Teaching Directing Actors through Screenwriting

and vice versa

1 Background

Each year at the Metfilm School Berlin, the BA students are assigned a complex project: to collaboratively write and direct a feature film of at least 60 min length. This project takes over a total period of five months and includes three different modules: Screenwriting, Working with Actors and Directing (Level 7). The students may decide to either work on a single narrative or an episodic film. The process is done under a specific time pressure and within given budget restrictions, but is a chance for a whole class to realize a substantial project, much longer than the short film each one of the students can realize on their own.

Often the project suffers from too fast writing done under strict conditions and with a specific result in mind. Students may do their best to accommodate the needs of their assignment, but often end with an unsatisfying end product. One of the major difficulties of the project is that the students have to juggle three different abilities at the same time: writing, working with actors and directing. Moving from one module to the other my primary task as a tutor is to help students not forget that all these new tools they are acquiring are interconnected and simply different sides of the same process.

2 Intervention

A script, being nothing else than a map, guides all involved departments during the process of interpretation. The actors, having the duty and privilege to bring the written characters' behavior to life, have to engage in an in-depth analysis of the script and bring a vast amount of sub-textual information to the surface. (Weston)

During this year's BA Screenwriting Module (Level 6), and while rewriting a second version of a script intended for the collaborative feature film, I asked the writer/directors to once again reconsider the question they have been asking themselves all along: "Who are we writing for?". Fo rmy intervention, I asked the group of four students to come together in an online writer's room and use each other as actors, to analyze, interpret and re-write parts of their scripts. In the end of the process I encouraged them to reflect on how this intervention has helped their writing and what they think they might do differently next time while directing actors.

3 Literature

Working with actors is, per se, a fragile moment in the process of filmmaking. It demands sensitive communication that relies on professional trust, should encourage creative interpretation and can't be result oriented. (Weston) Directors cannot merely ask actors to create the qualities they want to see in an authentic performance, but should be able to guide them there through active processes. (Travis) Supporting students to analyze their own texts and gain insight of the characters they create may help them to move away from stereotypes, allowing the characters of their scenes to step out of the paper and become real people, creating the necessary space for interpretation for all participating actors. (Weston)

Travis, W Mark, Directing feature films: the creative collaboration between directors, writers, and actors, Rev.ed.of: The director's journey.1997, (Michael Wiese)

Weston, Judith, (1996) Directing Actors, (McNaughton and Gunn)

4 Evaluation

The students had different approaches to the process.

A student, with a very vivid actor's imagination, who had all characters' behavior in her head was used to describe emotions instead of actions while working with actors. This is a much less precise way of communicating inherent characters' qualities. During the intervention she used her actors' feedback to create, in her own words, "more likable, more human" characters, by concentrating on their tactics. She realized, she would need to focus more on her scene's characters and work more on defining their objectives. "The process made me want to add depth and subtext to dialog, which is of huge importance to my characters' behavior. I know this is a stepping stone to a better communication with actors."

A second student, who appeared to be quite clear, structured and very precise, almost sterile in his approach of communicating his characters' behaviors to the actors, after asking questions to them, and instead of explaining what he wanted from them, he received feedback that helped him rewrite his characters into more concrete yet empathic versions of themselves and pursue their objectives in the scene with greater plausibility. After the intervention, the student decided he wouldn't change "the basis of the scene" but would need to revisit all characters' behaviors and tactics. He would even cast to match the interpretations he wanted, if he had to.

A third student decided to let his actors read first and ask them later what they thought about the scene. He would only then make everything concrete by describing how he saw things. Although he was very specific and well organized, the process helped him realize that the changes of the characters' tactics in the scene were clear to him, but not to the actors. When asked after the intervention, he had decided he needed to change that, by breaking up the scene into smaller segments, giving it a clear rhythm. He admitted, he realized that he can't put all his ideas about nuances of his characters' behavior on the page and needs to leave space for actors to interpret them. In his own words he should "not bombard actors with too much information on the page." He understood that the idea of a script is one thing but the realization, the work with actors, completes the process of writing.

A last directing student mixed all previous approaches, discussing with her actors on a more intellectual level about the characters and their objectives in the scene, in order to come to the understanding, that the characters of her scene needed stronger motivations for their objectives. When asked, she said she had realized that she needed to be much more specific and that working with actors helped her do eactly that. The student decided she "needed to work more on the scene's dialog, to incorporate the actors' feedback about their objectives into the spoken word." The insight she gained, would help her communicate with professional actors."

5 Conclusion

The process of encouraging students to revisit their texts with other students taking the roles of actors, helped writer/directors to reevaluate their work and learn individually what they needed to, in order to progress with their screenwriting abilities and be better prepared when they would soon be working with actors. They learned to observe their characters behavior, listen to actors, make good use of their feedback, be more specific and leave the necessary space for interpretation.

A step away from the detrimental practice of judging and closer to engaging with one's own ideas. (Weston)

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