

Development Hell of a German Action Movie

By Thomas Hernadi

A Personal Account of a Survivor

Force Majeure is one of the big budget “event movies” lining up for the new TV-movie season of German RTL. Only in a few cases has a German private TV-channel invested so much in an Action movie packed with special effects and cinematographic roller coaster rides.

Force Majeure has not only been a good working title for the movie itself but in a more literal sense it's also a very precise headline for what was happening during script development in which three writers were involved: Alexander Rümelin, an LA-based German writer who basically delivered the idea, the principal characters and the story, Burt Weinshanker, an American whose main job was polishing and doing last-minute changes according to production needs, and myself, in terms of plot and character development.

There is no shadow of a doubt that this project was a learning process for all of us, including the hard working producer, Wolfgang Latteyer (Telenorm Film) and our brave program editor Nick Krämer (RTL) who would not give up when everybody else would have killed the project. All is well that ends well! The film is in post-production now: the US-director, Joe Coppoletta ("Falcon Crest," "Texas Ranger," "Götterdämmerung") and the investors are happy and world-distributor Bavaria Film is looking forward to including the movie into their MIP-portfolio.

It all started with the high concept of an Action movie involving terrorist activities, a special elite task force flying, believe it or not, Harrier-Jets and a hijack situation aboard a chartered plane that crashes in Germany. The outrageously crazy plot and the characters were everybody's darling from scratch.

The first draft of the screenplay, a good read and very entertaining, got full support from the Bavarian Filmboard, FFF (Film und Fernsehfond Bayern) and a foreign investor: the French TV-station M 6 offered an attractive pre-sale deal which obviously is very unusual for a German TV-Movie.

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Latteyer says that he was determined to break the rules. He was not willing to accept that German TV-movies do not sell abroad. Backed by the well-reputed company TELENORM (co-producer of *Under the Volcano* directed by John Houston) the unthinkable became reality, the deal was made, the project took off. All this sounds too good to be true but it was only the beginning of what writers know as “development hell” that most successful projects have gone through.

High Concept is one thing, likeable characters and plot logic is another. Most European investors tend to be quite sloppy readers. A good pitch seduces them; rather unusual elements like Harrier Jets make their eyes shine. Everybody is afraid of terrorists and an air-crash of a passenger plane. All of us like heroes and really mean-minded and treacherous villains. All of those elements were in *Force Majeure* but none of the elements was in right proportion.

Characters and the plot had to be re-drafted scene by scene. It took us thirteen drafts to turn it into a decent piece of work. Naturally a writer feels like an idiot when writing one draft after another only to find



Anja Freese ready for combat. Photo by TNF Telenorm Film GmbH.

out that there are more problems to come. Now, in retrospect, having analyzed many other TV-Action movies and having spoken to colleagues we found out that we were not the first being in trouble.

Whenever Action or Adventure are sold, producers seduce with plot rather than characters. "Wow, they fly Harrier jets in a big city!" The damned jet and the air crash on German ground, not to mention the Elite Task Force (which does not exist in Germany) were the big thing for everybody except the writers because we had a hard time embedding all those elements in a logical story. It turned out to be a common "plot first, characters second" problem.

I remember endless discussions with writer colleagues, dramatic advisors and US-screenplay gurus arguing about what comes first, intriguing characters or a fascinating story. This common debate reminds me of the chicken or the egg question.

Based on what we learned from *Force Majeure* I tend to say that the creation of strong characters must come first even in an Action movie. They tell the story, they are the warrant for identification, without them even the most dramatic maneuver of a Harrier-jet saving the nation cannot compensate for a lack of life, a lack of emotions and, above all, of identification. The mere outbreak of a volcano without a good story and strong characters is simply not powerful enough to draw a big audience into movie theaters (just to refer to a recent Hollywood example).

Theme and character development are often neglected in the Action genre and lead to disaster at

the box office or in terms of ratings. My advice: Investors get more suspicious if someone pitches a story with props (Harrier jets) and characters without faces (Task Force)! I prick my ears when someone starts like this: "It's the story of a man/woman who..." Only then do I get emotionally involved, only then does the writer get my unlimited attention when I'm in the producer's shoes. However, I'm not saying that the other way round cannot be done. It can, as we have proven with our own project, but it's so much harder.

We had all night discussions about plot variations only to make sure that we could keep the Harrier in the third act. This specific jet type normally has one seat. There are some types with two seats. Given this prerequisite, we had to plot the characters backwards to make sure that we only had two people left for the final take off. It seemed so ridiculous to squeeze the characters into this "Harrier-frame".

"Ask yourself whether an expensive action scene is worth the money. Don't ask whether it looks good on the screen; ask whether all the effort and all the money spent will contribute to the development of the characters and their conflicts."

It took us days to get rid of false compromises that would have killed both plot logic and character traits. However, we take comfort in big US-Hollywood movies like the recently released *End of Days*. They reveal that we are in good company. Without knowing a thing about the script-development of this movie, one can see that the main character was built around the hook 666 = 999 (which gave us all the creeps when we were watching the trailer). I suspect that Schwarzenegger was "squeezed in" as well.

The Negotiator, however, is a very good example of how well even an Action movie can feed on solid character development. Compare the two movies and you will see what I mean.

Common investors do not know anything about bombs, trigger mechanisms, aircraft technique and guns. You can tell them anything and they'll buy it. This is good for raising financing but it's bad for the writers approaching a shooting script.

Proper research is the very beginning of everything! In an Action movie every single left behind screw can cause an explosion and has to be triple checked by experts working in this specific field. A good director will deeply plunge into each scene and investigate what's going on. He does not like vague descriptions in Action movies because once he is on location the actors will ask nasty questions about what to do in front of the camera.

Our first draft was drenched with fancy sci-fi technology that had to be eradicated step by step and replaced by what actually can be done.

Precise timing and an almost insane scene breakdown are two more characteristics of an Action movie. Usually, in a solid teleplay in master scene format I end up with around 100-120 slugs for drama and 120-140 slugs for thriller or comedy.

Force Majeure gave me 240 slug-lines on 100 pages which is a shock both, for the writer and the producer because so many slugs will kill the budget. Whether they want it or not, writing Action forces the writer into shooting script format and the producer/director into many more intercuts and camera positions than in any other genre.

A film living on extensive Action obviously needs precise and broken down Action descriptions. Add complicated special effects, technical devices, fumbling on bombs etc. and your life as a writer gets really complicated. The plot has to be as tight and fast as possible. If you have more than two main characters you constantly think about what to do with the other characters when they are off screen.

When X is there what can Y do to reach X and Z in time? Where was Z when X was with Y? Tough work, I'm telling you. Precise timing is what we all underestimated most. Actually, I have always thought writing an Action movie is peanuts. Thinking back to all the white boards smeared with time lines, I know better now.

It goes without saying that the budget plays a vital role in scene decision making. Naturally, the producer is always delighted if the writer finds a cheaper solution for an action sequence. However, he wants scenes that look big -- a vicious circle.

In *Force Majeure* we had many location changes which is no problem as long as the function of a scene, the purpose of a sequence and connecting story spines remain unchanged. This is actually the key for finding alternatives. It does not really matter whether two characters are engaged in an air battle (flying Harrier jets) or actually fight against each other in a gym which obviously is much cheaper. As long as the outcome of the scenes is the same (in our movie we had to establish that one of the two characters is playing foul), such changes can be easily made. However, it's nerve-wrecking to write a nice action sequence only to find out that it's out of budget.

Ask yourself whether an expensive action scene is worth the money. Don't ask whether it looks good on the screen; ask whether all the effort and all the money spent will contribute to the development of the characters and their conflicts.

Last but not least, let's talk about dialogue.

We all know that it's nice to write what we call "indirect dialogue". Never write what the character really thinks. Let him refer to what he has previously done or what has been exposed earlier. Use metaphors, triggers, play with the character's psychology. It's fun to do that and it's very difficult too. Actually, this is the Art of writing good dialogues. However, an Action movie with a complex plot has different laws.



Harrier Jet challenges character development.

Photo by TNF Telenorm Film GmbH.

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and maintaining your engagement with the process is a writer's work, or at least some part of it.

We write for the sake of *it* -- mere rejection is not the slight that should dim our fervor nor weaken our resolve. Be of good cheer and tackle the next one with renewed vengeance.

The world can be yours.

Sean Rooney has been screenwriting since the early 90's. In 1998 his script JOAQUIN! won first place in the Breckenridge Festival of Film screenplay competition. His screenplay PERFECT DEFECT was a quarterfinalist in the Maui Writer's Conference and Quantum Quest competitions this year.

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An average TV-Movie audience does not get into their cars, drive to a multiplex, chose a film, pay for it and sit down to attentively watch and enjoy a picture. They are consumers -- not more, not less. Therefore, dialogue has to be more direct than you might bear.

Table readings and the experience of our program editor revealed that we would lose our target audience if we were too subtle in dialogue. I'm not saying that I will write my next TV-Action movie with dumb dialogues, but I would constantly remind myself of extreme clarity.

To put it all in a nutshell, writing Action for TV is not easy, sometimes it's even more difficult and work intensive than writing any other format. It's more of an intellectual than a creative challenge. A great plot pitch cannot make up for a lack of solid character development.

Prior in-depth research is indispensable to avoid the big mess when one takes a closer look at each single scene.

Timing and plot complexity will inevitably lead to approaching the shooting script format with a high scene breakdown and don't forget the budgetary limits.

Nevertheless, it was enjoyable doing the job and a great learning experience which I would like to share with colleagues who have never written Action for television before.

My advice: Go for it, 'cause Action can be a bigger challenge for a writer than most of us might assume!

Thomas Hernadi has been active in the film industry for the past 9 years. He works as a freelance screenplay writer for cinema and television as well as a script consultant for German TV broadcasters and production companies.

The Litmus Test From page 66

To put as simply as possible, make your characters as believable as possible. They move the story along, not you.

A well-defined character, even if faced with impossible situations, and many reversals, will allow the reader to accept the world you have created in your screenplay.

Unrealistic character actions and reactions make your script appear unrealistic. If you attempt to do this, your story will appear forced. Non believable, then the interest of the reader will soon slip.

Even if you have accomplished all of this, and your script is eventually read, you probably will still get a pass. Your script may not be for them.

The wrong genre, a story that they do not feel strong about. There are a million reasons why your script will not be made into a film, and you will probably hear most of them before you get an acceptance, but at least they have read you.

They like your writing, like your style, so they will keep you on file. Maybe a future proposition, a rewrite on one of their projects, who knows, but best of all. You possess an open invitation to submit other scripts to them. You can use this to your advantage, but that belongs in another article.

The greatest storytellers of all times have the gift of grabbing your attention right off the bat. They get you engrossed in the story by showing you their words. Then they carry on with this technique, and before you know it, you are living the story. Feeling for, and with, the characters. Sharing in their fears, their aspirations. Sometimes loving them, sometimes hating them. This what you have to do to the reader.

So armed with all of this information, are you ready? Is your script ready? Are you ready to show the

