

ON-SET A & E

A Clinical Examination

Film sets are really dangerous places to work. In August 2014, the *Independent* newspaper reported that gruff-voiced action star Jason Statham (of whom both the Doctors are huge fans) had 'narrowly avoided death on the set of *The Expendables 3*'. According to the story, 'the actor was forced to leap from a truck he was driving before it plunged 60ft into the sea after a stunt went horribly wrong'. 'He faced death,' declared *Expendables* co-star Sylvester Stallone with a straight face (or at least a face as 'straight' as Sly can actually manage). 'He was test driving a three-ton truck and the brakes run out. It went down 60ft into the Black Sea and was impaled.'

For anyone else, it would have been catastrophic – but not for The Stath. Luckily, before becoming everyone's favourite shirtless, oil-wrestling screen star, Jason was a champion diver (he competed for England at the Auckland Commonwealth Games in 1990) and was thus able to leap nimbly from the crashing vehicle, presumably performing a perfectly executed pike en route, before swimming

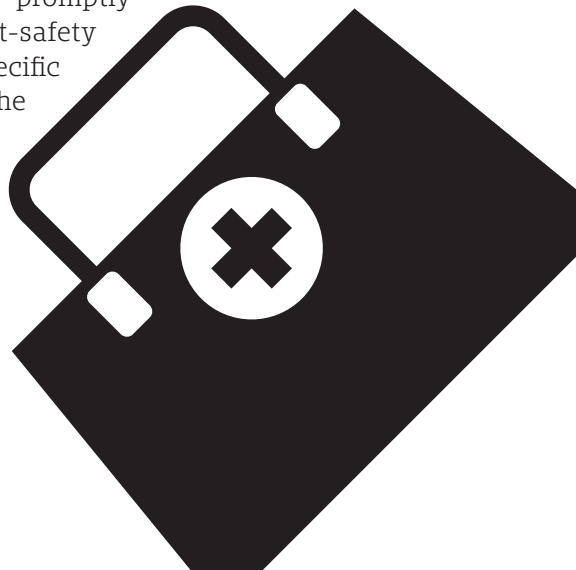
briskly to safety. 'If anyone else had been in that truck he would have been dead,' Stallone told the *Indie*. 'But because Jason is an Olympic quality diver he got out



of it.' As for The Stath himself, he proved as cool as his on-screen persona, playing down the allegedly life-threatening incident, and insisting that the worst thing that happened to him during the shoot of *The Expendables 3* was the fact that 'I snapped a shoelace in the very first scene.' You can see why we love him.

Jason's on-set accident made for acres of lively news coverage, all of which helped to publicise the movie. But the fact remains that (if the story is true) Statham had a very lucky escape. Others have been less fortunate. Indeed, over its hundred-year-plus history, the art of moviemaking has often proved injurious and occasionally lethal, with cast and crew risking life and limb in pursuit of a good shot.

Michael Curtiz's disaster epic *Noah's Ark* (1928) was billed as 'The spectacle of the ages!', using a reported 600,000 gallons of water to bring the image of a massive biblical flood crashing onto cinema screens. Audiences were awestruck by the results, but few contemporary viewers knew that such overwhelming spectacle had been achieved at an extremely high human cost. According to popular folklore, three extras drowned during the climactic flood sequences, while another lost a leg from injuries incurred on the set. Indeed, so high was the casualty rate on *Noah's Ark* that Hollywood promptly instigated new stunt-safety regulations with the specific aim of minimising the risks which had become an everyday part of moviemaking. Yet even with such apparent safeguards in place, lives have continued to be lost while making movies.



Glancing back over the last forty years of film-making, we find a litany of tragic accidents which demonstrate just how perilous the profession can be. Most distressingly, in the early eighties seasoned performer Vic Morrow and youngsters My-ca Dinh Le and Renee Shin-Yi Chen were killed on the set of *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (1983) when an action sequence involving a helicopter went horrifyingly wrong (the ensuing scandal and lawsuits would last a decade). In the nineties, rising star Brandon Lee died of a gunshot wound during the making of *The Crow* (1994), an accident blamed by many upon cost-cutting measures which led to a breakdown in standard safety procedures (a props master, rather than a weapons expert, was left in charge of the gun). In 2007, set dresser David Ritchie was killed when 'a frozen piece of sand and gravel' fell from the wall of an outdoor set during the making of the sci-fi thriller *Jumper* (2008). As recently as 2015, Randall Miller became the first film-maker to be jailed for an on-set fatality in the US. Miller pleaded guilty to the involuntary manslaughter of camera operator Sarah Jones, who died when a train hit a metal-frame bed during the filming of a dream sequence on the Gregg Allman biopic *Midnight Rider* (the film has since been abandoned).

While such horrendous cases become headline-grabbing news, far more common are the stories of everyday injuries which have long been a part of the moviemaking process. Back in the late 1920s, screen icon Louise Brooks was warned by friends and colleagues that *Beggars of Life* director William Wellman was 'a madman' who would try to get her to take part in dangerous stunts from which she should steer well clear. Yet, true to form, Brooks merely saw the warnings as a challenge, and opted to do several potentially lethal scenes herself, including a sequence in which she jumps a freight train with co-star Richard Arlen. Apparently, the rule of thumb for hobos at the time was that if you couldn't count the lug nuts on the wheels of a train, it was moving too fast to board.

Just try counting the lug nuts on the train onto which Brooks jumps in *Beggars of Life*. Even allowing for a degree of photographic ingenuity, that train is clearly moving fast enough to present a very real danger to the famously fearless actress, who miraculously completed the shoot without needing to be carted off to the local hospital.

In those days, such fortitude was business as usual for screen performers. Leading players Lillian Gish and Richard Barthelmess performed their own stunts for D.W. Griffith's masterpiece *Way Down East* (1920), including the celebrated river sequence in which Gish drifts on a slab of floating ice toward a waterfall while Barthelmess leaps to her death-defying rescue. Filmed at White River Junction in Vermont, the sequence opened with Gish – wearing only a thin dress and a shawl – running out into sub-zero temperatures, the shock of which famously caused her to faint. A nurse was on hand to tend to Gish, but the medical ministrations seem to have amounted to little more than taking the actress indoors to warm up a bit before being sending her outside to do it again. Next, Gish was required to fall face down onto a slab of ice (*real* ice, as opposed to prop ice) which breaks free and floats off down the river. With her hair and a hand trailing in the icy water, Gish promptly found her face frozen (you can see the ice forming on her skin) and lost the feeling in several fingers. Years later she would note that the hand in question still caused her pain. Meanwhile, Griffith (whose face also froze) kept his camera warm by lighting a small fire beneath it to prevent the machine from grinding to a standstill. To this day, the fact that both Gish and Barthelmess appear to be in genuine peril remains a key part of this legendary sequence's appeal – an alluring mix of dramatic invention and documentary endangerment.

At around the same time that Gish was having her fingers frozen off on *Way Down East*, comedian Harold Lloyd was having two fingers blown off his right hand when a prop bomb

exploded during the making of *Haunted Spooks* (1920). Meanwhile Buster Keaton fractured his neck while filming *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), but continued filming the scene in question, his injury not being detected until it showed up on an X-ray eleven years later! Dancers had a hard time of it too. While shooting a celebrated number for *Swing Time* (1936), Ginger Rogers was left with bleeding feet, prompting the famous quote that 'Rogers did everything Fred Astaire did, except backwards and in high heels'. As for Astaire, he got whacked in the face by Rogers' 'flying sleeve' while filming 'Let's Face the Music and Dance' for *Follow the Fleet* (also 1936) but 'kept on dancing, although somewhat maimed'. The smack made it into the movie.

Other minor on-set accidents which have been caught on camera include Charles McGraw suffering a broken jaw as his head is forced into a vat of soup by Kirk Douglas in *Spartacus* (1960); Ellen Burstyn ricking her back while being hoisted off her feet by unseen ropes in *The Exorcist* (1973); Viggo Mortensen breaking two toes while kicking a helmet in frustration in Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (2002); Robert Downey Jr. breaking Halle Berry's arm as he attempts to restrain her character in *Gothika* (2003); and Leonardo DiCaprio accidentally smashing a glass with his hand in 2012's *Django Unchained* ('Blood was dripping down his hand [but] he never broke character,' recalled producer Stacey Sher admiringly). Meanwhile, Brad Pitt spent a large portion of *Se7en* (1995) with a heavily bandaged arm after accidentally putting his hand through a car window ('we worked his injury into the storyline'), and during the filming of *Troy* (2004), in which he plays hunky Achilles, managed to tear – guess what? – his Achilles tendon!

Afflictions such as these are all part of the rough and tumble of moviemaking, and there can be few performers whose screen careers have passed without a work-related visit to A & E. Oddly, audiences seem to rather like the idea of

performers suffering actual bodily harm for the sake of their entertainment, provided the injuries remain relatively trivial. Yet the occasional tragedy shows us just how dangerous moviemaking can really be, and reminds us why film-making unions spend so much time banging on unfashionably about 'health and safety'.

Films may be fantasy, but on-set accidents are real, and the Movie Doctors look forward to a future in which cinema is not just spectacular, but – more importantly – *safe*. As executive producer Steven Spielberg observed in the wake of the *Twilight Zone* (1983) tragedy, 'A movie is a fantasy – it's light and shadow flickering on a screen. No movie is worth dying for. I think people are standing up much more now than ever before to producers and directors who ask too much. If something isn't safe, it's the right and responsibility of every actor or crew member to yell, "Cut!"'