

May 4, 1999

Martial Law

Writer's Guidelines

This is *not* a cop show.

It's an action-adventure comedy that delivers the kind of thrills and fun that, until now, you had to pay \$7.50 to see. It's a throwback, in the best sense of the word, to the kind of 60s television we all loved as kids ... "Wild Wild West," "I Spy," "The Avengers," "The Man from Uncle"... but with a contemporary spin and the kind of martial arts action that only Sammo Hung and Stanley Tong can deliver. We want to capture the wild, unpredictable action of the best Hong Kong movies and the character comedy of films like "48 Hours" and "Lethal Weapon."

Our stories are not about crimes, suspects and clues... they are about fun, comedy, and pure adrenaline. Our stories should never stop moving and should leave the viewer exhilarated. If the story you have in mind can be done on any other show, then it's dead wrong for "Martial Law."

As far as we are concerned, last season didn't exist. We aren't sticking to any of the back story, with the exception of the central concept: A cop from China working on the LA police force as part of an exchange program.

Here are some basics:

- Each episode should start *hot*. That doesn't mean it has to begin with Sammo Hung in a martial arts sequence – but it *does* mean we want a strong hook, something the viewers can't resist. Big action is a plus, but as long as the teaser really grabs you, that's all that's important.
- The stories should put our heroes in conflict. We aren't saying they should be constantly bickering, arguing and fighting – but they should have differing opinions and approaches to the problems they have to resolve. That's a big part of the fun – seeing how they are different from each other, and what makes them unique. But remember, these people genuinely like each other and the disagreements aren't personal. The paradigm here is Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy... or James T. West & Artemus Gordon... or Murtaugh & Riggs.
- Our heroes should have something at stake in every story. That doesn't mean we want to see their family members and friends as either the victims or the bad guys...nor does that mean one of our heroes has to be captured and facing death each week. That's the easy way out.
- While each episode should have some major martial arts sequences, there is no formula. We don't have to have one at the end of each act, or necessarily as our finale. Nor does each episode have to end with Sammo

and the bad guy duking it out. Let the story dictate where the fights are, who they are with, and how long they have to be. We don't want the fights to feel irrelevant, tacked-on or obligatory. And our heroes shouldn't always win...our guys can, and should, lose.

- Each story should have a major turn at the end of Act Two -- and if you can find major turns for the ends of acts one and three, we won't object...the last thing any of our plots should be is predictable. If we know the whole story in Act One, then it's not a story we should be doing.
- The crime, whatever it is, should never be ugly or seamy. This isn't a show about kids killed in drive by shootings, pregnant women getting raped, and anything else that makes your skin crawl and stomach turn. This show is an escape, not dark reality. If it's not fun, we don't do it.
- It's not funny, interesting, or unusual to put Sammo in his own element... helping other Chinese people in Chinatown, for instance. The fun comes when he's plunged into a cultural situation he doesn't understand...it's a lot more interesting to see him help some Hassidic Jews in the Fairfax district than a Chinese family fighting to keep their restaurant.
- Terrell will never, ever, have a gun kicked out of his hand again. We don't make our martial artists look better by making our other heroes look stupid, weak or ineffective.
- We aren't interested in clues and suspects... that said, our detectives are smart. We need to see them being clever, intuitive, and experienced. We don't want them relying on easy clues like fingerprints, DNA, and forensic stuff. That can be a starting point, but we like to nail our bad guys using clues that come from behavior, habit, or personal quirks.
- Not everyone in Los Angeles is a martial arts expert...if they were, Sammo wouldn't be unique. This is especially true of our villains... they don't all have to be Van Damme. If Sammo takes on a martial arts master, everybody knows exactly what they're going to get. But if he's unarmed and facing a bad guy with an Uzi, or a bomb, or a tank, then it gets interesting.

The Characters (An Overview)

Sammo Law (Sammo Hung), is a Shanghai cop on loan to the LAPD as part of an exchange program. He is a member of an elite major crime unit that works on high-profile cases and international crime...and that operates outside the usual LAPD bureaucracy. He's a good cop, deceptively agile fighter -- and, *always*, a "fish out of water." No matter how long he lives in Los Angeles, he will always be thoroughly Chinese, and a lot of the fun in this series will come from the clashes between Sammo and American culture (and the many sub-cultures within our own).

His partner is *Terrell Parker* (Arsenio Hall), a tough, street-wise detective whose unpredictability makes him dangerous... not only to the crooks, but to everyone around him. His improvisational approach to crime fighting makes him a stark

contrast to Sammo...and, in fact, to just about every other police officer on the force. Terrell is as much an outsider on the force as Sammo is to American culture. The difference is, Terrell totally understands the way things are done – he just *chooses* to do it differently.

The other members of the unit are *Grace Chen* (Kelly Hu), a fiercely independent, Chinese/American undercover cop and Sammo's former student; and *Caitlin Sweeney*, the most-decorated female cop in the department, whose ambition is only matched by her tireless dedication to her job.

The major crime unit is for people who don't fit in anywhere else in the department, but are too damn good to let go -- it allows them the "space" they need to do their best work. They are the American police equivalent of the British "flying squad." This unit doesn't only react to crimes that have *already* occurred... they are aggressive about preventing crimes *before* they happen. They will often target and bring down major criminal operations...through undercover work, scams, traps, whatever it takes.

The Characters (the nitty-gritty)

Sammo Law

In Shanghai, Sammo Law was Columbo... with fists of fury. His intuitive and deductive skills were legendary...as was his amazing physical prowess. He was the perfect person to send to the United States as part of a high-level exchange of law enforcement experts. And for Sammo, it was a challenge he couldn't resist. What he wasn't prepared for are the huge, cultural differences between the two countries and the impact they will have on how he works.

Sammo is smart, Sammo is funny, Sammo is charming, Sammo is surprisingly graceful... but most important, Sammo is *Chinese*. That doesn't mean (as it has in the past) that he speaks in fortune-cookie aphorisms and calls people "acorns." It means he comes with a completely different set of cultural assumptions. He believes in consensus and the success of his unit over his personal success, for instance. He prizes harmony between people, and dislikes open confrontation. (Except with bad guys, of course...) He's much more comfortable with silence than his American partners. And he's been taught from birth never to let his personal feelings show.

There's a constant contrast between his methods of working and those around him. His idea of American law enforcement techniques comes from "TJ Hooker" reruns; their idea of the Chinese police comes from bad movies... LA cops think he must be some kind of fascist interrogator who beats confessions out of everyone. Both sides have a lot of learning to do and a lot of preconceptions to abandon. (Sammo, for instance, doesn't use handcuffs – he'll use whatever is

nearby. He might bind a suspect's thumbs together with rubber band, or tangle his limbs around a simple stick...or wrap him around a light-pole...)

This cultural difference applies to all areas of Sammo's life, not just law enforcement. For example, Sammo is far more careful with his money than most Americans, and thinks about every nickel he spends. He's not cheap, he's just frugal. He has a very different conception of the proper social distance between people, often standing too close for American taste. Bribery might be an accepted way of doing business in China, and Sammo is still learning that it's frowned upon here...especially when a cop does it. He's not a prude, but he's not comfortable with public displays of affection or passion. There are a million differences between Shanghai's culture and ours, and Sammo runs into them every day.

But he doesn't let that, or his difficulty with English, slow him down. His deductive and reasoning skills transcend cultural differences. The fact is, he didn't communicate what he was thinking much in China ... and now he can use his problems with English as an excuse to do it even less. In fact, he's happy to let people underestimate him -- like Columbo, he finds that if his adversaries think he's stupid (or old or fat or incapable of understanding English), they're going to let down their guard and make mistakes in front of him. Sammo knows how good he is; he never feels compelled to prove it to anyone, especially if looking bad will help him reach his goals.

Besides, it has always been easier for him to just go out and do things his way, rather than waste time explaining himself... even if that gets him in more trouble here than it ever did in Shanghai. And when he does speak, it's not unusual for him to get colloquialisms or metaphors wrong, or at least very muddled ("I've got other cats on the griddle," "don't pull my tongue," etc.)

He is very much the classic "fish out of water" and he will never entirely fit in. He's inquisitive about everything, almost like a child. And although he is a martial arts expert, he's not anxious to get into fights -- he will use the least amount of force necessary to get the job done. He fights as a last resort... and he never uses a gun. He's the Chinese "MacGyver" of self-defense...anything around him is a potential weapon, from a loaf of bread to a shelf of video cassettes, from an apron to a folding chair.

He is the defacto leader of the unit, but he doesn't press this point. Sammo is utterly self-effacing, with a wit so dry, it's some times hard to tell when he's joking. He has the utmost respect for his co-workers, even if he often disagrees with their approach. This is especially true with Terrell, his partner. Terrell talks fast, Sammo talks slow, or not at all. Terrell likes to argue a point into the ground; when Sammo disagrees, often he will communicate his unhappiness only with silence. Sammo communicates little, Terrell communicates too much.

Sammo is low-key, Terrell is showy. Sammo plans, Terrell improvises. The differences drive them both nuts.

Sammo still sees himself as mentor to Grace, even if she doesn't. It's hard for him to accept that she's on her own now, making her own decisions. In a way, he's like a father who won't let go of his child... and she's like a daughter rebelling against a parent. In Sammo's mind, she a capable detective and a promising martial artist who has become too Americanized in her thinking. Yet she is the one person who truly understands him.

Sammo and Grace have their own language, beyond Chinese. Almost like a code. They can read each other's expressions and body language. All he has to do is breathe a certain way, and it can piss Grace off. (Grace: *You are so judgmental.* Sammo: *I didn't say anything.* Grace: *I heard you breathe!* Sammo: *I have a cold.* Now, for the rest of the episode, he has to remember to pretend he has a cold so he doesn't hurt her feelings.) And they have a shared history, which they can refer to when dealing with a situation.

In Caitlin Sweeney, he sees a woman with enormous potential if she would only relax... both physically and mentally. He takes her on as his new student, but it's going to take a lot of work.

Terrell Parker

He loves this job. He loves the danger. The car chases. The fights. And especially the expense account. There is no legal way to have this much fun, which is why he's wearing a badge.

Terrell likes nice clothes, fast cars... and women. Why be a cop otherwise? He's not in it strictly for law and order. He's a risk junkie, living for the high that comes from danger.

His weapons of choice are his smooth tongue and natural charm. If that doesn't work, he pulls a gun. He can talk his way through just about anything, though he's not afraid to get tough when he has to. Terrell is not a martial artist – he's a street fighter. He fights hard, and he fights dirty...and usually with the same flair for improvisation that characterizes everything else he does. That said, in a fair fight with someone larger than him, he will lose. So he doesn't fight fair. He would rather shoot someone, or hit'em from behind with a two-by-four, than fight for 20 minutes.

He works on instinct and adrenaline, improvisation and pure luck... and knows he looks good doing it. He enjoys taking bows after a job well done. Sometimes even before. His arrest record is among the best in the department...even if he can't seem to "play well with others." Terrell was booted from every division in

the department before ending up in this major crimes unit. This is his last chance to make it...or he's finished as a cop.

No matter what, Terrell always knows he's on top of every situation. Usually, he's right. *Usually*. He doesn't like to plan ahead, but to go with the moment, to improvise... which often frustrates Sammo and irritates everyone else on the unit, especially Caitlin. But it's his unpredictability that is, in many ways, what makes him an exceptional cop.

Terrell loves what he does, and he wants to have a good time doing it. And he wants everybody else to have a good time, too. Which is one thing that really bugs him about his partner Sammo. Why can't Sammo just loosen up? Terrell's always working to get some kind of reaction out of Sammo. What he doesn't realize is that this only makes Sammo more determined not to show him anything -- Sammo's enjoying himself in ways that Terrell will never understand.

Grace finds Terrell too showy, and is afraid his rogue approach could get them all killed. Which is why she prefers to work alone...and why Terrell enjoys needling her so much. In his mind, she's too serious, too full of herself, too much of a loner. And a very easy target for his own amusement.

Caitlin, on the other hand, represents everything Terrell dislikes about the department and why, until now, he hasn't really thrived. She is far too absorbed in the politics and procedures of the LAPD, too interested in promotion, in how things "look" to others...rather than just doing whatever it takes to get the job done. But he even he can't deny her abilities.

Grace Chen

She's equal parts Emma Peel, La Femme Nikita -- and even more Jennifer Lopez in "Out of Sight." She comfortable with her weapons...whether it's the ones she was born with...her fists, her feet and her beauty... or the arsenal at her disposal.

She's happiest when she's undercover, freed from the restrictions and expectations others have placed on her...and that she's placed on herself. Alone, there's no one to disappoint but herself, and she rarely does that.

When she's with Sammo, she's like a 16-year-old trying to rebel against her strict father...a man she nonetheless respects and is utterly devoted to. What she can't seem to make him understand is that things are *different here*. She's knows more about America than he does. What he does may work in China, but it doesn't always work here.

Everyone else may see her as a lethal lady....but Sammo will always see her as a wayward student who still has many lessons left to learn. To him, she doesn't

know more about America, she's just gotten sloppy. He sees it as his responsibility to reinforce in her the Chinese way of doing things. And that makes her crazy. Despite all that, they are very close. She is the one person he will open up to...because she is the only person in America who truly understands him.

Where Terrell is instinctive, she is aggressive. She always believes she is tougher than anyone in the room and wants to prove it. Although, like Terrell, she likes to do things her own way, she thinks things through. She never improvises... she strategizes constantly. The truth is, she wishes she had his skill for quick-thinking, for choosing the one approach that would never occur to anyone else.

While Caitlin is an expert at politics, Grace is a total failure. Grace doesn't care what's politically correct, only what works for her. While Caitlin wants to work within the system, Grace fights it. Grace rebels against anything that forces her to conform, that makes her less unique and independent. But again, the truth is she wishes she had Caitlin's ability to smoothly navigate the political waters of any situation.

What Grace is out to do is prove herself...to herself.

Caitlin Sweeney

At 26, she's the fastest-rising female cop in the history of the department. She got that way by being single-minded about her work, absolutely dedicated to her job. Some would say obsessed.

Her goal is to be the first female police chief in LA history. To get there, she knows she has to not only be good, but better than everybody else. She will play the politics of any situation – and believes that this so-called promotion to the unit was actually designed by her male superiors to derail her rise to the top. To her, this is a demotion. She believes she's only one big arrest away from getting back into robbery-homicide and the promotion track.

As a result, she's relentless when it comes to pursuing a case, and making sure it's done if not by the book, within the bound of acceptable procedure. It's for her own protection – if they break all the rules to make a bust, and the judge throws the case out, they've wasted their time, returned a crook to the streets, and tarnished their careers.

Because she comes from a wealthy family, she can afford all the latest technology (even if the department can't), and is forever looking for any gadget that can give her an edge.

She talks to Sammo, Terrell and Grace as if she is the only adult, and they are unruly children when, the fact is, they actually have more experience than she does. Sammo has no desire to show her up...unlike Terrell and especially Grace, who will rub Caitlin's nose in a mistake every chance she gets. It's the one thing Grace and Terrell can always agree on.

Caitlin admires Sammo and Terrell, if only she could convince them to work within the system, they could be terrific cops. And she wishes she had Grace's ability to blend into any situation. No matter how hard Caitlin tries to blend in, no matter how she dresses, no matter how she walks, you can still always tell she's a cop.

Maybe that's because she is all cop. That is her life. What she lacks in physical prowess she more than makes up for with sharp intellect and political savvy. And she's smart enough to know this... which is why she swallowed her pride and asked Sammo to teach her martial arts. He gladly accepted, because she recognizes this weakness in herself. The problem is, she's not proving to be a very good student. . When it comes to martial arts, and Chinese teaching, she has a *long* way to go. She thinks her problem is physical prowess, Sammo knows it's more about the way she thinks... which is *too much*. He will use martial arts to teach her not only how to fight, but how to find her true self.

What They All Have in Common:

Despite their differences, they genuinely like and respect each other. And together, make an extraordinary team. Although they may argue, although they may have different approaches, their basic respect and affection for one another never wavers.