derby's criminal past, and her secret identity, Delfina Denton, which is a great name for a Depression-era gun moll like Bonnie Parker or Billie Frechette. On page 102, for instance, the comedic voice also gets a chance to shine when Rick returns to Mike's to fess up to what he's done. The increasing apparent pain in Rick getting hit by progressively (traditionally) weaker characters is very funny, and actually reminds me of a Mr. Show sketch.

Lastly, the dynamic between family Mike and Rick's past and present family is thorough, well-thought-out and heartfelt. Mike and Helen have the best of intentions for Billy, and clearly love him, even though they are often so bogged down with intense professional lives. But they love one another, and in an entertainment landscape, especially comedy, where characters so often hate each other because it's funnier, it's refreshing. I also see the origin of both brothers, and the

events in their youth that set them on their current paths. Mike, pressured and bullied to succeed by an alcoholic and ruthless businessman father, who, in an interesting paradigm shift, loathes the star athlete and cruelly enforces his will and expectations on the “nerd”. This is a reversal of the common trope often seen in movies like *Stand by Me* or *Whiplash*, or countless others where athleticism and physical prowess are valued above anything else by an abusive father. That Mike and Rick can forgive one another, move on, and be present for each other as seen at the end, is an uplifting ending and while bittersweet with Mike and Helen’s divorce, bodes well for our titular brothers.

Logic:

All this said, unfortunately this script falters in its logic, both dramatic and world-building, as I found this to be one of the more distracting elements, and touches on other topics. There were several instances where I found myself questioning the decisions of the characters, their dialogue, and the logical leaps made to accommodate the plot. Most glaring is that Burger King does not have waiters. Okay, maybe not MOST. While I don’t expect anyone who isn’t an investment banker to be an expert in investment banking, and that any script would benefit from experts in the protagonist’s field, it also feels like Noah does not understand what investment banking actually is. The “last-minute statement papers” on page 5, miscellaneous statements on page 8, managing a sole individual’s bank accounts on page 12, working at a bank on a Saturday on page 43, and the entire central conceit of Nitay moving \$30, 000 all scream “no research”. Investment bankers are not intimidated by large amounts of money; they work in corporate finance; big numbers are their wheelhouse. And \$30, 000 is a lot to a writer, but not much of anything to a construction conglomerate moving money internationally, nor would a client come in to essentially e-transfer such a small amount to another account, and then immediately leave. Wire transfers and multiple organizations are involved here. Instead, what Noah might consider is Nitay moving several larger sums of money at regular intervals. I simply don’t see Rick, who makes wildly bad decisions like gambling away \$10, 000 that he has in his hands to pay off, would be satisfied paying off Calan seeing such huge amounts of money, and leaving it at that. Additionally, during the flashback sequence, I don’t really see an 18-year-old promising footballer being hit with a belt by a businessman father, unless that father happens to be exceptionally big and strong.

Plot:

Furthermore, the source of Rick’s debt to Calan is never really explained, and it feels like a sense of his current life is left an unsatisfying mystery. According to Calan, this money was to help pull off a robbery (page 13), but what robbery costs \$10, 000? And with that amount of money, he seems like he’d be more than a petty crook. On Rick’s side of logic problems, why would Brock and the goon give Rick two weeks to pay the debt, but be spying on him and do nothing, but then track him down after a week (page 18 & 54)? Additionally, on page 65 and 73, Calan teleports to Mike’s home and immediately is intimately knowledgeable of Rick’s family, and when paid back three times over, he’s very willing to let the whole thing go and not pressure Rick to acquire more money from Mike, even though he did it with such ease. In the flashback, I also don’t believe that Rick’s arrest would influence Mike’s scholarship, which is a huge sticking point between the brothers. An addendum to the flashback, the chief of police wouldn’t be

involved in busting a high school student with cocaine, but more likely, the school liaison officer. Finally, Rick's revelation that he stole from Nitay and not Mike is delivered via newscast the morning of its discovery without involvement of the police on page 100, is far outside of the realm of possibility and far too much of a bizarre coincidence. These issues overlap with the credibility of the plot, the characterizations and motivations of the cast, the plot, the structure, and the effect on the reader. Oh, and roulette is not played with dice.

Characters:

Rick: While I feel that Mike, Rick, and Helen have clear motivations for what they want and why, I think Rick suffers as our protagonist because he is very unlikeable and remains that way for the vast majority of the script. By page 43, I truly didn't find him sympathetic, and even after the flashback revelation of having taken the fall for Mike and his drug habit, I feel that it wasn't an adequate reason for them to have been estranged for over twenty years and have such enmity between the two of them. Why would Rick not reach out after their father died? Until the end, nothing he does feels like an attempt to right wrongs, but instead a walking litany of bad decisions, immoral acts, and unpleasantness.

Mike: Mike is definitely the most sympathetic of the two brothers. He works hard, is reliable to a fault, loves his family, and while he frequently disappoints Billy by being absent, it doesn't come from selfishness or neglectfulness, like other movie dads, such as Fletcher in *Liar, Liar*. He wants to support his brother, and even seems a little naïve when Rick visits him at work and quizzes Mike about accounts and vulnerabilities. Mike can often come off as a little flat, being so willing to help everybody to his detriment without a clear reason, and it's only later that he reveals he feels guilt for Rick's situation. But why would Mike not try to reach out at some point after their father's death? Although I do see the workaholic values his father instilled in him when he was young, I don't get a feeling of the other, negative sides that inevitably come with abuse, and that contributes to his flatness.

Helen: Helen is the no-nonsense voice of reason, a competent businesswoman, and is immediately extremely skeptical of Rick when he shows up, but I feel that her change is not that stark after the revelation that Mike was the drug addict. On page 94, she insists on sleeping downstairs, away from Mike, and she's stand-offish the next morning, but is immediately back to supportive, loving wife and adamantly joins Mike and Rick for their plan to get the money back from Calan on page 104. She's even willing to drive a van full speed into a garage with Mike and Billy inside, a recklessness heretofore unseen. Then, at the very end, Mike tells Rick she's divorced him. She is quite uneven, and has no backstory, and no arc.

Billy: Billy is a lot of the heart and soul of this script. He's a decent kid, frequently bullied at school, desperately looking for parental approval, and finds it in the worst place. However, his characterization is impeded by his uneven-ness. He's very childish for twelve, as seen on page 25 when he doesn't understand and can't pronounce "fraternal" and fails to see through Rick's obvious lie about walking into a door, or page 103 when he thinks Rick needs to pay an actual shark. But he sounds more like someone his age when he's talking videogames on page 44-45. For being so important to the development of Rick and the story, though, he's left off the ending, and his absence is sort of hand-waved, which was disappointing for me.

Calan: Calan is an interesting antagonist, with a friendly but mercurial disposition, and breaks with convention by being gay. He's also quite clearly a dangerous, violent, and intimidating figure, and a natural antagonist for Rick. But, like a lot of elements of this script, his characterization suffers with an uneven tone and undeveloped personality. As I stated above, he is perfectly willing to murder in cold blood in one or two instances, but just doles out beatings otherwise. Besides being a gay criminal, however, I know nothing about his past, his criminal empire, or really anything else. His motivation is clear, but I don't understand why he wouldn't press Rick to acquire more money, when he gave him \$30 grand so easily.

Ms. Derby: Ms. Derby gives just enough hints of a remarkably interesting backstory on page 15, she's got a fiery and helpful personality, and is a loyal and tough old battle axe 'til the very end on page 57. She is the most fun of all the characters, and while she doesn't get an arc, her scenes are the most satisfying.

Dialogue:

The dialogue in this script suffers in two ways; first, tonally, and second, the lack of unique voices. There are tonal problems that hold it back, and these overlap with our characters and the stakes of the plot. I see Calan more than willing to murder Ms. Derby on page 57, but throughout the rest of the story, he always resorts to more beatings like on page 66 and comes off as sort of a PG-13 villain with R-rated language. It reduces the level of danger and tension that I feel for Rick. These tonal issues of frequent compound with uses of "fuck" throughout, a "cunt" on page 55 and they make the script seem unsure of what it's supposed to be when on page 106, I get a wacky driving scene that feels like it's a part of a different, much more family-friendly movie, like A Goofy Movie or Home Alone. Rick even cleans up his language for the first time. If this were to relate to his arc, that would be one thing, but at this point, it feels unearned. And keep in mind, this is the last fifteen pages of the script. While the characters sometimes have their own distinct voices, there are times when they bleed together and become indistinct. Billy, who initially sounds much younger than twelve on his first introduction to Rick, is suddenly dropping "I'll have you know" on page 44. Both Rick and Nitay using the phrase "Hell to pay", which could be a deliberate contrast or call-back, but contextually, does not feel that way. It's such a specific, unnatural phrase in modern speech, that it comes off as glaring. There are also wordy and unnatural exposition dumps from Calan on page 13, Mike on page 27, Rick on 56, and elsewhere. While the sentiments being expressed are completely valid and the essence could be kept, it may help to cut redundancies and limit exposition.

Structure:

The structure is fairly solid for the most part, and there were no major loose ends that left me questioning the end of the script. I'd also say that the plots of Rick and Calan, and Mike and Nitay intertwine in a fairly satisfying way.

The A-plot concerns the relationship between Rick and Mike, and I do get an immediate and clear sense of the worlds of both Mike and Rick from page one. On page 13, Calan tasks Rick with coming up the money to pay him back, and a clear way that it might be resolved on page 12. Following these two lines of logic and their parallel lives, this doesn't feel late at all in the plot.

On page 20 is the first act turn. I see Rick's plan already in motion, arriving at Mike's house – after twenty years of no contact, and bruises and abrasions plainly visible. He's got two weeks, and no other plan to come up with the money. At this point, he has driven through the night to reach Mike. Rick is in too deep to find another way.

I found the midpoint on page 69, in that Rick gets the money to Calan, but it signals no change in him. However, it does provide a false victory; he believes that his immediate troubles are at an end and that Mike won't notice such an insignificant amount of money missing. This does also precipitate the fall and crash of the second act turning point.

On page 98, Rick's actions bite Mike in the ass: Rick paid off Calan with Mr. Nitay's money, and now Nitay is contacting Mike, his boss, and the police. The relationship between the brothers has reached its nadir.

The climactic confrontation comes in at page 109 to 116, bringing all the key players together at Calan's pub. There's an emotional moment when Billy is grabbed by Calan's lover, Lake, on page 112, finally putting him into the middle of the action. This is immediately followed by the biggest action set-piece when Helen drives the van through the back room of the pub, injuring Calan and giving Rick and Mike the opportunity to recover the money, and reconcile.

The final five pages wrap up the story in the new normal, with Mike a little less uptight, and Rick being released from prison. Helen and Mike are divorced, and Billy is disappointingly absent for having been such a key, emotional character.

Script Length & Pacing:

The pacing is decent in parts, but in scenes cited above concerning exposition dumps (i.e.: Calan on page 13, Mike on page 27, Rick on 56), or the lengthy flashback sequence from page 79-91, this script does suffer in those areas. With a little bit of trimming, however, this is an easily fixable problem. There are scenes of action – especially towards the end, and quiet character moments like when Rick and Billy bond on page 71. A lot of the heart, in fact, comes from Billy and his fears of abandonment. However, I think the two scenes on page 18 could be cut, because they don't really add stakes, and the further conversation between Rick and Ms. Derby feels redundant because they'd already come to an agreement. This script could be much tighter; as it currently stands, there's no reason for it to be 121 pages.

Theme:

The theme is about the importance of owning up to one's mistakes. Craig Mazin has said that "The purpose of the story is to take a protagonist from ignorance of the truth of your theme, to embodying the theme through action". Rick has been so ready to blame Mike for these past twenty years, concerning his own circumstances. He's fired from jobs often, he's broke, he's got a gambling problem, and he's in deep with loan sharks. In this case, Mike is the heel, that allowed Rick to be crushed; to be sold down the river, kicked out of their abusive home and disinherited. Rick allows the vicious cycle of bitterness to rule his life. Calan represents the antithesis of this theme. He is flagrantly violent, and acts with wanton aggression, seemingly convinced his actions will not have consequences. He is incapable of owning a mistake. Interestingly, Ms. Derby is fully accepting and proud of her past life as a criminal, even giving

Rick advice. But ultimately, her advice is to run away from his problems, to hide, and to let time pass to avoid responsibility. In the climax, Rick lets go of the bitterness that has ruled him for twenty years, and pays for his transgressions, both criminal and personal between him and Mike during the course of the script. One could argue, it's an atonement for those missing years.

Conflict:

The conflict between Rick and Mike is quite clear; besides the obvious personal strain already in place between them, and the familial drama present between most any siblings, I get a clear image of Rick's desperation. Though the stakes in this relationship feel quite low, as they've been estranged for about twenty years. Calan is quite obviously willing to kill anyone who gets in his way, and casually hands out vicious beatings. There is also the matter of Mike's family difficulties surrounding Billy's feelings of neglect, and while the conflict is clear, the stakes don't often feel very high.

Effect on the Reader:

I sometimes feel that this is a frustrating read; not because of a lack of quality, but that there is a really great story in here, being hindered by a lack of direction, uneven tone, and glaring logical problems. I also don't find myself dying to know what happens next because of the aforementioned low stakes. For instance, I really like Billy – I want to see him thrive and get the attention from Mike and Helen that he deserves, but unfortunately, he never really does. It is also hard to connect with him because of his odd characterization, where he feels like a much younger child. The page count is also intimidating at first glance.

Grammar, Spelling, Formatting, & Clarity:

Even more into the nitty-gritty, this script is in severe need of spellcheck. I count on average probably five mistakes per page. For instance, there are random words capitalized (page 2: "Pajama's", "Kitchen), frequent spelling mistakes or wrong words used ("coach" instead of "couch"), as well as formatting errors such as describing Ms. Derby after her initial appearance (page 4, 14). While, for the most part, these errors didn't impede understanding, it can be distracting and shouldn't be so prevalent in a professional setting. Sometimes it leads to unintentional comedy on page 104 when Helen insists on accompanying Rick and Mike, and Mike says "Absolutely. It could be dangerous," like it's a good idea.

Budget:

As for the much more practical elements of Brothers, this may not be producible on a Canadian low budget. While there aren't any overly-complicated shots, and stunts are fairly minimal – some fistfights and beatings now and then, there is a complicated, high-stakes set piece when Helen drives the van through Calan's pub storeroom. Additionally, there is the difficulty of acquiring multiple luxurious locations associated with Mike, like the office and his home, as well as a school and home setting for the flashback. Alleyways often dominate the exterior shots, and some clever set decoration to disguise the same alley or alleys being used repeatedly. The number of characters could stand to be pared down, as well.

Genre, Audience & Tone:

A problem this script faces, is the uncertainty of its audience. As mentioned in the dialogue

section, there are huge tonal shifts, that make an audience hard to pin down. On page 57, there is Ms. Derby's murder. On page 107, Helen is suddenly incompetent with electronics. On page 83, Rick's father beats him with a belt. On page 19, Billy feels like the ignored kid of a 90's family comedy like *Prehysteria*. It is certainly a crime comedy, the operative, primary genre being crime. And it definitely seems to court the 2000's-2010's comedy appeal, like *Pineapple Express* or *We're the Millers*, which also feature petty crooks going toe-to-toe with crime bosses. They all also have some liberal use of expletives, and relatively minor violence; the worst of which is off-screen. Not unlike *Pineapple Express*, though the violence in that movie is primarily played for laughs. This seems like a 14A movie, with 18A elements. While not every scene needs to be foul-mouthed and violent, the aforementioned scene of Rick driving Mike, Helen, and Bobby to confront Calan feels like a scene from a different movie. For that reason, I feel like the demo might be adult male audiences, if the script were rewritten to lean into the stoner, guy-humour elements. As it is, I'm not 100% sure who this is for.

Representation:

The script certainly does not pass the Bechdel test, with only two named female characters, Helen, an upstanding character and strong-willed voice of reason, and Ms. Derby. However, where it may run into trouble is in its representation of a gay character; Calan and his lover, Lake. He's interesting, because he's not subtly queer-coded like flamboyant Disney villains, but in a way, is like Omar from *The Wire*; he is a tough, dangerous dude in a realm traditionally dominated by macho, straight men. And he also happens to be gay.

Closing:

All this being said, I genuinely do like the story. Family drama is my Achilles heel, and movies like *Brothers* (2009), as imperfect as that may be, feel like a gut-punch. It seems Noah really has something authentic that he wants to express, and sometimes it feels like he reaches out to you via Billy. There's a real heart and wisdom behind the story and these characters, and that reveals itself through an apparent, recognizable voice. This has a certain, distinguishable voice, and authenticity can't be taught, but rather it's earned.

Brothers is an easy read. Thanks to some fluid dialogue, fun description, and solid visual gags, the time and pages flew by. It's interesting to think about what directions this script could go in, and to consider what elements to amp up, be it the comedy, family drama, crime. Those things are all there to create a truly compelling script. There is also a good understanding of structure here, and with a bit of massaging, the pacing could match that and flow so much more smoothly. My hope is that with direction, the gears and mechanical pieces can slot into place and work together, much like the two leads.