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Writers Infuse Serious WGA Awards Contenders ‘Parasite,’ ‘Little Women,’ ‘Jojo Rabbit’ with Humor

By [RANDEE DAWN](#)

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This year's crop of WGA-nominated adapted and original screenplays appears on the surface to be a grim lot. There's war ("1917," "[Jojo Rabbit](#)"), insidious homewreckers ("[Parasite](#)"), a Civil War-era coming-of age ("[Little Women](#)") and an arch murder investigation ("Knives Out"), to name just a few of the nominated scripts.

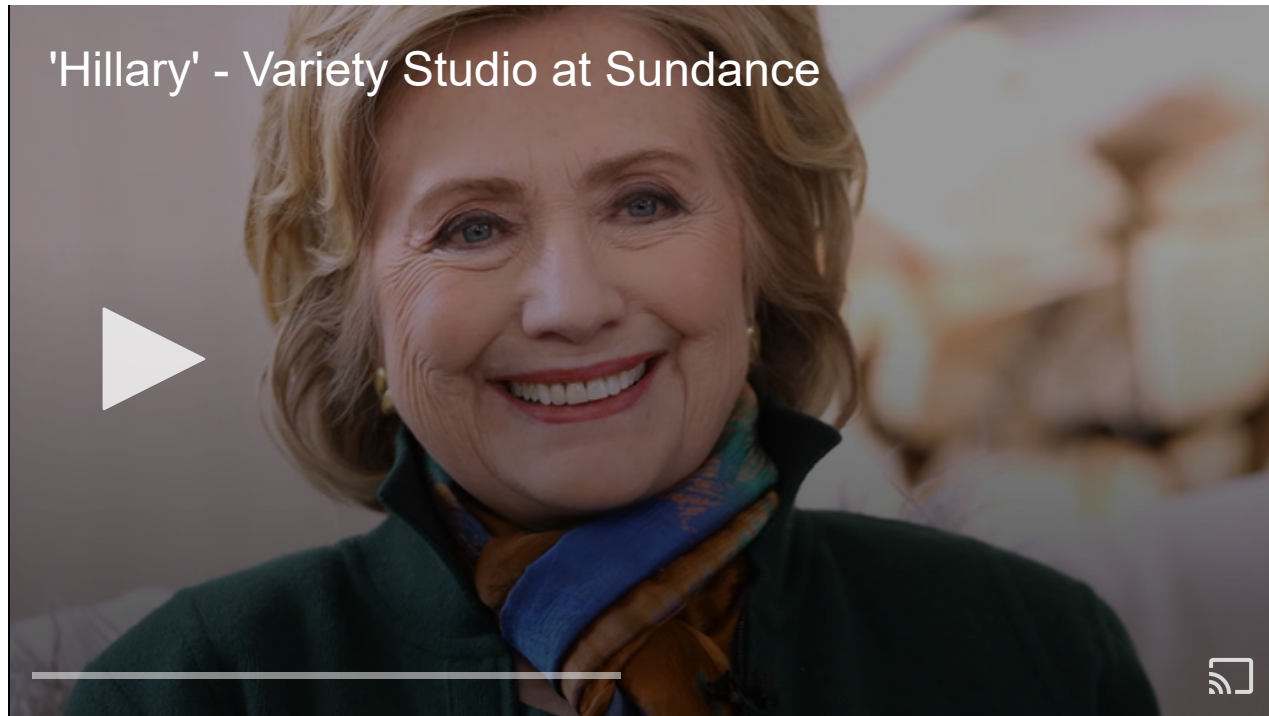
But here's a surprise: Every one of them is funny. Or, at least, funny in parts. And as screenwriters and producers alike admit, a script without funny moments is possibly the grimmest one of all.

"Ah, yes, the hilarious ride that was '1917'!" laughs Kristy Cairns-Wilson, who wrote the WWI screenplay with director Sam Mendes. "Here's the thing: even when you're going through something horrible, you often crack jokes. Our characters were young men. There's a wanking joke in the trenches!"

As one of the heaviest topics cinema tends to regularly tackle, war pictures are not known for jocularity. But all of the humor in this year's scripts is aimed at character development. "You have to embed it into the genetics of reality," says Cairns-Wilson. "With younger men, it's hard for them to talk about their feelings in the real world."

War also gets a ribbing with a different type of humor – satire – in “Jojo Rabbit,” written and directed by Taika Waititi. Telling the late-days WWII story from the point of view of a 10-year-old boy (whose imaginary friend is Adolf Hitler, played by Waititi) naturally lent itself to moments of light and fantasy – but there are several straight pokes in the eye that also are part of the story, such as when Jojo breaks up with his imaginary pal and kicks him out the window.

Popular on Variety



“It’s a real cartoonish moment,” says Waititi. “Humor helps to disarm an audience and let their guard down, so you can deliver a deeper message that means more. I get more out of films that make people laugh and deliver an important message than straight dramas that are intent on just being intense and depressing. People switch off when you force them into watching something like that.”

When it came to adapting “Little Women” for the big screen again, director Greta Gerwig says she found surprising humor in the original text, particularly from the book’s narrator (presumably author Louisa May Alcott). “In the opening scenes she says something like, ‘because readers like to know what characters look like, here’s what they looked like,’” says Gerwig. “There are moments of real, snarky humor, which I hadn’t associated with Alcott until now.”

Looking ahead from the WGA Awards, comedies are not traditionally Oscar winners, whether as best picture or for screenplays; the frothy nature of a straight-up comedy tends not to feel ... well, serious enough to voters. Arguably, original screenplay winners “Little Miss Sunshine” (2006) and “Juno” (2007) and last year’s adapted screenplay winner “BlackKkklansman” were weighted a little more heavily in the humor department than many other scripts, but they weren’t exactly light.

“It is a strange thing why serious fare is considered more Oscar-y,” says Rian Wilson, whose “Knives Out” has an arch, slightly absurd touch. “We’re not a full-on comedy, but we’re pleased that as an audience-pleasing genre movie we were able to sneak in there.”

In several cases, scripts this year undercut their darker, even horrific aspects with well-placed absurdist or surrealist humor. In “Parasite,” co-written by director Bong Joon Ho and Han Jin Won, Han says he wanted to avoid any particular genre labels while putting together the script.

“Various ‘genres’ in traditional concepts define the form of the work, but also limit specific viewpoints at the same time,” he writes in an email. “If I had approached ‘Parasite’ focusing more on ‘thriller’ or ‘horror’ genres, various attempts such as metaphors or symbols, [a] mix of both literary and colloquial expressions and situational ironies would have looked forced or difficult.”

Instead, he was able to construct scenes like the montage where the original housekeeper is set up to get fired; that’s what he calls the “funniest scene,” along with a cross-cutting of scenes where the son teaches his father how to act and the father snitches to the Mistress based on his lessons.

He writes: “[That’s] the climax of comedy.”



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JOJO RABBIT

LITTLE WOMEN

PARASITE

