

## Fight Like Girls: The Stuntwomen of Bond

In their 2015 article on stuntwomen, Miranda J. Banks and Lauren Steimer argue that the figure of the stunt double is subjected to a process of erasure throughout the production of the action film or series and most certainly in popular press accounts that promote the idea of stars (both male and female) as the performers of their own stunts. This erasure is also evident in the comparative lack of scholarly work on the labour-intensive – and often life-threatening – contributions made by stunt performers to the on-screen fantasy of the kick-ass action star.

The Bond franchise has seen its female characters increasingly defined by their all-action credentials and, consequently, the size of the stunt team has grown with a higher number of female stunt performers being included. This article looks at how stuntwomen have contributed to the spectacle of the Bond franchise, including driver Jessica Hawkins and the much-in-demand Marie Mouroum, both of whom worked on *No Time To Die* (2021). As behind-the-scenes footage of most action franchises becomes more available and often forms part of the marketing of franchise cinema, including the Bond films, the concept of erasure will be examined in relation to these contemporary contexts of production. The increased diversity of action heroines also opens up sites of exploration around women of colour as part of these production processes, both on-screen and behind the scenes.

Keywords: Action heroine; stuntwoman; stunt double; doubling; wiggling; painting down; Marie Mouroum; Jessica Hawkins; erasure; bodies

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Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Tiger Lilli Rudge and Annie Lees-Jones for their generosity in providing me with invaluable insights into the experiences of women stunt performers and coordinators in the industry.

## **Fight Like Girls: The Stuntwomen of Bond**

One of the – many – pleasures afforded by the Bond franchise, and action cinema more widely, is the spectacular action set pieces that are central to the genre. Trailers for any given Bond film foreground the extravagant, propulsive action as much as the character and narrative. The official trailer for *No Time to Die* (2021) highlights the core emotional beats of the coming film – James Bond’s (Daniel Craig) complex relationships with Blofeld (Christoph Waltz) and Madeleine Swann (Lea Seydoux), the intimations of his own mortality – but is bookended with the sort of action sequences that are central to the franchise’s appeal. The trailer begins and ends with a high-speed car chase through Matera, complete with the expected pyrotechnics and a jump from a high bridge. Clips from numerous fight sequences featuring Bond (Daniel Craig) increase in frequency towards the end of the trailer, along with fight sequences featuring fellow MI6 agent Nomi (Lashana Lynch) and CIA operative Paloma (Ana de Armas).

As with all action cinema, the editing of these sequences maintains the illusion that the actors themselves are responsible for any and all of the impressive and physically challenging stunts that the audience sees: this raises issues around the idea of authenticity, an ongoing debate in film studies more generally, but takes on a specific resonance in action films where the genre’s stars are frequently positioned and foregrounded as being physically capable and fearless, with the implication that they are performing many if not all of their high-risk stunts themselves. Masking the presence of the stunt performer is, therefore, a necessary part of building and maintaining the diegetic film world and this masking has long been part of the film industry’s production processes. As Mollie Gregory points out in her comprehensive history of stuntwomen in Hollywood, stunt performers, along with a variety of production personnel including designers and technical crew are ‘below the line’, meaning that their contributions are not viewed as being directly linked to the creative direction of a film (2015: 29). For all stunt performers, this erasure is part of the work; however, for women there has historically been further erasure, with male performers often doubling for female stars and performers of colour have long seen work going to white performers in black- or yellowface. The work done by Miranda J. Banks and Lauren Steimer (2015) on stuntwomen and the processes of erasure that have been particularly relevant to the experience of women in this line of work is crucial to the framing of my argument. Yvonne Tasker’s seminal book, *Spectacular Bodies* (1993), is also central to identifying how women have been positioned with the narratives of action cinema. This article has been greatly shaped and informed by interviews with stunt directors Annie Lees-Jones and Tiger Lilli Rudge, whose experiences and insights

provide invaluable understanding about production practices, especially in relation to women in the film industry. As behind-the-scenes footage of most action franchises becomes more available and often forms part of the marketing of franchise cinema, including the Bond films, this article will examine the concept of erasure in relation to the contemporary contexts of production. The increased diversity of action heroines also opens up sites of exploration around women of colour as part of these production processes, both on-screen and behind the scenes.

### **A Brief History of Cinema Stunts**

The stunt performer has their origins in the daredevils or ‘thrill makers’ (Smith 2012: 9) of the nineteenth century. In his examination of the history of stunt performers in early and pre-cinema, Jacob Smith identifies the lion tamers, bridge-jumpers and human flies who were media celebrities in their day and who often went on to work as stunt performers in the early days of cinema; he points to a 1916 article appearing in the *New York Tribune* that detailed the work of the ‘Stunt Men’s Club’, whose members were responsible for doubling for Hollywood stars during scenes that included stunts (ibid.). While the presence of the stunt performer was highlighted as far back as 1916, it was still many years before stunt performers were widely recognised: ‘stunt persons began as extras, with the ability to perform a stunt little more than a requirement for being an extra, along with the ability to dance or to ride a horse. But by the 1930s these stunt persons had become screen performers in their own right’ (Slide 2012: 8).

Stunt work as a masculine space was established early on, all the way back to the pioneering thrill makers. Smith’s history establishes that the overwhelming majority of the early stunt performers were men, with women featuring in only a handful of acts, usually as human flies or lion tamers, the latter facing scepticism about their ability to control the animals but also ‘praised for entering what was considered to be a male sphere of dangerous activity’ (2012: 80). The implication, as identified by Smith, is that courage and physical strength and ability were inherently masculine attributes that women could not match. The very name ‘Stunt Men’s Club’ highlights the fact that the dangerous, physically demanding work of the stunt performer was understood to be a wholly male endeavour. However, what is ironic is that in those early, pioneering years of silent cinema in Hollywood, many of the most fearless stunts were performed by women. Female emancipation in the USA ran parallel with technological developments such as the motorcar. In silent cinema, the image of motorcars being driven at recklessly high speeds by young women became a potent signifier of modernity and female competence and ability in all spheres:

Racing, crashing, and overturning cars became essential to movie production, and major stars like petite Mary Pickford set the pace. Who wouldn't be impressed by "America's Sweetheart" leaning into a curve as she hit fifty miles an hour or Helen Gibson hunched over on her speeding motorcycle? A surprising number of silent movie actresses were fully engaged in the action.

(Gregory 2015: 10)

Mary Pickford performed 'Hollywood's first great car chase' (Drew 1997) in the 1908 film *A Beast at Bay*. Helen Gibson was the star of *The Hazards of Helen* (1914-7), a weekly serial that followed the adventurous exploits of the titular Helen and included the incredibly dangerous stunt of jumping from a roof of a station and onto the roof of a moving train. As film historian Anthony Slide has pointed out, the major serial stars of the silent era were all female (1996: 2), physically fearless and frequently rescuing their male co-stars. Movie stars such as Pickford and Mabel Normand (producers both, as well as commanding screen presences) were often filmed driving their cars at high-speed and at a time when these sequences could not be replicated in a studio and certainly had no computer-generated imagery (CGI), these women performed their stunts themselves. Far more female stars of the silent era had their own production companies than their male counterparts. Female power lay both behind and in front of the camera, and the audience demand for daring feats performed by modern women ensured that stunts were performed either by the actresses themselves or by their doubles (who frequently became stars in their own right) dominated the screens. However, as the Hollywood film industry hardened into the studio system, women found themselves locked out of positions that they had previously held both above and below the line on productions - including as stunt performers. By the 1930s, the number of stuntwomen had dwindled to the point that when Lila Finn was hired to double for Dorothy Lamour in *The Hurricane* (1937), she recalls there being only ten other women working as stunt doubles in Hollywood (Slide 2012: 138). Yet, despite this lack of female stunt performers working in the industry, female characters were still shown to drive fast cars, jump from high places, ride, swim and fight. This demand did not result in dramatically increased opportunities for female stunt performers; rather, the solution to the problem was usually to give the job to a man and put him in a wig. The replacing of female bodies with male (known as 'wiggling') and having white stunt workers doubling for performers of colour ('painting down') became long-standing industrial practices that have added troubling layers to the already multifaceted figure of the double.

### **'Double' Trouble**

'Double', the word often used in relation to the stunt performer for a star, is an ambiguous one. The term has been used interchangeably, albeit erroneously, with 'stand-in': the stand-in usually replaces the star for technical processes such as lighting tests, while the double appears in front of the camera, replacing the star in long-shots or sometimes pick-ups where close-ups of the star's face are not needed. The double, therefore, is not automatically a stunt double and the lack of clarity in this area – and longstanding practices of not giving screen credits to stunt performers, or hiding their contributions behind titles such as 'double' - means that it is easier for the work of the stunt performer to be erased. This erasure is necessary onscreen in order to maintain the believability of the story world; however, it also links directly to the notion of authenticity, especially in relation to the action star. There is, after all, something appealing about the notion that the stunts we are seeing are actually being performed by the star, that they are as courageous and physically adept as the characters they play. The ambiguity around doubling, therefore, allows for the illusion of authenticity to be promoted. The philosopher Denis Dutton identifies authenticity as being a dimension word, 'a term whose meaning remains uncertain until we know what dimension of its referent is being talked about' (2003: 258). Dutton further distinguishes two stands of authenticity: nominal authenticity, which is determined by the object's verification as being truly what it claims to be; and expressive authenticity, which is a more ambiguous concept and is predicated on a 'fusion of object and representation' (Banks 2012: 161). This latter identification is, arguably, more relevant to film which is, by its nature, concerned with the representation of people and objects both real and imaginary. Yvonne Tasker's work on action cinema (1993) has foregrounded the importance of the physicality of the action star. Muscularity and the appearance of physical prowess has long been a key aspect of the visual appeal of the genre, as well as central to the believability of the character. The action star, therefore, needs to have the appropriately athletic body to sell the idea that their character is truly capable of performing the feats seen on screen: the fusion of the object (the body) and the idea that they represent (the action hero or heroine). The practical effects of which stunt work is a part are, similarly, central to the construction of the believability of the filmic world. The increased use of CGI as opposed to purely practical effects in contemporary cinema feeds into discussions around authenticity, with questions around how films can retain authenticity – in the sense of expressive authenticity – when the artifice of much CGI is very apparent. Production design that incorporates the flaws and dirt of real life is one way of constructing a 'tangible reality' (Russell 2022) for audiences, a judicious blend of CGI and practical effects is another (ibid.) For audiences, therefore, the knowledge that we are looking at a series of stunt doubles running through CGI backdrops can

be potentially off-putting. Film is engaged with the mediation of reality (or authenticity) and action cinema and its stars appear keen so offer audiences some sort of tangible relationship with ‘reality’. The release of behind the scenes footage that is part of the marketing for the majority of action films and franchises often place emphasis on the practical effects and this clearly demonstrated in the release of and publicity around the Bond films.

One of the stand-out scenes in *No Time to Die* comes as Bond and Madeleine Swann, in a Toyota Land Cruiser, are chased by a squad of goons in Land Rover Defenders. In 2018 the British racing car driver Jess Hawkins answered a Facebook advert looking for skilled drivers (Goulding 2021). It turned out to be a talent search for drivers for what would be *Fast & Furious Live* - which is exactly what the name implies: stunts from the *Fast & Furious* franchise performed as part of a live show. Her participation in the show as one of the drivers performing the stunts led to Hawkins being recruited as part of the stunt team to work on *No Time to Die*. A behind the scenes featurette released by Land Rover (Land Rover Australia 2021) includes shots from the film as well as footage of the stunt team, including Hawkins, driving the cars over rough terrain. The commentary from the Stunt Co-ordinator, Location Manager and Action Vehicle Supervisor emphasises the authenticity of the stunts, that these are practical effects rather than CGI, with the real cars being driven by real people. The featurettes does also, inadvertently, highlight two issues: one is the practice of doubling and how it links to the question of authenticity; and the other is the presence of female stunt workers in sequences where a performer’s gender is immaterial.

**(Figure 1 Here)**

First, the doubling. Throughout the featurette, we see the stunt driver performing the actual stunt; during the editing process the close-up shots of Daniel Craig are inserted to create the illusion that it is Craig - in the person of James Bond - who is doing the driving. Developments in technology mean that this process of erasure of the stunt performer from the diegetic world of the film is no longer only about editing. A picture posted on X (formerly Twitter) in 2021 (Figure 1) shows Jean-Charles Rousseau and Marie Mouroum, stunt performers for Daniel Craig and Lashana Lynch respectively, on the set of *No Time to Die* with tracking markers on their faces so that the features of the two stars can be digitally mapped onto them during post-production (James Bond Stunt Doubles 007: 2021b). These production and post-production processes allow for a more seamless integration of the body of the star and that of the stunt worker, yet it is one that elides and erases the stunt performer with increasing efficiency. The erasure of the stunt performer is not just confined to the diegetic world of the film: for many years in the film industry, the presence of the stunt performer was underplayed

to the extent that their very existence was often denied. As Mollie Gregory argues in her work on stuntwomen in Hollywood:

The use of doubles developed to protect stars from injury, but since this arrangement was a trade secret, it enhanced the stars' box-office appeal. For example, because a sixty-foot dive off a boat appeared to be done by the star, the actor reaped the benefits.

(2015: 36)

Efforts to render the stunt performer and their work invisible even went so far as to hide the work of the stunt performers from each other: multiple takes of the same scene would be filmed with different stunt performers, doubles and the star themselves so that when the finished piece was screened, the participants themselves could not always be certain whose version they were looking at (ibid.: 37). As noted in the introduction, the work of stunt performers is classified as being 'below-the-line', part of the teams of technical staff who bring the film to life but have no direct impact on the creative and artistic world of the film. The blurring of lines around the figure of the stunt performer and the ambiguous term 'double' hides the - literally - active part that the stunt performer plays in the creation of a character.

For example, the hit TV series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001) foregrounded actress Lucy Lawless as an all-action heroine. When Lawless was injured in 1996 while recording a skit for *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno* (1992-2009) - she fell from a horse, fracturing her pelvis - reports soon went out that when she returned to set, doubles would be handling the stunts for her, the implication being that up until that point she had been doing the stunt work herself. The truth was that it took - and always had taken - Lawless plus a team of six stunt performers and body doubles to bring Xena to life (Banks and Steimer 2015: 144). Given that the very title of the series positioned Xena as warrior, a seasoned and experienced fighter, the TV series naturally put a premium on extensive action sequences and the spectacle of Xena demolishing countless (usually male) enemies was part of the series' appeal. While the role of the stunt performers and doubles was openly discussed at conventions, this was not matched in the press coverage of *Xena* and the profiles given of Lawless herself. This is not a unique situation, but rather is reflective of the wider attitude towards action heroines and the women who play them. As Banks and Steimer argue,

While the actor might be adored for her looks or her dramatic abilities, it is the stunt double's body, a body that seemingly jumps over fences, kicks a man across a room, and fights to the death with multiple opponents, that is integral to the visual pleasures derived from these visceral spectacles. But in the media's coverage of

action-adventure programmes, it is the star, not the double who is celebrated as the vigorous, heroic performer.

(ibid.: 145)

As stunt performers have unionised and receive better recognition and representation, along with an increase of behind-the-scenes videos and stills released on social media, the stunt performer has become more visible and acknowledged. But this idea of authenticity is still an appealing one and the idea of an actor performing their own stunts frequently becomes part of the marketing of a film, especially in action movies.

**(Figure 2 Here)**

It would be almost impossible to look at stunt work and action cinema and the star without mentioning Tom Cruise. Much of the pre-publicity for the seventh instalment in the *Mission Impossible* (1996-present) franchise, *Mission Impossible: Dead Reckoning - Part One* (2023), centred on the ‘death-defying’ (Sharf 2023) motorcycle stunt that sees Cruise’s character Ethan Hunt drive off a cliff and going into freefall before parachuting to safety. The actor’s insistence on performing his own stunts is well-known and has become one of the draws of the *Mission Impossible* franchise - the thrill of seeing a well-known action star actually performing the action himself. But, possibly due to the historically secretive role of the stunt performer, there is still a certain amount of scepticism as well as fascination with Cruise’s stunt work. In June 2023 a photograph purportedly of three of Cruise’s stunt doubles celebrating at a party after the premiere of *Mission Impossible 7* went viral (Figure 2). The photo, however, is a fake, part of a set created by the artist Ong Hui Woo using the AI generator Midjourney (Sengupta 2023). The image of the star and the stunt performer, especially in action cinema, becomes inextricably intertwined - and these fabricated images of the Tom Cruise stunt doubles and the speed with which they were accepted as genuine, also points to the expectations that we as the audience have around how action cinema works and that the stunt performer is an integral part of creating a character and maintaining their ability to perform fantastic feats. While Cruise’s work on the stunts is documented, there are still stunt doubles involved in their creation, in part to design and choreograph the stunts and in part due to the demands of insurers who issue complex policies and demand high premiums based on the nature of the risks involved (Esola 2009). An article in *Newsweek* estimated that the insurance premiums for *Mission Impossible: Dead Reckoning Part One* would have been around \$9.7 million – not all of it just on Cruise, but given his hands-on approach and age a significant amount would be charged as a premium (Burton 2023). Publicity around the star is quick to assure (or reassure) audiences that the stunt performers are only involved in technical checks – the work of a stand-in – and not doing the



work of stunt doubling (Diggins 2023). Issues of erasure are, therefore, also true for male stunt performers as well as women; but as previously discussed, women stunt performers have historically faced erasure not just on screen but from the practice of wiggling that removes the female body as part of the production process. Men doubling for women was only denounced by the Screen Actors Guild in the late 1960s (Gregory 2012: 29), yet the practice continued until a lawsuit was filed in 2018 to put an end to it (Carroll 2018).

### **Authenticity and the Female Action Body**

I discussed at the start of this article the behind-the-scenes footage from *No Time to Die* and how it relates to two key areas: one is the ongoing discussion around authenticity; the other is the presence of Jessica Hawkins behind the wheel as one of the stunt drivers. In the final film her presence, as with all stunt drivers, is rendered invisible. However, that she is there at all is unusual in an industry where male stunt performers have predominated, even in positions that could be taken by women. As Banks and Steimer point out, female performers are routinely overlooked, especially in the creation of sequences where there is no close-up of a star, meaning that there is no specific physicality that needs to be matched:

These kinds of stunts, where the camera is at a great distance from the stunt person, are not sex, race, or age specific, and yet, these jobs have historically gone to young white men. Even in films and television programmes starring mostly women or minorities, the stunt coordinator was generally a white male.

(2015: 148)

Of the drivers involved in the chase sequences in *No Time to Die*, Hawkins is the only one who is foregrounded in the publicity materials – it is not explicitly stated that her gender is the reason, but given that she is the only female driver involved it is difficult to ignore the sense that she is being viewed as something of a novelty in the press coverage.

As one of the longest-running action film franchises in the world, part of the visual pleasure of the Bond films is predicated on the visceral thrill derived from viewing the spectacular action set-pieces and the illusion of genuine danger that is created by the stunt teams. As the discussion around the filming and presentation of the Defender chase scene makes explicit, there is still an emphasis in both the behind-the-scenes clips and the publicity on the authenticity of the practical effects and the physicality of the stars; in the case of *No Time to Die* on Lashana Lynch and Ana De Armas in particular. One of the featurettes posted as part of the publicity for the DVD/Blu-Ray release shines the spotlight on the two women

and their heavy involvement in the film's action sequences (Collider Exclusives 2021). The short features sequences of both actors rehearsing their fight choreography and these are juxtaposed with the finished sequences from the released film. Director Cary Joji Fukunaga praises Lynch's physicality, noting specifically her speed and precision, while Lynch herself talks about the daily training in weapons and combat that she underwent in preparation for the role. De Armas emphasises her drilling in weapons handling, saying: 'Paloma uses three different guns, she runs with them, she changes them in action... I really wanted to get it right, and look like I know what I was doing.' Videos posted on de Armas' Instagram feed show the actor rehearsing her character's fight sequences. In an interview for *Screen Rant* (2021), Lynch details her audition for *No Time to Die*, which included a test of her physical abilities:

It was a stunt test like no other. They set up maybe five different scenarios, whereby you had to change a clip of magazines, run out of ammo, grab another gun, change the magazine on that, load up, run across the room, roll on your back. It was like an assault course as a test for a movie.

(Bentz 2021)

That this was called for in an audition highlights that there is an expectation on the part of the filmmakers that action stars, both male and female, will be capable of performing their own fight sequences and their ability and willingness to do so feeds into the narrative around the authenticity of what is being presented on screen.

There is no doubt that both Lynch and de Armas did perform some of the highly choreographed fights; and with the further publicity around their training regimes, the focus and discourse within the publicity materials still maintains that implication that the stars are doing all of the stunt work themselves, thereby reassuring the viewers of the authenticity of the action. However, this is not the entire story. In an interview for *Time* (Begley 2015) stunt performer Bobby Hanton states that 'there are so many actors I've worked with who love to do their own stunts, and they're very good at it and more than capable.' He cites production insurance – as previously noted in relation to Tom Cruise – and fears around injury as being a main reason for actors not undertaking more stunt work, 'because if they get injured and the show goes down, then potentially people are losing money. We're replaceable, as horrible as it sounds, stunt performers can be replaced, but the actors can't' (ibid.). The more complex and dangerous stunts are, therefore, still undertaken by stunt performers and this is true for *No Time to Die*.

In September 2020, the X account James Bond Stunt Doubles 007 posted images of actress and stunt performer Marie Mouroum, with the caption, 'Marie Mouroum is the stunt

double of Lashana Lynch in *No Time to Die* and also in the new Nokia Commercial' (2020). The Nokia advert has Lynch reprising her role as Nomi, with an emphasis on her as an all-action heroine – jumping off roofs and driving through the streets of London on a motorbike. A *Daily Mail* article (Addo 2020) provides details of the shooting of the advert, including numerous of photographs of Lynch and Mouroum on set, as well as pinpointing the precise moments when Mouroum would take over the action, including riding the motorbike. In an interview with the website *HuntingBond.com*, Mouroum discusses the intensive training over the eight month shoot and the interview highlights the creative input that stunt performers bring to the film world – despite their below-the-line status that ostensibly precludes this, as highlighted earlier:

It means months of practice and really challenging hard work. We filmed for more than 8 months, I was on location at Jamaica, I filmed in a different place in Italy and Scotland, Pinewood Studios in London. The stunt crew practices the moves for several weeks. Then we show our results to the director and he decides, if it fits.

*(HuntingBond.com 2021)*

She further details the necessity of learning to move like a secret agent:

I mean you have to jump and run sometimes with special forces gear on and sometimes have your weapon at hand. It's these kind of tactical movements, that any soldier knows by heart, but a normal person doesn't.

*(ibid.)*

Mouroum and Lynch formed a friendship on set and a photograph of the performers, both in costume as Nomi for the Cuban-set sequence, was posted on X in October 2021 ('James Bond Stunt Doubles 007': 2021a), Mouroum with trackers on her face to allow for the post-production work that will enable her features to be replaced by Lynch's. These articles and interviews point to the fact that Mouroum's involvement in the screen creation of Nomi and the propulsive fight and action sequences was far more extensive than the official publicity would allow; in fact, the presence of Mouroum is wholly overlooked and effectively erased from the official publicity profiles of the stars and the behind the scenes features, leaving audiences (deliberately or not is not a question that can be answered here) with the impression that Lynch was wholly and solely responsible for all of the physical fights and stunts of her character.

These changes in the expectations around female characters and the women who play them are reflective of the shifts in action cinema as a whole. Women taking central roles in

action cinema is not new; as Tasker points out, there is a tradition of placing women at the heart of action narratives that stretches back to the 1970s (1993: 3). That tradition on television goes back to at least the 1960s, with characters such as Cathy Gale (Honor Blackman), Emma Peel (Diana Rigg)<sup>1</sup> and Tara King (Linda Thorson) in the series *The Avengers* (1961-9) taking on as much, if not more, of the action sequences as their male colleague, John Steed (Patrick Macnee). The production powerhouse that is Marvel Studios initially focused on male superheroes during the first three phases<sup>2</sup>, with their female counterparts largely being relegated to supporting roles – Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson) in *Iron Man II* (2010) and Peggy Carter (Hayley Atwell) in *Captain American: The First Avenger* (2011) are clear examples. However, the number of vehicles on both cinema and the streaming platform Disney+ that are female-led has risen dramatically, starting with *Captain Marvel* (2019) and seen more recently in the limited series *Echo* (2024). In the Bond franchise, the popularity of Ana de Armas' character, Paloma, in particular led to an almost immediate call for her to have her own spin-off film (Gunning 2022); the fan and critical response to Paloma demonstrating the desire for strong showcases for action heroines in contemporary action cinema.

The attitude towards and expectations of the female leads in action parallels the evolution of the 'Bond Girl' herself – although, these evolutions may not be as comprehensive as we might like to think. Robert A. Caplen argues that in Ian Fleming's original writings, the Bond Girl 'merely served as a vessel through which Bond could enjoy sexual gratification' (2010: 60); he ultimately concludes that the films and the Bond Girls, especially 1979, 'shed significant light upon gender politics and reflect the archetype of a feminine ideal that is relevant to a new, post-feminist generation of audiences' (ibid. :360). The anthology *For His Eyes Only: The Women of Bond* (Funnell, ed. 2015) provides a compelling and comprehensive examination of the ways in which the Bond Girl has been reframed and represented from *Dr No* (1962) to *Skyfall* (2012). More recently, *Resisting James Bond: Power and Privilege in the Daniel Craig Era* (Funnell and Lindner, eds 2023) has identified the enduring problems around sexual violence and female submission and disempowerment in the Craig era, which ultimately 'undermines the assertion/assumption that the representation of women has substantively improved in the series' (Funnell and Lindner 2023: 4). It is interesting to note that of the three women featured in *No Time to Die*, Léa Seydoux's Madeleine Swann has probably received the least attention, despite being the love interest to Bond, the female lead and having considerably more screen time than the twelve minutes given to Paloma. Ana de Armas' ass-kicking turn highlights the changes to the nature of the female characters since the inception of the franchise with *Dr No*. If we think about the history of the Bond Girl, she was very often the

damsel in distress<sup>3</sup> and her physical danger arose out of her proximity to Bond – arguably, this is a role that Madeleine Swann still fulfils in her appearances in both *No Time to Die* and its predecessor *Spectre* (2015). The stunt performers doubling for the Bond Girl in previous iterations of the franchise would usually, therefore, perform stunts that reflect these more ‘passive’ roles as it were - although the stunts themselves were still very dangerous. Stuntwoman Cyd Child<sup>4</sup> sustained injuries to her leg and face while doubling for Cassandra Harris in *For Your Eyes Only* (1981). The sequence is filmed on the beach and includes the point where Countess Lisl (Harris) is hit and killed by a dune buggy – collateral damage as a result of an attack on Bond. What Child highlights in her interviews - and is mentioned by numerous women stunt performers - is that they are often performing these stunts in far skimpier outfits than their male counterparts meaning that there is little to no option for padding; the natural consequence of this is that female stunt workers run far greater risks of sustaining serious injuries. Child’s stunt on the beach was performed while wearing a bikini and filmy beach wrap, allowing for no padding. As she explains during an interview with the BBC in 2022, Child had rehearsed the stunt with a driver, who was replaced at the last moment just before filming (BBC Online, 2022). The dune buggy was moving far faster when it hit her than had been rehearsed, leading to the headlamp being knocked off by her legs and her face smashing the windshield.

The dangers faced by all stunt performers are clear – if there were no danger, there would be no need for skilled professionals trained in gymnastics, martial arts and swordplay – but female stunt performers face all of these dangers usually without the protective padding given to their male counterparts:

“[T]hey tell us to fall down a flight of stairs. Even when a scene calls for long pants they’re usually too tight to allow padding. We’re made more susceptible to bruises, rug burns and splinters than the boys are.”

(Gregory 2015: 100)

That the women are more susceptible to injury is noted by their male colleagues:

“There isn’t a stuntman in the world that would look forward to the work stuntwomen do, because they go down flights of stairs in a bathing suit,” said New York stuntman Vince Cupone. “The men pad up, padding protects you a lot, but nine times out of ten women don’t have that luxury. I know several girls that have done car hits in tight dresses with nothing protecting them from that car except technique. Not only do they work in spite of their wardrobe, they’re in a completely macho field where they have to constantly prove themselves,” he said.

In a personal interview with stunt performer and fight director Annie Lees-Jones, she explained that contemporary padding can be as comparably thin as a pair of exercise leggings but still affords protection (2024); however, even that is not available to stunt women if the character is dressed (or not dressed, as the case may be) to expose a lot of skin.

The tactical gear that forms part of Lynch's costume for Nomi does, at least, provide protection and the possibility of padding for both her and Mouroum; and the costume itself speaks to the different ways in which women in the franchise are positioned. Although, not all are positioned that differently: Paloma's fights are carried out while she's dressed in a slinky, backless evening dress with a thigh-high split. Recent Bond films have placed an increased emphasis on the action credentials of the female characters and the female stars by extension; but there is, perhaps, a feeling that the stars need to 'prove' themselves as action heroines. Much of the publicity around de Armas's recent film *Ghosted* (2023) focused on her having performed her stunts herself; she commented that she is not yet 'at Tom Cruise level' (Rivera 2023), once again pointing to his status within the industry and certainly in action cinema. Despite, or perhaps because of, the ambiguity around the use of stunt workers in action cinema and the resulting ambiguity around the audience's knowledge and expectation of the involvement of stunt performers, the reassurance that the star is ready, willing and able to engage in this dangerous and highly skilled work has become part of the landscape of contemporary action cinema. The rise of the action heroine - and more mainstream acceptance of female-led action spectacles - in the Bond franchise is also notable for the rise of action heroines of colour. Which has the knock-on effect of more stunt performers of colour. The practice of wiggling - men doubling for women - has been discussed here previously but what has not yet been addressed is the longstanding practice of 'painting down': white performers in make-up to double for Black, Brown and Asian stars.

### **Some Industry Perspectives**

While black- or yellowface has long been frowned upon in contemporary cinema and the practice of whitewashing (casting white performers as non-white characters) is recognised as deeply problematic (Brook 2015), the practices of wiggling and painting-down are still enough of an issue that they were addressed in the SAG-AFTRA negotiations in 2023 (Pollock 2023). Part of the issue stems from the organisation of stunt work itself: while most stunt performers in the USA are members of SAG and SEG (Screen Extras Guild), it is the membership of

smaller, private groups that lead to consistent work and the criteria for membership is high (Blistein 2023). In the UK, most active stunt performers are members of the British Stunt Register, the only professional association of industry recognised Stunt Performers and Coordinators in the world ([thebritishstuntregister.com](http://thebritishstuntregister.com)) and as an entry-level, those wishing membership have to be trained and certified in at least six different sporting disciplines – with training costing upwards of £30,000 (Lavelle 2018). That immediately forms a serious barrier to aspiring stunt performers from less privileged backgrounds. In 2018, there were only 70 women members of the British Stunt Register and of those only two were women of colour (ibid.). The Black Stuntmen's Association (BSA) was founded in 1967 in order to protect and promote the interests of Black stunt performers working in Hollywood. One of the founders, Edward 'Eddie' Smith was hired as a stunt coordinator for *Live and Let Die* (1973) and he took pride in being the only African American holding that position on the production (McLellan 2005). Despite Smith's involvement, it was still a male stunt performer who was brought in to double for Gloria Hendry during the relevant sequences for her character Rosie Carver and performed the stunt in blackface and Hendry's wig and costume. In Hendry's account of the production - during an interview for the series *We Need to Talk About Cosby* (2022) - it is clear that there were no women stunt performers available on the production to double for her, let alone a performer of colour. The popularity of the 'blaxploitation' films of the 1970s saw an increased demand for both male and female action stars of colour, and consequently more opportunity for stunt performers of colour to gain traction in the industry (Gregory 2015: 81). However, the tendency for the stunt performer to be male and usually white was still the default position, despite the work of the BSA and the success of a number of its members. During the filming of *A View to a Kill*, two male stunt workers (B.J. Worth and Clive Curtis) were brought in to double for Grace Jones – with the Black British Curtis in particular being cited as being the only stunt performer the production team could find who matched Jones's physique (James Bond 007 2023). The overall lack of parity for stunt performers of colour with their white counterparts is evidenced through the ongoing work of organisations specifically created for the purpose of promoting the availability of, and work done by, stunt performers of colour – just as the BSA did in 1967. In 2018 the actress and stunt performer Jwaundace Candace founded Stunt POC, an online database for stunt performers of colour: it currently has 195 members with 80 women listed; it has a further 41 members who are stunt co-ordinators, with 11 being women. Even with 80 available women the fact that SAG-AFTRA is still addressing issues of painting down and wiggling points to the wider issues within the industry.

One of the biggest problems around how women are treated as stunt performers is largely due to limitations on opportunities, which is frequently the result of the fight directors and coordinators largely being male and white. This also extends to the issue of injury, as pointed out by stuntman Vince Cupone:

“They don’t have girl-to-girl communication because most stunt coordinators are *not* women. Stuntmen and coordinators understand as best as we can what the women face. A good coordinator will try to protect them, but at the end of the day, they’re not padded. They’re not protected.”

(Gregory 2015: 101)

During the research for this article, I was fortunate enough to speak to the stunt coordinator Tiger Lilli Rudge, an experienced stunt performer and one of the founders of Stunt Alliance, which brings together stunt co-ordinators and fight directors. During our conversation, Rudge identified the same problem as Vince Cupone: namely that the majority of stunt coordinators are male. However, she goes further in analysing the issue as being one that starts with the production studios’ approaches to hiring and the fundamental lack of opportunities for women to move into the roles of stunt co-ordinators where the decisions around who is booked in the core stunt teams are made:

The basics of employing a woman to do what is still perceived as a man’s job isn’t being realized. I feel like the final details have come before the foundations, in that sense. [...] I believe it has to come from the top if the people at the top, if Warner Brothers and DC and Warner Entertainment and Lions Gate and all the production companies don’t open their eyes to it. I’ve had this once with a conversation about *Wonder Woman*. [...] [Y]ou had a lead that was phenomenal. You had a director who was phenomenal, almost all female cast. And in terms of the leads and everything else which would almost always be male. Maybe there’d be one female. But this really flipped it on its head, the success of it, which showed the desire of the audience to see more of this. [...] [E]verything is so good about it, except there was not a female in charge of the action. So the stunt coordinators were male, and that’s so disappointing.

Rudge goes on to detail a conversation she had with the Health and Safety Manager responsible for *Wonder Woman* (2017), where it transpired that they had looked for a female stunt coordinator, but it was deemed that there was only woman working in the position who was qualified – and she had been unavailable. This exchange highlights the central problem: with women not being given the opportunities to gain sufficient experience as action directors and stunt coordinators, the issue becomes self-perpetuating. Rudge, however, offers a solution:



Why couldn't you have had a joint coordinator, one being female, one being male? [...] I don't know if that conversation went elsewhere. Did it go back to Warner Brothers? These things need to go back to the people making the decisions.

In the challenging and dangerous world of the stunt performer, the need for highly trained people with the correct skillsets to be in the appropriate positions is self-evident. However, what is also self-evident is that with the continual side-lining of women as action directors and stunt co-ordinators, there is little opportunity for women to gain the necessary experience that would give them access to the roles where they would be in a position to make a genuine impact on the hiring practices within stunt teams.

## **Conclusion**

Women on screen have been actively engaged in performing stunts and creating both active and action heroines since the inception of the motion picture business. The popularity of Lynch's and de Armas' characters in *No Time to Die*, as well as an increasing number of female-led action vehicles in cinema and on television and streaming services, points to the enduring demand from audiences to see women in action-oriented roles. What we are also seeing is an increase in action heroines of colour and, as a result, a greater demand for female stunt performers of colour. The presence of performers of colour such as Marie Mouroum and Belle Williams, who doubles for Naomie Harris as Eve Moneypenny in the Bond franchise, is a welcome sign of greater inclusivity within the processes of production. However, what this article seeks to highlight is that despite some improvements in terms of female stunt performers being given first refusal in the casting of female roles, women are still marginalised and excluded from positions that would allow for further advancement within the industry and, crucially, more women given greater opportunities to form part of the core stunt teams who receive longer contracts and therefore more money and more stable employment.

The semi-invisible nature of stunt work feeds into these problems and that is, ironically, made visible through the lack of recognition for stunt performers during awards season. As Tiger Rudge points out, all production departments are represented at the Academy Awards – except for the stunt teams. Of the major awards, only SAG has a category for Outstanding Performance by a Stunt Ensemble in both its Film and Television Awards. For the stunt performer, invisibility and erasure is often part of the job; as has been discussed here, erasure is integral to the processes employed in constructing notions of authenticity around action cinema and the bodies that perform them, usually foregrounded as being that of the action star themselves. While this erasure may be a necessary part of maintaining the believability of the

text, both in its reception and promotion, the invisibility and silencing of stunt performers allows for potential exploitation and pernicious practices to remain embedded in the industry, especially where women and performers of colour are concerned. When we start to look more closely at these roles through the lenses of gender and race we can see that in an industry that often makes a lot of noise around diversity and positive representation, significantly more work still needs to be done.

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#### Notes:

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1. Both Blackman and Rigg were cast in Bond films shortly after their runs on the series: in *Goldfinger* (1964) and *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1969), respectively.
2. Phases in the Marvel Cinematic Universe are groups of films and series and can be identified through release dates and subject matter: each phase usually focuses on specific characters who are involved in an overarching narrative that links the disparate texts.
3. Although not always: Honor Blackman's role as Pussy Galore in *Goldfinger* is an early and notable exception.
4. Child had previously doubled for Diana Rigg and Linda Thorson during their stints on *The Avengers*.