

## Why stuntwomen are in more danger than men

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Performing life-threatening stunts is scary enough – but to swordfight or crash into cars wearing skimpy costumes rather than padding requires a special kind of courage.

By Leila Hawkins



They perform mind-blowing stunts dressed in clothes as flimsy as paper doilies and are forced to meet Hollywood's demands for ever-shrinking waistlines without losing the muscles they depend on for work. Meet cinema's small but dedicated community of stuntwomen: because of the skimpy clothes they have to wear, they put themselves in more danger than their male colleagues.

But it's all part of their day job. Tammie Baird is Hollywood's go-to stuntwoman for car hits. She's appeared in *Fast & Furious*, Chris Brown's *Next 2 You* music video, and *NCIS: LA*. She's been smashed into windshields, bounced off bonnets and slammed into the tarmac – more often than not wearing a tight dress and heels. When Baird got her first role, in *Mr & Mrs Smith*, she went shopping for stunt gear "like a guy". "I bought the biggest, bulkiest pads, and thought, 'Yeah, I'm protected, nothing's gonna get me.' Then I saw my wardrobe – I was wearing a miniskirt." Straight away, she says, she realised this was the deal. But there was never any question of it being a setback. She researched athletes who risk injury to their knees: female figure skaters turned out to be the best role models. Figure skaters perform pirouettes on one of the hardest, most slippery surfaces in the world, while balancing on thin blades and wearing minuscule dresses. Baird discovered they use crash pads made with gel to protect their hips, shoulders and knees from smashing against the ice. By dipping them in tea she matched the gel pads to her skin tone to make them invisible on screen. The idea has now spread throughout the stunt community.

Detailed statistics comparing the on-set injuries of stuntwomen and men are not kept. Andy Armstrong runs one of the biggest stunt facility companies in the world and has created gravity-defying sequences in some of the top action films of the last 25 years, including *Total*

Recall, Charlie's Angels and Thor. "There are a lot more men performing stunts than there are women," he says. "It's very disproportionate: on any movie you'll end up with mostly men doing the action. You won't get many movies where there are lots and lots of women."

Studios are wary of discussing the specifics of injury rates, but Armstrong stresses they employ safety officers whose job it is to make sure actors don't fly around in cherry pickers without a harness. They recognise the extra risks women face because "unless they're playing athletic nuns, they're going to be less covered than men".

Baird says she was lucky to have veteran stunt performers mentor her. Take Dayna Grant, a leading stuntwoman from New Zealand who has doubled for Charlize Theron twice (in Mad Max: Fury Road and Snow White and the Huntsman), Tilda Swinton (The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe), and Lucy Lawless (Xena: Warrior Princess). Throughout her 22-year career she never questioned the fact that men have the benefit of being fully padded while she's flung off galloping horses in a tight leather skirt. "It's just what needs to be done for film. It's not life-threatening; it just hurts a lot more," she says.



Grant once did have a serious accident, caused largely by her footwear. "They were very slippery, feminine shoes. I slipped on a hill and I got impaled by a dagger, through my head. I ended up going into cardiac arrest and I was a bit of a mess." The dagger went through her cheek, both nasal cavities, and fractured the back of her left eye socket. It wasn't anyone's fault, but as a stunt co-ordinator herself she makes sure her crew are able to work with the shoes they're given, otherwise they'll get special footwear.

The pressure for women actors to inhabit a figure that's only sustainable in Photoshop trickles down to their stunt doubles too. Crash dieting is common if they're needed to double a particularly twig-like performer at short notice. Baird says: "It breaks my heart whenever I hear someone's starving themselves, whether to double an actress or just because a bully wants them to be thinner." She says she wouldn't take a role to double for someone who's suddenly lost a drastic amount of weight. Unfortunately for those with less choice over parts, such weight loss can have a damaging effect on their ability to perform. "If we lose our muscle tone then we're no good to the actress," Baird says.

Melanie Wise, founder of the Artemis Women in Action film festival, devotes her career to supporting empowering female roles in action movies. “All the stuntwomen I’ve personally met are beautifully built. They’re athletic, they’re muscular, but they don’t look like women on steroids. They’re very fit and trim, and I’m sitting here thinking: ‘OK, they want them to be thinner?’”

Stunt performers’ acting skills also go largely unnoticed. For each job, they have to study the body language of the actor they’re doubling and look for quirks in their movements so they can copy them exactly: you should never notice them, after all. It’s precisely because of these talents that they haven’t earned much recognition historically. Olivia Munn, starring in X-Men: Apocalypse, released last month, enraged the blogosphere when she seemed to claim she’d done all her own stunts while Julia Rekaikyna is listed as her double. But Baird says that she may well have done all the stunts she was asked to do, rather than every single physical feat her character Psylocke performs.

Neither Baird nor Grant are bothered when actors take the credit for their stunts. In fact they categorically say their job is simply to make them look good. But it does ruffle feathers among some members of the stunt community, and Grant believes this is happening more and more because newer generations want their work to be recognised.

Stunt co-ordinators are campaigning for an official category at the Oscars, while the Taurus world stunt awards have been honouring stunt performers since 2001. At least the gender pay gap doesn’t apply to stuntwomen. Men and women get paid the same daily rate, and on top of that they get “adjustments” for the more dangerous scenes. When Baird is hired she discusses how much she gets per car hit for example, and if she thinks the rate is too low she negotiates. New Zealand goes one better, paying women more than men because they take into account their lack of protection – as do a few stunt co-ordinators around the world, including Armstrong.

“I think women are amazing,” says Baird. “There’s nothing a woman can’t do hands down.” Men get hurt too – “Even a man who’s doing a stunt with big bulky clothes, I guarantee that if he’s doing a stair fall, the pointiest part of the stair will find the one spot that he does not have padding on” – it’s just that they’ve been given the luxury of protection. Women have had to seek it out themselves.