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# Improv movie first of its kind

At least, as far as its creator Daniel Wilson, can tell

BY JENNIE PUNTER  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Improvisation is an approach to performance that is a lot more about a developed skill and planning ahead than it may seem to the audience. We're used to seeing comedians and musicians winging it, so to speak, live on stage in a skit or extended solo.

But improv by actors in a feature-length film has always been a riskier venture — or at least it seemed that way until recent developments in cost-cutting video technology, not to mention the success of *The Blair Witch Project*. Throw some actors in the woods with a video camera, a few scrawled notes stapled to logs and presto, you've got a box-office bonanza.

Okay, so *Blair Witch* wasn't quite like that, not quite so haphazard. But the film has opened some doors in terms of what audiences — and perhaps the industry at large — will accept on the big screen.

"(*Blair Witch*) showed that the camera can be crazy, that the sound doesn't have to be spectacular," says Daniel Wilson, the director of *Steve*, which opens tonight and runs until Sunday at the Bloor Cinema. (Tonight's gala premiere is \$30, which includes drinks and munchies at the post-gala party; the Saturday and Sunday screenings are at 4 p.m. and are \$8. For more information check out the Web site [www.steve-the-movie.com](http://www.steve-the-movie.com))

*Steve* is Toronto-made, low-budget (\$500 for a four-day shoot in the director's apartment) film which is being billed as the world's first single-take, unrehearsed and completely improvised feature film. Wilson did some digging to be certain of this claim.

"Something like this would have been hard to do, until the last three or four years, without video," he says. "I did quite a bit of checking, and from what I can tell, a completely improvised film done in a single take and completely unrehearsed is absolutely unheard of."

"My main goal was to put something on camera like no-one had seen before," Wilson continues. "And it was only after we made the film, when I researched the work of directors like Mike Leigh (*Secrets And Lies*) that I realized those guys prepared for months, that the improvisation on screen involved a lot more preparation and improvisation in rehearsal than I thought was the case."



**TAKE ONE:** *Steve* was shot without a script over four days. Director Daniel Wilson chose an unedited 2 hour clip as the final cut.

Far from not caring about the written word, Wilson wrote a screenplay for and shot a self-financed film in 1994 called *1994*. "That film has an eight-minute tracking shot," he says. "To a certain extent it was about all the things I could do with the camera. But what I realized, in the course of that process, is that if you want to make sure you're making a good film you have to know how to direct actors."

'I had 10 incredible hours, and thought about leaving it in that form,' Wilson says

So after paying off *1994* by working as a computer consultant in San Francisco for a few years and writing and optioning screenplays, Wilson returned to Toronto earlier this year and began an acting workshop. In the course of the workshop, Wilson announced a project he wanted to do for an entirely improvised film and four participants, all female, expressed interest.

Each actor created her character on her own, and Wilson came up with the idea for the beginning of the film: the unseen character of Steve. Other than that, there was no planning of situations.

In *Steve*, the film, four women arrive at an apartment that all of them expect they will be sharing with a guy named Steve. All four women have paid first and last month's rent to Steve and sooner or later realize they've been had. For various reasons, Roberta (Arlea Elizabeth Ashcroft), Carol (Laura Bil), Cynna (Pasha McKenley) and Roxanne (Alison Minors) stay put for a few days and get acquainted, and conflicts, revelations and empathizing arise.

The result is a seductive cinematic experience, because although what is presented on the screen seems raw, slow and sometimes explosive, it resonates with a reality as awkward and unscripted as, well, real life. Watching the video version (the film has been blown up to 35mm film for its theatrical release), I felt like a metaphorical fly on the wall, bored for a stretch and then suddenly drawn in by unexpected drama or a fascinating turn in the conversation.

"I don't like the kind of thing that blurs the line between fiction and reality," Wilson says. "While (*Steve*) might seem like documentary to viewers, it's important to understand that what these actors are doing is stuff they made up. They are not playing themselves. They are experimenting with acting as an art form."

"My creative contribution was in the editing. Being a writer, who would normally look for climaxes and character development, I knew I wasn't going to get those things presented in a stereotypical way."

"I cut 27 hours into 100 minutes. At one point I had 10 incredible hours, and thought about leaving it in that form, but in the end decided to go for a conventional movie length."

What Wilson and his cast offer in *Steve* somewhat anticipates reports of director Mike Figgis' improvisational comedy, *Time Code 2000*, slated for release next year. Figgis (*Leaving Las Vegas*) recently wrapped a film project shot on hand-held video cameras, with the actors (Holly Hunter, Stellan Skarsgard, Salma Hayek and others) improvising the film twice on each day of shooting, guided only by time cues to co-ordinate their actions.

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