





JUST SAY NO

...IS THE BEST WAY TO MAINTAIN SAFETY ON SETS, ACCORDING
TO THIS GROUP OF HOLLYWOOD STUNT PROFESSIONALS

by Pauline Rogers

“THAT WASN’T MY JOB,”

MIDNIGHT

RIDER

DIRECTOR

RANDALL

MILLER KEPT

REPEATING

UNDER

OATH,



Second Unit Director/Stunt Coordinator Andy Armstrong on the set of *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* with Andrew Garfield

while standing trial for the death of 27-year-old camera assistant Sarah Jones, who perished working on an active railroad track outside Doctortown, GA. Miller ultimately accepted a plea bargain and two years in jail for involuntary manslaughter. Debates may rage forever about who was to blame, and how many, for the preventable accident. But the message that resonates loudest is that we are all responsible for each other in this budget-conscious, high-pressure world of film production.

“There are hundreds of kids like Sarah, young kids just starting out, and they need someone to look after them,” observes 2nd Unit Director/Stunt Coordinator Andy Armstrong (*Thor*, *The Green Hornet*, *Spider-Man 1* and *2*). “[*The Midnight Rider*] situation is a classic case of the often appalling lack of communication between departments and of people who ignore sound advice. Someone should have said no!”

In fact, saying no is one of the biggest challenges 1st ADs, stunt coordinators and stunt workers run into every day on sets around the world. “It’s the biggest word in Hollywood,” describes Stunt Coordinator/Stuntman Conrad Palmisano (*Disturbia*, *Rush Hour 3*). “No to production if the shot doesn’t look safe. No to your coworkers if you see a risk that others don’t,” insists Palmisano, who can speak firsthand about the consequences when safety is trumped on a set.

In 1977, Palmisano’s close friend, Vic Rivers, who was

trained in live shows, was hired to coordinate and design stunts for a low-budget feature. “All of our ‘gang of pals’ worked for him and did chases and crashes,” Palmisano recounts. “We thought we were bulletproof and could squeak out of any tight situation. The last stunt, on July 8, 1977, was Vic jumping his pickup truck into water that was just eight feet deep and 30 feet across.”

Knowing that television and movies were different from live events, the “pals” urged Rivers to take a scuba tank in the cab. But he’d never done it in live events, so why now? He wanted to show he was tough, to demonstrate how long he could hold his breath. Palmisano did convince Rivers to have an escape hatch cut in the floorboard.

“Vic hopped into the truck, drove down to his start mark, turned around and stuck his head out the window and gave the ‘I’m ready’ wave,” Palmisano continues. “They rolled camera, and when he hit the takeoff ramp his right front tire punched through the plywood and the tire hit a cross brace. The truck spiraled upside down in the air. We all knew it was bad.”

Palmisano and gang hit the water and quickly got the hatch open, but Rivers was not there. After “walking the water,” Palmisano found River’s body, too late for paramedics to revive him. After the shock, hurt, and anger subsided, Palmisano wondered how this tragedy could have been prevented. One word came to mind: certification.



First Blood Photo Courtesy of Conrad Palmisano

Decades later, Palmisano is a member of the Board of Directors for SAG/AFTRA (along with Julie Michaels and Jane Austin) representing the stunt community and stunt coordinators who, since 1981, have been fighting for a qualification system to help guarantee stunt coordinators (as well as other departments involved in safety) have some film experience before they are allowed to make safety decisions.

They dubbed it the A, B & R system. New entrants would start with an “R” – meaning restricted from coordinating and only allowed to do stunts with an “A”-rated coordinator. Three years with a certain number of jobs would move the stuntperson up to class “B” (set up personal stunts with no other performer involved). “At five years and a certain number of jobs, you could get an ‘A,’ which allows you to become a full-fledged coordinator,” Palmisano states.

The proposal passed nationally within SAG and moved to AMPTP, where it died because it was deemed “too hard for women and minorities.” to advance. Longtime Stunt Coordinator/Stuntman Jack Gill (*Ride Along 2*, *Fast and Furious 7*) says it’s time to petition SAG/AFTRA to reconsider such a tier system.

“The AD department in the DGA has a substantial tier system,” Gill points out. “The Special Effects department has a substantial tier system. If any business should have a work-based tier system, the stunt business should be the first in line.”

Gill mentions another loophole the industry faces (which would also benefit from a tier system), called “stunt coordinator match,” where American productions go out of the country and are required to hire a stunt coordinator from that country.

“In some instances, not all, the ‘match’ has no real duties, other than that he or she gets a credit,” Gill describes. “Big action film. Credit. An easy hire on other films because of that



Stunt Coordinator/ Stunt Performer Conrad Palmisano leading a safety meeting on the set of *Romeo Must Die* / Courtesy of Kharen Hill



Stunt Coordinator/Performer and Vice President of The Stuntman's Association Jeff Wolfe with director John Showalter on the set of *Revolution* / Courtesy of Jeff Wolfe



Courtesy of Jack Gill

credit, without knowing if that person is truly qualified. A tier system would prevent that from happening. That 'match' would have to be a qualified coordinator."

Stunt experts insist safety is all about vigilance and communication. The stunt coordinator for *The Dark Knight Rises*, Pat Romano, who is President of Stunts Unlimited, recalls how "not too long ago a commercial director brought in a friend who was supposed to be a stuntman for a bust through a TV set to look inside a room. The 1st AD didn't like what the guy was setting up and told the producer. The producer called me. I got to the set and said, 'No.' The director fought me, insisting his friend knew what he was doing. Finally, I called Universal. 'You have to come here,' I insisted. Safety came to the stage. 'You aren't doing it that way on my lot,' I said. The stunt came back to me."

Discussions like Romano describes go on all the time, and that's a very good thing, as they encourage more caution in an inherently dangerous area of production. And while most major-studio safety guidebooks list the 1st AD as being in charge of maintaining overall set safety, in reality no one person can properly monitor all areas, as 1st AD Alan B. Curtiss (*Master and Commander*, *The Perfect Storm*) explains.

"I rely on a small committee of talented people around me – stunt coordinator, special-FX coordinator and either the key grip or gaffer, depending upon the specific dynamics of the production," Curtiss explains. "But even with this input, there are always two incredibly important ingredients needed: preparation and communication. Without either of these, the potential for problems is heightened, and the door can open to accidents and



Promo film from RED/3ality for Produced By Conference / Dawn McElhane in chair / David Morizot next to her / Hooded bad guys are Jaye Paul-Jefferson Cox Brennan Dyso / David Dragun / Courtesy of Co-Stunt Coordinator Chip Mefford



Courtesy of Co-Stunt Coordinator Chip Mefford

injuries that no one wants to see.”

Another part of stunt work where communication and control aren’t what they could or can be relates to productions leaving California due to film incentives. “This can lead to working with crew members or even stunt personnel who do not have the proper experience and safety training,” Curtiss remarks.

Emmy-winning Stunt Coordinator/Stuntman/Actor and Vice President of The Stuntman’s Association Jeff Wolfe (*Bolden!*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Captain America*) knows that scenario well. Wolfe says productions not only get breaks with tax incentives, but they can save money by hiring local. “The issue arises when the local hires aren’t able to bring the same experience of safety to the set,” Wolfe describes.

“Your [lead actor or actress] is worth millions,” he continues. “If he/she goes down from an injury, your production is shut down, and everyone relying on this film/TV show is out of a job. In 42 episodes of *Revolution*, we flipped wagons, had lead actors fighting 20 people at a time with swords and more, and no one got hurt – because we hired the best people for the job: some local, some we brought in.”

Wolfe says he has no problem saying no. And the powers that be listen. Recently he did a television show where the director wanted the actress to hold a gun with a blank and pass it in front of another actor’s face, then

shoot a third actor.

“I said no. And gave him some other options,” Wolfe reports. “But he threw a tantrum. I grabbed the box of blanks and showed him the sticker in the front that states a 20 feet minimum distance to the other side of that firing weapon. Five minutes later, the camera operator came up and thanked me – considering he was going to be on the other side of that firing weapon.”

Adequate prep time is another safety sticking point, particularly in the schedule-challenged world of episodic television. Stunt Coordinator/Fight Choreographer David M. Morizot recounts an episode from Season One of *The Originals*, for which he was creating a fight that was supposed to look like the lead actor, a hybrid vampire/werewolf, facing off against 80 hostile vampires.

“How do you create a safe, simple, effective, story-telling fight in a time frame that doesn’t break the bank?” Morizot asks. “We cast about 17 stunt people, asked the wardrobe department to give them two different looks of wardrobe and then rehearsed, got directorial and production notes, refined, taught the lead actor, and prepared the necessary wire gags. We coordinated the action between the stunt performers and filled out any empty spaces strategically, with background actors. And we communicated to make sure everyone was safe.”



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Stunt Performer Debbie Evans in front of the 2014 Dodge Challenger from the Monarch Pass, Colorado set of *Furious Seven* / Courtesy of Debbie Evans

But not all projects take that message to heart. Just ask stunt driver Debbie Evans (*Monster Trucks*, *Fast and Furious 6* and *Furious Seven*, *Captain America*), who is a survivor of a stunt gone wrong because the schedule to execute the stunt had been so drastically truncated – to less than 90 seconds – after the 2nd-unit team had been working all night long.

“The time and scheduling priority for stunt work has always been frustrating to our community,” Evans shares. “Productions often will run the same take with the [first unit] actors over and again, at the expense of the time the crew and stunt performers need to safely plan and complete their job. By the time they are ready for us to do the stunt, it can be the most dangerous part of the day, when the sun is going down [or coming up]. There’s just no need to push the most critical part of the production, from a safety standpoint, to the very end of the day.”

Evans says stunt performers feel the pressure and they need the support of other departments. “Often times when I reach the car, the grip and camera department have already set their equipment,” she continues. “And that might not always be the optimal spot for the stunt performer’s safety. It would be great if we could get into the car before all the other gear is placed to give some feedback, and in advance of lighting, too, so we’re not presented with this finished scenario, where there’s no time left to make adjustments based on our own personal experience and safety concerns.”

President of the Stuntmen’s Association and stunt coordinator J. Mark Donaldson (*J. Edgar*, *The Road*) notes how crews often depend on stunt professionals to be markers of potential dangers on set. “Most stunt people watch for any safety dangers as part of the job,” Donaldson offers. “If you trace accidents that have happened on set many can be traced back to a breakdown in communications. It is a very hard thing to say no to production, but as the coordinator, you have to be willing to take a stand on the safety side for everyone involved.”

Armstrong insists that most major accidents happen “through stupidity and a lack of perspective of what could happen. Sometimes you just have to say no. Not just the stunt coordinator. Not just the 1st AD. But anyone involved who sees something wrong.

“There is an old adage,” he continues, “that there is no animal on earth more dangerous than a weak man. We can’t be weak when it comes to someone’s life. I look at Sarah Jones and see my daughter and other young women and men starting out in the movie business. [Sarah] signed on to work with cameras and learn the moviemaking business, not for a life-threatening undertaking. Too many people say, ‘It’s not my job,’ when in truth, when it comes to people’s lives, it’s everyone’s job to be responsible. This is especially true of any head of department. Nobody should die to make a movie.” 🎬

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