

Fall Girl

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Last year was a doozy for Lee O'Shaughnessy: she was shot at, fell off a ship and had a close call with a skidding motorbike. And those were the good days. Not your average year perhaps but when your resume notes your ability to be a human torch then you come to expect the unexpected. She has also traded blows with a flying alien, been set upon by vampires and tackled by AFL player, Troy Simmons. Being a 'stuntie' has its perks but a quiet life isn't one of them.

You may have seen Lee briefly while watching your favourite soapie, mini series or feature film: Remember Janea in Neighbours near drowning (only near! shame), Susie Porter swimming in East of Everything, Able Seaman Rebecca "Bomber" Brown going head over epaulette off the side of the ship in Sea Patrol - all Lee.

Petite, blonde and with a voice often mistaken for a child's over the phone, there is no mistaking her moxie as she explains a recent stunt for McLeod's Daughters "the car was rolling down the hill and I was sitting in the passenger side," she says. "There was nobody driving it so I had to steer from the passenger side with my leg over the console on the brake. I had to do a head-on collision into a tree and there was a cliff on the other side of the tree so I had to make sure I hit the tree in the middle of the bullbar."

I know she is a highly trained stunt woman but I still ask if she was scared: "It was a bit disconcerting knowing that in order to stay safe I had to hit the tree head-on which goes against your instincts," she says, "so you have to over-ride that and stay focused enough that when you hit the tree you have to let go of the steering wheel because it is going to spin around and you don't want to get your hand caught."

Says Lee: "The thing is to remain very present – your instinct kicks in and then it is all over and you just get this amazing heightened sense of reality. At that point the stunt coordinator came over and asked me if I was ok. I got out of the car and the director gave me a big hug and said "you're a nut bar." It was a good moment."

Losing your identity to the actor you are doubling for; taking the risk while they take the glory seems like the rough end of the cinematic pineapple but for this self confessed "show pony" it is all part of the job. "It is a job where all ego goes out the door and you give away your identity to work," she says. "The first job I had, they cut my hair short and died it brown and I was fine with that - you are willing to do anything like that to get the job because it is just the most fun you can have."

Lee is currently one of 27 accredited stunt women working in the Australian industry nationally and in WA she is on her lonesome. There are fewer action scenes written for women but far more men are drawn to the thrills and spills of stunt work. The ratio's have so far been working in her favour. They used to put wigs on men (there are an awful

lot of cat fights in cinema history with strangely broad-shouldered women) and sometimes they still do, but the real deal is always easier on the editor.

She has returned home to Western Australia to double for Andie MacDowell in the upcoming WA feature *Temper, Blood, Fury* due to start filming in September. After living and training in Queensland for the past 3 years, being close to her family in WA is a priority and Lee intends to base herself here confident that her contacts will ensure continued work both locally and nationally. Stunt work can be lucrative but the sporadic nature of it means that most have to work outside the industry to survive financially. Lee works at a nursery in Mount Barker to support her passion.

Day rates for television are around \$500 per day, features can reach \$1200 and commercials are usually higher. There can be additional loading for the degree of difficulty of stunts and the number of times they have to be performed. Stunt workers must have their own personal and public liability insurance.

Lee had nine jobs last year; a highlight being the feature movie, *Daybreakers*, a vampire flick shot in Queensland starring Ethan Hawke and Willam Dafoe due for release in 2009. She got shot with a cross-bow by a vampire and thinks her face (in its death throes) may pop up briefly on screen as she hits the gravel of a studio-built quarry (yes she did get a little gravel rash). She also swam through an eel infested lake in the middle of the night for *Killer Croc* feature, *Rogue* and dove out of the way of a skidding motorbike for Bollywood (via Queensland) film *Singh is King*. The tackle by AFL player, Troy Simmons was for a BankWest commercial and she had to reassure him that she was tougher than she looked.

Lee came to the profession relatively late (she is now 34) with a grab bag of physical proficiencies that began with gymnastics training as a child and morphed into teaching at a circus training school in Fremantle. It was an out-of-the-blue phone call to the school, requesting someone do a back flip out of a tree for a childrens television drama (Barron Films Parallax) that set her thinking. "When I did it, it was a piece of cake and everyone clapped. I was a bit taken aback...a bit of appreciation. I thought well it's alright to be able to do these things but you might as well do it for a purpose." A pay slip that identified her role as "Veronica Ninja stunt double" was the clincher.

Lee immediately investigated getting her ticket through the MEAA (Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance) grading committee which requires you to prove competency in 5 areas (water, height, body control, animals and vehicles). 18 months later after taking numerous training courses from sky diving to horse riding, Lee qualified as stunt action personnel although it was only the beginning of her journey. (Stunt grading has various levels from action personnel to stunt coordinator which can take up to ten years to complete.)

She then spent three years in Queensland taking courses at a stunt training facility - FIST (Film Industry Stunt training) to hone her skills and gain further expertise. In her year she was the only woman amongst 20 men.

The training at FIST focused on protecting the body in the best way. “We did the same sort of basics over and over – brake falls, shoulder rolls, barrel rolls – many of which come from martial arts training,” she says. “When it comes to the crunch on any stunt all you can do is protect your body and because you have practiced these falls over and over it sinks into your body memory.”

Even though her training certificates including tractor license, motorbike license, advanced and stunt driving, sky diving, open water diving, springboard diving, horse riding, full body torch course (I could go on) are a necessary part of the “jack of all trades” nature of being a stuntie, it is probably safe to say that stunt workers are born not made. When it comes to setting yourself on fire or purposely driving your car headlong into a tree you either got it or you ain’t. (Lee’s brother is a tow-in surfer so perhaps it is in the genes).

But it takes more than a daredevil streak and a risk takers DNA to work effectively in the profession. Stunt work used to be about cowboys (both the horse riding kind and the generally unqualified loose nuts who would do anything for a buck) and for many it was a short lived ride. Today safety and maturity are paramount. Safety checks and systems are used to back up extensively trained individuals. Stunt workers are taught first and foremost that they have the final word and should walk away if they have any concerns. Says Lee “Always at the end of the day if you don’t feel safe about anything you just have to put your hand up and stop and say I am not prepared to do this and that is your call.” To date, apart from a sprained ankle and bruising Lee has not been injured but she says there is no desire to unnecessarily push her luck.

“Normally you would work with a stunt rigger or a stunt coordinator or a stunt safety person - it is really their job to assess it, set it up and make sure you have the ability to perform it,” she says. “Occasionally you do get asked to do things without these things in place and you could say yes but if you slip and land on the concrete that is your own problem. You need to know that someone is thinking about what could go wrong and you yourself are always thinking of the variables and what you would do in each circumstance.”

Lee believes that it is that mental control that is crucial “It’s really what counts,” she says. “It is not that you can jump and do somersaults in the air, it is the fact that you can remain calm under pressure and keep your cool and just be clear in situations that are potentially dangerous. That is why I think doing stunts in your thirties is a lot more appropriate than in your twenties because you have that maturity of mind ...you are not going to freak out.”

She says her dream stunt is to hang backwards out of a speeding Monaro doubling for Drew Barrymore. Drew can take the glory; Lee gets the adrenaline rush and the residuals.

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