

The Stunt Locker

News from the stunt community

37



by Branch Councillor, **Michael Scherer**

Thirty-seven. What significance does this number hold for me? I will tell you. When I was 37 I felt I was at the top of my game in the stunt world as a performer. I had been around for a good 15 years so I had made all the mistakes on and off camera I was going to make and learned from them. I had done just about every type of stunt there is, even horse work, which I would rather avoid and leave to the pros.

My body, although damaged, was still in good condition and quite flexible for a big guy. You develop a high pain threshold in this line of work and you carry on when the work is there. Perish the thought that word gets out you are hurt. You might as well

take a six month sabbatical if people think you aren't functioning at 100%. So I, like all my peers, would bite the bullet and press on. The scales were beginning to tip from youthful exuberance to practical wisdom. I was getting it done on the first or second take. The mechanism was now finely tuned and the phone was ringing with steady work. I felt secure in my little world and thought it would never end.

Wake up call. A few years later the accumulated injuries I had inflicted upon myself started to manifest themselves and there was a lot of downtime for repairs. Once fixed, things didn't seem to move as well as they used to. I started using progressively stronger pain medication so I

could keep working. This becomes a vicious cycle, blocking pain so you can cause more damage. But you can't let go now, you're just getting started, right? The grey hairs that had started to come in and were now threatening to take over. What is happening, it's only been 20 years? And who's the new kid?

To be honest I had a feeling at the time that I had better prepare, which is the point of this article. Stunt people have always been likened to professional athletes. They are our closest cousins and we need to learn from them and how they plan for the long term. Many start businesses that are up and running and waiting for them when they hang up the cleats. Some actually use the education they got with their scholarships and many find themselves in the corporate world. Some stay with sports, but in other capacities like coaching or commentating.



Still flipping cars in his 60s: **Dave Rigby** on the set of *The Expatriate*.



Back in the day: a 30 year old **Mike Scherer** on the set of *Delta Force 3*.

Others invest their fast made money for the long term. We admire the 42 year old quarterback for hanging in there, but secretly wonder when he is going to call it a day? To be fair I can safely say that a stunt performer's career expectancy is considerably longer than that of an athlete if we want it to be. We can pick our jobs to suit our situation. The great Carey Loftin had some trouble walking towards the end but the man still could drive circles around the younger performers.

In this town we have Dave Rigby who has been around since it all started in this city. While he still drives, which is his specialty, he also still mixes it up too. Last year I hired him and Normand Roy to literally get run over by a college football offensive unit. These guys are in their sixties. If they felt it they never said a word to me or anyone that I know.

So what's out there? Our jobs are pretty specialized and don't really lend themselves to an easy transition. Well, some of us go on to be stunt coordinators and a select few make it to second unit directing. There is also the occasional stunt performer who makes it into acting like Richard Farnsworth. Some produce films themselves and others can be found scattered throughout the film industry in different types of jobs.

For myself, I developed a system. Every time I got hurt bad enough that I had to stand down for awhile, I would take a course or get training in another skill. Over the years I have acquired a heavy multi engine pilot's license as well as my divemaster and master scuba diving cards among other things. I have long haul trucking experience and I can weld and machine. These things are all part of my plan B, my "just in case" I don't make it back to the Big Show. Many of my brothers and sisters in this vocation have already had businesses up and running for some time and are very successful at it. Still it's hard to think about moving on sometimes.

So now a few more years have gone by. I look in the mirror and my hair has gone from the conflicted salt and pepper to a bright silver. Thankfully grey is the new blond. Oddly enough my body

has settled. You get used to anything after awhile and what used to hurt a lot now hurts just a little, more of an annoyance than anything. You adapt. At one point determination sets in and we put on the big push to get fit with a renewed vigor so we can get back in the game for another kick at the can and for the most part we are successful.

Our main ace up our sleeve though, is our experience. While an older stunt performer may inwardly dread the thought of flying down a flight of stairs five or six times they usually don't have to because he or she has skills and intuition amassed over years of work to pull it off on the first or second go. It's the signature of a professional.

As an older stuntman and working coordinator I, like many of my colleagues, have always looked forward to the day when we would get called to just drive a car in a chase or be that guy that gets knocked over at the hot dog stand. I suppose you could look at it as sort of a semi-retirement so to speak. Can't say it's quite worked out that way for most of us.

So what to do? Do you put on the big final push or implement Plan B? Like I said, it's hard to let go - especially when your brain is wired like ours are - so I know that for most of us it's onward and upwards, at least for a little while longer. But the idea of doing other things which has always been relegated to the back of our thoughts is now starting to creep forward, like a baseball player looking to steal second.

I guess the point of all this is to hopefully plant the seed in the newer ranks of stunt performer out there, to maybe get them thinking about what seems like a distant future. Take my word for it; it all comes up on you so fast. Put a little aside, develop a secondary skill set or get the basic foundation for a business ready to put into place.

To quote a line from a famous film, "Revel in your time", but remember that we all need an exit strategy of some kind, whether it's planned or forced upon us by circumstance. Everyone knows that in the end, the tortoise won...

COMING TO A SET NEAR YOU

Summertime in Montreal means festivals, construction work and thankfully, in the past few years, an increase in production. What you may have noticed - if you are lucky enough to be working on a few of these projects - are the familiar faces of your friendly neighbourhood ACTRA stewards showing up more often on sets this summer.

"The most effective way to protect performers is to be there - on set - and be proactive in our job," says Daintry Dalton, acting Branch Representative. "Preventing a problem is always better than solving a problem."

Whether it be a feature like *Snow White*, a series like *Being Human*, a commercial or a motion capture session, **Carmela Algeri**, **Shannon Joutel** and **Claire Martell** have had an increased presence on sets and in studio. Day or night, week-day or weekend, priority for the visits have gone to sets with minors, nude scenes, stunts or large casts; situations from which complications are more likely to arise.

So the next time you are on set, keep an eye out for your ACTRA steward.



1. Claire answers a question for Katherine Mewett on the set of *BMS*, 2. Carmela chats with Megan Rath on the set of *Being Human*.