

Shoot it and run with it means so much more

Neutrino Project screens instant flicks to waiting audience

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Pulling back from a dumpster behind the Midas Muffler at King and Peter Streets, Jan Caruana, Tabettha Wells and Rob Baker form a brief huddle. The clock's ticking. Important decisions need to be made.

"Who should vomit?" Caruana asks, straight-faced.

"I should. I'm the tough guy," Baker volunteers, looking at least half the part, in a white tank-top undershirt. And so he does — a heaving, howling, whole-hearted spew, judiciously framed just outside the view of the mini DV camera that's capturing the whole thing.

Baker's not really hurling, of course, though the volume and verisimilitude is more than convincing. Yet the occasion is stressful enough to be vomit-inducing: it's called the Neutrino Video Project Toronto, an on-the-fly, off-the-cuff show that goes on-screen, in front of a live audience, while the performers are taping it.

It works like this: three or four teams hit the street at the same time, with a cameraman and a runner. The performers launch into an improvised skit, tape two minutes and pass their first tape off to the runner, who sprints it back to the theatre in a best effort to avoid that most dreaded of stumbles: dead air.

"It's pretty nerve-wracking," says Jennifer White, who served as the booth director — the traffic cop, essentially, who waits for another tape before the one that's spinning runs out. "We'll have a comedian to fill in if something happens, but that's not ideal."

Some way, somehow, the distinct storylines are merged into a full-cast resolution (think of any TV drama) conceived, shot and on-screen in three minutes or less. "Or that's the idea, anyway," said Wells, laughing.

Tonight unfolds the main event: Neutrino's Toronto coming-out party at the Drake Hotel Underground. They've done one preview, countless rehearsals, and honed their craft. Perfection awaits. Right?

"Audiences love to see accidents," says David Ivkovic, one of Neutrino's producers. "Yeah, we're not perfect. But that's part of the fun."



RICHARD LAUTEWS/TORONTO STAR

Behind the lenses, among other things, of The Neutrino Video Project Toronto are, from left, producer Carmine Lucarelli, executive producer Jen Radomsky and producer David Ivkovic.

Perfection, in fact, might be a little dull. "You set up the rules so people know when they're breaking them," says Carmina Lucarelli, another producer. "The runner might have to run a little faster now and then, but that's part of the fun."

Which, after all, is the point. Loose, and spontaneous, Neutrino relies on organic fast-thinking. On the street, the cast drags waiters, bus drivers and random passers-by into their scenes. The audience offers objections, suggestions and sometimes an extra body that, minutes later, is projected back on-screen, fused somehow with the evolving storyline.

As White cues a tape and hopes for another at the final rehearsal, a runner bursts in, panting. "Pans front and back on the out," he says, dropping a tape before dashing out again. "That way, I know how it ends, so I can put the next one in," she says.

White's challenge — daunting as it is — wasn't the only one to reconcile, Lucarelli said. "At the beginning, it was 'I can't do this. It's just not enough time,'" he said. "And then you realize that if you just commit to an idea, it'll work out fine. It strips away a lot of that stuff we deal with on stage — second guessing ourselves, all of that sort of thing — 'is this working? Is this not working?'"

For the performers, all seasoned improv vets, it's also one step further into the chaos that characterizes the improv genre. "When you're not chained to the

stage, or the audience, you focus on one thing: what you're doing," said Jennifer Radomsky, a member of the Bad Dog improv theatre and the leader of the Neutrino troupe. Radomsky glommed onto the Neutrino phenomenon after the original New York-based troupe came here for the Toronto Improv Festival in 2003. She managed to score the Toronto licence for Neutrino, which has spawned troupes in Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle.

Lucarelli and Ivkovic were recruited to help spearhead it; together with Radomsky, they've assembled a gang of the city's top improv talent.

"Mostly, it's been people emailing Jen saying 'I love it, I want to play in it,'" said Lucarelli. "And we've been 'Ouch, we love you, too, but...' We're trying to get everybody in, somehow."

Skirting the edge of disaster — and on tape, no less, where falling flat on your improv face is committed to digital evidence — seems to have just as much appeal for the performers as it does the spectators.

As Neutrino Toronto evolves, the goals will become more lofty — literally. "Dave's goal is to someday get a tape run back from the CN Tower," says Radomsky, laughing.

"The audience would just be sitting there thinking, 'How the hell did he get up the CN Tower?'" Ivkovic says.

Maybe someone should tell White. Or maybe not.