

Doctoral School of the University of Theatre and Film

**The Application of Improvisational Techniques
in the Development of Screenplays and the Education of Screenwriters**

Thesis of Dissertation

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THESIS

My dissertation is based on the hypothesis that the application of improvisation techniques is an efficient and desirable method both in the development of screenplays and in the education of screenwriters. The goal of the paper is the presentation of the method I created in order to give sufficient short-term and long-term help in the traditionally lonely work of screenwriters and to provide better screenplays in general.

The paper wishes to be a methodology of the subject: a review of definitions and types of improvisation, a short history of theatrical improvisation, an analytical summary of previous work in the field of applied improvisation in screenwriting, a theoretical founding of connections in improv and screenwriting and a functional collection of exercises of my method based on my experiences. My target audience consists of screenwriting teachers, screenwriting students and practicing screenwriters.

In the introduction I demonstrate that there are basic similarities between screenwriting and theatrical improvisation since both art forms tell their stories in dramatic ways and their most basic, most important formal unit is the scene. I point out that regarding the possibility of actually facing and perceiving scenes, being an improviser comes with a number of benefits compared to being a screenwriter. Thanks to this, the use of improvisational techniques and approaches could be an efficient method in the development of screenplays.

In the first part I describe and interpret the possible definitions of improvisation. I differentiate and analyze its shades of meaning, its possible groupings and the relating theories. Then I allocate my own screenplay-development method among the categories of improvisation: as a method that uses the approach and exercises of public, pure improvisation as an applied technique.

The second part of the dissertation which contains two chapters summarizes the historical and theoretical antecedents of my method. The first chapter gives a summary of theatrical improvisation from ancient times to our days. I show that until the 18th century improvisation has always been a natural and organic part of the performing arts, but how an aesthetic turn based on the ideologies of enlightenment extruded improvisation outside the boundaries of high art. I describe how the 20th century rediscovered improvisation, then I describe the main areas where theatrical improvisation is being present in our days from actor training via applied improvisation in psychology and education to improvisational theatres.

In the second chapter - putting my method into context - I give an analytical summary of previous work of using improvisation in the process of making films. I deeply examine those artist and educators (John Cassavetes, Mike Leigh, the Second City improvisational theatre of Chicago, Christina Kallas) who similarly to me, use improvisational techniques not during the shooting but during the development of screenplays.

The third part of the dissertation describes the method I developed in five chapters. In the first chapter I identify the hidden correspondence between spontaneity and structure through a playful exercise. I point out that spontaneity and storytelling are natural instincts within all of us and that improvisation builds exactly upon using and raising our awareness of this instinct.

In the second chapter I briefly summarize the actual materializations of my method. I trace out three areas in the application of improvisational techniques: the education of screenwriters, the entrance exam of screenwriter students and the screenplay development of professional screenwriters.

In the third chapter I demonstrate the practice and theory of applying improvisation techniques in the education of screenwriters. Using practical examples, exercises, theory and feedback from students I verify the efficiency of the method in the actual script development, in personal and creativity development, in basic competencies and in a general, long term dramaturgical approach.

In the fourth chapter I briefly describe the experiences of using the method in the entrance exam of screenwriter students.

In the fifth chapter I summarize the forgoing appearances of the method in professional scriptwriting in the form of case studies. I point out the most important factors to the success of using the method and list the mistakes to avoid. Finally, as a play of thought I demonstrate

the most important steps of a multi-level, complex improvisational development process through the documentation of the imaginary development of an imaginary feature film.

My hypothesis is that the application of improvisation techniques is an efficient and desirable method both in the development of screenplays and in the education of screenwriters. Throughout my dissertation I prove that the use of improv in screenwriting brings in the notions of playfulness, alternatives and collaboration to the act of screenwriting and redefines the process in a productive way.

I further verify that theatrical improvisation is spontaneous and conscious storytelling. The application of the methods, exercises and approach of theatrical improvisation in the development of screenplays and the education of screenwriters helps to bring participants closer to the essence of storytelling and the foundation of dramaturgy.

Thanks to the similarities of improv and scriptwriting, the collaborative and playful characteristic of the improv method and the bridge it builds between the writing process and the shooting process of a film, the method contributes to the education of screenwriters in general and hence it contributes to better screenplays being written.

Finally, I verify that like no other development method, the method of using improv techniques in the development of screenplays and in the education of screenwriters results in building a very important BRIDGE between one of the earliest (writing) and one of the latest (acting) stations of making films. Having the reality of human body, sound, movement, time so early in the process of movie making gives the writer the possibility of constant visual feedback of her ideas and the opportunity of continuous rethinking and rewriting that leads to the ultimate goal of the method: to get the most potential out of an idea.