

Call L.A. Stunts For A Good Time

City Stunt School Offers Safety Tips, Free-Falls

By Ross Baringer



Writer Ross Baringer takes the plunge at L.A. Stunt's 35-foot high fall. (Credit: Peter Cagnolatti)

What did you learn in class last week? In the massive Stage 8 building at Celtic Media Centre, students were learning about how to die horribly – from being run over by a car, to falling 35 feet face-up, to being set on fire. They are the students of L.A. Stunts Training Center, a comprehensive boot camp for those looking for a little more action in their day job.

I had the opportunity to visit the training camp and see the students and instructors in action. Michael R. Long and Shelby Swatek, instructors and directors of the program, were in the middle of a safety demonstration when I arrived at the soundstage. Their assistant, Nathan Moore, was strapping himself into a harness, preparing to demonstrate the Air Ratchet: an ominous-looking contraption that uses air pressure and a pulley system to yank a stunt-person off the ground and through the air. Sounds like a death machine right? If you don't know the safety protocol, it is.

Student Cole Miller was strapped into the Air Ratchet harness, preparing himself for “the ride,” as Long calls it. Miller had to keep tension in the cable attached to his back, so Moore knelt in front of

him, holding his hands to keep him leaning forward. Seeing Miller's nervous grin, Moore commented on his "pretty smile." Everyone laughed and Miller seemed to relax. Moments later, Long shouted a brief countdown and Miller went flying backwards into a wall of pads.

Long and Swatek, have a combined 50 years of experience between the two of them, and over 100 stunt credits; the pair run the show at the six-day Boot Camp sessions. Their method can only be described as thorough: it encompasses not only the techniques used to pull off these stunts safely, but also the rules of set etiquette and strategies for building a reputation as a reliable and talented stunt-person.

One student received a sharp reprimand for taking a picture with his phone while Swatek was explaining how to safely do a stunt.

"Stunt work is a dangerous business and a distracted stuntman is a liability," she said. The work they do is extremely difficult, and there are plenty of examples of what can go wrong. Google "stunt accidents" and you'll see what she's getting at.

Swatek began most of her lessons with "When I was on Terminator: Salvation," and proceeded to tell us about having 16 "squibs" (small explosives used to simulate bullet wounds) detonated on her costume, and a separate instance of being pulled 70 feet into the air. That first-hand experience on recent films is an important credential for the training center.

"There's a guy in Brooklyn with a stunt school. He doesn't have a single stunt credit," said Swatek. She even has that school's demo video on the L.A. Stunts website, and offers a free t-shirt to anyone who can pick out their mistakes.

This group of students came from a wide range of backgrounds, and some were more experienced than others. Jake Eavey started his own stunt production company where he writes, coordinates, and directs live shows for an Oklahoma theme park.

“I approached stunt school as a chance to learn more about the film aspect of stunts, which are much safer and very different to live action,” he said.

Raymond Rehage has taken the course at L.A. Stunt Training Center before, and prior to his first enrollment, he had no stunt experience.

“I hadn’t done any stunt work...but I was always that guy in my drama class who was getting thrown into walls or falling down,” said Rehage. “I decided to take it a second time to refresh on things and improve skills.”

In a corner of the room, a giant airbag was inflating. Long parked a scissor-lift in front of it and informed me that they would be doing “suicide falls” from 35 feet up, into the airbag, and asked if I’d like to join them. Naturally, I jumped on the offer.

The top of the scissor-lift swayed a few inches in each direction, and my head was among the pipes and rigging of the ceiling. I stared straight down at the painted red square in the center of the bag – the part where my ass was supposed to land after plummeting 35 feet. They tell you to scream on the way down, with the dual purpose of letting the air out of your lungs and because you’re technically an actor’s double in the scene. So I stepped off, kicking my feet out, and free fell, screaming and flailing all the way down.

It was every bit as cool as it sounds.