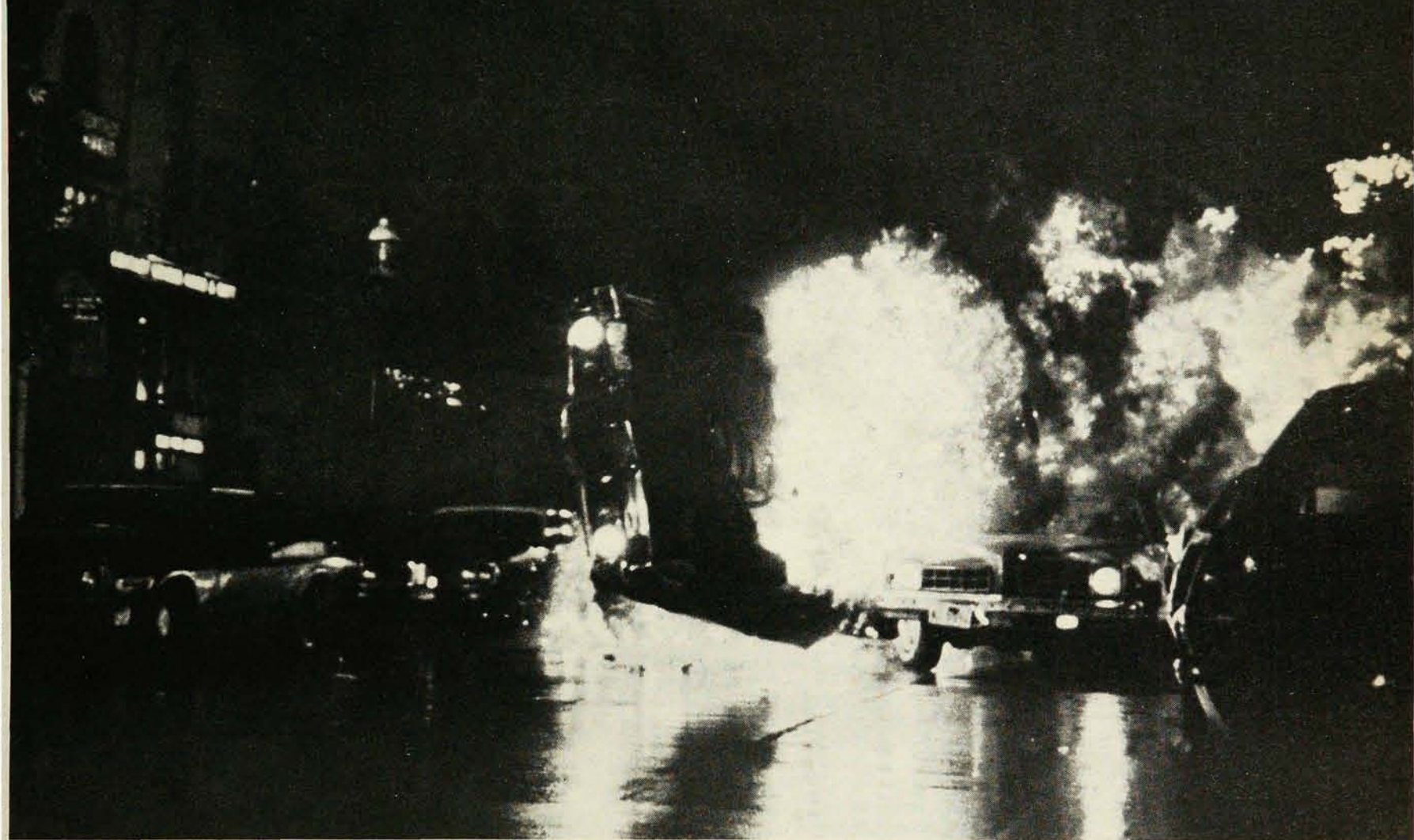


## The Canadian stuntman

### A coast-to-coast introduction



● Dave Rigby performing a dramatic fire-roll in *The Class of 1984*: "I could feel all the heat coming through the car as I travelled through the air"

photo: Shin Sugino

## Eastern Canada...

# In search of industry

by Michael Dorland

*Films are 'fabricated' and they remain tied to an apparatus, to a machine in a narrower sense than the products of the other arts... The motory, the mechanical, the automatically moving, is the basic phenomenon of the film. Running and racing, travelling and flying, escape and pursuit, the overcoming of spatial obstacles is the cinematic theme par excellence. The film never feels so much in its element as when it has to describe movement, speed and pace. The... film... (is) the self-teasing of man caught in the wheels of a mechanized world.*

— Arnold Hauser  
**The Social History of Art**

It is perhaps not surprising in a civilization in which most people spend most of their lives working that the content of the culture would, for the most part, consist of highly glamorized versions of people doing their jobs. And this is most apparent on U.S. television where the dramas of the family (*I Love Lucy*, *Leave It To Beaver*, *Father Knows Best*, etc.) have long since been replaced by the dramas of the TV workplace. From spies, doctors, lawyers, policemen, to print or TV journalists, U.S. television in its relentless description of the exciting jobs of America today, has recently discovered a new, hitherto unsung hero of the contemporary workplace, namely, the stuntman.

Be it directly in programs like *The Fall Guy* in which the stuntman is the star or indirectly in *Dukes of Hazzard*, *The A-Team*, *Blue Thunder* or *Knight Rider* which are predominantly packages of stunts, the stuntman has at last come into his own as a figure worthy of imaginative popular emulation. To put it less glamorously: the stuntman has been fully integrated into the mechanized world of the culture industry as some 400 stuntmen in the American film and television industry, grouped in two main professional associations, have reached a level of professionalism that has made stunts a job much like any other.

For the American stuntman's official

appointment to TV's roster of plumb jobs is the equivalent of the gold watch of recognition after years of loyal service to the motion-picture industry. More than any other film industry in the world, American filmmaking since its earliest days has privileged stunts in its extraordinary sensitivity to such essential cinematic themes as running and racing, travelling and flying, escape and pursuit. And yet ironically that recognition finally arrives at a time when the American stuntman, like many other occupations, faces redundancy as animation technology and the use of models in stunts encroach threateningly upon the stuntman's brief moment of public glory. Behind the on-



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camera glamor of risky feats and high-flying individualism, the stuntman has been devoured by the machine.

In comparison, the chronic underdevelopment of the Canadian film industry offers glimpses of a similar process, but with fundamental distortions. On the one hand, Canadian film's colonized relationship to its more advanced neighbor has led to the emergence of individual stuntmen whose level of professionalism is fully compatible with the American, mechanized style. On the other, Canadian film's approach to what Hauser calls "the overcoming of spatial obstacles" is still so tentative that it can't make full use of its stuntmen. While some Canadian stuntmen feel that a national, professional association would be the answer to developing an industry, others, particularly in Toronto, who do work regularly, consider the situation fine as it is. Caught between professionalism and "spatial obstacles," Canadian stuntmen, like Pirandello's characters in search of an author, are a handful of individuals in search of an industry.

It is only recently that the Canadian film industry has had any place for stuntmen at all. When Canadian film was restricted to the documentary, there were obviously no stuntmen. Even in the artisanal period of Canadian feature filmmaking, roughly 1955-1965, there was little room for stunts, both for reasons of budget and given these films' greater predilection for verbosity as opposed to action. Quebec's fledgling private film industry of the late '60s early '70s would be the first to make extensive use of Quebec stuntmen. Thrillers like Gilles Carle's *Red* or Jean-Claude Lord's *Bingo*, the early features of Denis Héroux (*Y'a toujours moyen de moyenner, J'ai mon voyage*), or David Cronenberg (*Rabid*), would put the Quebec stuntmen on the screen. Nor would the use of indigenous stuntmen be limited to genre films or low-budget comedies that made up in car crashes whatever else they might have lacked; even such culturally respectable films as Michel Brault's *Les ordres*, Jean-Claude Labrecque's *Les smattes*, other Carle features like *Les mâles* or *La mort d'un bûcheron*, Claude Jutra's *Pour le meilleur et pour le pire*, would also make use of local stuntmen.

In a parallel, if slightly later development in Toronto, the films of Peter Pearson or Don Shebib, but especially TV drama production (CTV's *Police Surgeon*, CBC's *The Phoenix Team*, or Glen-Warren Productions' *The Littlest Hobo*) would likewise nurture a local coterie of stuntmen.

The film boom of the late '70s-early '80s with its culturally maligned clunkers like *Gas*, *Meatballs*, *Pinball Summer*, *City on Fire*, or even non-tax-shelter flukes like *Porky's* would provide the second phase of the professionalization of Canadian stuntmen, enabling them to come somewhat into their own. Had it not been for these films, the Canadian stuntman could never have emerged from beneath the shadows of the American stunt coordinators on the only other shoots in Canada that do make extensive use of stuntmen, namely American productions. Yet the fight of the Canadian stuntman has been first of all a struggle for recognition from the American employer; and if Canadian stuntmen today, from Vancouver to Montreal, with the major exception of Toronto, have begun to make the first tentative gropings towards their own national association,

it is in large measure on the strength of the recognition they have earned from Americans.

If art historian Arnold Hauser is right – "the overcoming of spatial obstacles is the cinematic theme par excellence" – then the struggle of the Canadian stuntman for recognition in Canada is a microcosm of the problems of the nation itself, and as a reflection of that, its filmmaking.

So one begins with a humbling consideration of smallness. There are very few Canadian stuntmen – just as there are few Canadian films. In Montreal, the Union des artistes list nine stuntmen on their rolls; how many of these can and do work in films was not known. In Toronto, ACTRA, after what seemed like considerable effort, came up with two names. Best-guess estimates of the total numbers of Canadian stuntmen range from five ("top-notch") to 15. But simple numbers can be misleading.

For one, stunting in films covers a wide range of activities, from overall stunt coordination to special effects, through particular and often specialized activities like fights, falls, jumps, driving, wrangling, and pyrotechnics.

For another, the stuntman is something of a real-life anachronism – a patriarchal figure whose roots go back to such pre-industrial forms of social organization as the clan, the tribe, the

gang or the extended family. The stuntman is a living reminder that part of the cinema's past originates in the circus. In the stuntman is reunited the derring-do of the trapeze artist, the illusionism of the stage magician, the macho of the cowboy, and the blood and guts of the stock-car driver. Organized in families like Quebec's Fourniers; in teams like Ted Hanlan's Stunt Team in Toronto; in companies, both in the theatrical and the business sense, like Dwayne McLean's The Stunt Company, also in Toronto; in loose associations such as Montreal's Tiberghien, Rigby and Associates, or larger regional associations like Stunts Canada in B.C. (John Wardlow) and Alberta (John Scott), a stuntman usually commands some dozen or two people with whom he is used to working and, above all, whom he trusts.

The stunt business is an intensely personal one, both in terms of the relationships among a group of stuntmen, and between stuntmen and those who hire them. For example, Quebec film director André Forcier who has used the Fournier family for all the stunts in his films, says he would never think of any other stunt team. "Marcel (Fournier) is like a member of my own family; we're friends."

However, there are both positive and negative aspects to this. While it may foster loyalty, it also creates cliques and local monopolies. The rivalries between stuntmen are notorious – "dogs fighting over a bone," says Montreal's Dave Rigby

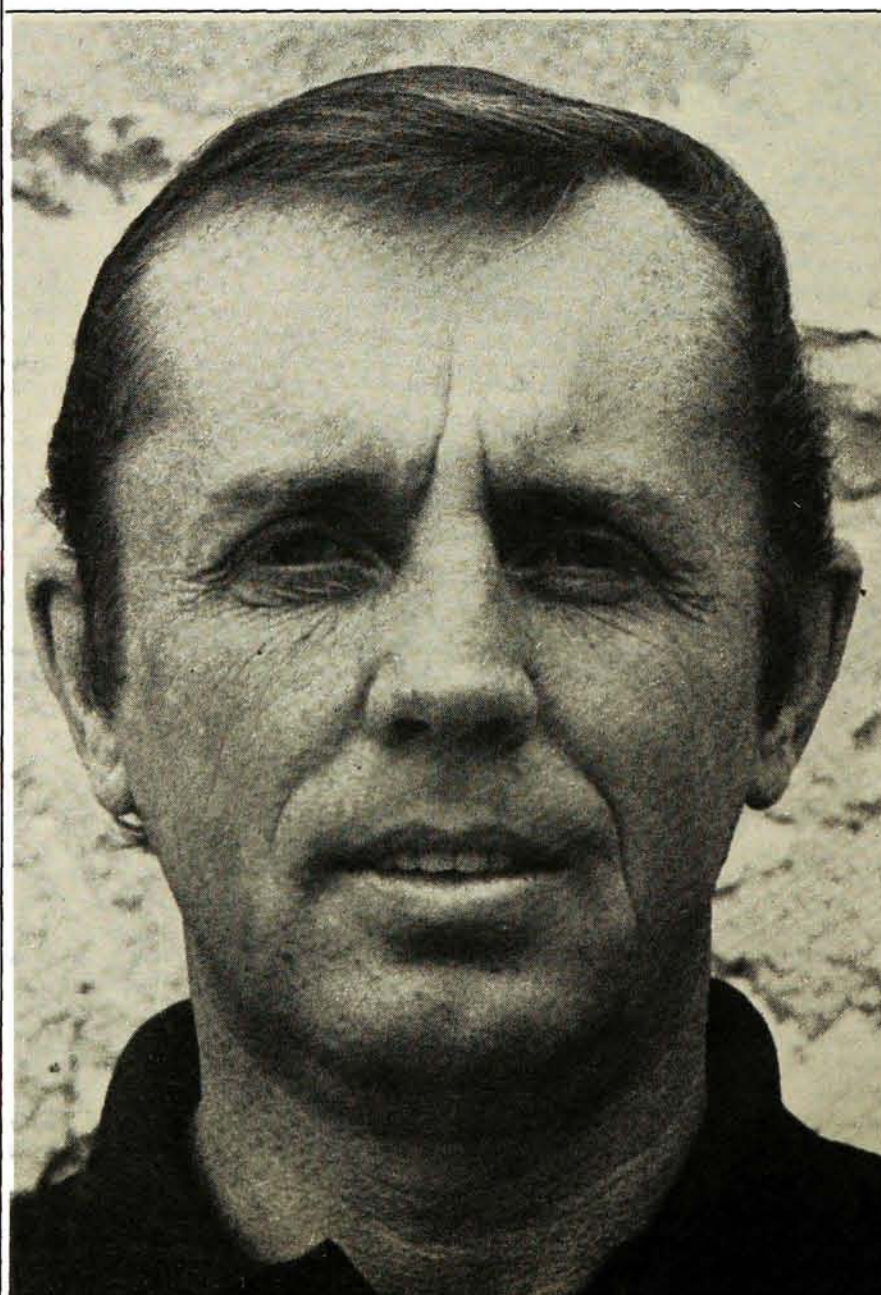
– and the divisiveness and suspicion with which competing stuntmen view each other testify eloquently to the limitations of networks built primarily on word of mouth or personality. Not to mention that the ancient imperial tactic of divide and conquer has lost none of its traditional effectiveness. "You wouldn't believe what some of the American coordinators say about Canadians," says Rigby. To the rivalries between stuntmen for work on American shoots can be added the whole gamut of internal Canadian hatreds: among Anglophones, Quebec stuntmen are often viewed as dangerous lunatics who'll kill themselves for \$1000; and the contempt with which Canadian stuntmen on the west coast or in Montreal, both English and French, regard Toronto stuntmen does not take long to emerge.

One way to approach the situation of the Canadian stuntman would be to see who's working these days. Here again the boom-and-bust cycles of the Canadian film industry have meant the alternation of periods of intense activity followed by longer periods of unemployment (and not only for stuntmen). If Quebec stuntmen like Marcel Fournier and his family (brother Charles, daughter Céline, son-in-law Pierre Giard, and associate Serge Déniou), together with freelancers like Gaétan Lafrance, pioneered the Quebec film industry's use of stunts – the Fourniers claim 180 film, television or commercial credits – the almost total collapse of subsequent local feature production that would employ stuntmen has left them virtually out of work in films. "We're hoping for better days ahead," said Marcel Fournier from the Florida garage where the family works and winters "like any self-respecting Quebecker." "Film work represents 75% of my income and so I hope the slack is only temporary. I'm confident the spring'll bring something our way." Indeed, the reorganization of the Quebec government film structures in the wake of Bill 109, together with Quebec's 150% capital cost allowance, bodes positively for a rebirth of Quebec stunting activity. André Forcier has lined up the Fourniers for the stuntwork on his fifth feature, *Kalamazoo*, shooting this summer, and Montreal filmmaker Lois Siegel who used the Fourniers for the stunts in her 1983 feature *A 20th Century Chocolate Cake* has made them the subject of a television documentary, *Stunt People*.

But veteran Quebec stuntman Gaétan Lafrance, who at 46 has some 75 feature credits since 1969 and most recently on *Maria Chapdelaine* shooting rapids, is less optimistic. "The past two years have been terrible – you couldn't make a living. There isn't an industry here that rolls all year long. And I've reached an age where you start to feel all the bruises and blows you've taken. Even if I was called to do a film, I think I'd rather direct younger stuntmen. You see, it's not a living – young people may think it's the great life, and while I've had some good years, no doubt about it, it's getting to be time when I thought of doing something else."

The current lack of production in Quebec means that younger stuntmen like 26-year-old Montreal daredevil Ace Cooper, who heads a largely American 30-person stunt team called Universal Stunts, mainly contracts work across the border. Cooper who holds the world's record for the longest climber's

● Dave Rigby approaches stunts with an engineer's meticulousness







● The stuntman's leisure moments : Marcel Fournier in Lois Siegel's *Stunt People*

rappel over legendary American stuntman Buddy Joe Hooker and has done stuntwork on Sergio Leone's made-in-Canada film *Once Upon A Time in America*, is critical of "the Canadian film world especially in eastern Canada where talent and expertise comes second to personal contacts." "Unlike Hollywood," says Cooper, "where know-how is a priority, it's unfortunate to find Canadian production managers resort to local stunt families who have acquired their daredevil experience in demolition derbies."

And yet one stuntman who came into film four years ago from the racetrack circuit and in that short time has established a reputation as one of Canada's half-dozen top-notch stuntmen is Montrealer Dave Rigby. Rigby, along with Jerome Tiberghien as part of Rigby, Tiberghien & Associates, figures among Quebec's busiest stuntmen today. Like the Fourniers, Tiberghien's stunt credits go back to early Denis Héroux films (*J'ai mon voyage*), Michel Brault's *Les ordres*, Claude Jutra's *Kamouraska*, Robin Spry's *One Man*, Cronenberg's *Rabid*, through the boom when he was joined by Rigby (*City on Fire*, *Death Ship*, *Pinball Summer*, *Gas*), and together they have broken into the exclusive Toronto market doing stunts most recently on American shoots like *Strange Brew*, *Dead Zone*, *Police Academy*, and *Martin's Day*.

If Tiberghien in Quebec has largely replaced the Fourniers on current Montreal productions, cracking the American-dominated Toronto market is only one aspect of Dave Rigby's strategy for canadianizing the stunt business – and the first eastern step towards a national association of Canadian stuntmen.

"The problem," says Rigby, his rough-and-tumble, windblown features coming alive, "isn't with the Canadian stuntmen,

it's with the American coordinator who'll come in here and get \$50-60,000 for a couple of months' work when that work could more equitably be shared among Canadians and with a more lasting impact on upgrading the Canadian industry as a whole.

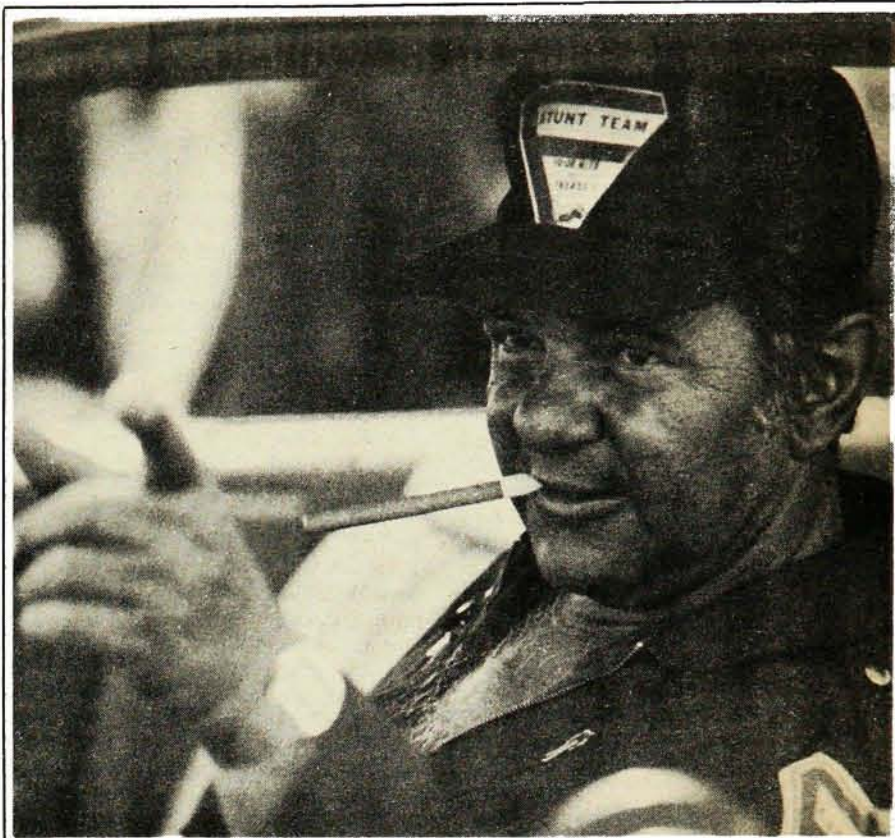
"What we'd like is that the people making movies consider Canadian stunt people as good as any they'll find anywhere in the world. We'd like them to know that they don't have to go to Paris for a certain guy to drive a car, that they can find a top-class, 100% professional here in Montreal or Toronto or Alberta."

But – and for the moment it remains a big but – the inability of Canadian stuntmen to work together makes them their own worst enemies, something Rigby and Vancouver stuntmen like John Wardlow or John Scott in Alberta recognize and would dearly like to change.

"One of the problems in the business in Canada," says Rigby, "is that we have maybe five or six top people and we just can't seem to work with each other. There is no one specific group that has a governing body for Canada per se; there are a lot of stunt companies and stunt teams but no governing body, only each little group.

"There are a lot of good stunt people out there, but give them a chance, show them where their weaknesses are. If we can get a group going across Canada, then we would have a more professional group working together with each other for the benefit of Canadian cinema in general, not just trying to keep control over a certain area. Sooner or later we're all going to get older and who's going to take over? Somebody has to take over; people have to start training the younger kids coming up."

If Rigby's preoccupation with performance, standards, techniques, his insistence on "the importance of doing your homework," on careful preparation, his concern with what he calls



● Marcel Fournier, the granddaddy of Quebec stuntmen

"state-of-the-art thinking," often makes him sound like an engineer, it is because he has a background in industrial design. And far more than the almost carefree individualism of most stuntmen, Rigby brings not only to his own work in stunt coordination, but to his view of filmmaking in general, a thoroughly industrial attitude. A film, he argues, is a manufactured product and every aspect of filmmaking has to be approached with the same precision and rigor that is involved in any large-scale production process. One example from Rigby's particular area of competence:

"All the emotion and fear is out of my system. I now exactly what to expect. Somebody who rolls a car once every two years, there's no way he can have the same feelings inside of him that come over a stuntman when he's at the point of impact. No matter how much experience you have, it comes over you – dying, to be blunt. And when emotion or fear gets to you it causes you, if you're in a car, to slow down and put on the brakes and sometimes boggle up the stunt. So you have to know exactly what to do in that situation. For instance hitting that tractor-trailer in *Dead Zone*. That was major scene where Christopher (Walken) goes into his coma for five years. It had to be established that he had a serious accident. An inexperienced stuntman who has only rolled a car two or three times in his life sees this massive tractor trailer coming at him at 20 mph; and he's doing 40 mph. The impact is almost at 50 mph and he's got to get through it and turn over and find a mark on that trailer where his pipe-ramp is camouflaged inside. And if for some reason he gets the fear into him and slows down and only puts a big dent in the trailer, then the shot is no good.

"We had only 10 minutes of light left. Botching the stunt would have meant first unit again the next night; all the special effects would have had to work through the night riggering the trailer back to the position one, refitting the aluminum, bringing in another 50,000 gallons of water for the rain, all the arc

light, 200 people on first unit between the crew and gaffers, cameramen and whatever, on a dirt road in King City airport in Toronto. It was a massive stunt.

"If I hadn't been on the mark and somehow boggled the stunt, we're talking \$150,000 a night that was on my shoulders.

"But because I laid it out properly, I knew exactly what to do – and did it. A lot of people say I worry too much, but if I do my worrying before the stunt, I don't have to during the stunt itself. When somebody says don't worry, it's always that which happens to show up on the set."

This concern with the set, with the process of filmmaking, with how a stunt will look on film, is one of the hallmarks of Rigby's approach.

"It takes a lot more than balls to be a stuntman. Stunts in general involves more than just being able to perform that stunt. The stunt's going to get done, fine, but do your homework, get your preparation down – it's so important in any picture. Learn something from directors, from the d.o.p. when you get the chance; find out about the state-of-the-art equipment; do your storyboard, break down your stunts, make sure you have all your elements, make sure that there's safety – and then the stunt's the least. You have to play for the picture, not play for your own self-esteem or the people on the set which has been the problem in the past.

"Because stunt people didn't have a lot of work, when they did get work it was more of a parade of who could go the fastest and crash the car the worst. And that put people and cameras and lives in danger and created a reputation that hurt all of Canada in general because of that. That's why we had such a bad reputation with American coordinators.

"In the end it comes down to saving dollars and shooting days. We don't sell ourselves on risk; I sell myself on how many days and nights we put in. We don't leave at five o'clock to go to the bar and talk about how many cars we crashed and who we scared. When a

photo : Simon Lefebvre

photo : Lois Siegel



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day's shooting is over, we're back at the drawing board doing our homework for the next day's shoot."

If Rigby has in the past two years done major stunt-work for such American shoots in Toronto as *Dead Zone*, or the Anglo-American production *Martin's Day*, this has been at the expense of what might be called the Toronto stunt establishment.

At 43, after some 14 years in the business, Toronto's Dwayne McLean is perhaps the godfather of Canadian stuntmen — and one of the very rare Canadians who make a full-time living from their stunt-work. With over 100 motion-picture credits, including such Canadian films as *Porky's*, *My Bloody Valentine*, *Quest for Fire*, *Ticket to Heaven*, *Unfinished Business*, and an equal number of television series (*Seeing Things*, *Some Honorable Gentlemen*, *For The Record*, *The Great Detective*), McLean's career has closely paralleled that of the Canadian industry.

He began in stunts in Vancouver "as a way to keep fit," training, like many Canadian stuntmen, with an American. In 1971 he made the move to Toronto — "I decided to give it a shot — it was an uphill grind for years." He got his first stunt credit in 1973 on Don Shebib's *Between Friends* and his first crack at stunt coordinating on Peter Pearson's *Only God Knows* (1975).

"Our industry was pretty much a baby at the time. There was not enough work. For the first four or five years it was like that, convincing people that you could produce the stunts. Then the people started to know who you were and there was more opportunity for work.

"Essentially in this part of the country there were only two people doing stunts, and if there were five pictures in town only two might have stunts at all. Stunt people were just self-taught. We sort of developed along with the industry."

As in Quebec, the films were low-budget; there was no pre-production time, and the stunts were often dangerous. "You were prepared to do things you wouldn't do today; we were stuck with what we had."

The expansion of the industry in the mid-'70s brought increasing prospects for work, especially in the area of low-budget where Canadian stuntmen could get opportunities not available to them on the larger American shoots. "Canadian producers will give you more opportunity because they don't want to pay an American stunt coordinator \$50-60,000 for three months. The big (American) pictures that have the money will bring in their own people. We often end up with the smaller stunts. I can't blame them; it took time for them to have confidence in us."

But relying on low-budget — what McLean calls "the run-of-the mill stuff around town" — meant steady work, greater specialization, and increased focus on safety. "There have been a lot of changes in attitudes, particularly the attitude that stuntmen are professional technicians instead of some fools, and working conditions are 500% better than they used to be. We don't worry like we used to; now we know that the work is there."

If for McLean today, the seven full-time members of The Stunt Company and nine part-timers that he trained himself, "things are going so well; I

wouldn't change a thing," the future is not without its shadows. "I just came back from L.A. and there are a lot of changes happening in the stunt business. More and more films are going to models for crashes. Technology is going to eat up some business in all areas of the trade except for actors, as more and more they'll be using models in areas where men were used."

Still, Dwayne McLean is confident that "though the changes are starting now, they won't make a big difference in my lifetime. I don't think our bread-and-butter work will suffer."

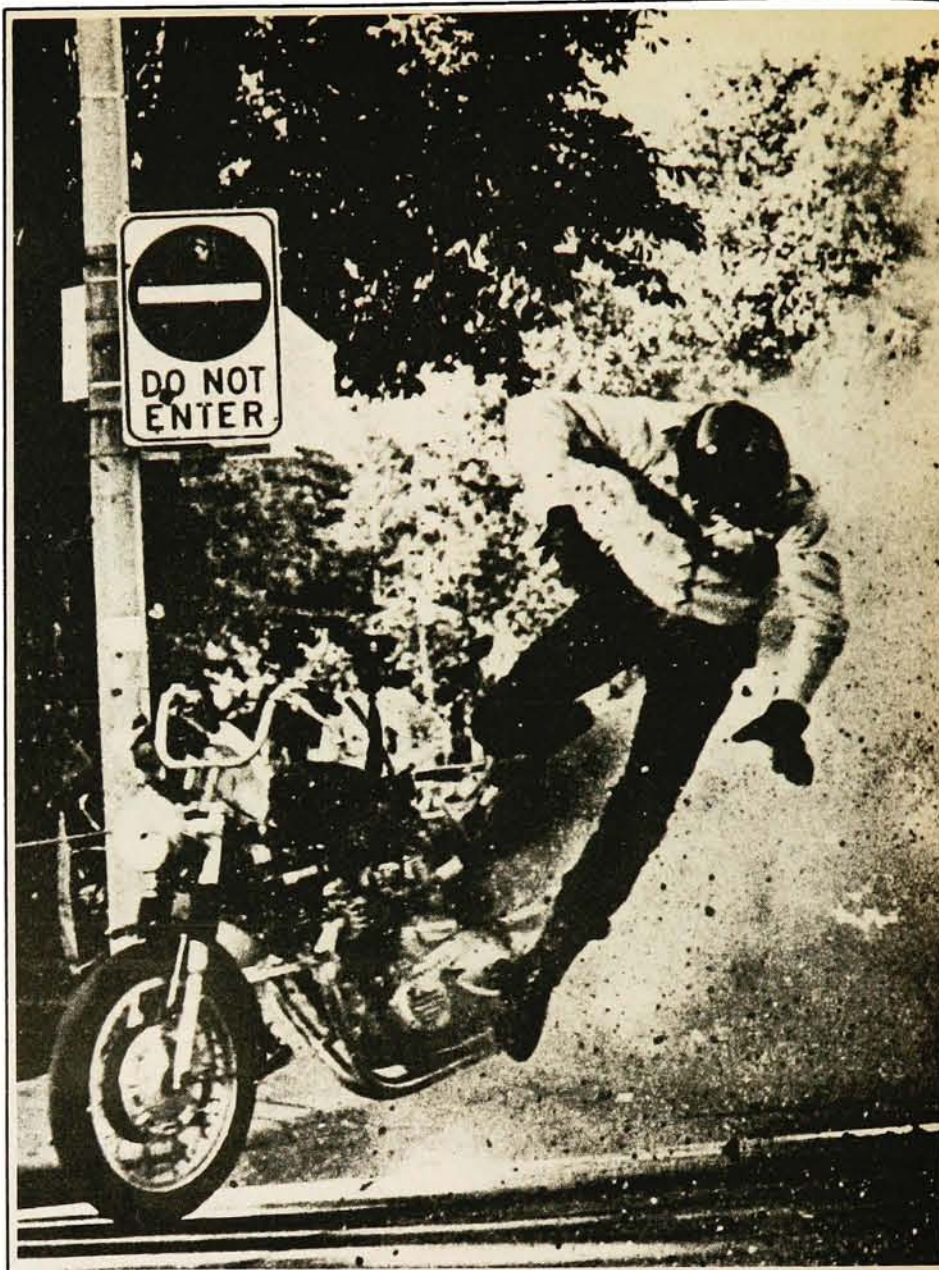
However, McLean may be wrong in estimating the pace of coming changes in the Canadian stunt business — particularly as people like Rigby forge ahead in laying the foundations of a national stunting organization. In Toronto, Rigby has now teamed up with "the new kids on the block", 27-year-old Ted Hanlan and the two other founding members of The Stunt Team, 23-year-old T.J. Scott, and 26-year-old Marco Bianco. What makes the collaboration between Rigby and The Stunt Team possible is a similar view of "state-of-the art thinking."

"What you always think of is how the finished product is going to look," says Hanlan.

"Not everybody knows how to think like that," Rigby explains, "not every stuntman knows how to think and break down the shots: I do, Jerome (Tiberghien) does, (Alberta's) John Scott does, Ted Hanlan does, but I can't speak for the rest of them because they don't know how to think."

"State-of-the-art" thinking is the ability to think of film as a product. As Rigby explains it:

"I get my experience from the *shmat* business in Montreal, from breaking down garments. What's the difference between manufacturing a film or manufacturing a dress? Some people'll say, you're totally ridiculous — there's no way you can compare them both. But it is the same: you have a shot size, you have a collar size. You have a shot length and you have a sideseam. And the way you get that dress or that film together for the best quality or the best productivity is the way the engineer says you put it together. The same thing works in a picture: the best way to put this stunt together is to make sure you have the fire extinguishers, the roll cage, is the hood latched on properly or is it going to pop up when you hit the ramp and blow



● A member of Dwayne McLean's The Stunt Company in a scene from CBC-TV's *Sidestreets*

the whole shot — is all that done? You're breaking down your elements. So there is a similarity: a dress is one product, film is another — but you're thinking in the same way."

It is this ability to think 'product', to think like a technician, that has permitted the American film and television industry to become an enormous machine that churns out culture like General Motors turns out cars. This, the industrial reality of the American dream, is also to a great extent the Canadian cultural dream. In a recent brief to the

Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada, Communications minister Francis Fox noted that "the issue is much more one of whether the cultural industries are to be placed on the same footing as other industries and treated with the same seriousness — in an industrial sense — as steel, automobiles or telecommunications."

But it's when ministers of the crown and stuntmen speak the same language, that you realize the industrialization of culture is no longer an issue at all. ●

● Ted Hanlan's The Stunt Team in action in a scene from the group's seven-minute promotional video

