

The New York Times

'Double Dare'

Opens today in Manhattan
Directed by Amanda Micheli
Not rated, 81 minutes

In the thin but pleasantly diverting documentary "Double Dare," women don't just fly through the air with the greatest of ease. At least one, a young New Zealander with an infectious grin and a killer body, named Zoë Bell, rapidly spins like a top while hoisted up in a harness and engulfed by flames. And then — with the greatest of apparent ease — this preternaturally cheerful daredevil crashes through a plate-glass window like some Tinker Bell turned Ninja assassin.

Ms. Bell was working as a stunt double for the formidable Lucy Lawless, the star of the defunct television series "Xena: Warrior Princess," when she pulled off this outrageous bit of choreographed bedlam. A tomboy who in her younger years executed tight flips across the gymnasium floor, Ms. Bell was only 19 when she landed her job as Ms. Lawless's main stunt double. The gig came to an end when the series permanently wrapped in 2001, leaving the restless Ms. Bell without steady employment or apparent purpose, though not for long. Through the efforts of the documentary's makers — the director, Amanda Micheli, and the producers, Karen Johnson and Danielle Renfrew — Ms. Bell came to Hollywood (or rather a nearby suburb), where she met another stuntwoman, Jeannie Epper, then 62.

A story about women who like to roll cars, throw punches and jump from gaspingly tall heights, "Double Dare" is another reminder of how tough it is for women to make it in Hollywood. Ms. Epper, who comes from a famous stunt family (everyone always seems to be flipping through the air at her house, even wee kids), is probably best known for "doubling" Lynda Carter when the curvaceous actress was starring in the 1970's television show "Wonder Woman." With its cornball plots and silly theme song, the show looks pretty bad now, but it's impossible not to be awed by the sight of Ms. Epper leaping, running and fighting in that ridiculous red, white and blue costume (and don't forget the breastplate, wristbands and lasso!), and without benefit of padding.



Jeannie Epper

Jeannie Epper holding Lynda Carter in the film "Double Dare."

Forced to dress like a Vegas cocktail waitress, Ms. Epper was prevented from wearing any protective layering while doubling Ms. Carter; the costume also required her to rigorously maintain the actress's beauty-queen proportions.

Decades later, Ms. Epper is still crash-landing on back lots and worrying about her weight, to the point that she is even considering liposuction. In addition to these scenes, each of which is painful to watch for a different reason, the filmmakers furnish a nice mix of talking-head interviews and clips of the women going through their spectacular paces. Along the way, the familiar hurdles appear, notably sexism, age-ism and one flaky actress, while Ms. Bell and Ms. Epper bond and give each other some hugs. Considering the bruising they receive from the movie industry, they need all the comfort they can get.

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