Clarion Review

Performing Arts

Dixie
Marnie Holt Swenson
CreateSpace
978-1-4774-9176-8
Three Stars (out of Five)

Until a screenplay is produced into a movie, it is difficult to critique its literary merit beyond basic screenwriting techniques and grammar. The transition from script to screen can enhance what appears to be a cliché into something new and magnificent, or revert what seems to be intelligent and moving into drivel. A screenplay's success depends upon what is lost or added in the translation from one artistic medium to another.

Marnie Holt Swenson's unproduced screenplay *Dixie* is a period piece that captures a seedy part of the South; an underbelly of poverty, bigotry, and violence. The opening scene is set in 1958. During a winter snowstorm in an overcrowded shack, the figure of a man picks his way in the darkness across the sleeping forms on the floor until he finds his daughter, Dixie, with whom he proceeds to have incestuous relations.

The opening is disturbing, but it sets the tone for the screenplay. Right away, it is understood that Dixie, Swenson's protagonist, faces tremendous adversity. Dixie's life becomes worse when Grandma Cassidy decides that Dixie needs to be married off before she becomes pregnant and adds to their brood. Writing in a vernacular that could become unintentionally funny and annoying in the hands of a less-talented screenwriter, Swenson holds nothing back with her scathing, brutal, and graphic dialogue.

Dixie marries a local man named Irving. He treats her as a housekeeper and as property that he loans out to other men sexually to settle his debts. After she miscarries, Irving kicks her out of his home. She becomes a waitress at a diner and hooks up with a stray dog, which she names Butch. Later she meets a trucker named Stomper who appears to be the man of her dreams and her rescuer from an awful existence. Dixie wanders into one abusive situation after another until she finds inner strength and is able to validate herself as an independent person.

Grandma Cassidy, Stomper, and Butch the dog are strong three-dimensional characters.

Yet there are also characters that feel quite flat, as though they were designed mainly to keep the momentum of the story going and to place greater emphasis on Dixie's rotten life.

Dixie channels many movies that are set in the Deep South, such as *Thelma and Louise*, *Urban Cowboy*, *A Love Song for Bobby Long*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. In fact, *Dixie* has moments that are so reminiscent of the movie *Deliverance* that one might expect to hear "Dueling Banjos."

The protagonist of any screenplay must face some adversity or otherwise an audience would have difficulty developing empathy for the character. Dixie's reactions to her more dire predicaments can border on hilarious in a perverse way rather than being shocking or heart wrenching. For example, periodically in the screenplay, when life is too tough for her, Dixie sits down and slaps herself hard in the face and calls herself stupid. In moments when Dixie seems to be continually choosing to play the role of victim, it can be difficult to root for her.

As mentioned before, critiquing an unproduced screenplay is tricky. If it is eventually produced as a movie, it must go through extensive revisions; the transformation from script to screen can enhance or decrease the quality. If the author is serious about *Dixie* as a produced screenplay then she should submit her script to various film studios. She should then also consider enlisting the aid of a script-doctor and perhaps try to solicit an agent. Swenson writes proficient dialogue and might want to consider converting *Dixie* into a stage play.

Lee Gooden