



# CAUTION!

actsafe★

set the stage to work safely



# SAFETY is a Team Effort

Keith Martin Gordey interviews Lori Stewart

Stunt performer Kory Grim  
flying backwards in *Movie Mechanics*.

Photo: StuntList



Lori Stewart understands the behind-the-scenes health and safety issues of our industry. In 1993, she was hit with 22,000 gallons of water in a confined hallway during her first stunt job on *The X-Files*. Since then Lori has worked on more than 100 productions. She currently serves as a Director on the UBCP/ACTRA Executive Board, is UBCP/ACTRA's representative for Actsafe and is a Trustee of the Members Benefits Trust. Lori served nine years on the B.C. Stunt Committee. With a degree in Physical Education, a background working in Sports Medicine, competing on the UBC gymnastics team, Lori has also won several Canadian, U.S. and World Championship titles in outrigger canoe and dragonboat racing. Lori has seen and experienced her fair share of injuries and accidents on and off movie sets throughout her career. She is dedicated to helping 'prevent the preventable' injuries in the world of stunts and for all performers in the film and television industry. In this Q & A Lori shares her first-hand knowledge of set safety with fellow performer Keith Martin Gordey.

**Keith Martin Gordey:** *Our work in the entertainment business is sometimes risky.*

**Lori Stewart:** What actors and stunt performers do is so "out there" - off the charts of normal compared to most other occupations. Each province has a different form of workers compensation insurance coverage, like here we have WorkSafeBC. But greater exceptions must be made for our line of work and we all must lead when it comes to safety on sets.

**Keith:** *One of your performer specialties is wire work. Let's start there.*

**Lori:** I'm a pretty huge fan of our dedicated 'Stunt Riggers' when it comes to pulling people on wires. For a special effects gag, if you make a mistake pulling a shopping cart down a road on a cable - well, okay, you get another shopping cart and do another take. But if you are pulling somebody on a wire, and they are going flying and crashing into a wall - those dedicated, experienced riggers and pullers behind the wall will know when to feather off just in time to take the edge off that impact for that performer. It is such an important partnership - the performer and the wire team - for the best performances and the greatest safety. The fine details are critical. That's why obtaining a "Stunt Rigger" Category in the British Columbia Master Production Agreement (BCMPA) has been an ongoing debate and conversation for the B.C. stunt community for the past 20 years.

**Keith:** *With Stephen Waddell as our new chief negotiator, maybe we can get that into the BCMPA.*

**Lori:** Well, our new Stunt Committee has got some pretty good, new, keen, smart people who want to make sure everyone goes home safely at the end of the day, while achieving all of the craziness the directors and creative minds want to see on screen. We'll see what they can do to help our community in the next few years and what Stephen can do to help this stunt community.

**Keith:** *Tell us about WorkSafeBC.*

**Lori:** We have a good relationship with them. And they've actually created a 'WorksafeBC Film Team', trained specifically to work with the film industry so we are not dealing with WorksafeBC people who are unfamiliar with our unusual work practices. For example, on set if people are getting headaches all of a sudden, anyone can call WorkSafeBC and tell them, "I'm working on a film set and there's something bad happening, please send someone out." That line, "I'm on a film set," triggers the Film Team. This 'Film



Lori Stewart

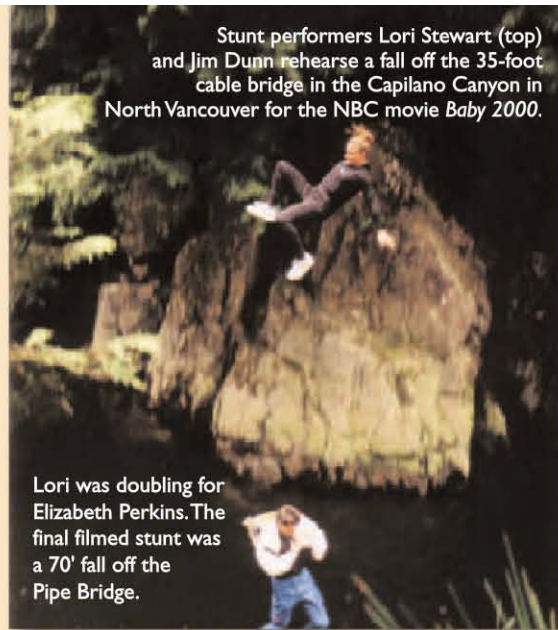
Team' has been trained to specifically deal with the strangeness of our business. They know we do our best to act responsibly and follow Best Practices and regulations that have been set for our industry. WorkSafeBC gives our film industry the leeway to do what we need to do to achieve movie magic.

**Keith:** *If an accident happens and somebody gets hurt, what's the procedure?*

**Lori:** If you are hurt at work, something not too traumatic, you're not on a spinal board with the ambulance being called, perhaps a slight concussion or you've taken a hit and you're not quite sure if it is bad or you've broken something, you should report it to the First Aid Craft Services person right away. They will be able to quickly let you know if you should see a doctor and they will generate a 'Form Seven' to be submitted to WorkSafeBC. That opens the door to you establishing a claim, and I urge people to file these in a timely manner as they have a one year time limitation. I want our members to understand that it is important to file with WorkSafeBC even if you don't follow up and make a 'time loss claim' - having a paper trail of your injuries is so important.



Stunt performers Lori Stewart (top) and Jim Dunn rehearse a fall off the 35-foot cable bridge in the Capilano Canyon in North Vancouver for the NBC movie *Baby* 2000.



Lori was doubling for Elizabeth Perkins. The final filmed stunt was a 70' fall off the Pipe Bridge.

**The vast majority of all our stunt performers have had at least one concussion and over 15% have had more than 3 – I still suspect these numbers are conservative.**

Things can cause you problems later on and if you didn't report it, you are rolling the dice on getting the help and support you may need. We have seen many performers have issues with this – with concussions and other injuries that tend to cumulate as we age.

UBCP/ACTRA has also created an online "Accident-Incident Report" to help track accidents and near-miss incidents. It is easy to fill out online, on our website. The report – including your name - will be held in confidence unless you authorize the release of this information. Again, I am urging members to report their injuries here too – even the small ones – so that our staff are aware that something has happened and we can direct you to the right resources and make sure that that production has, in fact, filed the paperwork that you may need in the case of a claim. Often our staff won't know anything has happened to our members until the show wraps and all the paperwork gets submitted.

**Keith:** So this is all the responsibility of the stunt performer, all performers?

**Lori:** Yes, everyone. And, once you have reported your injury

to your employer, contacted WorkSafeBC and checked in with your doctor, you should also contact your benefit provider MBT or AFBS. MBT and AFBS have a time limitation on reporting of 90 days. For example, if you got a concussion at work and you experience ongoing headaches for two months and you are unable to work and need to be on short-term disability, it should be covered by WorkSafeBC. But if you are a high income earner, such as a really popular actor or a really good stunt performer/coordinator, you should know that the most money you'll ever get from WorkSafeBC is approximately \$77,000 annually in compensation. So if you're making say \$150K plus, that could potentially be a problem for you. You may have expenses that go along with the amount of income you're used to having and your benefit provider can possibly help to top it up or cover some things beyond what WorkSafeBC may be willing to do. BUT, if you don't keep your benefit providers in the loop along the way, that back up won't be there if you need it.

**Keith:** What if there is "grayness" to your injury. Broken arms are easily seen, but what about, say, concussions?

**Lori:** In my case, I had a significant soft tissue neck injury and there was a point when WorkSafeBC stopped paying my physiotherapy. I kept a claim open with my benefits provider (MBT) that whole time, so in the end, they helped cover some of my costs that WorkSafeBC wouldn't. It was frustrating, as you just want to get better. I was glad I had kept the MBT in the loop and they were a big help in the end.

**Keith:** So you have to advocate for yourself?

**Lori:** Yes. And it is important to know that if you feel that your WorkSafeBC case worker is not listening to you, there's the "Workers Advisor's Office". It's a government body that serves as a watch-dog on WorkSafeBC. The WorkSafeBC Act book is about five inches thick and it is impossible for a 'worker,' with no legal knowledge, to defend their own case against these WorkSafeBC employees who know all the rules and ins and outs of the 'Act'.

**Keith:** That's a lot to read.

**Lori:** It is completely full of legalese and can be overwhelming. The Workers Advisor's Office is basically a bunch of retired lawyers and such who help you to interpret the Act and can advocate on your behalf. If your claim, in your opinion, starts to 'go south', there is free help out there for you. They saved me big time when I had problems with my claim.

**Keith:** So, do you know what it's like in the rest of the country?

**Lori:**

In Ontario for example, **stunt performers are not covered by the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB)** and in Quebec a Performer who is an independent operator (incorporated) can subscribe for coverage under the Commission de la santé et de la sécurité du travail du Québec (CSST).

Fortunately, Actra Fraternal Benefit Society (AFBS) has created the "Accident on Set" insurance plan to cover performers in all provinces, where they don't have protection under their provincial workers compensation board.

**Keith:** Is this type of insurance mandatory for signatory producers?

**Lori:** Under the IPA, producers have to have insurance for everyone. And hats off to AFBS for this forward looking insurance – it fills a huge hole in terms of performer protection. Most productions right across the country buy it, because they have to. In B.C. the ultra-low budget productions are required to purchase it. Accident on Set insurance covers stunt performers where most insurance companies do not.

**Keith:** Where do performers fall short in their responsibilities? Where do performers do things, or not do things, that put them in jeopardy?

**Lori:** There can be pressure put on actors and stunt performers to do things that are outside our ability range and comfort zone. Our members really need to know that we have a right as a worker to refuse unsafe work.





Stunt performers Matthew Mylrea and Angela Uyeda from the tv series *Falling Skies*.



Stunt performer Mike Ching performing a body burn stunt. Photos courtesy of StuntList.

**Keith:** *Is there a fear that if you refuse unsafe work, you may not get the next job?*

**Lori:** Yes. But, this holds true also for carpenters, Teamsters, camera and locations folks as well. Squeaky wheels might not get called back. It's tough when a director, really, really wants to see your face when you're doing something outside your comfort zone. You have a right to say no. You must say no.

**Keith:** *Any advice on where to draw the line? Where discretion lies?*

**Lori:** [big sigh] Usually you know it. And if you listen to your gut instincts, your little internal 'Jiminy Cricket' can guide you. Trust your inner voice. For example, I remember one day setting up a box rig for my friend who was doing a fall from the Grouse Mountain Sky Ride. As we were setting up boxes someone said, "Okay, I think that's enough." I felt we needed more boxes and asked that performer if he minded if I kept building as 'something' was telling me to do so and he said "absolutely!" When the stunt performer took the fall he landed exactly where I put those extra boxes. You just have to roll with your gut... whether it's something like that or whether it's knowing you are going to get really hurt if you agree to do something you know you shouldn't.

**Keith:** *When I worked in heavy industry I said, "no, this is unsafe" and was fired. I was happy with my decision. (And they later hired me back.)*

**Lori:** It takes courage to say no. That person, or group, might not hire you again. But someone else will. We have to change this culture of 'fear of saying no', 'fear of reporting'... all it does is cause more injury and creates problems for us going forward.

**Keith:** *So how often do stunt performers get concussed? What should they do about it when they do?*

**Lori:** The vast majority of all our stunt performers have had at least one concussion and over 15% have had more than three – I still suspect these numbers are conservative. But, over a five year period there were only a total of three concussions reported to WorkSafeBC. Yet a study done by Dr. Leslie McMichaels over that same period revealed that 88 of us had concussions. The 2012 B.C. Stunt Performer Injury Survey backed this up. Under-reporting of concussions and injuries is off the charts and this is not a good thing for those performers.

**Keith:** *So when people get concussed, they don't report it?*

**Lori:** Number one reason they don't report is that they don't realize the severity of the injury at the time it happens. Quite often you may feel okay for a couple of days, but then you start having headaches and all kinds of issues. So if three years later you get another concussion – and it doesn't take much to get that concussion – it can now be seen as a cumulative effect. That's why a paper trail is important – we have to get

better at documenting our injuries

**Keith:** *So if you're the coordinator, a stunt performer, or you're another performer on set, and you see that a person is "out of it" what should you do?*

**Lori:**

**Speak up. When a performer is in the moment, the adrenaline's going, mistakes can happen.**

If you see someone whack their head, stagger to get up, and someone says to them, "That was really, really good – but have you got one more in you?" **we may need to say, "No, no, no!"**





Stunt Performers Lauro Chartrand and Ed Anders in a scene from the *True Justice* TV series.



## I encourage our other branches to look at **actsafe.ca** in B.C.

This guy isn't even looking at me. His pupils are dilated and are different sizes. He's gotta go get checked out." We really want to empower people, whether it's another performer, a stunt coordinator, a rigger, a 1<sup>st</sup> AD – anyone who sees something like this, to speak up. At all cost we want to prevent '2nd impact syndrome' which is where someone hits their head again after an initial concussion – it can be fatal. That second take could kill you.

**Keith:** So let's assume you're not sure - it's mild and you shake it off. Three days or a week later you notice you have headaches, and so forth, should you make a report then?

**Lori:** Yes. Go to the doctor. Call WorkSafeBC and call the production company. Get the reporting taken care of. If you have symptoms of a concussion you have injured your brain! You only have one of those and it is not replaceable. You must stop, get medical attention, report the injury and take care of yourself!

**Keith:** What about fatigue? Over the years they've been expanding the zone and it can take me an hour and a half to get to work and the same to get home. So an eleven hour turnaround is now an eight hour turnaround. Plus we need to eat, sleep, memorize lines, rehearse a fight sequence. If you're on set several days

in a row, fatigue can be a huge factor.

**Lori:** People die in car accidents because of fatigue. A cultural shift needs to happen here. We need to take care of ourselves and our families. There's a point where all of the unions and guilds in Canada should be having a conversation about "turn-around" times and expanding the zone.

**Keith:** Last thoughts?

**Lori:** I encourage our other branches to look at **actsafe.ca** in B.C. There's nothing like it anywhere else in the country. ActSafe is funded by WorkSafeBC and was created to help inform and educate the film industry and the performing arts sector about the safety issues unique to these businesses. It's where people, both employees and employers, address all the safety issues involved in the B.C. film industry and beyond. There are lots of great resources there that can really help inform people and make things safer on our sets. Piggyback on the work ActSafe has done.

When I started performing I sort of knew what I was getting myself into. And I made a promise to myself that I would come out the other end with all my body parts, and my head, and my faculties intact. I thrive on making movies, being

creative and physical and enjoying my career. Having had three significant stunt related injuries, I stress that we all have to think about our safety and we all have to know where to draw the line. Falling asleep at the wheel is not worth a pay cheque – nor is having permanent brain damage nor ending up with type 2 diabetes, or shortening life expectancy by having a heart attack at 52 from working too many crazy hours. It's about balancing out our quality of life, being able to do what we love and being able to go home at the end of the day in one piece. That should be a reasonable expectation of all workers in any industry.

**Keith:** And we need to look out for each other on set as well, don't we?

**Lori:** Absolutely. •

**Keith Martin Gordey** is an ACTRA National Councillor, Treasurer of UBCP/ACTRA, Treasurer of Western Gold Theatre, a past President of PAL Vancouver and serves on the board of the Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Foundation of British Columbia.