

# FILM JOURNAL

## INTERNATIONAL

### DOUBLE DARE

Those who think all movie stunts today are created by computer animation will be delighted to learn otherwise from *Double Dare*, an entertaining documentary about two stuntwomen and the unusual work they do. Apart from the positive feminist portrayal, Amanda Micheli's film gives a terrific insider look at the making of action-adventure shows and movies.

Micheli focuses on Jeannie Epper and Zoe Bell, two women from different generations but with the same zest for stunt work. Jeannie Epper is Johnny Epper's daughter (he was a legendary western rider) and clips from her stunts in *Romancing the Stone* and *RoboCop* demonstrate her affinity for dangerous physical performances. Her most notable action-heroine doubling came in the 1970s, when she executed the stunts for Lynda Carter's Wonder Woman. Today, Epper is a grandmother and still likes to perform, but she has experienced considerable age discrimination in Hollywood, where male directors and executives believe she is too old for her profession.

New Zealand-born Zoe Bell got the coveted stunt-doubling assignment for Lucy Lawless as Xena: Warrior Princess when she was just 18. Bell is less aware than Epper of women's history in stunt work (and the industry's prejudices), but Epper becomes a mentor to the brash Bell, who has gone on to work in *Kill Bill* and "Six Feet Under."

Micheli interviews such showbiz luminaries as Lucy Lawless, Lynda Carter, Steven Spielberg and Quentin Tarantino, in addition to producers and other stunt performers. Archival and behind-the-scenes footage round out the portraits.

*Double Dare* engages at several levels—as interesting, moving personal histories of two different women in the same profession; as a peek at a little-known but all-too-overlooked part of the myth-making and manufacture of feature filmmaking; and as a candid criticism of a male-dominated industry. Micheli's access to her subjects and the other interviewees, in addition to the illuminating material, makes the film successful in every respect, though one does start to wonder about the other female stunt artists (a few are glimpsed in union meetings organized by Epper), as well as the fuller history of stuntwomen in the movies. *Double Dare* also sidesteps any psychoanalyzing about what draws stunt people to do what they do.

Still, Epper alone makes a worthwhile figure of study. The most touching parts of the documentary show the compromises Epper has to make in order to stay employable, including a visit with a liposuction surgeon. Even the meek way Epper enters the stunt person's trailer in one scene illustrates how this strong-willed and physically strong woman feels overwhelmed by her external circumstances. (She reveals that an injury at her current age might end her career and, ironically, her own daughter is injured in a non-stunt-related incident during the course of the shooting.) Epper may be a star in her own world, but she's not Lynda Carter and she's not even treated all that well by some of her colleagues.

By default, Bell's story is less gripping, but the contrast of her life with Epper's illustrates a form of evolution for women in the last few decades. Clearly, *Double Dare* tells us that Zoe Bell (and a number of other courageous performers) owe something to the pioneering career of Jeannie Epper.

—Eric Monder