

stunt family

Lois Siegel took time out from a busy schedule to make a three minutes Canadian Vignette at the National Film Board called *Stunt Family*. Below, she introduces the leading players.

by Lois Siegel

In the beginning... Céline, Réal and Pierrette Fournier





Two generations of Fourniers.
Two passions: film and action.
Four brothers, 6 sisters, 8 children.
All stunt people for films.
125 features to their credit.

The family began their stunt careers about 12 years ago. At that time Gilles Carle was working on his film *Red* and was looking for demolished cars. Carle visited one of the Fournier's Saturday afternoon 'demolition derbys' in Longueuil, Quebec. Afterwards Carle asked Marcel Fournier, "How long have you guys been stunt men?"

"We said, 'What do you mean stunt men?' We didn't even know what stunt men meant. We thought it was somebody who was playing a joke. So Carle explained that in Hollywood they have people specially prepared to double up for actors in violent scenes, fights, car crashes... We never dreamed of being seen in a movie – even less of performing in one. Then Gilles Carle told us about his project *Red*.

"So we asked, 'How much do we have to pay you?' – we thought that we would have to pay for the chance. He said, 'No – you get money for that.' We found it surprising that someone would pay us for something we considered to be a pastime...

"In the beginning we would flip a car over for \$50. We had no idea what a risk was worth. We were doing it mostly for kicks. On *Red* we worked 90 days and supplied 27 vehicles, including my own plane.

"After this first feature, word started to get around that there were some crazy guys in Longueuil doing some stunts for peanuts.

"Now it's up to the Union des Artistes to set the basic fees. This includes ordinary stuff like high speed chases, collision with no rolls at a certain speed limit. We get a basic fee of \$150 a day for fights with no high falls, being attacked by a knife, bottle or chair.

"Consultation is also \$150 a day because we might have to demonstrate how the actor has to perform a stunt.

"When we get into the more involved stunts – a chase with impact, a roll... we start to speak of \$300 for one shot. If we miss, it's free. The fee goes by risk. When you pass three stories for a fall, you're getting into high fees. We go to \$1000, for instance, when the landing material is not too thick.

The Fourniers love performing stunts. When there is an old car around, it's difficult to distract them. They jump inside and aim for the nearest obstacle.

Marcel Fournier, being the oldest, is chief of the group. He emphasizes the value of working as a "family" because, as he explains, "People who are close to you are reliable, and 98 percent of the time you require assistance."

The Fourniers are proud of their work, and they insist on doing the best job possible. Marcel insists, "You're called to do a shot, and it has to be done the way the director wants it, that's what you're paid for. First the director will ask if the stunt is feasible. He explains, 'This is the effect we are looking for.' If you fall from 20' you don't fall zigzag, you fall straight. If the director wants you to make an 'S' – you say, 'no – we'll do the stunt, but we can't fall in an 'S.' Also, a shot has to look good. Film will only give you a flat picture. But there is depth – so we have to work a little bit on the film – so that the action shows.



Marcel Fournier is right at home, battering up cars

"With the director and cameraman we discuss what is going to happen – how well the vehicle or car reacts and what is the best vehicle to choose. The movie is there to show the action and then the damage. Sometimes it's good to tell a cameraman or director 'now when I hit, this is going to happen, and then this car will peel off and you will see the metal turning.. and if you are at just the proper spot, there's no danger for you, and you will see everything as it's happening.'

"A stunt, whether it's tough or small, you can still be hurt. Just the same, my crew is instructed not to move before they hear the word 'cut.' I watch the director signal that the take is over. But if one person is caught in the car, it's not a matter of five seconds that will save him. If you're dead, you're dead. Five seconds more won't make you come alive. It sounds funny, but it's true. If you are squeezed – if you have an arm which is caught between the seat and the door because it's crushed in, there won't be much difference. The scene might as well be completed, and then we can move in.

"If we rush in too soon, and they have to shorten the scene, it might not show the proper punch – and the stunt is lost and then maybe you have to do it again.

"Even the production crew itself is told 'let us take care of the stunt' because if an explosion happens – why should the crew risk their necks – this is not their job.

Lois Siegel writes, photographs, teaches and makes experimental films in Montreal.



Three formidable members of the Fournier Stuntperson Team: Patrick, Céline and Yves

"We are always taking precautions and considering what would happen if something goes wrong. In addition we provide our own fire extinguishers. At least I can rely on my own equipment. I know if the extinguishers are full. We also always have chains, bars and a hammer to break the glass should we have to exit someone through a back window, and I always have someone with a knife to cut the seat belt if someone is squeezed.

"I'm not saying all this to prove that we do big dangerous items, but if they're not calculated well, they could become dangerous. I've got to make the stunt as spectacular as the director has described and walk out of it after the shot is completed."

The Fourniers prepare all their stunts in detail.

"Everything is rehearsed verbally or at least mentally before. When my family goes out there I want complete obedience. You do it like this and it will work.' Up to now it has worked. But you know that there is always the chance that if something changes during the action, you have to make your own decision."

The Fourniers seem to take injuries in stride. Accidents are part of their business.

"My sister Céline hit a horse and broke her spine in two places – and right after she was anxious to get back to doing stunts. But I wanted her to heal before she started again. There's no use to go limping on a shot when you're not able to do your best. We're not worried about physical injuries. If they happen – they will happen. You can be a normal person crossing the street and lose both your legs – and you're not even paid for that.

"We've got blood and bones, and we know one thing – they heal. This is the first quality of a good stunt man: you have to heal fast because you've got other jumps waiting..."

The weather often becomes a factor influencing the performance of a stunt.

"A slight change in temperature, like wetness, can effect a car crash. One day it's dry, the next it's wet. Now you've got two totally different conditions. With wet ground you have less control, less precision in your movements. Perhaps the next day the car doesn't perform the same: the tires are softer, worn out a little bit more. This is why when you're doing a stunt of importance you like to have a safety man with you.

"If I get 'knocked off,' the 2nd man is there to finish the stunt. Also the 2nd man is your second set of eyes. If I'm busy with a stunt, I concentrate on the action, but I might forget something which might make the difference between performing safely and getting hurt."

Marcel also emphasizes safety for the everyday automotive traveller.

"If something happens on the highway: a car crosses into your path and you know you are going to have an accident – you as a passenger should be prepared. If you have your seat belt on, if you know where to brace your hands, how to put your chin on your chest, and not to have the upper part of the body loose because you can be knocked around, you have a better chance of surviving.

"The passenger in the back has the front seat as protection, but in a roll over, this passenger, if he is not bracing



himself, can receive a skull fracture. When you are unconscious you don't have control of your body and the worst can happen. Without a seat belt, the general public is putting its survival chances to zero."

Marcel always wears a seat belt.

"The law's not a joke — just to test that, get into a car and go 10 m.p.h. and hit a solid post. You will be surprised how far you are thrown: clear off your seat.

"The road is the worst race track there is in the world. This is where you get killed. You don't see guys getting killed every day on the race track or stunt men getting killed everyday as a result of a studied stunt. When I go on the highway, I am always careful. I'm always watching for the other guy. I drive prepared for the unexpected."

Each member of the Fournier family has his specialty. "When a scene is proposed to double for an actor, we choose the member of the family who resembles that person physically. But I also have to consider who is ready for the stunt. Sometimes I have to get one of my sisters to do a horse fall. One sister may be afraid of horses, but she thinks nothing of flipping a car. My wife likes physical stunts, such as falls. She's not worried to fall from a second story building."

The Fournier family grew up on the outskirts of Drummondville. Marcel's father was a garage owner. There was a race track next door and plenty of space. They raced every weekend. Marcel started to drive a car at age 5.

"My children... the minute they could hold a steering wheel, I let them drive... so now they're pretty good drivers — motorcycles, cars, trucks... anything they want to drive, I let them."

Marcel's oldest son, Yves, is 16. He wants to be an accountant.

"That doesn't mean he shouldn't know the art of mechanics, but I don't want his taste for stunts to get him to dislike his studies. Last year he made about \$1000 in the movies. At one point I realized that he thought this was an easy income... so I had to slow him down."

Although car stunts are the Fournier's specialty, they also stage fights, fire scenes, falls, horse stunts, explosives and other special effects. "We're trying to cover the whole field."

Sometimes a film will require that they work as actors: bodyguards or gangsters in scenes that require stunts which

would be too dangerous for an untrained actor. "Where the actor leaves off, we take it from there.

"There may be a week of shooting which goes with the stunt, and you have to memorize lines and be like the person you are portraying... if they want an ugly face like you, fine, you have to play the part. You have to feel like an ugly man."

As might be predicted, it is usually difficult to double a male actor with a female stunt woman.

"This created quite a hassle during one shoot. In Quebec, with the Canadian male ego — a woman replacing a man? There's no way. On one feature when the actor found out that my sister was going to double up for him, he went into a tantrum and wanted to quit — so finally we couldn't use her for that stunt — it was a question of pride. Since then, I don't try to put a girl in an actor's place if he is going to be present during the stunt."

Besides his immediate family, Marcel sometimes accepts other stunt men into the business.

"Students come to me with their little bit of specialty, and we develop the rest. But they have to be persistent enough and free enough. I have one insurance broker whose revenue is in the upper bracket, but he does stunts because he likes doing them. I use him as a cop for chase scenes.

"I get calls: 'I want to be a stunt man. How do I go about it?'

"I ask: 'How old are you? Do you do anything special? Are you good on a motorcycle? How about races?... just to see that the guy has a start in something before... otherwise you lose a lot of time... you see whether the guy has the guts for stunts — to say you are interested and to do a stunt are two different things.

"You get kids maybe 17-18 years old. They seem to be good material, but they don't have the experience. To see how the guy reacts, I get in the car with him. We drive off a ramp. I watch how he reacts. I see the nervousness or perhaps the guy will not make it over the ramp.

"We do stunts partly for the glory and money and for a taste of a different venture... we're not special physically... we're just like normal people."