



OPENING

analysis magazine

HERO'S JOURNEY BEGINS

Robert DeNiro
and Charles
Grodin take the
Buddy Pic to a
whole new level

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Opening Analysis

Comedy duos have been a common setup since the days of Vaudeville. But when you add action adventure to a comedic pair, you might just have the right ingredients for a blockbuster movie. The 80s were the dawn of the “buddy pic,” an action comedy style that derived its appeal from using *Odd Couple* arrangements for the main leads. *Lethal Weapon*, *Tango and Cash*, *48 Hours* and even *Turner & Hootch* worked in this genre by taking very different characters and slamming them together for comedic and dramatic tension. From this formula emerged what *Rolling Stone* considers “the Casablanca of Buddy Pics” (2019), *Midnight Run*, starring Robert DeNiro as Jack Walsh and Charles Grodin as Jonathan “The Duke” Mardukas.

The success of this great movie rests largely on the chemistry and emotional interplay between Jack and the Duke. The ground for this dynamic is established by a particularly effective opening. The first few scenes set up the world and a large array of characters who interconnect from unexpected angles, but most of all, we see the set up for two radically different main characters whose worlds will soon be colliding.



The film opens with Jack entering a dingy hallway, the first slow, bluesy notes of Danny Elfman’s score setting a gritty, low-key tone. Jack is clearly snooping around, door-checking an apartment, and when he hears nothing, he drops to one knee and starts picking the lock.

This is how you know Jack is the hero of the movie; he has mad skills beyond the reach of ordinary viewers. He also has hero’s luck – just as Jack ducks to retrieve a dropped pick, BLAM! The door is blasted with gunfire from inside the apartment. Less than a minute into the film, we can see that our hero is in deadly danger.

The film has established the world Jack moves in – a dark urban underworld where the exchange of gunfire is routine, and where he must risk death

and ignore niceties like search warrants to pursue his quarry. The music picks up as Jack rushes through the blasted door in time to see his target heading for the fire escape, but not before turning and taking a shot at Jack. Now it’s personal, and the chase is on.

The tension is effectively ratcheted up through a parallel action sequence that cuts between Jack racing down the stairs inside the building and the shooter racing down the fire escape outside. They face off at the bottom, but the shooter turns and runs down an alley, making it look like he might get away. Just then a car pulls through the narrow alley and the driver’s side door pops open, knocking the shooter to the ground. A driver jumps from the car and wrestles the stunned shooter to his feet, shoving him against a wall,



frisking and cuffing him. Jack rushes up to the driver and they immediately begin arguing over who should get the money for bringing in the shooter, showing that they are rivals in this business. By now, the unconventional chase, the discussion of reward money and the profanity-laden bickering have made clear to the audience what the shooter then observes out loud: “WTF, you guys ain’t cops!”



This sequence establishes the fact that despite wielding handguns and handcuffs, and engaging in stereotypical police behavior like frisking, these guys are actually not cops but bounty hunters. What's more, this scene lays out basic character contrasts and similarities between the two rivals. Jack attempts to reason with Marvin, but Marvin turns his gun away from the criminal to point it at directly Jack, telling him to fuck off. At first Jack appears to back up and calm down, but then he uses a simple "Look behind you!" ploy to lay out Marvin with a sucker punch. So while Jack is perhaps smarter and less threatening, he seems just as willing to do whatever it takes to land his catch – including driving off with the shooter in Marvin's car, just as the music swells and opening credits kick in.

Cast names and Elfman's upbeat main theme play over the scene as Jack delivers the criminal to the police station and gets a receipt. We are shown a tiny but important plot point as Jack walks up the street, when he glances at his wristwatch, then shakes and rattles it next to his ear. We'll later learn that the faulty watch has emotional significance to Jack and represents him holding on to a lost past.

A tawdry neon sign reading BAIL BONDS sets up the next scene, as does the desultory phone conversation in progress as Jack enters: "Cash only, no checks, no cards. Sorry, that's the policy," an assistant intones, reminding the viewer of the heartbreaking yet heartless business of bonding criminal suspects.

Money is reinforced here as a strong character motivator and a running theme. This theme is strengthened when the bail bondsman himself, Eddie Moscone, arrives, lowballing the bounty he owes to Jack, all the while protesting that his reputation as a chiseler is utterly undeserved. Moscone is also clearly in distress, shown chugging Malox straight from the bottle, 80s symbolism indicating stress-related stomach ulcers. This is our clue that his request to speak to Jack alone is important.

Over breakfast in a nearby diner, Jack and Moscone

have an extremely effective expositional conversation which defines the conflict and characters for the rest of the film. A tremendous amount of story establishment weight is carried by every single line in this exchange.

Clearly worried, Eddie begins by asking Jack if he has ever heard of Jonathan Mardukas. Jack replies, "The Duke, sure I've heard of him, I read the papers." This tells the viewer that Jack has indeed heard of Mardukas and even remembers his nickname, and also that the case was sensational enough to be covered by the press. Jack elaborates that The Duke was that accountant who embezzled a million bucks from a Vegas mobster and then gave the money to charity. This is meant to indicate to the

audience that the Duke, despite being an embezzler, is clearly a moral person at heart.

But, Eddie is quick to point out that Jack doesn't have the whole story – it was actually fifteen million dollars, and it wasn't just any Vegas mobster, it was Jimmy Serrano. Eddie's comment greatly raises the stakes, implying for the viewer that the money - and therefore the mobster - are at least fifteen times greater than Jack realized. Jack replies, "Yeah, I know that," but much less confidently, suggesting that he is bluffing about knowing all the details. Jack is playing to type as a stereotypical tough guy, projecting a macho exterior while covering for hidden vulnerabilities, and the name Jimmy Serrano has clearly touched a nerve.

Looking for advantage and sensing a moment of weakness, Eddie turns the screws on Jack. "I hate to bring up the past," he brings up, "but wasn't Jimmy Serrano the guy who ran you out of Chicago?"

"He didn't run me out!" Jack objects.

"Yeah, you gave up being a cop to do this shit," Eddie retorts. In a simple exchange, we now understand how Jack came by both his skills and his current lifestyle – he had once been a Chicago cop, but the bad guy had somehow ended his career, and now he is down to bounty hunting. This is an early peek into Jack's main conflict, and a hint at the source of his bitterness.

Even more distressed, Eddie finally gets to his point. He had unknowingly bailed out the embezzling accountant. In another quick and brilliant expo, he explains that if the accountant goes to jail, the mobster will soon arrange to "vanish this guy from the planet," and Eddie will be out \$450,000 in bail money.



Eddie has now established the Duke as a kind of living MacGuffin, who both he and a mobster are in a race to find.

When Jack learns that the Duke has to be in an L.A. jail in only five days, he presents his initial resistance, telling Eddie to forget it and asking what other jobs he has. But Eddie explains that there are no other jobs - if he doesn't get the Duke, he is out of business.

This is the moment when Jack is presented with the Hero's Quest, a chance to save them all. But Eddie's desperation gives Jack the opening to demand a Hero's Reward for taking on the quest. Jack is tired of getting shot at for a living - to take this job, he wants one hundred thousand dollars, enough money to get out of the bounty hunting business forever, and he wants it guaranteed in writing.

Eddie balks at first. He explains that the Duke is a mild-mannered accountant who isn't going to shoot at Jack, calling the quest "...an easy gig, a midnight run for Christ's sake!" But Jack sticks to his guns, and with

no choice, Eddie agrees, calling Jack "worse than any criminal I ever put up a bond for."

This line could be seen as a mere throwaway joke to wrap the scene, but I believe it is actually a character challenge for Jack. We have seen that he can be ruthless, dishonest and lawbreaking to get what he wants. How far will Jack go? Does he have a moral core that separates him from those he hunts?

All of this motivation and backstory is covered before we are even eight minutes into the movie. But, *Midnight Run* has a complex plot, and I would argue that the next several sequences are also part of the opening, as they continue to introduce the film's characters and their motivations.

Once Jack has agreed to the Quest, he again relies on his Hero's skills, tapping old friends and old phones to quickly locate Mardukas in New York. But before he can get on a plane, Jack is confronted by a cadre of suited and besunglassed FBI agents led by Alonzo Mosely. They manhandle Jack into a car to warn him that the FBI wants Mardukas, in order to build a federal case against Jimmy Serrano, and they won't let Jack bring him back to face local charges in L.A. This establishes another group who is after the MacGuffin/Duke. More importantly, it also gives Jack the chance to lift Alonzo Mosely's badge, which he will use to pose as an FBI agent throughout the rest of the film.

Jack flies to New York and is met at the airport by a couple of thugs working for Jimmy Serrano. They reveal some more of Jack's Chicago backstory, stating that Jack could have cooperated with Jimmy back then, but it's not too late. They also extend



the character challenge that has been laid before Jack, by offering him more money, a million dollars, to hand over the Duke. Jack does not accept, but he does not refuse, and once again the theme of money as temptation is invoked. Where is Jack's line on getting what he wants?

Finally, Jack calls Eddie Moscone from the New York airport and informs him that he has apprehended the Duke and they are about to hop a plane for L.A. As Eddie celebrates, the viewer is treated to two additional plot setups.

For one thing, we are shown a van full of listening devices parked on the street outside Moscone's Bail Bonds, with two FBI agents who have been tapping Eddie's phone. For another, Eddie's assistant offers to buy donuts to celebrate, but instead slips away to make a quick phone call to Jimmy Serrano's thugs. With these informants in place, soon the FBI and the mob all know that Jack has the Duke.

References

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At this point, the world, the factions and the personalities and challenges of the characters have all been arrayed. We know who wants the Duke, and why. We know that Jack will have to decide what he really wants and what he's willing to do to get it. And perhaps most importantly, now that Jack and the Duke are together, the true brilliance of the movie can emerge. Mardukas tries to bribe Jack to let him go, but Jack just tells him to shut up. "I've known you five minutes and already I don't like you," he snaps. "Too bad, because I really like you," the Duke responds dryly, and a humorous character dynamic is born.

As in all buddy pics, Jack Walsh and Jonathan Mardukas will eventually overcome their differences and find mutual understanding. Jack will have to confront his past and find out where his moral line is. This action-filled, funny and effortlessly expository opening have set the stage for a great Hero's Journey film.