

Script to Screen: "Witness"

[Scott Myers](#)

The movie's title exists for a reason: Samuel witnesses a brutal murder.

From the 1985 movie *Witness*, screenplay by Earl W. Wallace and William Kelley, story by William Kelley and Pamela Wallace & Earl W. Wallace.

Setup: Samuel, a young Amish boy, is traveling with his mother. Needing to use the facilities, he enters the bathroom at a train station in Philadelphia.



Here is the scene from the script:

It's now much later and the terminal has practically emptied. We can see the dozing figures of Rachel and Samuel almost alone amid the benches.

RACHEL/SAMUEL

as the boy rouses himself, says something to his mother. She nods...

He starts to go without his hat, but Rachel collars him and puts it on his head.

25 ANGLE IN MEN'S ROOM 25

as Samuel enters.

It's a long row of sinks, urinals, and stalls... Samuel stops before one of the urinals -- a long, trough-like affair with water drizzling down the rear porcelain panel.

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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
50 EAST LAKE STREET, CHICAGO, ILL. 60607-7090
TEL: (773) 837-3000 FAX: (773) 837-1500

INTERNET: <http://www.uchicago.edu>
E-MAIL: orderdept@uchicago.edu

CHICAGO, ILL. 60607-7090
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Here is the scene from the movie:

Lots of small differences between screenplay and movie:

- It's not really a point in the movie, but I like how the script uses the "gurgling" sounds of the urinals to "intimidate" Samuel. It not only ups the tension, it also provides a rationale why the boy uses a stall, not a urinal... which is absolutely necessary for the scene to play out the way it does.
- In the movie, the victim never sees his assailants coming after him. That creates some dramatic irony in that **we** see what the victim doesn't see.
- In the movie, the Black Man (Danny Glover) is much more calm and composed than the script, taking time to wash his hands, straighten his tie. I'm not sure what that adds to the scene other than Glover's character is persnickety about his looks, but there you go.
- In the movie, Samuel makes a tiny noise which draws the attention of the Black Man. That makes more sense than the script where he's about to leave, then for no apparent reason pulls out his gun and starts inspecting the bathroom stalls.
- In the script, Samuel spies the victim's body on the floor. In the movie, the scene ends with a close-up of

Samuel's face frozen in fear.

Overall, the scene is very much like the screenplay, but while we can't reverse engineer the rationale for some of the changes made in the movie, with others it's apparent why the alterations were made.

One of the single best things you can do to learn the craft of screenwriting is to read the script while watching the movie. After all a screenplay is a blueprint to make a movie and it's that magic of what happens between printed page and final print that can inform how you approach writing scenes. That is the purpose of Script to Screen, a series on Go Into The Series where we analyze a memorable movie scene and the script pages that inspired it.

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