

The Stuntwoman: And... Action! [C1]

Lividi quotidiani, lussazioni, decine di costole rotte e occasionali commozioni cerebrali... il lavoro della controfigura richiede un'insolita resistenza al dolore e una malsana attrazione per il rischio. Abbiamo parlato con una delle più esperte controfigure di Hollywood.

Jump off a tall building? Fall down the stairs? [Be set on fire](#)? Sure, no problem! It's a normal day on the job for [stunt](#)woman and [stunt](#) coordinator Jane Austin. Originally from Studio City in Los Angeles, California, Austin is the youngest of nine children and has five older brothers. As a child, she explains, she was "very, very athletic" and "the biggest [tomboy](#) you could imagine."

STUNT DOUBLE

Austin began by doing a [stunt](#) for the US military drama Tour of Duty in 1987. Since then she has doubled for stars such as Nicole Kidman, Uma Thurman, Geena Davis, Meryl Streep, Daryl Hannah and Jennifer Beals. She has worked as a [stunt](#) performer on music videos, films and TV shows, including popular shows like Law & Order and True Blood, and Hollywood blockbusters like Star Trek: Generations, Scream 3, Poseidon and Avatar 2.

STUNTWORKS

She co-founded a company called Hollywood Stuntworks with her business and life partner, Kurt Lott, who is also a [stunt](#) performer. The firm rents out equipment, does [rigging](#) — the art of doing dynamic, gravity-defying [stunts](#) on set — and produces specialised products, including a fire gel that protects skin from being burnt. To find out more, Speak Up contacted Austin. We began by asking her how the industry has changed over the years. **Jane Austin (American accent):** I did get into the business mainly doing heights, because I'm not afraid of heights at all. So [aircraft](#), aerial stuff, descenders, which is a machine that you have a cable on you and you do pretty much a

freefall, and then you stop before you hit the ground. When I started in the business — this is 87 — one actress had one [stunt](#) double; whereas today, on some of these [features](#), as an actress, it's not uncommon for her to have five doubles, each one specialising in, either it's fights or gymnastics or driving, fire, whatever it is, because the action is so much more intense and it's bigger. I mean, TV is just as big as feature action now.

DANGEROUS

Stunt performance is extremely dangerous, even when performed by a trained professional. We asked Austin to describe her most challenging [stunt](#). **Jane Austin:** [I got 'em in buckets](#). The one that was the scariest one is I had to do an eighty-foot-high [24.3 metres] fall. So, imagine jumping off of an [eight-storey building](#) into an airbag. High falls are just [tricky](#) anyways, and that one, because it was so high, 'cause usually you do about forty feet, thirty feet, maybe fifty, and this one was thirty feet more, and that one really was scary. My most dangerous ones? I did a burn for Law & Order that was just the biggest burn. It was so awesome because it was nine degrees out [F; -13 °C], so I got to hold it really, really long, because I didn't get hot at all. I had on a dress with this big coat and a [scarf](#) and just, I mean, this whole [wardrobe](#), and it literally burnt all the [wardrobe](#) off by the time I was done with this burn. It was very cool. I love fire, I love doing burns... I did another one for True Blood and I was this lady, and that one was good too because I was in a fat suit: I was Beulah, and I walk out in the daylight and just... poof!

EXCITING

Austin loves her job and explains why. **Jane Austin:** Every single day is different, and it's fun and it's exciting, and especially, like, if you're [rigging](#) and you set up a really, really complicated sequence, and at the end of it, when it's all done, and it wasn't done with [CGI](#)... it's just exciting, it's just exciting! For example, we worked on Pirates [of the Caribbean] 4, I think it was, and it was the one with the ship that [came alive](#). And when we got the script, on the script it said, "And the ship comes alive." And we had to sit down and we had to figure out how exactly that was going to look. We had,

like, one guy jumping out and the [ropes](#) grab him and bring him back, another guy runs down the stairs and we have [ropes](#) that pulled him back up; we're at the end of the sequence, all the pirates were hanging [upside down](#) or hanging from the [rigging](#) and the [masts](#) and everything, and we had to, like, figure out how to do that.

FEARLESS

So, what qualities do you need to work as a [stunt](#) performer? **Jane Austin:** You can't be afraid, and you have to... The thing is that you have to be smart also. You have to be smart and you have to figure out how to do this action without hurting yourself, or anyone else for that fact.

INJURIES

Injuries are expected as part of the job. However, nice things can happen, too, as Austin explains. **Jane Austin:** I was working on a movie and a [prop](#) that was on fire fell on me when it wasn't supposed to fall where it fell, and I got burnt really bad on my leg and behind my back of my head. I've broken [wrists](#), broken [toes](#)... nothing major though, unlike my husband, who's broken everything, including his back twice. He's a [stunt](#)man by the way... I have a great story for you, though, of how my husband and I met. I got hired to do a really, really great [stunt](#). It was a 650-foot fall [200 metres] off of a sixty-five-storey building. I was doubling Anna Nicole Smith, so needless to [say](#), it was an interesting project, but it was a great [stunt](#). And we met on the roof that day. He started explaining to me the rig and I was just like, "You know what? Nice to meet you. Please don't kill me." So, then he threw me off the roof and literally, by the end of the day, it was August 27th 1995, we fell in love. I mean, we've been together ever since. So, I fell for him!

WOMEN IN ACTION

The industry for [stunt](#)women has evolved considerably as female roles have become ever more dynamic, [says](#) Austin. **Jane Austin:** When I started out in the business, you know, it was the old boys' club. There really weren't any

female [stunt](#) coordinators. It was a very male-dominated profession, but there wasn't as much action for women back in the '80s and even in the '90s. And it wasn't until there was that great fight in Kill Bill between Uma Thurman's character and... [oh gosh](#)... Daryl Hannah, I believe it was. And they had that [rolling](#), just [vicious](#) fight in the trailer. And it was just these two women just [beating the crap out of](#) each other. And you'd never really seen that before. The guys did that to each other, but the women never. And then in Mr. & Mrs. Smith, when Brad Pitt and Angelina got into that fight, that was never done, that a man and a woman were fighting like that, as [vicious](#)... So, more opportunities are [presenting themselves](#), and writers, I think, are writing more action for women, and women are being more of the stars instead of it just being male-dominated. So there's so much more work now than there was when I started out. More women are coordinating, and I think that the whole movement that women in film especially has been doing, [has brought awareness](#) that women are just as tough and can do just as good of a job — if anything, we multitask much better. I know I do in this house!

Glossary

- **prop** = arredi scenici
- **wrists** = polsi
- **presenting themselves** = presentarsi
- **stunt** = acrobazia, caduta
- **CGI** = immagini generate dal computer (computer-generated imagery)
- **I got 'em in buckets** = ne ho un mucchio (lett. a secchiate)
- **tricky** = difficile
- **ropes** = corde
- **vicious** = feroce
- **came alive** = prendere vita
- **oh gosh** = accidenti
- **features** = film
- **scarf** = sciarpa
- **toes** = dita dei piedi
- **rolling** = roboante
- **stuntwoman** = controfigura
- **upside down** = appendere a testa in giù
- **has brought awareness** = fare prendere coscienza
- **Be set on fire** = essere incendiato, dare fuoco
- **rigging** = attrezzatura di scena
- **eight-storey building** = edificio di otto piani
- **tomboy** = maschiaccio
- **wardrobe** = guardaroba
- **masts** = pali
- **say** = inutile dire che
- **aircraft** = aeroplani
- **beating the crap out of** = fare a pezzi