



Zoë Bell



By Leonard Pierce March 18, 2009

Zoë Bell was still a teenager when she got her first job as a stuntwoman, and she went on to make a living—and suffer a number of debilitating injuries—working as a stunt double in *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*, two popular syndicated action shows filmed in her native New Zealand. Her biggest opportunity came in 2003, when she landed the role of Uma Thurman’s stunt double in Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill*—a process intensely followed in the riveting 2004 documentary *Double Dare*. The film was a revelation to those who weren’t aware of the physically and psychologically painful ordeals women face in this dangerous profession. Since then, Bell has begun to pursue an acting career: Tarantino gave her a

leading role in *Death Proof*, and in her latest project, the web-only action series *Angel Of Death*, she's playing an assassin who suddenly develops a conscience—a role that celebrated comics author Ed Brubaker created with her specifically in mind. Recently, Bell spoke to *The A.V. Club* about making the transition from stunts to acting, the demands of working with a legendary director, and what really scares one of the bravest women in the business.

The A.V. Club: You've come a long way, career-wise, since *Double Dare*. Is it difficult for you to watch it now? Do you feel you're a different person than the one who appears in the documentary?

Zoë Bell: No. Actually, it's become easier and easier for me to love that movie. At first—I always loved it, but when it's a documentary about you, it's hard to go “Hey, this movie, it's all about me. It's fantastic. You should go watch it.” You can't help but seem a bit arrogant. But over the years, as I get further away from it, it's easier to think about it objectively. It's the sort of thing you want to be able to show your kids, you know? And I've had enough people come up to me and say that it moved them in a way that's important to them that it's hard to not appreciate the influence it's had. It's not as if I feel I'm a different person in the movie; obviously, I recognize myself even though I'm now a bit older and hopefully a bit wiser. I don't know. I can't possibly say if I'm still that person. You'd have to ask friends of mine. Hey, guys... [Laughs.] I'm in a car with some friends, and they're all making fun of me.

AVC: Just in the time since you've been doing stunt work, since 1998, have there been any major changes in the way it's done? Has the increased use of CGI affected the way you do your job?

ZB: Yeah, there have been some shifts, but if I were to take you through the timeline of stunt work since the beginning, there have always been shifts. In

the early years, when Westerns were popular, there was a lot of horse work, and women weren't allowed to do stunts. Later on, you had martial arts come along, which was a major shift in the industry. Horses and car chases and martial arts and wire work—they're all just shifts you had to learn to work around, and CGI is just the next step. There are some things about CGI that are great, because you can avoid using a real person and maybe save a life, but at the same time, you may be putting a stunt person out of a job. Sometimes CGI can enhance a great action scene, and sometimes it takes away from it. CGI is at the point now where the way people use it is amazing, but I still don't think it can replace humans. I think the audience is too smart. Humans sort of instinctively respond negatively to something that's not true, that's not real. I really think that's part of what made the car sequence in *Death Proof* so effective—we had great people working on it behind the camera, we had great drivers, but whether or not they knew it was me, they knew that it was a real person on there, taking the risks. And it's nothing that they're really thinking through—just instinctively, seeing a real person in a situation like that is frightening to an audience.

AVC: Ed Brubaker has said that he wrote *Angel Of Death* intentionally for you to play the lead role. Were you familiar with his work when you got the script?

ZB: No, I'd never heard of him before. I wasn't really into comic books or anything—they're pretty cool, but they're not really something I grew up with. It was interesting when I started working with him and first realized who he was—I met him, he told me he'd written the role for me, and I got along with him, but it wasn't until we went to [San Diego] Comic-Con that I realized, "Oh, I've got a *god* writing a script for me! That's pretty special." I liked it when I got the synopsis, and then when I met everybody and got to know who they were, I knew I definitely wanted to be a part of it.

AVC: Did you know from the outset that it was going to be a web-only series?

ZB: It was always planned to be that way—that’s how it was created, as a way of sort of exploring the possibility of doing these types of shows on the Internet. I came into it knowing it was an Internet-only thing, and I was fine with that. I was interested in seeing how to branch out and sort of use the Internet more as a way of making and promoting movies. There’s no real difference in making it successful—it’s all down to the dedication of the people involved to make it a success.

AVC: Is there any difference in terms of scheduling, or the actual process of filmmaking, when you’re creating something like this for the web as opposed to television or film?

ZB: Well, obviously, on the Internet, the budget is smaller. We shot it like a movie; I always think of it as a feature, and refer to it as a movie all the time, but the schedule and the turnaround is more like shooting TV. When you looked at the schedule, you started to realize, “Well, there’ll be no screwing this up—you have one chance and one chance only to get it right.” But the way I approached it—the way all of us approached it—was very professional. We didn’t really think “Well, this is just going to be on the Internet.” For us, it was the same as any other job, so everybody gave it their best effort. as if we were on any other kind of a set.

AVC: *Angel Of Death* is also a reunion with Lucy Lawless for you. How does it feel acting opposite her, as opposed to doing her stunt work?

ZB: Our relationship hasn’t changed at all. I mean, it’s obviously a change, acting opposite her, and it’s interesting to be doing things *with* her instead of *for* her—but the relationship we have is still pretty good. What she had to offer me is that she was there supporting me as a fellow actor. [Laughs.] I can’t believe I said that. But it was really fun; it was the first time we’ve both been in front of the camera at the same time. Usually I’d just wait for her to say her lines, and then we’d switch out so I could get beat up.

AVC: You laugh when describing yourself as an actor—it's like you aren't used to the idea yet. How have you approached making that transition from doing stunt work to acting?

ZB: [Sighs.] I don't want to make it sound as if I'm putting my ego up or anything—I mean, acting or stunts, doing my job means doing my job, and I'm loving it. It's fun to put my face in front of the camera; I'm really enjoying the process. But at this point, it's still just not too easy to go around describing myself as an actor. It took me a good long while to get to where I could do it not only without laughing, but without trembling a little bit, which is terrible, but... I mean, I was really hesitant to 100 percent walk down that path, to expose myself to that. There were times when I got fucking scared. It's a very intimidating career path to take. Being an actress in Hollywood, and leaving a career that I'm pretty solid at and that's treated me really well, that's always had my back—not that I need to completely walk away from stunts, but you're starting down that road by acting. I had a bunch of acting coaching when I first came to Los Angeles, as sort of a way to make it official that I was committed to doing the job, and I actually really enjoyed that part of the process. And what I've really enjoyed about *Angel Of Death* is the working of the script, the creation of the character, coming up with a backstory for her, making up her memories—all the things that go in before you even have a chance to do any acting.

AVC: It's funny that you're intimidated by getting into acting, since you were moving into it from a career where you would literally put your life in peril on a daily basis.

ZB: [Laughs.] I know, I know, I know! But the way you have to look at it is, when you're doing stunt work, there's a lot of physical fear involved, but acting's got a lot more of your own life involved in it. In stunt work, I could beat guys up and jump off buildings or whatever, but no one would *really* know what was going on inside my head. With acting, you're putting it all

out on the table for people to watch. It's a very different fear.

AVC: Quentin Tarantino encouraged you to act in *Death Proof*, and—

ZB: Oh, no, I think you've got it the wrong way 'round there. There was no encouraging me. He doesn't do that. He just laid the script in front of me and said "I've written *Death Proof*, and you're in it."

AVC: Has there been any downside to starting your acting career with such a legendary director?

ZB: I was really psyched when I got *Kill Bill*. I'd been doing *Xena*, which was pretty successful, so I'd been working for several years, but working with Quentin was *really* exciting, and we became pretty close pretty quick. I see him enough that I don't miss him, and in terms of his directing style, it's not that it's spoiled me for other directors or anything, but I really appreciate it when it's not there. As far as acting goes, I'm still trying to build up a résumé. *Death Proof* was pretty much it for a while, so I didn't have much to compare it to. But I've learned so much from him—there's things I don't even realize I've learned until I'm on set utilizing them.

AVC: Do you feel you're at the point where you want to stretch? Have you thought about getting away from action and doing drama, or comedy?

ZB: Oh, definitely. I'd love to do both dramatic and comedic roles. I understand that it might be a while before people are willing to see me in anything but action roles, and I enjoy doing action roles—they play to my strengths, so it's something I really get into. But part of the joy I'm discovering in acting is the fact that it's uncomfortable to me, that it's challenging, and the possibilities of always being able to improve on something, of always being able to try something new, it's intriguing and exciting. Ed and I have talked about the possibility of doing a comedy

together, of putting together this script about a cat burglar that would be a lot more comic, so there's definitely talk of all that stuff, and I'm looking forward to that. But right now, I'm just interested in anything that tickles my fancy—you get a lot of scripts, and so many of them look like everything else out there, so if I get something comedic or dramatic that looks really different, and the people behind it have enough faith in me that they want me involved, then I want to do it.

AVC: Well, anybody who can play the last five minutes of an episode of *Angel Of Death* with a knife sticking out of the top of her head probably won't have too much of a problem with comedy.

ZB: [Laughs.] Yeah, we really toed the line between action and comedy on that one.