

THE BYSTANDER



Fire the Scriptwriters!

Published in the Martinsburg *Journal*, May 03, 2020

When this historic episode is adapted into a lavish Hollywood blockbuster, I can suggest how the storyboard might look for the movie. For a title, "Outbreak" and "the Hot Zone" have already been taken, and "Pandemia" sounds too much like the adorable "Panda-mania" video game; something swashbuckling like "the Corona Warriors" might boost the box-office. After all, in the starring role is a self-described War President, straight from Central Casting.

Day 1: in a back-lit ovoid-shaped room, a man wearing a suit with a red tie reluctantly picks up the hot-line to call the highest-ranking chief executive at Amazon, warning him to have an enormous over-supply of cardboard boxes on hand. They are about to become the Prime lifeline of commerce in the world.

Day 2: Boom-shot of a Cabinet meeting. The first item on the agenda is how to blame someone else for this disaster. Then off to a press conference to blame someone else for this disaster.

Day 3: Camera pulls back as they discuss which businesses are "essential." But wait--- that meeting was canceled? Surely there was a top-secret conference on safeguarding the grid and the internet. Nope---that was rescheduled for May, due to illness.

And this cliffhanger is not even as suspenseful as the actual events. In 120 minutes, this movie will have to educate the audience on how pathogens spread; debate the ethical use of medical technology; design a communications app that's less hackable than Zoom; homeschool New Math; and get 3 billion masks, test kits and a silver bullet from the props department.

That shouldn't be hard to do in 2 hours--- oops, that was the preparation in real-time.

I'm just being sarcastic. I wouldn't know who to fire, because the scriptwriters are simply doing their job; exaggerate, fabricate, create chaos, glamorize, hype, spin, and sell it as a packaged product that can be extended beyond its expiration date this November. No wonder we're confused as to what is fake and what isn't. Where is a retired reality show star when you need one? Oops, you mean he's not retired?

This cinematic triumph has plenty of antagonists and protagonists. "Liberating the States" makes for a sexy sub-plot, using the clip of the picketing protester driving a pick-up truck while using a pair of lacy women's underpants as a facemask. For special effects, superimpose footage of a desolate Times Square---the universal metaphor for disaster, and now representing the tyrannical CDC, NHS and every Blue State. Then skip-frame to someone being intubated.... every 10 minutes.

But any discussion to emergently nationalize the health care system, similar to what FDR did with coal mines in 1943, mysteriously is never mentioned except by the livid Governor of New York. To have done that could have consolidated the medical resources needed to counter this

THE BYSTANDER



outbreak, and might have kept private and rural hospitals from going bankrupt when they canceled elective services and closed their clinics due to the contagion risk. It would have deployed the furloughed medical personnel from those locations---rather than having them file for unemployment---to hot spots where hospital staff is working triple-double-overtime. Because, if this is a “war,” wouldn’t the strategy be to prioritize the people we’ve sent to fight it? Instead, they are left begging for resources, reinforcements and R & R, while the rest of us stay home and call them heroes. Well, definitely, that part of this does sound like a war.

Day 7: Helicopter shot of college students on spring break in Miami Beach, Florida.

Day 29: Jump-Cut to senior citizens getting used to finally being retired and liking it: to millennials getting used to less stuff, fewer people and less social pressure and liking it: to a slow-motion sequence of people discovering solitude. Oops—that already looks like it’s in slo-mo... retake that scene in fast-forward.

Day 33: Cutaway shots of empty stores and restaurants, with a panoramic sweep of no money changing hands. Focus in on graphs of careening stock prices, zigging and zagging.

Get a close-up on the B-roll Camera---zoom in on tears rolling down the cheeks of people grieving today’s death count. The filmmakers need that sentimentality to remind the audience that parents, children, family and friends dying is why we’ve risked crashing the economy. Without that reality, people might not follow this simple advice from medical experts--- back off 6 feet, wear a mask, and keep your hands off of everything but the soap.

Day 232: Back to Florida; mountains of absentee ballots pile up uncounted by overwhelmed local election officials.

Epilogue: Trump wins by default; Supreme Court rules in his favor, 5-4. Orchestral music swells and modulates as the Marine Band plays “Hail to the Chief, Verse Two.” The credits roll after a special offer to purchase “Out-takes and Bloopers” from the film for an additional charge of \$4.99.

We don’t like this movie anymore; film an alternate ending, and fire the scriptwriters--- please!