

Book to Film Critique

Title: Light from Uncommon Stars

Author: Ryka Aoki

Format: Novel

Setting: Present Day Los Angeles

Genre: Fantasy/Sci-Fi

Recommendation: Excellent potential

Budget Level: Medium

Audience – General Audience – Teens+

Summary:

Katrina Nguyen has her escape bag ready; she made it the first time her father threatened to kill her. Inside, clothes, to show her as the girl she knows she is; make-up, to cover the bruises on her face; a birth certificate, even if it says male; her violin, the only source of comfort she's ever known. She takes the bus south to Los Angeles, specifically to the San Gabriel Valley, otherwise known as the Asian-American Holy Land.

Shizuka Satomi returns from Japan to her home in Monterey Park, restless from her travels, restless from her uncompleted mission. She is inarguably the greatest violin teacher of all time, and legend has it once a violinist herself, although no recordings exist to attest. Legend also has it that she made a pact with the Devil, which may explain the extraordinary success of her students. And their untimely deaths. Now she is searching for her seventh and final student. Her title as the Queen of Hell and the acknowledged price they may pay doesn't deter scores of hopefuls from lining up.

Lan Tran and her family arrive in El Monte, refugees fleeing a homeland torn by war, immigrants seeking a better life. That Captain Tran and her crew come from a galaxy far away and are plum colored isn't apparent, nor is that the giant plaster donut that adorns Stargate Donuts will soon be an actual stargate. In the meantime, their replicator produces donuts almost as good as those made by the immigrant family that came before them.

When Shizuka hears Katrina play, she knows she has found her final student, the one to fulfill her contract and free her. Katrina is unpolished, her repertoire culled from the video games she loves. A transgender youth abused her entire life, she has no confidence, no sense of worth. A soul would seem a small price to pay to stand on a stage and have the world see her as a woman and hear her music. Shizuka can do that for her. To have someone see you as you are, as you really are, that is no small thing. Lan Tran, looking nothing like herself, knows this too. She wasn't expecting to fall in love with Shizuka or have the Queen of Hell feel the same, and to accept her for who she is. Nor did Shizuka think the same of Katrina. As their lives and fates intersect and intertwine, maybe, just maybe their willingness to accept and sacrifice for the ones they love will end up saving them all...

Film Potential:

This is a highly original piece with definite film potential. As with any work that has a unique voice, it will not be for everyone. Further, it is a hybrid in many ways. With a realistic setting, presenting as a drama, but using a mix of both fantasy and sci-fi elements, some will scratch their heads, confused. Is it "Phantom of the Paradise" or "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" or....??? Demons and sold souls, Aliens and Endplague, a transgender teen and their journey to find their place? Next, the story lives in the world of classical music, specifically violinists. Not everyone's wheelhouse. Oh, and the characters are mostly Asian and almost exclusively female. The bullseye gets smaller and smaller -- and yet more interesting. These factors do not mean the material isn't worth pursuing, just that the road may be harder. But there is absolutely an audience for something unique, especially when it has themes both worthy and timely. The target is a younger audience: a more open-minded and adventurous audience. And that audience is huge. If one can connect, one can score a home run rather than a safe single.

Adaptation Feasibility:

With strong storylines, interesting characters and some great visual elements, this book has meat on its bones in terms of adaptation. However, it definitely feels best suited to the format of a closed-ended series versus a two-hour movie. This would allow the multiple characters and storylines more room to fully develop. The ability to give each its time and space is essential to drawing the viewer in. Therefore, my recommendation and comments are for this. I would be more reticent as to its feature film potential.

So, let's put aside the usual issues of structure and acts normally encountered when adapting five hundred pages to a screenplay one fifth that length. The work to be done

here begins in deciding how many episodes best suit the material and, once that is determined, outlining each episode. Just as a screenplay might take license to accommodate abridgment, creative license here will be needed to give each episode its share of dramatic peaks and valleys. There is enough material to accommodate but one shouldn't undervalue the work and difficulty involved. The overarching narrative will remain – that being the ticking clock of Shizuka's contract coming due, which keeps the finale in sight. Its inevitability gives urgency to the story as it moves toward this date. For an episodic series this is a good thing.

Clearly there is plenty of narrative to work with; each character has their own quite strong story. There are subplots too – Shirley's journey to become a 'real' daughter and Lucia Matia's to realize a woman can be a 'master' are both compelling. Narratively, the piece is rock solid. There is some work to be done in terms of character. Overall and essentially, the characters are unique and effecting. I would like, however, for them to be a bit more 'affecting.' While one feels for Katrina, I would like to see her in a situation from the outset that encapsulates her tragedy. While Lan is the "Captain" and so not overtly emotional, I would like some specificity to what caused her to flee. Her husband was left behind which makes me wonder why. It is one thing to understand a situation, it is another to feel it. Shizuka is meant, of course, to be more opaque but I still feel there is some greater clarity to be brought to her backstory and situation that would further invest me. The more I understand, the more I can care. But this is nothing a good screenwriter couldn't tackle, especially given the space afforded with multiple episodes. So I see no huge hurdles for adaptation.

Conclusion:

This is a great piece of material, well-suited to a closed-ended series. It features a host of unique elements: the San Gabriel Valley setting, with its Asian restaurants and shops is underseen; the cast of characters being almost all female and Asian is 'unheard' of; the mix of drama, fantasy and science fiction is unusual. Will it appeal to everyone? No. Will it appeal to enough? I think so, and in a big way, but it will take the right combo of producer/director/writer to pull it off. It's the worth the gamble, again imo. Swing for the fences!