

# The Stunt Locker

News from the stunt community

## THE BUMP

I am going to take this opportunity to discuss a matter that is a constant source of discussion amongst stunt performers, The Stunt Adjustment. Anyone who has ever signed an Actra timesheet on set has probably seen the column that reads stunt adj. For the uninitiated this refers to a bonus system designed to compensate stunt people for performing above and beyond the basic requirements of their profession, or to be plain, higher risk.

Why are we talking about it today? The system is a bone of contention for many stunt performers who feel there is too much inconsistency in values placed on risk going from show to show but more so amongst different stunt coordinators.

Now before I go any further I will, as always, state that these are my opinions based on 25 years of observation and participation. I can assure you I am about to annoy a few people.

Many years ago the few of us that were around had a basic understanding of what certain types of stunts cost. But as the film industry evolved, so did the stunts along with it. It was no longer a simple thing to place a value on risk. The stunts became complex and were starting to combine different disciplines.

An example would be a high fall through a window on fire and let's throw in going out backwards just for fun. What do you do here? Do you simply add what the fall would have cost to the risk value of the burn and the window? It's not that simple. The stunt was not twice or three times as hard as a simple fall, it was closer to being five times as hard. Throw in cables and props or mechanical aids like air rams and you've got a bit of calculating to do as a stunt coordinator.

So why are we having issues now? Well for one thing everyone has a different sense of value when it comes to risk. If you are a stunt performer who lives in the water

then certain types of stunts will seem like a cakewalk to you as opposed to the stunt performer who can't swim. That's pretty obvious and as far as we'll pursue that aspect.

You also have to ask, "What does the producer get for his buck?" I bring this up because some people think they should get an adjustment just for gracing us with their presence. Let's face it, we get paid principal performer rates and as such a certain amount of risk work is included in the price. An adjustment is reserved for those stunts that are either sure to leave a mark, are so repetitive that you can barely walk to your car at the end of the day or are so risky some people can't even watch.

Who decides what the adjustment should be? It is down to the stunt coordinator. They are the ones who fill in that little box at the end of the day. He or she will come up with some numbers as they do their breakdown. They will base those amounts on several things, like their



Helen Stranzl (pictured above and driving the car on the left) takes a few bumps of her own in *The Last Templar*.



by Branch Councillor, **Michael Scherer**

own experience actually doing the same kind of work, their own opinions on risk and sometimes their willingness to appease their employers and find a compromise.

Now I am going to reveal the dark side of the stunt adjustment. One sure way to work the budget, get the job and look like a hero to the boss is to lowball on the stunt adjustments. You basically get in the good graces of a production by placing little or no value on excess risk incurred by the stunt performer.

Keep in mind I am talking about extremes here. This means a stunt performer getting absolutely nothing or a token amount for the kind of work previously mentioned. There is even the "timed release" adjustment. That's where the producer doesn't have to pay an adjustment until after the stunt is done a predetermined number of times. News flash, it hurts on the first take too. But standing around a craft table after the fact complaining to other stunt people about it does not solve the problem, and ACTRA can't be expected to know anything on the subject and actually had to defer to the stunt committee on a recent complaint.

When you get the call to do a stunt and it sounds big, then you are within your rights to ask. Trust me, the coordinator already knows the amount, if any. They have submitted a budget and it's in there. If he or she tells you there is little or no adjustment, then you decide if you want the work anyway. Nobody is saying not to. But then you can't complain after the fact.

Some stunt performers, having to rely on stunt coordinators for employment, are afraid to rock the boat. If you are on set and its turning into a bigger deal than discussed, you can say something. A good coordinator, seeing a change happening to the scene, is already looking for the producer to effect a change in the adjustment. They are watching out for you.

There is even a practice where production tries to factor in the buyout. Let's be clear, the buyout has nothing to do with the risk of a stunt. It is a legality that takes into account the adjustment, but should not dictate its value.

To be fair, it does sometimes happen that a scene develops and the action evolves into something bigger along the way and there is just no budget for an adjustment. It is then up to the performers discretion whether they want to do it. But again, if you were told the situation and you agree to go ahead with it, you really should not be complaining down the road.

Having said that, I can tell you budgeting for stunts is not that easy. Production can put a good deal of pressure on a coordinator to keep costs low, it's their job. As a coordinator your options are either stand fast or drop the stunt, modify it according to what's available or look the other way. Working the problem backwards, sometimes putting the cart before the horse, can work. That means designing the stunt around a known adjustment value.

One could find the resources elsewhere; tell production to lose the gummy worms

from craft. Sometimes a coordinator is given a lump sum budget to work with and has to decide adjustments relative to each other on a percentage basis for the whole show. In the end the action sometimes gets cut back and the stunt community loses the chance to do big glorious things altogether. See what I mean? Not so easy having your cake and eating it too.

There has been talk of standardizing adjustments but there are so many variables involved. How do you account for the female factor? This is when you have 2 stunt performers, on male and one female both doing the exact same stunt but the woman is wearing a negligee or a skirt and high heels, as always seems to happen, and as a result can't hide any pads. She will obviously take a bigger hit than the guy.

Perhaps a set of bare minimums to work from would be better than nothing, a value that would cause stunt people to react if a coordinator went below it. This is something I feel the community needs to work together on so you get input from both sides. I could see the benefits to all parties involved.

It has been suggested that if the stunt community can't self regulate then maybe ACTRA could acknowledge those very basic adjustment values and have a word with those who would devalue any extraordinary risk that stunt performers take, but also have the coordinators back when budgeting for action. It might be better if we could keep it in the family though...less paperwork.

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