

HOW TO GET INTO STUNTS

The professional stunt industry is a highly competitive field in the film world. It is a tightly knit community of professional race car drivers, world-class martial artists, gymnasts, dancers, circus performers, motocross racers, professional skateboarders and the list goes on. Needless to say, it is also extremely difficult to break into.

As a potential stunt performer, you should have something extraordinary to offer the industry. Unfortunately, frequent gym visits, yoga, running, weightlifting and the like simply aren't enough. There is the occasional "natural athlete" who succeeds but, for the most part, stunt performers come to the job with something major under their belts.

In terms of training, there are tons of courses or sports you can sign up for that will help you along your path to becoming a stunt performer — take stunt driving courses, get your motorcycle license, and SCUBA ticket. Train at rock climbing, gymnastics, dirt biking, martial arts, trampoline, circus school, inline skating, diving, cliff jumping, etc. Take courses in acting, rigging, firearms handling and work with all kinds of weapons — there are literally unlimited things you can do to develop your career. The more specific skills you have to offer, the better.

A good question to ask someone who wants to get into stunts is, *"What is the skill set that you are offering to the industry?"* All too often the answer is *"I don't really do anything specific but I'm crazy! I'll do anything!"* Translation: I'm unqualified, irrational and willing to take risks. Great. Except that a stunt performer's job is to maximize the safety and minimize the risk in an action performance through knowledge, training and experience. Stunt performers are team players who work together and depend on each other to stay safe. Would you want to trust your safety to someone who proudly self-identifies as "crazy"?

There's another kind of would-be stunt performer, the adrenaline junkie, the thrill seeker who lives for excitement. These people are barking up the wrong tree and should be encouraged to pursue something more directly related to their personal adrenaline needs. For these folks, an "adrenaline high" is the end goal. But getting "high" isn't the same thing as performing well or getting the job done safely. For stunt performers, an increased adrenaline level is simply another factor to be reckoned with because, if not correctly managed, it can actually impede judgment. A stunt performer's end goal is a good, safe 'product' that reads well on film. The idea is that the audience gets to go home excited and the stunt performers get to go home.

Having read the above, if you still feel that you would like to get into stunts, ask yourself a couple of questions:

- Do I have a high pain threshold or, sometimes more importantly, a high 'discomfort' threshold?
- Do I scare or panic easily?

- Am I someone who operates under disclaimers (i.e. I don't like cold, heights, falling down, working nights, etc.)?
- Am I someone who listens intently to and can follow instruction?
- Do I have good body-awareness?
- Am I looking for fame? (If you are, you certainly won't find it here since, in this day and age, every actor "does ALL their own stunts," right??? LoL.)
- For females, ask yourself: Am I thin, or at least lean?

Unfortunately, this plays a huge part in getting stunt doubling roles. Actresses are, by industry standards, often sizes 0 to 6 and usually in the lower range of those sizes. It's unfortunate, but true. If you are bigger than size 6, don't give up by any means! – there is still tons of work in stunts and you may find yourself landing more 'uniform work' playing cops, military, SWAT, CIA, agents, etc. What is most important, above all else, is that you are fit, strong, lean and ready for action.

It helps to look "generic." For example, arms covered in tattoos are not ideal for landing jobs other than character roles, which are few and far between. Abnormally large or small anything is hard to hide for doubling; it also stands out in a crowd so you can only be used once on that series/feature and never again. For this job, it is best to simply look like everyone else.

If you're not totally discouraged yet, good for you!!! Keep reading...

So, now that you've had some realistic headshots done - perhaps a standard head and a three-quarter shot- you've made a resumé documenting your experience in sports, accomplishments, accreditations, training, anything stunt-worthy, and you've made an amazing demo reel showing the aforementioned skills, it's time to get your documents to the right people. Keep in mind, as stunt performers, we do not use agents; the stunt coordinators serve as our agents. An agent will NEVER get you a stunt-doubling job, regardless of what they tell you. They may submit you for a stunt-acting role, but 90% of the time the stunt coordinator has the last say on the performer selection. Stunt coordinators, themselves, usually submit their top performer choices to casting for stunt-actor roles.

It never hurts to become a Background Performer. This has multi-faceted benefits. For one, you can use your time wisely and learn how a film set works. Introduce yourself to the stunt coordinator when he or she is on set. Be polite, modest and offer your services as a Special Ability Extra (aka SAE). Some stunt coordinators will test out potential stunt performers by employing them as SAEs, sometimes for years. On the flip side, some stunt coordinators choose not to hire any SAEs at all, so be prepared for that too. If your day on set allows you to meet the coordinator, take that opportunity to put your documents in their hands. Plan your introduction wisely; they are busy people and the chance may not come again.

Whenever you have an opportunity, ask stunt performers about their job, their background and their recommendations on how to proceed with your own career. If you ask five different stunt performers how they got into the industry, don't be surprised to get five different answers. They are not messing

with you; everyone has a different how-I-got-my-first-stunt-credit story. Keep in mind, the stunt industry is very competitive so you may be met with some resistance. To minimize this, if you are a 5'8", 170lbs male, try not to ask a similar-sized male stunt performer how to get into the industry; find the 5'4" female. Nobody wants to give away tips to a potential competitor.

'Word of mouth' is the most prevalent way that new performers get to be known to stunt coordinators and the stunt community in general. To get your name out there, you want to find out where stunt performers train and then start training with them.

Check out <http://www.stuntlist.com/west> and click on the RESOURCES tab – click on TRAINING and you will find a multitude of sports, activities, providers and resources that stunt performers use. Then get busy and get out there training with others. Don't go there to bother people though as they are there to train and improve too – let your actions and your work ethic speak for you. Even if you are not a super-star in a gymnastics gym, others will respect your dedication to working on your weaknesses and trying to improve your skills if you come out. Commitment, determination and hard work will help move you forward in this business.

Another way to get documents to the right people is through the "What's Shooting" list on the UBCP/ACTRA website. Sometimes the stunt coordinators are listed, often they are not, but fortunately, the production phone numbers are always listed. Do the following:

- Call production, asked them the name of the stunt coordinator doing that particular show.
- Ask them for their production email address.
- Send them an email with this subject line: "Attn: Bob Smith, Stunt Coordinator".
- Write a brief note introducing yourself. Attach all your documents and add a YouTube link to your stunt demo reel.
- Send it and cross your fingers.

Now, be patient and DON'T QUIT YOUR DAY JOB!

Stunt coordinators are generally juggling a million things at once and may just delete your email without reading it. Or, you could get lucky and get a call because you're exactly what that stunt coordinator needs that episode – you just never know. Regardless, it often takes many, many years to build a solid, 'full-time' career as a stunt performer and many people will only ever do it as a 'fringe job'. Ensure you have regular employment that allows you the flexibility to pursue your stunt ambitions. Having a self-employed business is a really great way to go as you can put things down quickly to accept an offer of a stunt job on short notice.

The simple truth is that stunt performance is a difficult, demanding and highly competitive business with a lot of room at the bottom. Patience and persistence will be necessary as well as impeccable timing and good luck. On the other hand, if you truly feel you have the skills and mentality it takes...go for it! And don't give up. The stunt industry really is a tough one to crack, but it's a very rewarding career, once you've kicked in the front door...so-to-speak!