

What is a stunt performer?



Ingrid Kleinig performs a dangerous stunt on location

When you see an onscreen actor involved in a fall, an explosion, a gun battle, a crash or a fight, it is more than likely you are watching the work of a stunt performer. The stunties, as they are called, take on action shots that pose risks to the safety of the actor or that need specialist skills or training to undertake.

Because of the high level of risk involved, the stunt and safety team is subject to a rigorous accreditation system administered by the National Stunt Committee which is part of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA). Producers must ensure that only properly accredited stunt personnel work on their productions.

The MEAA has a very precise definition of the word 'stunt': "Identifiable stunt means stunt action performed that requires any extraordinary skill or endured discomfort as part of the performance. Examples include but are not limited to: fire burns, near explosions, vehicle impacts, high falls, stair falls, horse falls, flying rigs, air rams and ratchet rigs, precision stunt driving."

There are four grades of stunt personnel:

- Stunt coordinator. Qualified and skilled to arrange and oversee the production of a stunt.
- Assistant stunt coordinator. Assists the stunt coordinator with administration, such as stunt budgets, and the set-up and execution of stunts and hazardous action.
- Stunt actor. A suitably graded, qualified and skilled stunt performer.
- Stunt action person. Graded, qualified and skilled to perform in background action and group stunt work under the supervision of a stunt coordinator.

There are a lot of rules that need to be followed to ensure safety on a film set. Safety consultants and supervisors provide specialist knowledge, expertise and advice to minimise risk to crew, cast and the general public.

Every film must commission a safety report prior to shoot, and must follow these recommendations. A safety supervisor must be present for any stunt or other hazardous action, such as filming on public roads, construction at heights or contact sport rehearsals.

The qualifications and skills of people in the stunt team are broad, reflecting the different kinds of action they carry out. Different performers specialise in different skills, and the stunt coordinator recommends suitable stunt performers to the director and producer.

The skills might include:

- Body control. Gymnastics, diving, skiing, martial arts, boxing, wrestling, fencing.
- Heights. Climbing, parachuting, hang-gliding.
- Vehicles. Driving licence, and advanced driving courses.
- Animals. Dressage, jumping, rodeo.
- Water. Life-saving, diving, yachting, surfing.

During pre-production, the stunt coordinator analyses the script to identify stunts then meets with the producer, director and first assistant director to establish how they envisage the stunt appearing on screen.

The stunt coordinator works out exactly how the stunts will be performed and discusses the costs with the production manager. These costs might include location preparation (e.g. checking for underwater hazards), the number of stunt performers required and stunt equipment, such as mats, harnesses and pull rigs. They also establish the stunt loadings, the extra payment that the stunt performer will receive for particularly hazardous or difficult work, and the number of times a stunt can be performed. An especially difficult or dangerous stunt – a stair fall, a fire stunt, a car roll – may be performed only once, and the production hires additional cameras and crew to cover the angles the editor needs.

The director and stunt coordinator cast any stunt doubles required, and consult with the actors involved. Many actors know and recommend the stunt performers who double them regularly.

The stunt coordinator works with many other departments and crew, including:

- Makeup and hair for the wigs required.
- The costume department for extra costumes needed for the doubles or for costumes to be damaged in fights or explosions or gunfire.
- The art department for breakaway furniture or candy glass in windows.
- The armourer for the effect of gunshots.
- The visual effects department to coordinate rigging and wire work for later electronic removal.
- The vehicle coordinator about necessary vehicle modifications.

The stunt coordinator choreographs action, a fight for example, to establish exactly what the actors will do and when the stunt performers will step in. Everything is thoroughly rehearsed.

A safety officer and a nurse are always on set on stunt days, and the requirements are set out in detail on the call sheet, which might also have a special safety briefing.

When a stunt is to be performed, the crew is on especially high alert. They are very conscious that the stunt performer is at considerable risk of injury.

On the day, the first assistant director briefs the cast and crew in detail, with additional input from the stunt coordinator and safety officer. They go through the sequence of events so everyone is fully aware of what to expect, and in the correct place at the right time.



Strict safety rules apply to stunts to protect performers



Before rolling camera, the first assistant director double checks that all cast and crew are fully prepared, especially the stunt performers, and then the familiar sequence – final checks, roll sound, sound rolling, mark it, and the director calls, “Action!” Once the shot has been performed, everyone on set holds their final position until the first assistant director goes to the stunt performers and checks they are okay. The first assistant director gives the all clear. If it’s a big stunt well performed, the crew give a well-deserved round of applause.

Generally, filmmakers try to shoot the stunts required during the main shoot, when there is a full complement of support staff available, and especially when the lead actors are available to work with the stunt team to create a realistic blend in the action. However it’s sometimes necessary to do

pickups and re-shoots, and the entire stunt planning and apparatus has to be set up again.

Many big films run a second unit concurrently with the main unit, to film major stunt action. This will involve a second unit director, stunt doubles and performers, and a whole separate crew. The second unit on a big action movie can often be bigger than the crew required to shoot a medium-budget feature film.

[Click here to view interview with stunt performer Ingrid Kleinig](#)

Useful resources:

- [HowStuffWorks: How stuntmen work](#)
- [The Hobbit’s most dangerous stunt](#)
- [5 reasons doing movie stunts is harder than you think](#)



Stunt performer Ingrid Kleinig

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