

# Improv for Indie Filmmakers

Ivan Malekin

## Working Efficiently & Effectively

### *Get to Set Quickly*

We all know the maxim “time is money” and this maxim seems especially relevant to filmmaking. More time in development, more time in pre-production, more time on set usually means more money – either money you are spending by paying cast and crew for more days, hiring equipment, spending on locations, or money and time you are wasting by working on that script day by day, week by week, month by month. Time that you could be spending elsewhere.

Filmmaking is an interesting artform. Is there any other artform that requires such high initial costs, such high-end equipment, such specialised and various personnel to the point where budgets commonly top \$1 million and crews on film can reach into the hundreds, only to then sell to a consumer at the end of the chain for a few dollars on a streaming platform? If it sells to the consumer at all that is, and doesn't merely come free with their SVOD subscription.

Or consider indie filmmakers like you and me. Our films can still cost many thousands of dollars to make, but one of the most popular platforms to release a film, Amazon Prime, deems our work worth only 1 penny per hour streamed as of writing this.

The economics of filmmaking are rigged against you. The amount of independent filmmakers who make a living solely on their films is low. But it can be done. Targeting a niche audience is one method and this approach, combined with regular and consistent output, gives you a chance to make money.

Joe Swanberg built his career by making micro-budget improvised film after micro-budget improvised film. In fact, he released six films in 2011 alone. Each film helped him make the next film, and eventually his prolific output got him noticed. His philosophy was simple:

*“If everyone is going to ignore you, then you have to start producing film after film and eventually someone is going to notice what you are doing, even if the films are total crap.”<sup>1</sup>*

But to make this model work you need to keep creating content and you need to get to set quickly. We don't have time for the traditional one film every two or three years and to spend a year or more in development honing and refining a script over and over.

A quick example: we were in Berlin in 2019 for a screening of our film *In Corpore* with cast and crew. We had plans to film an episode of *Life Improvised* – our micro-short series of improvised films dealing with the small moments that make up life and relationships – while in Berlin but those plans fell through with just a few days left on our trip. Rather than give up, we drafted a new outline for a micro-short, gathered a small cast and crew, found a location, recruited extras by advertising on social media, and filmed *Cry Me a River*, all in only three days from concept to completion.



*Kelsey Gillis in Cry Me a River.*

So use improvisation to get onto set as quickly as you can. Come up with an idea. Write an outline. Sure, do a few drafts. Workshop the characters and story further with your actors in rehearsal. Good actors are fascinated with exploring human behaviour and they have spent years training to trust their instincts. Take advantage of this and allow actors the freedom to contribute. Just like you may trust your DOP or your editor or your music composer to

---

<sup>1</sup> A great summary of Joe Swanberg's career, philosophy, plus interviews can be found at: <https://indiefilmhustle.com/joe-swanberg/>. Also includes his famous keynote speech from SXSW 2016. Well worth watching

add their expertise and personal experience to your creative vision, trust your cast to work from your outline, expand your ideas, and make the characters come alive.

The point is, we don't need scripts to make good films. So don't get stuck in development. Don't fret trying to write dialogue that is realistic – let the actors contribute the dialogue on set. So many films over the years have shown you can begin production without a script. Take the multi-million dollar *Iron Man*; the script wasn't ready so the actors improvised their way through the film<sup>2</sup> and *Iron Man* is universally acclaimed as the best film in the *Iron Man* series and one of the best MCU films.

Of course, Hollywood doesn't advocate this approach and praises the script as sacred. And despite what it may seem like, we have nothing against script writers. Our background is actually as writers and we worked with scripts for ten years as filmmakers before turning to improvisation. But example after example has demonstrated a script isn't a vital component to make a good film. So skip the script. Get to set and film.

### **Case Study : Seven Films in a Year**

Let's take a closer look at Joe Swanberg as the man takes prolific to another level and uses the speed of improvisation to full effect. We said he released six films in 2011 alone – well, these were all filmed in 2010. In fact, he actually finished seven features in 2010. The films were *Uncle Kent*, *Caitlin Plays Herself*, *The Zone*, *Art History*, *Silver Bullets*, *Privacy Setting* and *Autoerotic* (co-directed with horror filmmaker Adam Wingard). But how?

It was from Wingard that Swanberg learned that lightning quick, improvisational, super cheap filmmaking was a great way to potentially make money making movies. During 2010, he was spending less than a week making each feature and then turning around and selling them to New York based indie distributor IFC. He admits that none of these films alone made much money, but cumulatively, they kept him fed, clothed, and brought him the funds and time to make his next film.

Swanberg also credits improvisation to his proficiency:

---

<sup>2</sup> Woerner, Meredith. *Jeff Bridges Admits Iron Man Movie Had No Script*. Gizmodo (February 12th, 2009) — <https://io9.gizmodo.com/jeff-bridges-admits-iron-man-movie-had-no-script-5417310>

*“Historically, I haven’t written traditional scripts. I think for most writer-directors, a lot of the lag time between films is related to having to write your next screenplay. But my process is mainly a collaboration with actors, and because I work again and again with people I like, as soon as we finish one project, it typically doesn’t take us very long to launch production of the next one. And because I edit as I shoot, post-production doesn’t consume too much of my time, either.”<sup>3</sup>*

Swanberg details this prolific period of his career and expands on his filmmaking philosophies during a fantastic keynote speech at the 2016 SXSW Film Festival. It is well worth tracking down on Google. I guarantee you will come away feeling inspired and want to go out and film immediately too.

### **Case Study : From Concept to Wrap in Four Months**

Though not as impressive as seven films in a year (we don’t have that much energy!), we did make our feature *Machination* ultra quickly. During the COVID-19 lockdown, we were itching to film, and had the initial idea for a story about a woman who slowly breaks down during the pandemic, overwhelmed by fear, media saturation, and her own spiralling mental health.

We spent a few days at the end of April 2020 writing the first draft outline. The month of May was spent redrafting and refining the outline. In June we approached cast, researched the equipment we would need as well as the VFX we wanted. We worked to fill gaps in knowledge for the story as well as the production, such as the specific mental health issues Maria was suffering from or how we could pull off a particular shot. This period was a mix of development and pre-pre production. One month of official pre-production and rehearsal began from July 13th. Finally, in August, we went into a 10-day production period split into two halves – August 12th to 16th and August 22nd to 26th.

This was all done between Sarah working a full-time job and myself working on other projects, including still shooting our *Cats of Malta* documentary and planning short film *Crossing Paths*, which we filmed at the end of June.

So until production, and perhaps the last couple of weeks of pre-production, we never dropped everything to simply focus on *Machination*, and Sarah didn’t stop working her day job until the first shooting day.

---

<sup>3</sup> Quote from Joe Swanberg. *The Working Class Moviemaker: Joe Swanberg’s 10 Tips on Earning a Living Making Microbudget Films*. MovieMaker (October 1st, 2013) — <https://www.moviemaker.com/joe-swanberg-10-tips-earning-living-making-microbudget-not-microbudget-films/>

That makes *Machination* a feature film done from first draft to wrap in four months, mostly part-time, during an uncertain time in the world where many productions shut down completely. The budget was only €6000. And we still paid everyone.

Make micro-budget films that quickly several times a year, or take Joe Swanberg's approach to film even faster, and you would soon build up your body of work. And it is your cumulative body of work that has a much greater chance of being a game changer for you rather than any single project. Consistency drives quality. Rather than pinning all your hopes on a single film like many filmmakers do, you need to keep making films over and over again to give yourself the best chance of making a living from this.

And improvisation is a much faster method of narrative filmmaking than any conventional approach.



*The banner for Machination.*