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WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 07, 2007

HEAVEN SPENT by Adam McDaniel

I'm sorry it's taken me so long to write about this, the 2nd place winner of our [2007 screenwriting contest](#).

The last week has been a nightmare. I'm sure many of you can understand. Yesterday was spent at one of the WGA picket lines (I dare not say which), and I have to put in a few more hours this week. I'll be off to New York next week visiting some long unseen relatives, so this may be my last post for awhile.

Had I not known **HEAVEN SPENT** was written almost ten years ago ([and already featured in another script review](#)), I might have been suspicious of the similarities it shares with both Angela's and Ian's scripts. Like **HELL FOR LOVERS**, it is a twisted comedy about the afterlife, with some broad, silly laughs about heaven vs. hell...and like Ian's **BORN IN THE RAIN**, it has parts that are tragicomic, bittersweet and surprisingly touching.

I'll make no secret that I'm a fan of Adam McDaniel's writing. Though I don't think **HEAVEN SPENT** is as strong a script as **IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THADDEUS THACKERAY**, it's still very, very well written, and that it was his first attempt at a feature length screenplay makes it all the more impressive. Even if some of his scenes run a bit too long, or seem too forced in a few places, he clearly has a flair for describing things in a visual, cinematic sense, as well as a strong ability to combine sentiment and humor without being too mushy or contrived. I liked it, and I liked it a lot.

Best of all, now that Halloween's out of the way and Christmas is taking center stage in every Wallgreens and ShopRite in America, I can't think of a better way to kick off the season than reviewing this...

HEAVEN SPENT
Screenplay by Adam McDaniel
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Where to begin?

It starts with a prelude, featuring a little boy who survived a car/train collision in which his parents were killed. Barely clinging to life, he is saved when (from his point of view) a little girl walks toward him, kisses him on the head, and then flies away on a pair of shining wings. Was she an angel? A dream? Both?

Fast-forward twenty years. The boy, Micah Cohen, is all grown up, but now works as a thankless assistant within a large food corporation in New York

great movie, but Hollywood producers and agents just don't give a damn?

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City. Reduced to a virtual corporate punching bag, his life is lonely and miserable.

McDaniel's script opens this up as an elaborate montage, with episode after episode of biting satire reminiscent of moments from OFFICE SPACE and BRAZIL to the opening of JOE VS. THE VOLCANO. Though I felt like I'd seen it all before, it was nevertheless genuinely funny and executed with a lot of panache.

But the humor takes a considerably darker turn when Micah, overcome with grief – it's almost Christmas and, even though he's Jewish, he hates the thought of spending another holiday alone – attempts suicide and fails.

From there, things get really, really complicated. Micah is unexpectedly visited by Coltan, an "agent for the afterlife" come 'round to collect his soul. But as Micah isn't technically dead yet, Coltan, still hoping to meet his monthly quota, tries to convince him into trying again...only now, Micah's developing second thoughts.

This scene starts only about twelve pages in, so you can imagine what I was trying to make of it all. Unlike the demons in HELL FOR LOVERS, who really got on my nerves, Coltan is a genuine scene stealer. He's the antithesis of Clarence in Frank Capra's IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE: instead of trying to save lives, Coltan's determined to END them. He's absolutely psychotic, loves and hates his work just a little too much, and gets all the script's best lines.

Apparently resigned to his fate, Micah strikes a deal with Coltan for another day of life. He then sets out to redeem himself by making amends with the curmudgeonly uncle who raised him, and exact his revenge on his evil bosses at work. This day alone has the makings of a movie in its own right, but again, nothing in this script turns out the way I expected, for just as Micah tries to set everything in his life right, he screws everything up and... well, let's just say it all gets worse and worse.

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BEST OF 2006

[1st PLACE: In the Footsteps of Thaddeus Thackeray](#)

[2nd PLACE: The Jeweler's Wife \(tie\)](#)

[2nd PLACE: Progger \(tie\)](#)

But the central story involves Micah's relationship with Christine, a young homeless woman he befriends, then romances, after a seemingly chance encounter. Given her name, it's easy to see who (and what) Christine's character actually is...so just as Coltan fights to depress Micah to the point of suicide, Christine's determined to make Micah see the joys of the world.

(On a personal note, I have a major gripe with stories that deem suicide as a crime punishable by immediate damnation. It's a rather harsh, immobile stance for a complex situation. To those of you who have ever experienced a loss, grief and suffering beyond words, I'm sure you can understand. Just my two cents.)

These are a lot of different subplots to juggle, and perhaps each of them feel more than a bit familiar – stuff borrowed, if not inspired from, other movies and stories here and there. But like McDaniel's IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THADDEUS THACKERAY, which spoofed and honored animated serial adventures and buddy films, HEAVEN SPENT starts out with basic, seemingly predictable elements, but then spins them into something new, surprising, and pretty wonderful.

You see, during the script's first half, I absolutely hated Micah. He was everything a central character shouldn't be: passive, depressing, inert, and pretty much uncaring to all these supernatural things around him. But that's

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exactly the script's best trick: we're supposed to hate Micah at first, so that when he finally takes the initiative to make his life (and himself) better, we get a kick out of seeing him go so far.

It's the screenplay's second half where everything changes. Micah soon realizes that he's not just a literal pawn in a game between life and death, but that a third potential consequence exists: he might not even have a soul to lose, and when death comes, he could literally meet his physical and spiritual end. To add to his troubles, Micah learns that his estranged uncle is dying, and Christine, whose divine powers are limited due to certain rules and regulations, is not allowed to save him.

Micah also meets a little deaf boy named Toby, with whom he establishes an immediate friendship. Toby, you see, also survived an accident, and was convinced an angel saved him. Micah quickly puts two and two together, and (finally) uncovers the truth about Christine's identity, while developing a paternal friendship with Toby and finding some purpose in life. And just as Micah realizes how wonderful his life has become, Coltan reappears to inform him that his days are now numbered -- for Death Itself is hunting Micah down. And so Christine, ever the dutiful protector, must prepare to do battle over Micah's soul.

As funny as the first half was, this second half works better, for not only does Micah become a stronger character, but the tone of the writing changes from cynical and overly "showy" to more honest and sincere. If Toby is a plot device all too similar to Dickens' Tiny Tim, it still gives the material a poignancy most writers would be too insecure to include. And Micah's romance with Christine, as well as his attempts at mending his relationship with his uncle, are genuinely touching.

The finale, especially, is dynamite, jumping from Christine's encounter with Coltan, to Toby being trapped in a burning building, to Micah's attempts to evade death. (The latter struck me as something out of FINAL DESTINATION, but McDaniel *insisted* to me that he wrote it before that film came out.)

In McDaniel's tale, those in the afterlife, from angels and demons to even death incarnate, are simply members of a blue-collar working class, each assigned to specific shifts, people, and places. It also throws around a lot of dark humor about religion, skewering not only Christianity but all sorts of different faiths. (That the central protagonist is Jewish also adds a little kick to a mainly Christmas-themed story.) And while heaven and hell are openly discussed (and regularly debated) by the characters, they remain more ambiguous concepts only hinted at from time to time. The script teases organized religion a lot, but McDaniel's "world" of the afterlife is quite an original one, beset by annoying rules and regulations, red tape, and a hell of a lot of paperwork.

My only real complaint with HEAVEN SPENT is that it seems to be trying just a little too hard; McDaniel crams so much in, he writes like an overzealous party host obsessed with making all of his guests happy. The script has a little bit of everything, with a lot of funny scenes ranging from all-out farce to extremely dark and malevolent satire in the first half, to dramatic, bittersweet, even sad scenes in the second half.

On the printed page, the script succeeds in holding things together and, by and large, it all works out very nicely. But as a film, HEAVEN SPENT would

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require an extremely skilled director to pull it all off with a consistent tone. Think a (restrained) Terry Gilliam, Peter Jackson, or especially Peter Weir.

With so many lazy writers – and lazy screenplays – out there, perhaps I shouldn't be so quick to nitpick an overachievement. This is a fine script, so much so that I was tempted to award it first place in the contest.

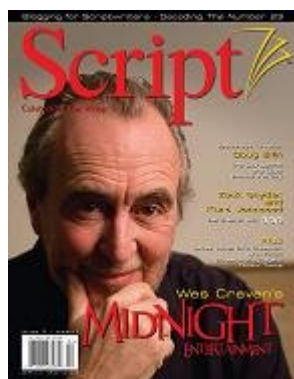
But while HEAVEN SPENT, the screenplay, was good, **HOW TO SUCCEED IN HEAVEN WITHOUT REALLY DYING**, the book, is even better..

...and THAT review is coming soon!

Posted by [THE UNSUNG CRITIC](#) at [11:11 AM](#)



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