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## Stunt double a wonder woman at 64

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Film festival followers who venture beyond the glitzy gala nights at Roy Thomson Hall understand that the true stars of this marathon and multi-faceted event are not the ones who saunter down the red carpet and find themselves hounded by photographers.

Forget the glamorous, spoiled celebrities of Hollywood who have had their names above the title long before their planes touched down in Toronto. Instead, consider the ones who are cherished and embraced by audiences who had never heard of them before the movie started.

And by that definition, the most lovable new star who emerged at this year's festival was a movie veteran you've probably never heard of.

You may have seen Jeannie Epper many times over the years, but you wouldn't remember her name. It's only now, with the delightfully entertaining documentary *Double Dare* that Epper emerges as the woman you can't forget.

The subject of the film — a huge hit at this and other festivals — is Hollywood stuntwomen.

Directed by Amanda Micheli, the picture was six years in the making. It's a winning mix of thrilling stunts and background comments from Steven Spielberg, Lynda Carter and Quentin Tarantino, among others.

The picture is also the most entertaining feminist rant I've ever encountered, portraying women who see themselves fighting against the sexist restrictions of the Hollywood establishment.

No wonder *Double Dare* was a favourite of festival audiences.

If you missed it at the festival, there will be other chances to see it in 2005. A deal that would give the movie theatrical distribution will probably be signed next week. And *Double Dare* will make its small screen debut on PBS next summer.

One of the stuntwomen we meet is Zoë Bell, who landed the job of doubling for Lucy Lawless in *Xena: Warrior Princess*, and went on to double for Uma Thurman in *Kill Bill* and Sharon Stone in *Catwoman*.

Bell, who is from New Zealand, specializes in fights and harness work, has experience with air rams, fire burns and high falls.

But interesting as Bell's life story turns out to be, in my view she can't compete with the other key stuntwoman on the screen. No wonder Epper became Bell's mentor.

They are from different parts of the world, and they are of different generations, but their work experience makes them natural buddies. Both of them have been set on fire, thrown off buildings, dragged by wild horses. Jeannie Epper's claim to fame is that she did the stunts for Lynda Carter in *Wonder Woman*. But what makes her special is something beyond the roles she's played, the stars she has doubled for, and the big movies in which she has appeared.

The thing about Epper is that she just won't quit. At age 64, she is not ready to retire. In fact, when I phoned her the day after she flew back to California from Toronto, she was on her way to a wardrobe fitting for her next gig. It's a film called *Elizabethtown*, featuring a fire at a nightclub that has victims jumping out of windows.

Never mind the fact that her Wonder Woman physique is long gone.

Stunt work is not just a job but a way of life for Epper and her entire family. Her father — who doubled for



Errol Flynn, Gary Cooper and Ronald Reagan — taught her to ride horses. And she became one of Hollywood's first stunt children at age 9.

Her family had money, and she was sent to an expensive finishing school in Switzerland, but Epper's only ambition was to make it as a stuntwoman. Her three brothers and two sisters also went into the stunt business, and so did her three children.

The biggest sorrow of Epper's life concerns her daughter, whose career in stunts ended abruptly a few years ago when she suffered an injury that has required neck surgery. Now at age 40, "she can hardly get out of bed," Epper says.

Epper herself has had close calls, most memorably during a scene in Spielberg's *1941* when a cable broke, unleashing a tank that went out of control while she was filming a scene.

"Steven Spielberg and Terry Leonard, the stunt co-ordinator, actually thought I was dead."

But by some miracle, Epper wasn't in the path of the wayward tank.

Over the years, she has doubled for Shirley MacLaine, Julie Andrews and Kathleen Turner as well as Carter. She has endured catfights on *Dynasty* and mudslides in *Romancing the Stone* (which earned her an award for most spectacular stunt sequence).

In *Stir Crazy*, Epper jumped from a helicopter onto a moving train.

More recently, she has been seen in *The Relic*, *Metro*, *Con Air*, *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*, *The Fast and the Furious 2*, and *The Italian Job*.

Like athletes, stunt people tend to retire early, but Epper says: "I'm going to keep doing it as long as I can. The money's good, and we all need to feel needed. But I've made a lot of friends, and people still want to hire me. When Hollywood is busy, I work all the time."

Okay, there are things she can't and won't do anymore.

"I am no longer willing to be hit by a car," she admits. The last time she did that was at the age of 50.

"Most everything else I still do," she says.

And she sees absolutely no reason why she can't keep right on doing it for many years to come.

Perhaps we should look forward to *Double Dare 2* — in which Jeannie Epper could emerge as Hollywood's first geriatric stuntwoman.

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