

# **Effective Directing Methods for Amateur Actors**

A Case Study of the Short Film “In the Lonely City”

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<p>There is ample literature regarding the director-actor relationship for film, but very little has been written about directing amateur actors, where the challenges you face as a director can be very different from directing professionals. This thesis is based on a case study from the director’s point of view on directing amateur actors in the short film <i>In the Lonely City</i>, and revolves around issues faced during casting, rehearsing and shooting the film. The director-actor relationship is based on communication, but it is also technical in its nature, with its own methodology, tools and workflows, and this thesis explores the question of whether the same directing methods are applicable to amateur and professional actors alike. It indicates that although one’s approach shouldn’t be entirely different, there are certain key areas that a director must focus on with amateurs in order to fulfil his or her vision, such as simplicity, flexibility and creativity in direction, casting using the right criteria and placing proper emphasis on rehearsing. The thesis is exploratory in its nature and strives to further the discussion in the field of directing actors.</p>	
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<p>Sammandrag:</p> <p>Det finns gott om litteratur angående förhållandet mellan regissören och skådespelaren i en filminspelning, men väldigt lite har skrivits om regiarbetet med amatörskådespelare, där utmaningarna man som regissör råkar ut för i jämförelse med proffsskådespelare kan vara väldigt annorlunda. Texten är baserad på en fallstudie från regissörens synvinkel av regiarbetet med amatörskådespelare i kortfilmen <i>I ensamhetens stad</i>, och kretsar kring utmaningar och lösningar som uppkom under castingen, repetitionerna och filminspelningen. Regissörens och skådespelarens förhållande baserar sig på kommunikation, men är även tekniskt belagd, med sin egen metodologi, sina egna verktyg och förhållandesätt. Texten utforskar frågan huruvida samma regimetoder går att applicera på både amatör- och proffsskådespelare. Den påvisar att regimetoderna inte nödvändigtvis behöver vara fullständigt annorlunda, utan att man snarare behöver lägga mera tonvikt på vissa områden för att nå sin ursprungliga vision, så som simplistisk, flexibel och kreativ regi, identifieringen av de rätta egenskaperna i castingen och utförliga repetitioner. Texten är utforskande till sin natur och strävar efter att föra diskussionen vidare angående regiarbetet med skådespelare.</p>	
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<p>Tiivistelmä:</p> <p>Ohjaajan ja näyttelijän välisestä suhteesta elokuvaa tuottaessa löytyy paljon kirjallisuutta, mutta hyvin vähän on tullut kirjoitettua ohjaustyöstä amatöörinäyttelijöiden kanssa, jolloin ohjauksen haasteet saattavat olla aivan erimuotoiset. Teksti perustuu tapaustutkimukseen amatöörinäyttelijöiden kanssa työskentelystä ohjaajan näkökulmasta lyhytelokuvassa <i>Yksinäisyyden kaupungissa</i>, ja kertoo casting-vaiheen, harjoitusten ja kuvausten aikana eteen tulleista vaikeuksista ja ratkaisuksista. Ohjaajan ja näyttelijän suhde perustuu kommunikaatioon, mutta on myös omalla metodologiallaan, työkaluillaan ja menettelytavoillaan luonteeltaan tekninen. Opinnäyte etsii vastausta kysymyksiin ohjausmenetelmien eroavaisuuksista amatööri- ja ammattilaisnäyttelijöiden välillä. Se näyttää, että vaikka menetelmät eivät välttämättä ole toisistaan erilaisia, amatöörinäyttelijöitä ohjatessa kannattaa keskittyä simplistiseen, joustavaan ja luovaan ohjaamistyyliin, sekä että casting-sessio yhdessä perusteellisten harjoitusten kanssa ovat tärkeämmässä roolissa kuin muulloin. Teksti on luonteeltaan tutkiva ja aihetta avartava, ja yrittää viedä keskustelua näyttelijöiden ohjaustyöstä eteenpäin.</p>	
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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

The various creative fields bear no difference when it comes to the importance of technique. In order for a painter to bring his vision to life, his first task will be mastering the brush. A sculptor needs to know of the qualities of different metals and minerals and how to use different tools and styles, whereas a musician must know his theory and learn his instrument. The same idea applies to filmmaking as well. At a film school or outside of it, students of filmmaking learn about audio-visual storytelling and its components, from cinematography and sound design to editing and lighting, all the way down to the film's basic component, the script. The technical knowledge required for a successful film is not to be neglected, and yet very little has been said about perhaps its most crucial component: directing actors.

A technical field is filled with structure: it has certain tools for certain problems, certain methods and workflows, and the knowledge and experience required to master them. The challenges concerning directing actors are often considered too abstract or emotional versus the rationality and straightforwardness of other technical fields, and this may well be the reason for why it is so difficult to approach. And yet it is very technical indeed: there is no escaping the fact that while some methods may be ineffective, counterproductive or just plain confusing, some others work a whole lot better, or that although every method cannot work on every actor, *some* methods do work on *many* actors. Perhaps the reason why directing actors is such a difficult subject to grasp is that for an average moviegoer, it is an art that is left invisible: everyone can recognise a qualitatively poor acting performance, but there are very few who know what to look for when the director is to blame.

The person primarily responsible for a performance is naturally the actor himself, but there is much to be said about the director's role as well. While an actor must be concerned with the beat and the screenwriter with the story, the director's responsibility acting-wise is to the scene. He must make sure the actors deliver their performance

according to the characteristics of the scene and ensure that it serves the scene's purpose. A director's primary responsibility is therefore to analyse *what the scene is about*, and act as a bridge between the screenwriter's intentions and the actor's actions. (Mamet 1992 p. 3)

As I started work with my final examination project, the short fiction film *In the Lonely City*, I realised that whatever little has been written about directing actors almost exclusively concerns the relationship between a director and an actor who has had professional training. It seemed as if there existed a massive, gaping hole in film and directing theory: directing amateur actors. There are a multitude of reasons why a director might prefer to work with amateur actors. For understandable reasons this should be considered a more challenging task, and thus perhaps something directors would be interested in learning about.

Stories are told of directors so skilled they'd be able to train a mute to deliver compelling dialogue, or for that matter, making amateurs appear professional. But there is no going around the fact that the secret to being a good director of amateur actors can't simply be a matter of being a good director in general. Just as there are methods and tools for professional actors and actors in general, so there must also be certain approaches that a director must consider when working with amateurs.

The purpose of this text is to examine the relationship between a film director and amateur actors. It is by no accounts a definitive text, but strives to diversify the discourse in the field of directing actors. Is directing amateurs any different from directing professionals? Do amateurs need to be directed from a different angle? Although the thesis may by no means more than scratch the surface of an utterly complex dilemma, hopes are that it may offer some ideas on the different challenges one will face when directing amateur actors. To specify, the thesis' central question is thus: How and why may a film director alter his or her approach when directing amateurs compared to professionals?

## 1.2 Methods and Material

The thesis will be a case study of challenges faced and experiences gained in my own short fiction film *In the Lonely City*, filmed in August 2014 and fully completed in January 2015. Naturally, there are certain trade-offs and hazards when drawing broad conclusions from research that according to the very nature of a case study is individual, intensive, subjective and specific. These qualities of a case study must be considered when examining the thesis, but since the nature of the thesis is exploratory rather than confirmatory, i.e. it aims to raise new ideas and thoughts in a field where very little has been said, basing it upon a case study may well be to its advantage when compared to other, quantitative methodologies. (Gerring 2004 p. 349-350)

There will be no attempt of analysing the results of the director-actor communication, i.e. the performances and the film itself, but rather the process, and how different approaches of communication panned out on set and during rehearsals. The thesis will also limit its approach in that it will use my own personal views and findings during filming as its material. Discussing with the actors how different methods worked may be valuable and interesting, but it is not relevant to the subject at hand. The director's task is to use the actors to bring *his* vision to life, and there is no greater authority in the world than himself to analyse whether the approaches he used worked for his vision or not.

The key literary source of the thesis will be the American director and actor Judith Weston, whose books *Directing Actors* and *The Film Director's Intuition* arguably are the most comprehensive works in the field. John Badham and Craig Moddero's book *I'll be in my trailer* is similarly important but not as comprehensive, whereas Sidney Lumet's *Making Movies* and David Mamet's *On Making Film* discuss directing more generally, and will be used less frequently. To provide additional insight I have conducted an interview with the Finnish actor-director Tapio Laasonen, who aside from having decades of experience in directing amateur actors in Ekenäs also played a part in my film, as the protagonist's brother *Tage*.

The screenplay, also written by myself, is centred on the fictional character *Sture*, an aging bachelor who lives in the dying town of Ekenäs where he takes care of his ill mother and works for the municipality tending parks. While taking down a swing a girl has set up in a park, Sture gets a call that his mother has passed away. He rushes to the hospital and finds out his brother hasn't been watching her as they agreed, after which Sture leaves to put candles by his father's grave. After a bizarre turn of events involving a bunny and a twisted ankle, Sture's brother arrives at the scene. They confront each other about their mother, life decisions and finally share memories of a lost childhood. In the end, they leave as brothers again and Sture comes to realise that the fate of his hometown is in the hands of him and its other inhabitants.

## **1.3 Terminology**

### **1.3.1 The Director-Actor Relationship**

Since this thesis will be attempting to expand the knowledge available concerning the director-actor relationship, it is important to clarify what purpose this relationship essentially serves. The short answer would be that what a director is looking for is a *good* performance from the actor, or perhaps more specifically a performance that is *right*. According to the director Sydney Pollack, he must be able to “recognize reality in behaviour”, or in other words “know the difference between truth and fiction” (Weston 2003 p. 10). A director's sole responsibility acting-wise is therefore to make sure that whatever the actors do on screen, it is authentic to the story. This is what the audience wants to feel when they're watching a film: that it is real, and that whatever people do or however they do it comes across realistically. From the actor's point of view, it is no different. Judith Weston quotes Angelina Jolie, Julianne Moore, Robert Duvall and other actors stating that they all base their characters on themselves, not out of want but out of necessity – it is the only way their characters will feel real (Weston 2003 p. 45).

### **1.3.2 Amateurs and Professionals**

The thesis makes a clear distinction between amateur and professional actors, and although one can never cut a clear line between the two, there are some characteristics

for actors that place them in either camp. For the purposes of this thesis, I refer to an actor as amateur when he or she hasn't studied acting at a drama school and/or doesn't work as an actor as his or her main profession. Instead, acting is seen as a hobby and usually limits itself to local theatre plays. This definition is true to the actors I refer to in the text and is also similar to general definitions of professionals versus amateurs.

### **1.3.3 Process-oriented versus Result-oriented Direction**

A major divide when defining what type of direction an actor is receiving is that of process-oriented versus result-oriented direction. Film director John Frankenheimer says the following (Badham & Moddero 2006 p. 155):

The terrible trap that so many directors fall into, is that they continually talk to actors in result terms. Like I want it faster or I want it louder. I want it this. Sometimes there are moments when probably you're going to have to say that, but most of the time if you want to help an actor, that's not what you want to say. You don't want to say, 'Better.' You want to be able to tell the actor a reason why he or she has to be quicker in this scene, why there has to be more urgency.

This, Judith Weston explains, means the actor will start "indicating": instead of experiencing his inner life, i.e. he starts trying to show it to the audience and ignores what he feels himself (Weston 1996 p. 21). It is the result of result-oriented direction – for someone unacquainted with directing it is something that seems quite natural: if a director thinks a scene is too slow, one would imagine the right thing to do is ask the actors to do the scene faster. But since the purpose of the director-actor relationship is to emulate reality and not fake it, with result-oriented direction you will not be receiving any performances that are anything close to a natural, truthful, *authentic* performance. With process-oriented direction, you instead focus on assuring that the actor knows *why* he is doing things instead of *how*. In the case of wanting the scene to go faster, you could be telling the actor that he is in a hurry. He then has playable direction and he understands why his character has to be talking so fast. (Badham & Moddero 2006 p. 120-121)

## **1.4 Structure**

The thesis will follow the production process chronologically, focusing on the phases where the director-actor relationship comes into play, starting from the casting process,

followed by the rehearsals and finally the shoot itself. However, every chapter will have a subject that is not tied to the production itself, but to the central question of the thesis. Experience gained during the production of *In the Lonely City* will be supported – or contradicted – by relevant theory.

## **2 CASTING**

Ekenäs is a town with a Swedish-speaking majority, and with its own, distinct local dialect, similar to the dialect spoken in the entire surrounding region of Västnyland. There are very few professional actors who know the dialect, and although actors are very adaptable, there were doubts if a professional actor would be able to fully internalise the quirks of the local dialect, especially considering the temporal and fiscal restraints that we had.

This left us with the local talent pool. Since I originate from the region myself, I knew some actors from beforehand and was aware of the vibrancy of the local amateur theatre field. Together with the producer we were in touch with local actors, posted casting calls on relevant Facebook groups and also contacted the organisation responsible for the annual, local summer play, held at the Raseborg castle ruins outside of Ekenäs. Despite these efforts, the final tally of actors who showed up to the casting session was very little, less than ten in total. Nevertheless, there were some tough decisions to make, and although I knew I would probably not be happy with all choices due to the low amount of potential actors, I had to make the best out of the situation and push forward.

### **2.1 Choosing the One**

According to the director Elia Kazan, eighty percent of the challenge in directing actors is finding the right actor for the role (Badham & Modderno 2006 p. 44). You need to find the best possible match, because as he puts it, “you can’t get your dog to sing Happy Birthday or your cat to do the New York Times Puzzle.” Once you settle on your choice there is no going back. There is much within filmmaking that can be redone or reworked, but your casting decision is final and should be taken very seriously.

The qualities you are looking for at the casting session can be broken down into two separate entities: external and internal qualities. When it comes to an actor's external qualities, a director often has a pre-conceived notion for what the actor for a certain role should look like. Some of these observations are obvious and relevant, whereas some are superficial and often based on stereotypes. The antagonist doesn't necessarily need to look like a "bad guy", but if a character is supposed to be old because the script demands it, there's no escaping it and the actor's age must be considered. (Weston 1996 p. 236-237) When working with Swedish-speaking actors in Finland, the pool of professional actors you have access to is relatively limited. If you're looking for an actor who looks a certain way, the external qualities you need can easily turn you towards amateurs or inexperienced actors. A script may unavoidably call for a morbidly obese, balding actress with a wooden leg, but you'd be pushing your luck trying to find one. Amateur actors can therefore be a necessity in many cases, as there are many more people interested in acting than there are professionals.

The demands for an actor's internal qualities are more elusive and varied. At a casting session, you're not looking for someone who "nails it" on his first reading. Building a character is a process, and you are rather searching for a person who has a feel of where the building blocks should go. You need to find someone with whom you can build a relationship of mutual trust and respect, someone who listens to you and wants to develop the character together with you (Weston 1996 p. 237-238). There is nothing that says you won't be able to find this connection with an amateur, although you probably wouldn't be finding it as often as with professionals.

## **2.2 Casting Amateurs versus Professionals**

When choosing to work with amateur actors the importance of good casting is even more apparent. With professionals comes a certain amount of flexibility or range – this is why big Hollywood stars rarely, if ever, attend casting sessions for their roles: a director can expect that an actor of a certain magnitude is able to deliver. But what especially differentiates amateurs from professionals is their unevenness. They have no "stamp of approval". You must be able to make a personal judgement of whether the actor can deliver, and there are many more aspects you need to consider.

For instance, how motivated is the actor to develop his character? Does he “understand” acting – what does acting mean for him personally? What kind of experience does he have with acting for film? Will he be able to adapt to its characteristics, such as blocking, ADR or smoking his cigarette at the same time in every shot? How committed will he be to the project? Is he okay with cutting his hair, or smoking, or physical performances? How fit is he? If you’re casting someone who must pretend to be dead on an obituary table, for how long can he hold his lungs? Can he take the long days, the overtime? Since he’s an amateur, will he be able to take enough time off work or studies in order to focus on the acting?

When casting for *In the Lonely City*, one of the roles called for a 10-14 year-old girl. What impressed me with the girl who finally got the part was that I felt like she understood her character despite her age. In the script, the girl has placed a swing in a remote park area and has to confront municipal workers intending to take the swing down. The actor, when asked why her character had placed the swing there, intuitively replied that her character perhaps had issues at home, and that the swing was the only place she could be alone. She didn’t have to be asked to relate to her character, but did so even before she was casted, which ultimately had a positive effect on my decision on casting her.

### **2.3 The Actor’s Background**

Another reason why I chose amateur actors was that of recognition: I wanted to find characters who fit their roles not just by their ability to act but also by their ability to adapt to their characters through their own life experiences, and their personal experience of life in Ekenäs. This approach has been used by other directors before, an example being the use of real-life thieves and police officers in the 1981 film *Thief*, directed by Michael Mann (Badham & Moddero 2006 p. 70). According to Judith Weston, all actors draw their characters from their personal experiences. She means that it is impossible for a human being to experience life from any other perspective than his own, and that following this intuition will give “original, specific and emotionally truthful” performances. (Weston 1996 p. 142)

## **2.4 Final Decisions**

In total there were five roles to be casted for the film, of which three were found through casting. No suitable candidate was found for the small role of a male nurse in a hospital scene. This role was given to a professional actor that I knew, whereas the actor for the role of the protagonist's co-worker was found through a local summer play that I attended.

The most challenging decision that had to be made was for the protagonist's role. There were two options, which I characterised as choosing between a marble slab and a granite draft. The marble actor had such interesting features and seemed to fit the role so well, with eyes that spoke of incredible sadness and depth, and a personal background very similar to that of the protagonist. And yet he was just a slab: his acting was theatrical and felt result-oriented, he didn't remember his lines and he didn't seem to connect with the inner feelings of his character. He would have to be worked on from scratch.

The other actor delivered considerably better, but something was off with him. He just didn't seem right for the role. He felt like a safe bet that I'd end up regretting, and after a week of consideration I ended up choosing the other actor. It seemed like more of a challenge, and a way to set the bar high from the get-go. However, it was a considerable risk, as I would have to completely reinvent acting for him. It was the first time I was to rely on an amateur actor, and I was unsure whether I would be able to teach an old dog new tricks.

## **3 REHEARSALS**

Many actors and directors swear by the habit of jumping straight into shooting without doing rehearsals, whereas Weston, Badham & Modderno and Lumet all recommend rehearsing (Weston 1996 235-244) (Badham & Modderno 2006 p. 57-75) (Lumet 1996 p. 61-62). Badham & Modderno (2006 p. 95) write the following:

Just because some brilliant actors feel comfortable not rehearsing does not mean that all actors feel that way. The vast majority of actors are extremely insecure and want, no, they need time to prepare. They need to work with their scene partners. They need time to discover the possibilities of the

scenes. They need to get over the very real anxiety of doing new material. Very, very few people can do that without rehearsal.

Compared with professional actors, the advantages gained from rehearsing with amateur actors are amplified. For an amateur it may be his first time at a film set, and giving him that extra time to work on his own part can be crucial to his or her confidence.

For *In the Lonely City*, we rehearsed a full week before starting shooting, concentrating on different scenes each day. In hindsight, even though the amount we rehearsed relatively speaking was more than in many feature films; more time would have been valuable. The actors in the film all had experience of acting on stage but very few had acted for film, where rehearsals commonly are less extensive. The main actor Leif Wikström had problems remembering his lines. He didn't act much and it was understandable that he'd not be able to know his lines as fluidly as a professional does, but his struggle with the lines continued into shooting and limited the scope of the rehearsals.

What surprised me the most during rehearsals was how willing the actors were to trust me as the director. Gaining trust from professional actors as a student director is always an issue, but it seemed like the amateur actors felt like they were in too deep and constantly needed guidance or support from me. Lumet (1996 p. 64) speaks of this trust as one of the key objectives of rehearsing with the actors: "They have to be able to trust me, that I "feel" them and what they're doing. This mutual trust is the most important element between the actor and me." Weston (2003 p. 104) describes it from another perspective. She means that when actors feel insecure, they don't know where they should be going with their act and therefore tumble into a vicious circle where the director feeds them result-oriented direction and they eat it up and hope it works. Gaining the trust of the cast was therefore vital and something a week of rehearsals certainly helped doing.

### **3.1 Creative Exercises**

An afterthought that occurred was that there was a certain lack of creativity during rehearsals. There was a strong focus on the scenes, with no acting performed other than

what the script called for. Professional actors have had years of creative exercises during their studies and after, but how “connected” are amateurs to their subconscious? Weston (2003 p. 37) describes this as one of the keys of acting. There are several exercises available for actors that help them connect and focus. Although I’ve only understood it afterwards, I’m now of the opinion that rehearsals for amateur actors should be structured very differently: whereas professionals can afford the luxury of concentrating on the scenes, working with amateurs means that you may need to boil it down a little, and focus on the acting itself. There is no literature available to support this claim, however, and it remains a question how the actors would have reacted to such exercises.

### **3.2 Working on the Lines**

A lot of effort was spent in rehearsals trying to make the actors believe in what they were saying. Repetition goes a long way: once an actor truly knows his lines, saying them will become more of a subconscious act. For amateurs it may be of more importance than for professionals, as professionals are more used to believing in their performances. But can you always trust that the lines in the screenplay work the best? Badham & Moddero write that dialogue shouldn’t be considered holy unless it’s Shakespeare, but add that it is rarely in the script you will find the problem, but in the actor’s laziness in trying to work out a believable way of saying something. However, they concede that “if after a sincere effort they can’t make it work it would be dumb to make them say something that sounds terrible.” (Badham & Moddero 2006 p. 21)

During rehearsals and after, several lines of dialogue were changed. It is my belief that a script needs to adapt to the actor just as much as the actor needs to adapt to the script. In the case of *In the Lonely City*, there was also the issue of the local dialect: some lines sounded good on paper, but they didn’t fit the dialect and had to be changed. Additionally, in general there is less flexibility with amateurs. Their characters will inevitably resemble themselves, and in order for you to fit their personality into the script, you may very well be the one who needs to be flexible.

## 4 THE SHOOT

Altogether *In the Lonely City* was shot during the course of a week, starting on a Monday and wrapping up on a Saturday afternoon. The schedule was fairly liberal, with the most challenging issue being four very long scenes to be shot at dusk and into the night at a graveyard. The rehearsals were still fresh in mind as they had taken place the week before.

We worked with a small, slightly shifting crew, with every team member performing tasks outside of their main one. Due to the film being shot in Ekenäs, 100 kilometres west of Helsinki, it was difficult finding crew members who wanted to commit to the project. However, a smaller crew meant that it was easier for the actors to relax and concentrate on their performances. The locations themselves were also isolated from onlookers, with the three main ones being the graveyard, a remote park area and a hospital room. Many shots included complicated dolly runs or lighting set-ups, and so there was a good amount of time to rehearse with the actors while the shots were being built. All in all, conditions were good for the actors. Even the weather was on our side. The entire week was sunny and warm, and even the nights were tropical, which was pleasant considering we shot three nights at the graveyard. It's worth asking what the week would've been like if the conditions hadn't been so ideal. How would the amateur actors have coped under pressure, during rough weather, with harder time constraints?

### 4.1 Stage Acting versus Acting for Film

None of the actors for *In the Lonely City* had any experience with acting for film, apart from Leif Wikström having a short, one-line role in a feature film twenty years ago. Badham & Moddero write succinctly on the differences between stage acting and acting for film, and condense the subject into three pointers: 1) On stage, the audience sees you 100 feet away. For film, the audience is three feet away. 2) The same applies to the viewer's ear. 3) On a stage you won't notice a good listener, but for film you will need to listen more than you speak. (Badham & Moddero 2006 p. 159)

These points were all proven by the main actor. He was so used to acting on stage that my job as a director became more of a demolition job than a construction one. His entire acting persona had to be torn down. When he smoked, it was a grand gesture; when he talked, it was as if he was addressing the entire nation. Fortunately he listened – not just to the other actor, but to me as well. He understood his own situation and knew that he needed to be put in line. I never made it to the point where I was fully satisfied with my directing and his performance, but day by day you could notice his stage persona was being replaced by his film counter like – his acting focused less and less on external factors and more and more on internal ones. Through this, he (hopefully) achieved what Glenn Close (Weston 1996 p. 158) calls “a condition in which one allows oneself to disturb the molecules in the surrounding space” – something Weston means is different for film and on stage: “On stage the actor ‘disturbs the molecules’ up to the last row of the balcony. For film, an actor must disturb the molecules of the camera lens.” (Weston 1996 p. 158)

## **4.2 The Art of Not Acting**

If you ask a person who doesn't know anything about acting what acting really is about, it wouldn't be surprising if his answer would be along the lines of acting being “faking it”, or “pretending to be somebody”. But any professional actor knows that a true performance cannot be anything other than genuine, sincere and that it must be or at the very least feel real. Weston writes that director James Brooks used to say to his actors: “Just remember, everything you are saying is true.” (Weston 1996 p. 86)

While shooting *In the Lonely City*, I was struggling with getting the actors to believe in their roles. I felt like they didn't really act in a particular way because their character would do so, but because the script or the director called for it. They didn't believe in themselves. This must be left as a generalisation of a wide field of actors, but there is a certain truth in that professionals are professionals for a reason: they believe in their characters, and if they don't, they say so and they work on making the character theirs.

Sometimes, the issue was not perhaps that the actor didn't believe in his character, but that he didn't think that acting should be real at all. One late night while shooting the

graveyard scenes, we were having issues with a certain line that the protagonist was supposed to say. Finally, between takes I asked him how he would say it himself. He thought for a moment and then said the line perfectly. After some trial and error, we finally got it on tape as well and moved on. Later on, I came to understand that there was an essential error in my ways: we hadn't communicated properly about the fact that acting should be real. This should be considered fundamental acting theory, but even Hollywood stars have been confronted with similar issues (Weston 1996 p. 61):

Jack Lemmon, in an A&E Channel Biography, gives another clue as to how a director can help. He tells a story about working with George Cukor, who kept asking him not to "act." Lemmon tried to comply, but Cukor kept exhorting, pleading with him to do less. "I can't do less," Lemmon snapped back. "If I do any less, I won't be doing anything at all!" Cukor replied, "That's what I want!"

In another passage, Weston (2003 p. 288) advises the reader that any non-actor shouldn't be asked to act. Although one must draw a line between non-actors and amateur actors, it is worth asking whether the same should be asked of them – or perhaps of all actors alike. Laasonen (2015 p. 5) says that the most important task for the actor is to shape a reality he can believe in and where his own meaning is real. Perhaps Weston (1996 p. 86) again puts it best: "Keep it simple. Be a person, not a character. Don't act with a capital A."

### **4.3 Intellectualising**

Both Weston and Badham & Moddero speak at great length about the importance of simplicity in your direction (Weston 2003 p. 15):

Directors (or in television, writer-producers) often think it is their job to tinker with the actors' emotional lives as if they were cooks adjusting a recipe, or mechanics adjusting the timing of an automobile – in other words, to micro-manage the emotional result. Micro-managing actors' performances is what some think directing is all about – extracting an extra twinkle here, a more prolonged grimace there. These misguided directors waste time and wreak havoc with the actors' ability to be believable and present because they don't know the difference between "fine tuning" and "micro-managing." Fine tuning is fine; micro-managing the weight and tone of every move and utterance is a descent into hell.

Badham & Moddero (2006 p. 20) mean that directors shouldn't intellectualise a scene because human interaction essentially is about behaviour. If character A is angry at character B, it would be interesting to suppose that character B reminds A of his mother whom he deeply resents, but a more playable and simple truth would be that character B is pissing A off.

The little Judith Weston has to say about directing amateur actors is specifically about simplicity. She recommends you explain the situation with just a few words and make sure the actor understands to behave as he would in real life. (1996 p. 295) Laasonen agrees, and mentions that one renowned director in Västnyland has taken this very far, to the level where the director in question tells the actor which foot to move first and exactly how to say a certain line (2015 p. 5). Although a professional actor would scoff at such an idea, for *In the Lonely City* I tried various methods and came to the conclusion that simplicity and clarity – albeit at not such an extreme level – seemed to work best. For example, there was a scene where the protagonist was to see his recently deceased mother at the hospital. Originally I wanted Leif to ignore his mother’s corpse and focus on the absence of his brother – I wanted him to deny her being dead – but Leif didn’t seem to understand my direction. Instead, I did the opposite: I asked him to see her and understand she’s dead at the moment he stepped into the room. It worked considerably better. Although the protagonist’s denial of his mother’s death would’ve brought more to chew on for the viewer, it was too complicated to be playable for the actor and the obvious, simpler way of acting the scene worked out better.

#### **4.4 Result-oriented Physical Direction**

Making your direction simple does not necessarily mean it should become result-oriented – your actor still needs to understand why his character does what he does. But whereas Weston vehemently attacks the use of result-oriented direction, she does concede that physically executable direction works (2003 p. 148):

A direction that can be executed physically, even one as inelegant as “pause here,” may work better than a vague emotional result direction like “be more sincere.” [...] Specific physical direction, such as “don’t smile,” or “don’t look at him until this line,” can work remarkably well. “Don’t smile” works because smiling is often a social response, a social automatic pilot. So “don’t smile” can operate as *permission* to feel more genuine feelings.

During rehearsals, a scene was causing problems where the protagonist goes to cut down a swing from a tree. Finally, having exhausted all other options, I asked the actor to do the action with his mouth open. It felt wrong because it felt like I was telling him how to act. It worked though, possibly because it gave the actor something to think about, i.e. what Laasonen explains as “keeping the actor’s mind busy” (2015 p. 2).

Although this isn't exactly what Weston meant, it's important to point out that when it comes to directing actors, one should never criticise an approach that works. This is often pointed out by Lumet: when it comes down to it, you have a relationship with the actor where the end-goal is the delivery of a story. Both you and the actor are working towards the same goal. (Lumet 1996, p. 74) Furthermore, there is perhaps a certain rigidity or structure in directing professionals that doesn't exist with amateurs. A mutual language hasn't been agreed upon, and therefore one needs to be more open to thinking outside the box.

On a related note, David Mamet means physically executable direction isn't synonymous to acting where physical actions convey emotional truth. He means that acting shouldn't be inflected and forceful, but be simple, physical action. For him, there is no way an actor can "walk down the hall respectfully," he can merely "walk down the hall." It is the role of the nail to be a nail and not the house, i.e. an actor performs the action, while the story shows its meaning. (1992 p. 68) Quite possibly a part of the reason why asking the actor to keep his mouth open works is because he then forgets his ambition of portraying the house, and adapts to his more workable role of a nail.

#### **4.5 Differences between Non-actors and Amateur Actors**

Actors alike come from various backgrounds, and it's important to make a distinction not only between directing professionals and amateurs, but between directing amateurs and non-actors as well. Partially due to the fact that amateur theatre is so much more widespread than amateur filmmaking, it is rarely the case that an amateur actor has been doing much else than plays on a stage. Even though acting has become something he has found confidence in, film acting is as mysterious for him as for a non-actor. The question therefore stands: should one be working with non-actors, where you will be working from scratch but with a clean slate; or should one be working with amateurs, who have a certain idea about acting and some experience to draw upon, but whose preconceived notions may be completely in the wrong direction? There is no literature to draw upon when attempting to answer this question.

Naturally, actors are human beings, with the result being that no attempt of generalisation can be entirely satisfactory. Some non-actors have a knack for acting and all you need to do is point a camera on them. Some amateur actors, even though they've never stood on a film set, may be fully aware of the quirks of film acting, and require little to no direction at all.

## 5 RESULTS

Directing actors in the end is as much a human experience as a technical one. Sam Mendes says that “the only language that works is the language you develop between yourself and your actors” (Weston 2003 p. 246). Therefore, directing amateur actors as well as professionals may be more a matter of adaptability than knowledge. Due to the human nature of directing, this thesis cannot be interpreted as anything else than a case study of the relationship between a few individuals, and therein lays its function as an exploratory rather than confirmatory text.

It is possible that the reason why so little has been written about directing non-actors and amateurs is that your role as a director leans more towards that of a teacher than of a partner in a relationship. Personal experiences gained during *In the Lonely City* support this theory. Many of the issues faced during shooting were not because of a lack of communication with the actors, but because there wasn't a mutual language of acting to begin with.

The case study shows that there are definite and clear differences between working with amateurs and professionals. Many of its findings sound obvious due to their simplicity, but are all the more important, and provide many new answers and ideas to the thesis' central question on how a director should be altering his or her approach with amateur actors. Its four main points could be summarised as paying attention while casting, rehearsing thoroughly, keeping your direction as simple as possible and being flexible with your solutions. These points are relevant to all direction, but it is perhaps the weight of these points that defines directing amateurs as a separate entity.

It is nothing new that the casting process sets the foundation for the director-actor relationship, but the thesis shows that there is an increased variety of questions one

needs to take into consideration when casting with amateurs. Due to the relatively limited flexibility or range of amateur actors and the demands of screen acting and the screenplay in question, the director must be absolutely sure that whatever he or she is looking for also can be found in the actors the director ultimately settles on.

Whereas professional actors sometimes go into shooting without rehearsing at all, the thesis displays that amateurs need rehearsals not only in order to memorise their lines, but also in order to make sure the lines fit their character, as a way of gaining confidence and as a way of honing their screen acting skills. The question of the director's role during rehearsals has also been raised. Is it that of an acting teacher or a director, and how does that affect the director-actor relationship? What is for sure is that one needs to make sure that there is a mutual language of acting to communicate on in order for the relationship to function at all.

For the shooting phase of a film, the thesis has indicated that effective direction may be a matter of simplicity and flexibility in both your choices for how to play a scene and communication in general. With professional actors there may be a certain technicality and structure in your approach and a director may be mistaken to think that an amateur actor will respond positively to the same lingo. What has also been discussed are the external factors of a film set, and how the size of your crew, the weather, time constraints and the selection of locations can be a more significant factor in the amateur actor's performance.

## **6 DISCUSSION**

It is certain that for any director, working with non-actors and amateur actors is the true testing ground of your skills and your technique. The work put into *In the Lonely City* was well and truly pushing the limits of my own experience on directing actors. It is said that wisdom cannot be taught, but that it must be learnt: just as no one can understand that life sometimes is unfair before he experiences it himself, so too must the director learn his craft not by reading but by doing. Truly understanding the director-actor relationship takes years, but working with actors who really need you to be there and guide them is a good start.

A question that has been left partially ignored in this thesis is what kind of an acting performance the director in the end is looking for. A short answer to the question is that the essence of the director-actor relationship is the delivery of an authentic performance true to the director's vision. One may be of the opinion that this definition needs to be narrowed down further in order for the thesis to maintain its credibility, but this is not necessarily the case. When learning methods for how to solve or simplify an equation, does one need to learn the value of the equation's variable? Regardless, if one would wish to pinpoint what a director wants the word *quality* comes to mind – the same word that distinguishes almost everything in life from each other, be it within fine arts, sports, food, poetry or clothing – and now the discussion goes into the realm of philosophy more than filmmaking. In his seminal book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert M. Pirsig argues that quality cannot be defined, and that statements attempting to accomplish this will merely corrupt the discussion by being mistaken for truth (Pirsig 1974 p. 327). Indeed, one may wonder whether quality acting and attempting to achieve it by quality directing is so elusive due to its very nature. What the value of the variable in the equation of the director-actor relationship is has therefore been left if not wholly, then at least partially, unanswered.

There is no doubt that the director-actor relationship will be explored further in the future, and that someone will define more specific directing methods and tools. However, directing actors is fundamentally about communication, something that humanity as a whole still struggles to master and something that will never cease to cause us headaches. Further research in the field of directing amateur actors is nevertheless needed. In its core lies the age-old question: Can anybody act? Intuitively the answer would be yes, considering the amount of acting any normal human being does in social interactions every day, but if that is the case one must wonder why acting for film can be such a struggle.

I went into the production phase of *In the Lonely City* with a sense that directing amateurs shouldn't be any different than directing professionals. Although some of the methodology you as a director can use should be considered universal, such as process-oriented direction, simplicity, clarity and gaining the actor's trust, what left the strongest

impression for me was how helpless both I and the actors felt. We were out there doing stabs in the dark and trying to figure out a mutual language for ourselves without any frame of reference. Perhaps the biggest mistake made was to suppose that the definition of “acting” was mutual. Everyone has their own understanding of acting, and amongst amateurs the discrepancy between definitions can be significant – especially when you throw stage acting versus screen acting into the lot. If I today were to cast amateur actors, I think the first question I would ask during the casting session would be: What does acting mean to you? Although this thesis cannot definitively prove that conventional directing methods should be thrown out the window when faced with an amateur or non-actor, it definitely shows that they by the very least should be questioned and realigned.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDICE 1/1. Interview with Tapio Laasonen

RD = Rafael Donner

TL = Tapio Laasonen

RD: Jag tänkte om du först kunde berätta om din egen bakgrund, vad du sysslat med när det kommer till skådespelande och regi?

TL 00:18: Tja, jag har livnärt mig på teater, musik och teater men framförallt teater nu under de senaste 15-20 sådär, och det är ju nog inte ett fett liv men, man klarar sig sådär så länge man tar alla jobb som man snubblar på. Jobb finns hur mycket som helst, bara man inte förväntar sig att få betalt. Att det är liksom verkligheten. Men det är ganska kul, man får göra precis som man tycker.

RD: Har du regisserat eller skådespelat mera?

TL 00:57: Nå i allmänhet är det så att om jag vill sätta upp en produkt eller någon förening kontaktar mig och frågar att hej att har du nån idé att hur man skulle kunna göra en revy så i slutändan blir det så att jag får skriva det, jag får regissera det jag får samla ihop skådisarna och göra allt grafiska materialet och själv stå på scenen också, för annars blir det inget jobb.

RD: När man talar om amatörskådespelare och proffsskådespelare et cetera, hurdan skiljedragning skulle du själv göra som definition på dom här?

TL 01:51: Båda lägren har nog sina fördelar, det som är hemskt kiva med proffs, är att det spelar ingen roll vad man bestämmer sig för att man ska leka så att säga, dom nappar väldigt fort på vad som är geisten i det hela och dom erbjuder hela tiden liksom infallsvinklar och... dom är väldigt, dom jobbar väldigt självständigt fram sin grej att man styr skutan på ett helt annat sätt med proffs än med amatörer, för att med amatörer hamnar man i allmänhet och lirka och locka och till och med mata ganska mycket det som ska bli innehållet sen och ska försöka få fram urmänniskor, nyanser, vad dom är egentligen och så här, och med en del amatörer så är det att man hamnar och dämpa ner

för att ett vanligt amatörproblem är ju det att man tror att man ska spela hemskt mycket teater, speciellt om man ska sätta det på levande bilder, och vi säger film eller nåt liknande så ju mindre det blir desto bättre brukar det bli.

RD: Har du jobbat med både nybörjarskådisar och amatörskådisar och hur jämför dom sig?

TL 03:31: Nå där också så finns det av alla sorter i alla läger, det är nog i nästan alla projekt så att det kommer med nån som är riktigt duvunge, och ibland blir det mera jobb med det och ibland blir det nästan inget jobb alls utan saker löser sig automatiskt. Det handlar också väldigt mycket om den här grundinställningen till jobbet och hur mycket förutfattade meningar man har om skådespelandet. Jag har varit med om nybörjare som har varit så kreativa och färdiga i sig själv redan att det har varit ett stort nöje att jobba med dem, och sen har det varit såna situationer också där det är väldigt tungt att få maskinen igång så att säga. Det finns nog av alla sorter, det som gäller med proffs är nog att dom är alltid igång. Det verkar vara en väldigt hög nivå på professionalismen överhuvudtaget i det här landet, åtminstone på finlandssvenskt håll för att... men också dom få finskspråkiga som jag har jobbat med så, dom ger genast väldigt mycket från början. Det är nästan så att man får sitta och bromsa eller så för att hänga med.

RD: Vad tycker du att är viktigast då man jobbar med revyskådisar eller amatörskådisar?

TL 05:35: Jag tror att det största jobbet eller viktigaste jobbet man som regissör har, är att få skådisen så bekant med vad det handlar om att den känner sig trygg, och samtidigt ge den så mycket att fundera på att den inte ens hinner vara nervös. För att om skådisarna är hemskt nervösa på premiärdagen, så då vet du att du har inte jobbat på det tillräckligt. För att då har dom inte tillräckligt att fundera på, på sin egen grej. Men det borde vara så att man under själva processen när man jobbar fram en grej så borde man undersöka liksom alla möjliga varianter att hej skulle man kunna göra så här, så att skådisen, vad som än händer på scen har en möjlighet att ta till någon av de där alternativen, och att medspelarna också vet att aijaha nu far vi in på det här spåret, och nu gör vi den så här. Det som man hamnar och jobba med, speciellt med amatörer, är att göra dem lyhörda för varandra, att dom faktiskt lyssnar på varann och ser på varann, istället för att bara ta från apotekshyllorna replikerna så som dom är skrivna.

RD: Du har talat tidigare om att det råder en viss lära bland amatörskådespelare i Västnyland.

TL 07:07: Det har hängt ganska mycket ihop med det här att, den här uppfattningen med att man ska spela teater på ett visst sätt. Det finns egentligen ganska få regler, om du står på scen så ska du tala tydligt, och uttala orden till slut för annars missar publiken dom och då är det ingen vits att du säger dom orden, men frånsett det så, så jo det har funnits väldigt mycket det här att man... jag antar att man har tagit förebilder från filmvärlden och sånt här, och så här gör man när man spelar teater, och i vissa fall är det lite svårt att ta bort det där. För att det är nog ett hinder. För man kan inte utgå ifrån att varje sketch till exempel som man skrivit, om man skriver fars eller revy, att den skulle passa in just i den rollen, utan man måste kunna vara lite flexibel och hitta den riktigare människan där bakom. Och den riktiga människan är det intressanta, inte kommer folk för att se något... ja nå... mera sällan vill folk se karikatyrer, dom vill se riktiga människor som gör bort sig och har svårigheter och sen löser kanske sina svårigheter, på det mest fantasifulla sätt, för det är ju lite det som det handlar om, därför går folk och se teater.

RD: Tror du man kan lära en gammal hund att sitta? Hur invanda är skådespelare i sina metoder?

TL 08:55: Jag ids inte nämna några namn men nu jobbar jag ju med somliga nu också i det här nuvarande projektet som vi alla är bekanta med också som gör saker på sitt sätt, och då får man bara ta skeden i vacker hand och liksom försöka modifiera omständigheterna och situationen ikring det så att det passar ihop med det sättet att göra saker. Och vissa skådisar igen som har hållit på hemskt länge är nästan naturkrafter att jo nog kan man försöka styra dom i nån riktning men dom landar nog ändå på samma ställe varje gång så att det, man får nog räkna med att, eller man får utgå ifrån att alla blir frustrerade och ta och bara hitta andra vägar sen, det är lite som att försöka styra en flod.

RD: Tror du att samma regimetoder fungerar på proffs och amatörer?

TL 10:07: Nä. Man jobbar nog helt annorlunda för att med proffs snackar man mera om riktningarna med innehållet och vad försöker vi göra här för stil och, hej kan du prova

den lite mera aggressivt, kan du prova den lite mera mjukare, kan du säga replikerna som om du skulle säga dom baklänges, och dom förstår genast och försöker. För att dom är så vana vid att bli utsatta för – och också försöka, att verkligen ge sitt bästa i varje situation, men en amatör kan bli helt ställd om du inte faktiskt förklarar väldigt ingående att, inte nu riktigt det här först sätter du vänstra foten framför och sen släpper du upp högra foten och sen flyttar du den framåt, och böjer den ner. Men nog lite ditåt att... till exempel repliktiming och också entreer och när man går ut och sånt här så och svängar så, många amatörer så hamnar man och nöta in det punkt för punkt för punkt, medan proffsen har det i ryggraden, att man läser av situationen. Det handlar sist och syvens väldigt mycket just om det här att läsa av situationen och medspelarna, eller bara med näsan fast i manuset.

RD: Skulle du hålla med om ett sånt påstående att vikten av tydlighet och en väldigt simpel regi är större för amatörer?

TL 12:05: Man måste vara hemskt tydlig, och där är det hemskt viktigt att man är så att säga på samma sida av manuset, det vill säga att alla förstår vad det är man försöker säga, och det som man ofta glömmer bort med amatörer, eller inte riktigt fattar hur noggrant det måste göras, det är själva analysdelen, att förstå innehållet, som är vad man eftersträvar, för att det brukar lösa knutarna i många fall. Det är där som dom stora aha-upplevelserna kommer och sen brukar det börja flyta mycket bättre. Förståelse är nog väldigt centralt.

RD: Tror du man bör jobba mera resultatorienterat med amatörskådespelare, d.v.s. att man säger ”du är arg” istället för att förklara varför han är arg?

TL 13:57: Om man lägger ner tiden på att åtminstone försöka få en amatör att förstå motiven, så brukar det nog betala sig ganska bra, i de flesta fall. Problemet med människor som inte har jobbat heltid med sig själv och sina egna reaktioner och hur det tar sig i uttryck rent fysiskt så är ju det att dom vet inte, ofta ser man också sådana människor som säger ”nä men jag är ju arg, syns inte det”, och dom har då lärt sig genom livet att hej man får inte visa ilska, så dom visar ilska på subtila sätt men det funkar inte till exempel på en teaterscen. Det kräver nog massor med arbete på egen tid före man blir bekant med sig själv, och det är ju det som skådespeleriet väldigt mycket går ut på, det professionella skådespeleriet, att bli bekant med sig själv och veta vilka

verktyg man har och hur man använder dom. Och det här har ju inte amatörer för att dom har ett liv som inte fokuserar på en själv, åtminstone inte på det sättet.

RD: Kunde du ännu specificera ännu, var det någon viss regissör i Västnyland som hade den här dominanta läran?

TL 15:45: Nå det finns så många olika praktiker, jag nämner inga namn men Sven Sid har ju alltid varit en, han har jobbat hemskt mycket med amatörer och hans taktik brukar vara den att rent fysiskt gå upp och visa och till och med rent fysiskt gå upp och flytta på skådisar, vilket man som skådis ofta finner väldigt irriterande, okej min vänster fot fem centimeter åt höger, mmm... Det är väldigt frustrerande, speciellt som Sven brukar kräva full emotionell laddning genast från början, innan man ens fattar innebörden. Men det är ett sätt att jobba som fungerar för honom, med amatörer, och det är väl lite synd att det har lite mycket bildat skola i en hel generation av skådisar. Men nu når man resultat med det också och han har ju lyckats åstadkomma väldiga publikfavoriter på Raseborgsscenen och jag antar att hans nästa projekt Sound of Music nästa sommar på Raseborg kommer att dra mycket människor igen. Han har en väldigt klar bild av hur en grej ska se ut, och han vill att den förverkligas just så men det blir lätt att det är 25-30 stycken Sven Sidar som hoppar omkring på scen, istället för att det är dom här 25-30 personerna som skulle bjuda på sin egen individualism än syntes, och visst, det är mera arbete att jobba fram amatörer till att vara individuella på scenen, än att vara kopior av en som har visat hur det ska göras. Men det är olika metoder...

RD: Har du något att tillägga ännu?

TL 18:04: Nä jag vill bara understryka att det viktiga är alltid att man förstår, som skådis förstår vad det är man gör. Om man förstår, om man åtminstone skapar sig en egen värld där en betydelse är verklig, så då brukar det nog komma ut i andra ändan sen som, den synliga ändan så brukar det komma ut som nånting som man kan tro på. Och det är alltid så med vilken dramatisk text som helst, så det finns aldrig ett sätt utan det finns hur många sätt som helst att göra, man kan säga nästan vad som helst med vilken text som helst. Man kan läsa upp telefonkatalogen och få folk att skratta eller gråta. Det mesta handlar om timingar och sen vilka bilder och världar som skådisen bygger för sig själv. Så länge dom förstår vad dom håller på med. Förståelsen är viktigast. Det där lät som en sån där avslutning på en intervju (skrattar).