



Cinequest 2004: *Double Dare*

By now, all of us have probably seen a few documentaries or featurettes about stuntmen. Whether it's Master Wo Ping's work on The Matrix movies, Jackie Chan's brigade of suicide machines, the occasional American teenager's backyard wrestling video, we feel compelled to watch hours of footage of people exploring the art of defying death.

However, it's always about one thing for us, the viewers: how mind-numbingly dangerous is it? Just how much does it violate that human instinct for self-preservation? Well, I want you to imagine a career of stuntwork done with little (usually no) padding. The roles are typically small and thankless, and the threat of never working again once injured is greater than ever...

Still wondering why no padding, eh? Well, it's just not that easy to hide shoulder pads and knee braces under a strapless evening gown...

Yup, we're talking about stuntwomen; those poor souls often relegated to work as "hair-pulling" doubles and fall gals for the "weaker sex", blah, blah, blah... But what about those bone crunching scenes in *Charlie's Angels* or, better yet, *Kill Bill*? You actually think the actresses are that crazy? Hell no!

Double Dare takes us through two generations of stuntwomen, focusing intently on Zoe Bell, the Xena behind *Xena: Warrior Princess*, and Jeannie Epper, probably best known for doubling Lynda Carter on *Wonder Woman*. Throughout the film, our perspective flows back and forth between these two characters: Zoe, the spunky New Zealander who takes repeated blows to the head, but still laughs it off in a way that's... well, frankly, adorable; and Jeannie, who pioneered into what was always a man's world and co-founded the first stuntwomen's organization, only to find Hollywood now far too ready to write her off as she enters her sixties.

But you know what the craziest thing of all is? We really do come to love these insane women well before the film even gets going. Director Amanda Micheli brings us so close to these characters, it's crushing when Zoe is turned down for the main stunt role in a new TV series. But, in a way, that's no hard task at all; Zoe glows with so much joy and youthful exuberance throughout the film that seeing her down at all is painful. Micheli's directing really comes to the fore when she takes us through Jeannie Epper's day, calling lists of stunt coordinators when no work is available, struggling to make sure women get recognized in the stuntwork community without belittling them as "good enough- for a girl", and then, in probably the saddest moment, watching her eyes when she visits a cosmetic surgeon's office for an appraisal and, for once, seems to feel her age catch up with her.

Micheli also shines in the way she structures her story; revealing the danger that starting a family presents to a stuntwoman's career, showcasing Jeannie's daughter's struggle with the "high fall" stunt after an accident all but ends her own career, and exploring the bond that forms when Jeannie takes Zoe under her wing and shows her around the LA stunt scene, hoping to kick start her struggling career.

By the end, *Double Dare* sucks you in so completely, you almost wish its stars would try their hand at acting... or at least that more movies would showcase women kicking major ass. In any case, the filmmaking world needs to get it's act together, and *Double Dare* is a step in the right direction.

Rating: