

SHADE

PRODUCTION CO: _____

WRITER: Damien Nieman

FORM: Screenplay/139 pages

GENRE: Caper

SUBMITTED BY: _____

SUBMITTED TO: _____

TIME: Present day. About 30 years prior to present day

PLACE: Los Angeles and surrounding communities.

STORY ANALYST: Terry McFadden

DATE: _____

LOG LINE

A poker playing card shark bluffs everyone around him and fixes every game.

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
Concept		XX		
Story			XX	
Structure			XX	
Characterization			XX	
Dialogue		XX		

Synopsis

Super slick conman/card-shark DAI VERNON, mid 30's, meets up with his former partners, grifters CHARLIE MILLER and TIFFANY in Los Angeles and they commence to sting some local players around town for short money while reminiscing about the good old days. They set up RICHARD JENNINGS at a game and when Jennings loses 80 thousand dollars he is murdered by thugs MARLO and NATE because the money he dropped belonged to local mob boss MAX MILANO, who Jennings was working for at the time. Meanwhile, Vernon learns that the granddaddy of all card sharks, DEAN "THE DEAN" STEVENS is coming into town for a high stakes game so he and Miller make plans on how they will dethrone the reigning codger and beat him at his own game.

Tiffany wants to get romantically involved again with Vernon. She tells him that her fling with Miller years ago was because she was angry at him then and that they are over, that they are just partners now. Vernon doesn't want any part of her and he lets her know it. Tiffany calls Max Milano and reveals that it was Miller who conned Jennings out of his 80 grand and she also tells them they can find him at a certain bar at 2 PM the next day. Tiffany goes to Vernon's hotel, seduces him and sleeps with him but when she wakes up, she finds a note telling her he has gone to meet Miller. Miller is at the bar with an engagement ring he bought for Tiffany when thugs Nate and Marlo get the drop on him. Just as Nate is about to kill Miller, Vernon walks in and Nate sets his sights on him. Guns are drawn everywhere. Shots are fired. The bartender is killed and so is a local cop. When Vernon is cornered by Nate and is about to be killed, Tiffany blows Nate away and her, Vernon and Miller escape into the night.

Tiffany and Miller want to leave town, but Vernon isn't going anywhere until after the card game with the Dean that commences in a few hours. They hide out at "The Magic Castle" a spooky little bar where Vernon's mentor, sleight of hand expert, PROFESSOR, does card tricks for local card-shark wannabes. When they arrive at the Roosevelt Hotel for the big game with The Dean, they soon realize that one of the other major card players in attendance is mob boss Max Milano, the man whose 80 grand was taken from Jennings. Since they go under assumed names, nobody is the wiser and the card game begins. Several hands and several hours later the only three players remaining are Dean "The Dean" Stevens, Milano and Vernon. They ante up for one last hand. Vernon is sure that he has the winning hand, but he has exhausted all of the money that he, Miller and Tiffany raised for the game. Tiffany and Miller put in their own private doe and Vernon is back in the game.

There is 300 thousand on the table and just as they are about to raise each other for the last time thug Marlo enters the room. He points out Miller and Vernon to Milano and tells him that they are the ones who heisted his 80 grand earleir. Guns are drawn by everyone just as dirty vice cop SCARNE comes in to the room. Scarne has been extorting money from Vernon all along and is curious to see what his take would be off of this giant score.

Synopsis

The Dean asks his friend, mobster Milano if he could put his personal feelings aside so that they may do what they came here to do and finish the game. He agrees. Vernon lays down his hand, three sevens. He has beaten Milano's hand and thinks he has got The Dean also. But the Dean has three Queens and that is a better hand. The Dean scoops up the mountain of cash and Vernon appears to be devastated. Milano tells Vernon to forget about their rift and to get out of town while Marlo tells Miller that Tiffany set him up to be killed. Everybody goes their separate ways. The next day in a neighborhood grill, The Dean tosses a huge envelope of cash across the table to Vernon, his cut on the sting they just pulled.

Comments

Premise: "Shade" is a caper story that offers an inside in depth look at the inner workings and the lifestyle of the professional con artists and their world. "Even when you win you lose," is a major theme explored here and although their game is interesting and fun, the stakes never really rise high enough for all the players as there are too many cards and they are all of the same suit.

Story: The main storyline follows the events of Vernon in his seeming quest to dethrone the reigning card king and take his place as the best card mechanic in the land. His duping everybody at the end for the big doe but ending up alone is an image that defines this piece and ultimately proves the premise. Great set-ups. The opening little sting scenes immediately introduce the viewer to the element that they will deal with and the seediness of this world immediately becomes attractive. The varied locations and haunts; from back-room games to swank hotels give the impression that there are players in every venue. Funny. Vernon's playing off of people, his acting dumb and his ability to get out of scrapes with cool and tact while still making the con is pure entertainment. The story moves well early on and the feeling that the con is everywhere layers in the fun as it should in this type of piece and this works. The characters, the hustles and the games add a stylish but authentic twist to a lifestyle not looked into all that much in Los Angeles. Effective.

The major shortcoming with this piece is that there is no real human story or emotional side evident. It is all about the game to Vernon. The audience needs a glimpse into his private and emotional world to identify with him fully and take this ride for two hours. Also, some important questions need to be explored. Why is he doing this? Why has he done it all of his life? What is he trying to prove and why? What is driving him? How did he get into this life? Where is his personal side? Why is he doing this job other than to dethrone The Dean? Is he ultimately just wanting to get back at Tiffany and Miller for a perceived snub because he and Tiffany were lovers in the past? There is a lot of actions and a lot of games going on in this piece in every sense of the word but the exhumation of his personal demons, his private feelings and his delicate issues need to be put on the table in some measure to add the human dimension to this piece.

Structure: Good tone, consistent throughout. Great visuals, the card tricks, the sleight of hand-cool and neat. Goals are clear and firmly in place: Tiffany wants a romantic relationship with Vernon again and Miller wants a relationship with her. They all want to set up and sting The Dean. The idea of having Vernon play along with Miller and Tiffany in their scheme to take The Dean when Vernon was allied with the Dean all along is clever and adds a nice little surprise at the end. The time jumps, that is, the cutting back to scenes seen earlier and adding another side to them is an effective device for filling in character objectives and unexplained occurrences like Tiffany tipping off Max's henchman on the sting of Jennings. This is visually interesting and smart because it moves the story ahead while going back.

However, the Tiffany dominatrix subplot is unnecessary. It doesn't add anything to the story, is not set up, is never referred to again, is inconsistent with her present-day reactions to the situations around her and does not comment or add to her current or past relationship with Vernon, the main character. Other watered-down scenes include the Professor at Magic Castle sequence. If the Professor is Vernon's mentor in card wizardry then this needs to be layered-in earlier, not when they are on the run from Milano's gang—we are talking about third act urgency, high stakes and a ticking clock, this is too late for this. The Professor's preaching to him here is pointless, slows the story down and takes the air and the tension out of their current situation. They need to be gathering forces for the final showdown here and not taking it easy because it is too late in the story for that. Milano's hoods and dirty homicide cop, Scarne, who represents the visible forces of antagonism should be breathing down their back and their threat, at this point of the story needs not only to be known and felt but dealt with and it is not. The stories and exposition on The Dean and giving him his own subplot is also too much. The author gets way out of hand in setting up this secondary character. Everything about the Dean after initial announcement of his arrival should be seen by the Dean in action concerning Vernon, Miller or Tiffany and not talked about.

The stakes seem to level off right after the bar shootout and never effect the three again. Yes, they do hideout, but they appear to be in no imminent danger from this point on. The idea here is that there are no real consequences going into this game if Vernon loses, there is no metaphorical gun to his head and even though crime boss Milano himself is one of the players in the "big game," his threat is null because he doesn't know who they are and when he finds out he simply lets them go. This is not only too easy and too convenient, but it robs the audience of the real confrontational scene that being Vernon, Miller and Tiffany against Milano (the real antagonist--not The Dean), for all of the marbles. This scene is called for, needed and must be included—put it in during the rewrite.

Character: Vernon is a charming con man. He is believable for the most part in his actions and his view of the world in general, but he is also two-dimensional because, to him, everything is a bluff and a con and he never shows any genuine emotion or reaction. Although there is a hint of regret in him for a second in the last scene, it is only fleeting and the sense that he will soon move on to the next con becomes obvious.

Because Miller is smitten with Tiffany and is making plans to swoon her, he shows an added dimension in his actions and reactions to this world. He is the only character who really shows a bit of a change at the end when he tosses the ring, he bought for Tiffany away demonstrating that he is over her. He is also more interesting in some ways than Vernon because one gets the sense that he wants more out of his life than just the con. His being so easily duped about his romantic situation by Tiffany also gives him a real human side. He will be fun to watch.

It is apparent that Vernon and Tiffany had a history together and it is also apparent that she wants him back. She's suave, sexy and sleek. She knows what she wants, and she goes for it. Her relationship with Miller that was set up early on appears to be solid and since it so definitely established that they are pals and a good working team, the idea of her setting Miller up to be killed just to get Vernon doesn't make sense and brings an inconsistent vibe to her character. Conspiracy to murder is quite a stretch just to rid her and Vernon from Miller. Miller has nothing on her; no visible or emotional hold whatsoever. All she would have to do is say she is moving on and that would be that. Also, since she too was in on the Jennings scam she would be in danger as well. These inconsistent actions cause her character to lose credibility at this point in the story.

Milano and his henchmen are cookie-cut bad guys for the most part, but Marlo does have a bit of character. This is evidenced in the pleasure he takes in describing to his victims what they did just before his partner Nate shoots them. But they wane and lose credibility at the end when Milano decides to just let Vernon, Miller and Tiffany go free because they lost a card game. These bad guys were not set up to have a heart and when given one at the end it doesn't add up.

The Dean works as the old poker unbeatable expert and also as a subtle reminder of what this world holds out for the player in the long run. Although he is set up as a guy who wants out, his actions at the end do not support that when he wins the pot and holds the crown. Even though his winning is a sham he is still in there conning.

The minor characters, cops, cronies and conmen work well to support and bring to life this world.

Dialogue: Good. The author went to great lengths to accurately depict the vernacular of the professional poker player and it shows. Dead-on. Not only does it fit the major characters perfectly, but the slang adopted by this elite group of people adds dimension and character to the situations at hand. It keeps the viewer in this world. The attitude is in the lines. The sentence fragments and quick lines are good subtext enhancers, especially in the softer scenes between Vernon and Tiffany.

Genre Considerations: Great caper films like "The Sting" and "The Grifters" not only accurately portray the lifestyle of the conman and his cons but they also give great insights to the history of such an individual and the reason he lives this kind of life. "Shade" is slick, but it leans too much on the surface of the game instead of the human workings of the machinery. This piece would be worth another read in a future draft after some cutting and exploration of the main character's emotional side but as for this draft, pass.