



Cameraman Michael Starceвич shoots actors Beth Meleuski and Dave Colan for a 2003 improvised performance by Neutrino Project 30,000.

Instant cinema

Meet the hot new couple: improv and digital video

BY CHRISTOPHER ZARA

SHOW DOES making movies compare with live theatre? To some, the two forms are like apples and oranges, but a new improv franchise has staked out a spot somewhere in between the two media.

The Neutrino Video Projects can best be summed up as near-live presentations of improvised movies. They are conceived, shot, scored, and edited all in the time it takes audiences to watch. A risky premise, perhaps, but with seasoned improv-theatre talent, the show can entertain in a way unlike any other kind of performance.

Like conventional improv, Neutrino performances begin with troupe members soliciting story ideas from their audience. Once armed with enough raw materials for a film, the cast members join forces with guerrilla camera crews and

take to the streets. Using real locations, real props, and even recruiting real extras, the teams shoot an entire movie based on audience input. For the audience, the playback is almost live. It takes about five minutes for crew members to shoot the first scene, rush it back to the theatre, perform minimal edits, and dub in some appropriate music. (A few of the performers stay behind in the meantime, keeping the audience entertained with amusing onstage banter.) But with three or more separate crews at work, a seamless movie follows the initial delay. Neutrino is, in the end, a movie-going experience. But unlike standard cinema, the show's success hinges on its players' ability to interact with a live audience.

The concept originated in 1999, when Neutrino was a long-form improv

group and regular participant in the New York-based CageMatch competition, a weekly face-off between two improv teams who each have twenty-five minutes to perform. "We were competing in Cage-Match for about two years, and each time we tried to do something different," says Neutrino co-creator Kurt Brauohler. "One day, we were just kind of brainstorming and came up with the idea to do our show completely video."

After figuring out the logistics of an improv-movie performance, the troupe brought its new format to CageMatch and blew the competition out of the water. "The response was overwhelming," Brauohler adds. "We won CageMatch for like five weeks straight. From there, the idea just took off."

Neutrino went on to perform in New York's Del Close Marathon, a long-form improv showcase sought out by troupes from all over the country. During the marathon, Neutrino caught the eye of Fuzzy Gerdes and Shaun Himmerick, two performers from Chicago. "They saw the show and fell in love with it," says Braunohler. "Fuzzy called me up later and asked, 'Hey, would you mind if we licensed it from you guys and brought it out to Chicago?'"

Braunohler agreed. To help get the show up and running, he spent some time talking Gerdes through the necessary preparations. FuzzyCo, Gerdes's Chicago-based production company, produced a trial run of Neutrino Project 30,000 in September of 2002. The show has been wildly successful since, garnering its share of favorable press in a town that takes its improv seriously.

The expansion of Neutrino's hybrid franchise has continued to snowball, with local troupes licensing the show in Seattle and, more recently, Washington, D.C. (possible franchises in Vancouver and Toronto were also being discussed at the time of this writing). After seeing a Neutrino submission tape Braunohler had sent to the Seattle Festival of Improv Theater, Seattle Neutrino artistic director Justin Sund jumped at the chance to bring the show to his hometown. He's been an improv artist since 1997 and considers Neutrino one of the most creative variations the genre has seen in a long time.

The form is made possible by digital video, which has put sophisticated moviemaking tools in the hands of the general population. The projection system, editing software, and DV cameras needed to bring Neutrino to life would have, a few years ago, pushed production costs well above what small theatre groups could afford. Nowadays the equipment is affordable. As Sund points out, however, incorporating it into a stage show is a complicated matter. "Finding a technical crew to help us pull this off was one of the first problems we ran into," Sund recalls. "But this is great learning experience for a cameraman. Normally, you're setting up shots, checking white balance—we do all that on the fly."

Sund credits his movie crews, composed largely of Seattle-area film students, with being the real muscle behind Neutrino. But what about the adjustment for the improvisers themselves? When Braunohler was making his first improv movies on the streets of New York, the theatre-trained actor learned that not everything translates from stage to screen. "When you're improvising on stage, you're talking a lot," Braunohler adds. "You're constantly having to generate information about where you are and what's going on. On camera we found that if you do that, you're telling too much and not showing enough."

Braunohler, who sharpened his stage skills at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre in New York, likens the camera to a laser. Where a live audience will miss many aspects of an actor's performance, the camera, in the hands of a skilled shooter, can hone in on every little detail. The Neutrino players have found that audiences will react to a movie much differently than a live performance. Quite often the biggest laughs come from an actor's facial expression or cutaway reaction shot. And in an age where special effects can recreate virtually anything, a movie-going audience is also less willing to suspend its disbelief, visually speaking.

"There's this idea that I can't play a four-hundred-pound black woman on camera," says Braunohler. "Which I could do on stage if I wanted to. I have to play someone with red hair and a goatee, because I can't look any different."

In Seattle, Sund has made similar observations. "With the movies we can't just create our surroundings out of thin air," he says. "If we're in a pub, we have to be in a pub. In many aspects it's more limiting than theatre, but there's also more freedom—It's like, at last I get to be myself."

Popularized in recent years by ComedySportz troupes and the ABC hit *Whose Line is it Anyway?*, improv in its modern form can be traced to 1920s inner-city Chicago. Actor and director Viola Spolin invented various theatre games as a means to teach acting to immigrant children. Her methods were intended to allow students to develop skills organically, without overbearing direction. Spolin's techniques were expanded in the 1950s

by her son, Paul Sills, who founded a theatre group that would eventually evolve into Chicago's legendary Second City. At about the same time, Englishman Keith Johnstone was developing Theatersports, a fast-paced, competitive improv form that continues to be performed by troupes all over the world.

Whether or not Neutrino's improv movies will enjoy the same longevity as their live counterparts remains to be seen. For the show's founding eight-member team, though, accolades for their innovative blending of cinema and stage keep coming. Back in March, Neutrino performed at HBO's U.S. Comedy Arts Festival, and the Chicago Improv Festival recently named them Ensemble of the Year. Neutrino also performs regularly at the People's Improv Theater in Manhattan, a recently opened venue owned by former *Saturday Night Live* writer Ali Farahnakian.

The particulars of Neutrino's format are, as Braunohler puts it, "constantly evolving." This is an exciting prospect to the young performer who sees improv movies as a medium with much unexplored territory. As for the old apples-to-oranges debate over cinema versus stage, Braunohler has his own analogy. "It's like writing a sonnet as opposed to free verse. There are all these limitations in place. But if you can use them correctly, I think it's a really beautiful thing."

Christopher Zara is a Seattle-based freelance writer and filmmaker. His latest film, Skippy Lightfoot's Perfect Day, is set to go into production in early 2005. He is also a regular contributor to Seattle Magazine and MovieMaker Magazine.