

# Stuntmen & Stuntwomen

Stuntmen (and stuntwomen), also known as stunt performers, are professionals who perform physically dangerous tasks (called “stunts”) for films, television, and live shows. These can include fights, falls, car crashes, explosions, fire scenes, and other high-risk actions.

## History of Stuntmen

### Early Days (1900s–1920s)

Stunt work began in the silent film era. Film directors used real physical danger to create excitement. **Buster Keaton** and **Harold Lloyd** were pioneers, they both did their own stunts. Lloyd famously dangled from a clock in *Safety Last!* (1923), and Keaton survived some amazing stunts in *The General* and *Steamboat Bill Jr.*

Buster Keaton: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LaApqL4QjH8>

### Golden Age of Hollywood (1930s–1950s)

As films grew more ambitious, dedicated stunt professionals became common. Westerns were a big driver of stunt work, with horseback stunts, fights, and falls. **Yakima Canutt**, a rodeo star turned stuntman, developed the “running horse transfer”.

### Modern Era (1960s–present):

With the rise of action films, stunts have become more sophisticated and dangerous. Car chases (like in *Bullitt*, *The French Connection*, and *The Fast and the Furious*), helicopter scenes, and building jumps are all commonly performed stunts. Today, stunt work combines practical effects with digital enhancements, though many practical stunts remain incredibly dangerous and skilled work.

## Famous Stunt Performers

- **Yakima Canutt** – A legend of Western stunts and an innovator in safety techniques.
- **Hal Needham** – First a stuntman, and later a director. He is known for epic car stunts.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27UY4AFDx-g>
- **Dar Robinson** – Set world records for high falls and bike jumps in the 1970s–80s.  
<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/yin3VkbQ6Eg>
- **Vic Armstrong** – Doubled for Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones and worked on *James Bond*, *Superman*, and *Star Wars*.
- **Zoë Bell** – Doubled for Lucy Lawless in *Xena*, then Uma Thurman in *Kill Bill*. Starred in Tarantino's *Death Proof*.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvnrvRvKhuA>
- **Jackie Chan** – Performs nearly all of his stunts himself, often without safety nets.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKRUYJarcEk>

## Notable and Tragic Incidents

Stunt work is extremely dangerous. Some notable accidents include:

- **A.J. Bakunas (1978):** Died attempting a freefall from a building in the film *Steel*.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oD\\_iRX8bQog](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oD_iRX8bQog)
- **Kun Liu (2012):** Died during an explosion scene on *The Expendables 2*.
- **John Bernecker (2017):** Fell to his death during a rehearsal for *The Walking Dead*.
- **Olivia Jackson (2015):** Severely injured while doubling Milla Jovovich in *Resident Evil: The Final Chapter*. Lost an arm and sued for damages.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9IXXYEn5n8>
- **Jackie Chan** broke nearly every bone in his body during his filming career and he even has a custom insurance company due to the high risks.

## Some of the greatest stunts in film history

### 1) Buster Keaton – House falls around him

**Film:** *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (1928)

**Stunt:** Keaton stands still as a full building facade falls around him.

**Why it's great:** No CGI. A blend of engineering precision and pure courage.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mN0I7R\\_NCe4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mN0I7R_NCe4)

2) **Tom Cruise** is one of the few Hollywood stars who does most of his own stunts.

#### a) HALO jump

**Film:** *Mission: Impossible – Fallout* (2018)

**Stunt:** Cruise jumps from a plane at 25,000 feet.

**Why it's great:** The first-ever HALO jump done with IMAX cameras. Cruise trained for over a year and did over 100 jumps to get it perfect.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BnOebsDtAQ>

#### b) Hanging off a plane

**Film:** *Mission: Impossible – Rogue Nation* (2015)

**Stunt:** Cruise hangs onto an Airbus A400M as it takes off. No special effects.

**Why it's great:** He was strapped to the plane's door, 5,000 feet in the air.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wkGHHAS34yw>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4qiTE2gsmA>

#### c) Walking on a high building

**Film:** *Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol* (2011)

**Stunt:** Cruise climbs the Burj Khalifa (2011), the world's tallest building. He's really there!

**Why it's great:** He wasn't at all afraid of the immense height.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqocrvv26eo>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16BFrEBZQS4>

### 3) Jackie Chan – Mall jump through glass

**Film:** *Police Story* (1985)

**Stunt:** Jackie slides down a 3-storey pole and crashes through glass panels.

**Why it's great:** He was burned, cut, and he dislocated his pelvis, but it's one of the most memorable moments in martial arts cinema.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PqpB4cVLBm8>

### 4) Yakima Canutt – Stagecoach jump between horses

**Film:** *Stagecoach* (1939)

**Stunt:** Canutt jumps between galloping horses, then goes under a stagecoach.

**Why it's great:** A pioneering moment. It influenced many other action scenes.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5\\_GP5BBm6I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5_GP5BBm6I)

### 5) Dar Robinson – Skyscraper freefall

**Film:** *Stick* (1985)

**Stunt:** Jumps from the top of a 220-foot building.

**Why it's great:** At the time, it was the highest freefall done by a stuntman in a film.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7xWib4LxUk>

### 6) The Cannon Roll – car flip in *Casino Royale*

**Film:** *Casino Royale* (2006)

**Stunt:** Bond's Aston Martin flips 7 times at high speed.

**Why it's great:** Set a world record for car barrel rolls. No CGI – just a car and a stuntman.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhbYK7WzeBw>

### 7) Harold Lloyd – Dangling from clock tower

**Film:** *Safety Last!* (1923)

**Stunt:** Lloyd hangs from a skyscraper clock.

**Why it's great:** While not done on a real building, the illusion was extremely well created.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEcTjhUN\\_7U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEcTjhUN_7U)

## More examples:

Buster Keaton craziest stunts: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34lqNZ0zB-l>

Behind the scenes: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oe\\_pLp5iihc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oe_pLp5iihc)

Top 10 stunts: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVm1qoGwGxk>