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Punch Lines

Stunt people take it on the chin while doubling for their actors.

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By Ryan Thomas

There is an occasion every couple of years during which stuntmen and women honor their own work: the falls, fights, fire work, and other onscreen mayhem by which Hollywood's lesser-known workers make some of the industry's bigger names look very good indeed. It's called the Taurus World Stunt Awards, and the 2005 ceremony took place in September, honoring such feats as the combat in *Kill Bill* and the car chase in *The Bourne Supremacy*, and recognizing the career achievements of director Quentin Tarantino and longtime action star Sylvester Stallone. There is, however, no Oscar for stunts or fights, an omission more than a few fight choreographers and stunt coordinators feel should be rectified.

"Hell yes," says Rick Sordelet one of Broadway and regional theatre's best-known go-to fight choreographers, as well as the chief fight choreographer for the CBS soap *The Guiding Light*. "There should be a Tony and an Emmy, a whole category in all the major awards to recognize that this is an art form in and of itself. When a stunt person successfully crafts a stunt well, it needs to

be recognized."

Sordelet has been the fight choreographer on every Disney stage musical, from the high-fly act of Tarzan to the cutthroat pride-land battles of *The Lion King*. For the past several weeks, he has been preparing actor David Hyde Pierce (*Frasier*) to get harnessed up and bounced all over the Ahmanson stage in the premiere of Kander and Ebb's new murder mystery musical *Curtains*. Playing a theatre-loving detective, Pierce's character is knocked off a catwalk, tumbles through space, and saves his own skin by catching a piece of scenery. Were this a scene for a film, a trained stuntman would likely be brought in to get through the riskier bits. No such luck with *Curtains*.

"The nature of theatre, and one of the biggest differences between theatre and film, is that with theatre, you have to do it eight times a week, the same way, and it has to be the star," says Sordelet. "David has been nothing but game. It's really more about being prepared mentally than physically." With a theatre production, at least, you have the luxury of extended rehearsal time to craft a difficult maneuver or scene. During his seven-year gig on *The Guiding Light*, Sordelet has routinely been asked to throw together a fight or a fall in a matter of hours, even to lend his own body when the need arises.

A majority of stunt coordinators, regardless of their age, are more than happy to step in. It's kind of a badge of honor. "I recently stunt-doubled Thomas Pelphrey to fall down two flights of stairs," says Sordelet. "It's a real challenge because he's a big strapping young man and I'm old enough to be his father. It's a challenge to see if I could still create the spirit of youthfulness in my body that would match what Tom was doing. I was very pleased with the craftsmanship of it."

Or take the case of Buddy Van Horn, who has been Clint Eastwood's stunt double for more than 40 years, and who requested to be blown up and set on fire in the service of Eastwood's latest movie, *Flags of Our Fathers*.

Request granted and mission accomplished, says Scott Leva, the assistant stunt coordinator on *Flags*. "It went great, and he's still alive and talking to me," says Leva. "The man's 77, and I think he specifically also likes to show, 'I can still do it and I want to earn my dollar.'"

Stepping Into the Moment

A well-prepared stunt person has studied the actor he will be doubling, either on the set, renting DVDs of previous work, or both. How does that person move, walk, carry himself? How are you, the impersonator, going to bring off the illusion that the audience is in fact watching, say, Angelina Jolie take a spill.

"If I have a fight scene, and I hire someone who is the perfect size to double an actor in a big martial arts scene, and he does the fights the way he would do it, that's not really much good to me," says Alex Daniels, vice president of the Stuntmen's Association of Motion Pictures. "The better stunt performers are the ones who understand the character they're doubling somewhat."

"Craftsmanship" is a key term in this profession. Many successful stunt people entered this world as actors and still very much consider the work they do—or teach others to do—a critical part of the world of make-believe. Beautifully toned martial artists, dancers, swimmers, and gymnasts may indeed have a place on a stunt team, but so does the regular-bodied man or woman who does the historical prep work and wields a sword like nobody's business.

Short or more-slightly-built performers may end up doubling child actors who are not allowed to be placed in situations of peril. If you can handle a line or two, all the better. Maybe you'll even come out of the experience with a role in addition to the stunt credit—particularly if you do your job so well that a bit of business ends up enhancing one of the star's performances. On the upcoming *The Guardian*, an action film starring Kevin Costner and Ashton Kutcher as members of the U.S. Coast Guard, Daniels noticed strong onscreen chemistry developing between the second unit stuntmen who were diving into waves off a U.S. Coast Guard helicopter.

"That physical interaction between them is probably going to be in the movie," says Daniels. "The slap on the back, the look they do with their heads. They're filling those acting moments. The relationship of those characters—one is a mentor to the other. When you fill in those moments with acting, it helps greatly."

Right Place, Right Skills

The more skills you can offer—be they fire, high falls, martial arts, or dance—the more use you'll be on the set and the more likely you'll get referred for later projects. Diversity? The membership directory of the SAMP website allows you to search for a stuntman based on no fewer than 126 different skills, ranging from farming to whips, from mimes to camel-riding.

Even with diverse abilities, aspiring stunt people should expect to encounter a field as difficult and competitive as, well, acting, says Leva—a stuntman, technician, and frequent second unit director. When he broke into the business nearly three years ago, he says, the Screen Actors Guild had around 1,000 members registered as stunt performers. Today, there are up to 6,000 living in California alone; only 300, Leva estimates, get regular work.

"Sometime it's being in the right place at the right time or having the right look," says Leva. "It's gotten progressively more difficult. You've got to want it more than anything. Really believe in yourself and believe in it. Otherwise don't even attempt it."

A former gymnast who originally thought about pursuing acting, Leva studied with the late Dar Robinson and became a high-fall expert. The death of a friend to a high fall got Leva thinking about redesigning the air bag such that it wouldn't pitch actors off if they happened to land off-center. You can't see it from the audience, but that's Leva's handywork breaking countless falls nightly in Cirque du Soleil's spectacular Las Vegas show *Ka*. Head rigging specialist Jaque Paquin asked Leva if he could design an airbag that could catch up to 25 performers, let them get off quickly, and just as quickly reinflate.

Leva could and did. In February he took home an Oscar for scientific and technical achievement for his design of the Precision Stunt Airbag. "My friend died doing a high fall. I took it personally," explains Leva. "The bag was built in his memory."

Natural Niches

Daniels has coordinated the various Batman stunt shows at a number of Six Flags theme parks, but his years doubling David Hasselhoff on various incarnations of Baywatch have brought him lots of water work. "I'm an aerialist too, but in this business you end up getting pigeonholed to some degree," says Daniels. "Water has become one of the things I guess I specialize in. I respect water. The power of water itself can surprise you."

Fight master and choreographer Roberta Brown's niche—based on her fencing background and acting training—was sword-fight choreography. "It's very specific, and I'd say there's not a lot of call for it," says Brown. "But there's not a lot of people who do it, so the ratio of people doing it to the demand works out all right." On one episode of the long-running medical drama *ER*, Drs. John Carter (played by Noah Wyle) and Luka Kovac (Goran Visnjic) found themselves stuck waiting in a room that happened to contain fencing equipment. As the woman both men were interested in happened also to be in the same room, the two doctors drew swords and squared off to display their nonmedical prowess, as it were. No stunt doubles were necessary. A choreographer with Brown's expertise, however, was.

"Both actors had some swordplay in their background, and they both said, 'We want a sword fight written into the script,'" recalls Brown, who choreographed the scene and labels it one of her professional favorites. "We had two weeks to rehearse, and they both came up to speed quickly. We worked hard to write the subtext into the choreography, and they took it and ran with it. They did a fantastic job of finding every little nuance."

The scene was a prime example, Brown says, of taking skills that an actor already possesses and using them to best creative advantage. In another instance, Brown was asked to train Bo Derek for a role in a pirate film, but found her balking at learning the classic brigand style and footwork. But after Derek revealed that several years back she and late husband John Derek had taken traditional fencing, Brown had something to work with. "So we throw the pirate thing out and use what you can look confident doing and make that work for you," says Brown. "That's the kind of pirate you are. From an actor's perspective, the more physical disciplines you can do, the better you will be at the discipline you're trying to do."

Andrew Villaverde of the Malibu Fencing Club also has a swashbuckling story. One of his students, Erica Grace, had been studying with him for a while when she got word she might be up for stunt work in the third installment of *Pirates of the Caribbean*, due out in summer 2007.

Because Villaverde is not the fight choreographer on the *Pirates* movies, and as it wasn't clear until shortly before Grace would have to leave for the Bahamas what specifically she might be asked to do, the assignment was fluid. Teacher and student worked on small sword, cutlass, and saber—anything that a stunt double in a movie set in that period might be required to do. "As things went on, she started getting better and better," recalls Villaverde. "It was best for her to keep working on a few sequences, so we just rehearsed over and over again for a few weeks, videotaped it, edited it together, and added it to her stunt reel."

Grace, it turned out, would end up doubling actor Naomie Harris, who appears in the current *Pirates*. "We had a good idea of what would be expected based on the first film," Villaverde says. "But the set is not somewhere where you want to be learning something."

No Short Cuts

Sword master Tim Weske, who has trained Sandra Bullock, Natalie Portman, and Matthew Perry for fight scenes, says the people who do the most complaining in class are not the celebrities but those who want to take shortcuts. Stars have reached their level, have gotten where they are, he contends, through hard work and because they are

demanding of themselves, even when what's at stake is combat verisimilitude that a stunt performer could more easily pull off.

From his students, Weske asks for a positive attitudes and strong work habits. Ability? Let's just say that the next time an assignment calls for a massive fight scene, the sword master's eye won't zoom straight to the "relevant experience" line of the résumé. "I vowed next time I'm going to put out a call not for people who have fencing or sword-fighting experience," says the man who trained 300 for a battle scene in *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*. "I want people who don't have it and are so eager to learn."

When it comes to stunts, everybody needs a teacher. It's not as if the Bob Yerkes and Conrad Palmisanos of the word emerged from the womb directly onto a burning building and quickly had to figure out a way to safety. It doesn't work that way. Stunt-worthy skills—like athleticism—may indeed be passed through the genes, but apprenticeship counts for plenty. Daniels cites Yerkes and Palmisano as mentors who helped him get started and advance in the business. (He recently brought Yerkes in on gag-reel work on *Jimmy Kimmel Live*.) Leva learned the act of falling from high-falling actioneer Robinson. Sordelet was barely out of high school when he strode into the office of Albert M. Katz (the author of *Stage Violence*) at the University of Wisconsin–Superior and announced, "I want to be your apprentice."

"He looked over his glasses and said, 'Who the hell are you?'" recalls Sordelet. "He taught me a great deal. By my junior year, I was teaching a class under his tutelage. By my senior year, I was teaching the class by myself."

Weske, who runs the Burbank-based fencing studio *Swordplay* and who has choreographed countless films, TV programs, and plays, learned the craft from a couple of British masters: William Hobbs and Robert Anderson. The story doesn't end there, however, as Weske took what amounts to a cinematic correspondence course.

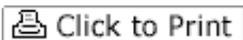
"We were doing *Macbeth* [in a San Diego stage production]. I was playing Macduff, and the director puts a pair of 10-pound broad swords in our hands and says, 'Go make a fight because they fight,'" says Weske. "Are you kidding me? I was already hurting people, and I had nobody to learn from. The only way to learn was to start to study film. I started breaking it down and breaking it down, learning their moves and seeing what they were doing."

While rehearsing **West Side Story** in a park, Weske noticed a guy in fencing regalia walk by. He flagged the swordsman down, inquired where he could learn the craft, and ended up in a small fencing group in San Diego. In Los Angeles he worked his way through the ranks at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and took over as the head of the fencing and theatrical combat division. Weske later went on to meet, befriend, and fence with the sword masters whose work he had studied. "I learned from the best," he says.

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