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Double Dare Movie Review Well-told 'Dare' hails stuntwomen

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When Kathleen Turner slid down the muddy cliff in "Romancing the Stone," that was Jeannie Epper. When Lynda Carter crashed through windows on TV's "Wonder Woman," that was Jeannie Epper. In "The Poseidon Adventure," "Blazing Saddles," "1941," "Blade Runner," "Road House," "Robocop," "The Fugitive," "2 Fast 2 Furious," if there's a woman driving a car into a wall or running around on fire, it's probably Jeannie Epper. "I've been doing stunts for about 50 years," she says in Amanda Micheli's engaging documentary "Double Dare." "It's all I know, besides being a mom and a grandma."

The title itself is a double pun, since it focuses on two female stunt doubles -- the 64-year-old and still active Epper, and Zoe Bell, a young New Zealander deciding whether she can springboard from being Lucy Lawless's stuntwoman on "Xena: Warrior Princess" to Hollywood success. Whatever happens, Bell's not about to leave showbiz, and after watching the fiery sword-wielding pirouette with which she opens the movie, you understand why.

While "Double Dare" sometimes struggles to keep its two stories in simultaneous focus, it provides a frank portrait of women trying to make it in a traditionally male game. The issue isn't just respect but employment; again and again, Epper has to work the phones to hustle jobs from movie stunt coordinators. She comes from a family of stuntmen; "In the bar fight in '1941,' there were Eppers flying everywhere," recalls Steven Spielberg, and it's a mark of the industry esteem in which this woman is held that Hollywood's most powerful director pays obeisance.

Yet work remains scarce, and Epper and her fellow stuntwomen hold such an uneasy place in the Stuntmen's Association that they form their own union. The dirtbike-riding grandmother considers liposuction to stay competitive; at the same time, she's selfless enough to donate a kidney to actor Ken Howard.

Epper also makes a place in her house when the young Bell comes to test the Hollywood waters. The two dress up and hit the 2001 World Stunt Awards together like old girlfriends, and the filmmaker eavesdrops on some especially funny bawdiness in the stretch limo on the way over.

Arnold Schwarzenegger, Burt Reynolds, and other "real" celebrities are there, but they're briefly glimpsed emissaries from another world. "Double Dare" focuses on a parallel universe that moviegoers rarely consider: that of the invisible, hard-working craftspeople who put the illusion together. Epper and Bell are

unglamorous and unpretentious; the former's a devout Christian with a husband 20 years her junior, the latter's a lanky, easygoing Gen-Xer who can't believe her luck. Yet when Bell meets with Quentin Tarantino and action choreographer Wo Ping as they're prepping "Kill Bill," you begin to realize that Uma Thurman might have looked like a stumblebum without her.

A sequence of shots from "Xena" shows Bell crashing after a wire stunt time and again, hopping up with a grimace of pain and aggravation. That's balanced, later in the film, by a high-fall training session in which both women dive off a platform 40 feet onto an airbag and come up with racing hearts and ecstatic smiles. Says Bell, "I don't think I could be a waitress again."