



## IF FX Feature: Life as a Hollywood stuntman

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By Rodney Appleyard for IF FX

For 26 years, Gregg Sargeant has put his life on the line as a stuntman to help directors deliver memorable moments for the movie screen. This has included jumping from exploding vehicles, taking part in swashbuckling sword fights whilst swinging from ship to ship and escaping from blazing buildings whilst set on fire.

Along the way he has enjoyed the privilege of working and partying with some of the biggest names in the business, such as Johnny Depp, Orlando Bloom, Kevin Costner, Russell Crowe and Arnold Schwarzenegger, but he has experienced some of the most fun whilst being completely covered from head to toe in make-up prosthetics by talented special make-up effects artists such as Rick Baker. "When I was involved with *The Haunted Mansion*, which starred Eddie Murphy, I was one of the zombies that Rick Baker made up," he says. "That was really difficult because I had to wear a massive make-up that was woven into me from the head piece right the way down into the body pieces. Once you were inside, you had really limited vision. But the great thing about Rick is that if there is a problem with the make-up, he'll work with you and listen to make it better. In *Alien Resurrection*", he doubled as an actor in the movie who gets eaten alive. "That was one of the scariest experiences of my life because the creature was life sized and looked so realistic. It came through the floor, grabbed me, pulled me down and then attacked me. It was amazing and felt like it was happening for real when it grabbed me. Come to think of it, I always seem to be getting eaten by some creature", but Sargeant has never grown sick of make-up and he appreciates what an important role it plays in the process.

“It's essential to the vision. When you're wearing it on set, it not only makes acting easier for the actor but it also makes life easier for the director. For us stuntmen and actors, it helps to take the words off the page and transport you to a place you didn't expect to be taken to.”

In Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* he played one of the people in a cage with Tom Cruise, that gets eaten and in “*Master & Commander*” he played one of the leaders of the French military. “I had to wear hair extensions for six months, which was quite an experience, and I was covered in a lot of wounds. Russell Crowe was a wonderful guy to work with on this movie. He had a real bond with the stunt performers. Sometimes actors can be caught up in their own thing when they are away on location, but Russell would make a point of hanging out with us, even at the weekends. He would organise football games for the stunt guys and take us all out for drinks in Mexico when we were shooting there. “He was a very gracious and wonderful man – nothing like what you hear about him in the press. When you think about it, us stunt guys only have to be in two or three scenes during the day, but a star like Russell has to be in every scene all day and carry the whole weight of the film on his shoulders. He's got to do every fight scene.”

Sargeant also worked with Arnold Schwarzenegger on *Total Recall* and Kevin Costner on *Field of Dreams*. “He used to take us bowling at the weekend. Johnny Depp and Orlando Bloom were great on *Pirates of the Caribbean* too. They would sit around and chat with us at meal times, which was really good of them. “As for Arnie, he is a very colourful guy. You're always guaranteed a good time when he is on set. He just wants to party all the time and he used to take us down to Mariachi Square in Mexico City during the filming of *Total Recall*, where they have hundreds of bands playing. He bought all the stunt people drinks and paid for the bands to have battles for our entertainment.” Sargeant says there is a special bond between stunt men and actors because the job involves making the actors look good and, very often, stunt men put their lives on the line for them.

But stunt men work just as closely with special effects crew as they do with make-up effects artists. “There is a mutual respect amongst us and the SFX people, responsible for setting up the explosions and cannons in films like the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies. During those movies, we had bombs going off all around us; water was constantly being blown up in our faces and all sorts of other explosions were set off very close to us. “The SFX crew are always watching, holding a button, knowing that they have your life in their hands. But we trust them completely. It's all about the timing, so that nobody gets hurt.

Unfortunately, we happen to be in a business that sometimes people die. It's the reality of our business. You don't get into it to make money – it's about doing it for the love of it.”

On many occasions, he also works very closely with the visual effects team. “On *Pirates of the Caribbean*, we worked as a team with ILM. It involved a lot of green

screen and blue screen work. They had to remove a lot of wires from us when we were sword fighting, being thrown down tables and when we were jumping from ship to ship, "Those guys are always phenomenal to work with". A lot of the time, the VFX supervisor is on set these days while we are doing the stunts, so they can work out what to do in post later. They need to make sure people are in the right place for when they create their shots later. Sometimes that also involves us wearing costumes for motion capture filming purposes. "When we did Godzilla, the VFX crew had to make it look as if I and another stuntman, were stepped on by a massive Godzilla. A 10-ton weight was dropped on the truck we were in to create the desired effect of a truck being crushed. The SFX crew hung it from a crane and we had to jump out of the truck when the director shouted action, and then run before the weight crushed the truck. "There could be no second take on that one and no room for error. If we didn't get out of that vehicle in time, we would have been killed. This scene was important so that the VFX crew could create the effects to make it look real afterwards." After so many years in the industry, Sargeant is now considered to be a generalist because he can do almost anything, including a wide variety of fights, dealing with fire, crashing vehicles, jumping out of a plane, diving and coping with a number of different explosions. "But you get a lot of new guys come in these days and they want to specialise. They say: 'I just want to jump motorcycles'. Back in the old days we had to learn everything."

#### "THE INVISIBLE MAN"



Sargeant has managed to capture the spirit of the stuntman in his soon to be released Documentary, "*The Invisible Man*".

It is about the story of heroic stuntmen and women who put their lives on the line each day so audiences around the world can be thrilled and amazed.

The documentary provides a unique insight into the personal lives of these people, some of whom tragically pay the ultimate price in pursuit of their passion. It also features stunt family dynasties in the movie industry. Although a stuntman's work is not always obvious to the audience, they should always be appreciated for their significant contributions to cinema around the world.