

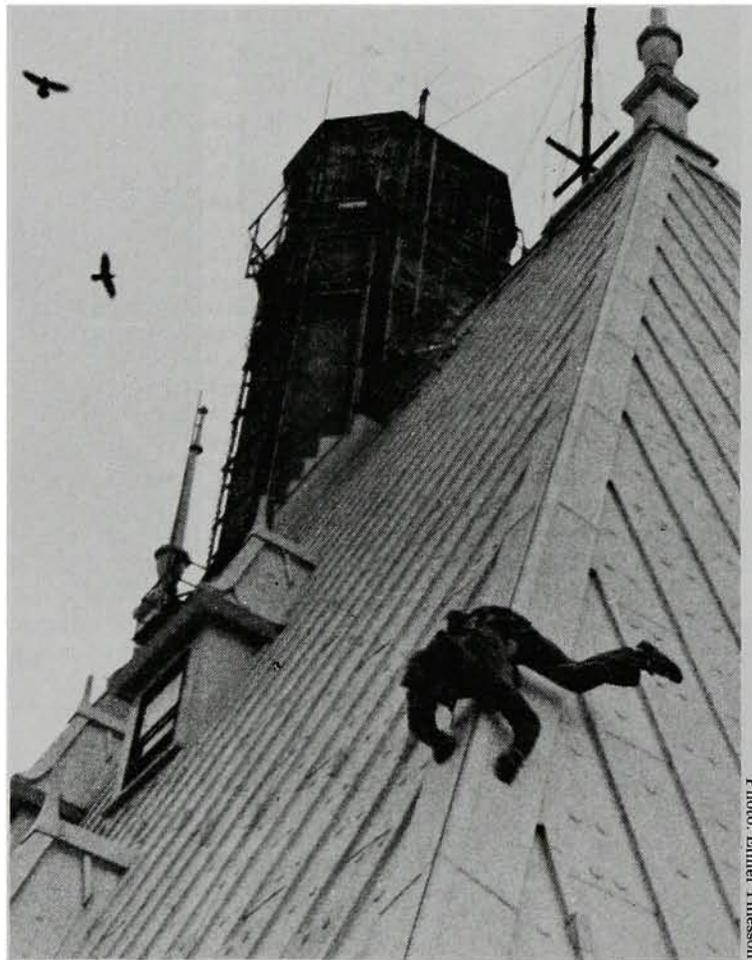
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A fall from a roof, a jump from a bridge, lightning which strikes a tree ... They're all in the domain of John Thomas. Working sometimes as a stuntman, sometimes doing gags, Thomas creates excitement. Peter Bryant captures the flavor of his work in the following article.

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# the smell of the smoke pitch, the roar of the primacord

by Peter Bryant



Executing a harness fall off the top of the Hotel Vancouver

John Thomas is like the outlaw Johnny Jump in **Little Big Man** — he is in the murder and mayhem business. John deals in falls, fights, hits, kicks, smashes, crashes, and the odd explosion or two. The assorted thrills, chills, laughter and carnage are referred to under the generic name “gags”, which is perhaps taken from the early Sennet days when comedy was not only King but dangerous.

John himself gets a bigger thrill from his own gags while doing them than any spectator in the audience. He enjoys his work so much that someday an unscrupulous producer will try to take advantage of him by making John pay to work. His love of motion picturing accounts for why people are in the godforsaken business to begin with; his enthusiasm and joy are catching.

A stunt man is only effective if anonymous. Effects, like magic, only work if you don't know how. But John and others like him provide some of the most entertaining and spectacular moments in film. It's time to give a little recognition.

And what can you say about a guy who for openers, has: air propane and water manifolds, arcing match, balsa wood, bullet hits, breakaway glass, blank loading equipment, blood, chemicals, drill presses, electrical equipment, fire extinguishers, fuller's earth, foam and papier-mâché rocks, fluids, grinders, gangs, hoses, harnesses, interior/exterior rain sets, lathes, liquids, Maidwell fog guns, micropress, micropress crimpers, oxyacetylene, olibanum, Pelican Hook Loads, plastic snow, piping, primacord, propane fire equipment; plumbing, power, carpentry, glazier, electrical, welding, leather and metal working tools; powder vaults, rigging for height work, rigging for cable work, ropes, smoke pots, s.s. cutters, and a sky genie (his pride and joy) not to mention sundry other items, gadgets, and gizmos and gaffer tape? (Natch!)

You could say that John Thomas is the best equipped effects man in the country. What he doesn't have, he's going to get. He has mobile stage boxes to contain it all and, as well as contained, it's classified, catalogued and kept in the right place, so that John can turn to his assistant and say, “we need a mortar, they are in box two, drawer eleven.” John is doing this because knowing what you need, getting it quickly, and doing the gag with a minimum of delay and bullshit is his professional attitude.

Stunt men and effects men are like magicians. This similarity is due not only to the trickster stuff they are engaged in, but also to their attitude towards work. Outsiders are not shown the tricks of the trade. However the fraternity doesn't mind sharing a secret or two with its own. John has learned a lot of what he knows, and its corollary, what he needs, from some of the best in the business: Alan Gibbs, Bill Warrington, Joe Day, Bob MacDonald, Hal Millar, Logan Frazee, Terry Frazee, Joe Zomar, Dutch Vanderbyl, Tom Fisher.

John found that all of them would go out of their way to provide him with valuable information. He finds it useful to be able to call someone in Los Angeles if he requires a specialized piece of equipment. Equipment is the key to doing the job. John spent two months rigging a roof with Day and MacDonald for a spectacular stunt where the heavy is shot and falls onto a car in the street below. The roof was 300 feet up on the Hotel Vancouver. The roof was also the scene for a fight sequence involving the hero, George Segal, and the heavy, and also a helicopter. The necessity for the proper cables to secure camera crews and equip-

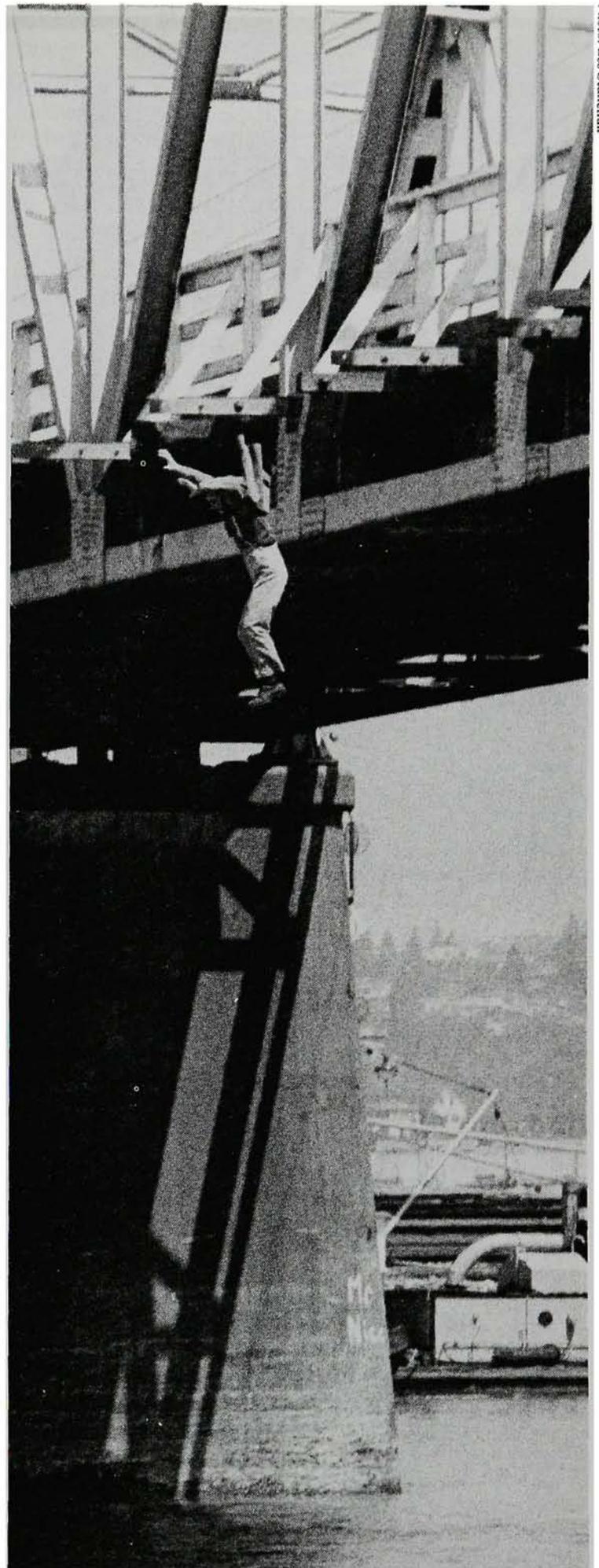
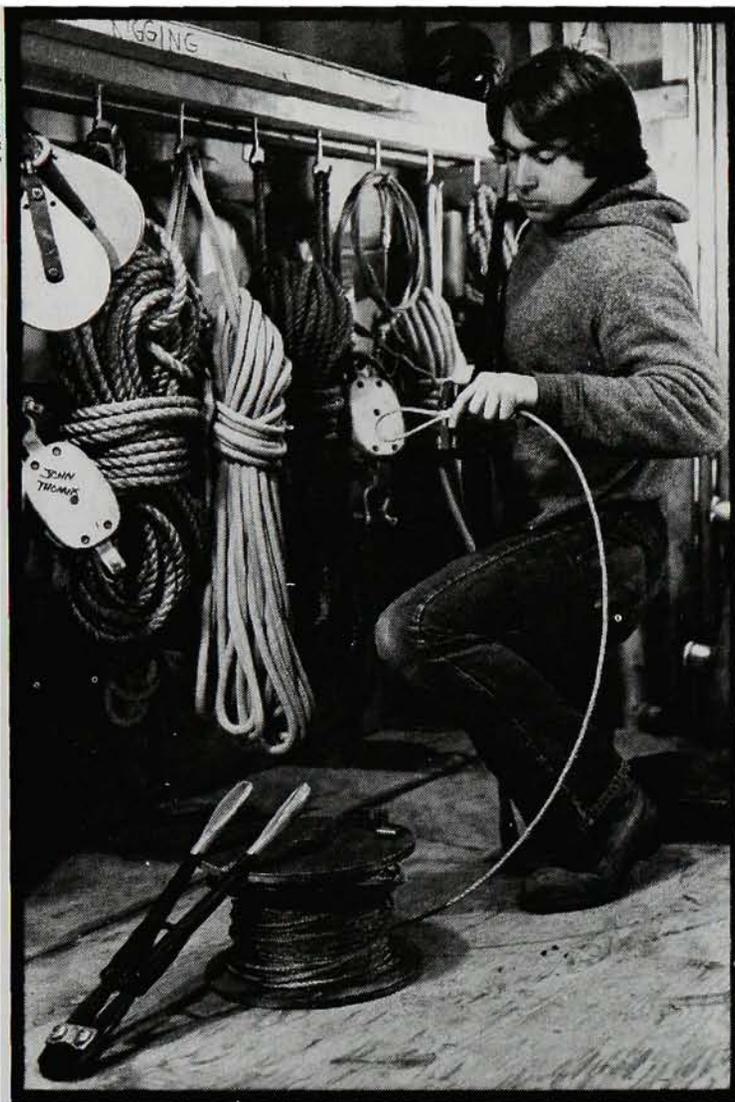


Photo: Les Stanchuk

John Thomas taking a 48 ft. leap off the old Fraser Street Bridge while doubling for Frank Moore in Peter Bryant's **Supreme Kid**

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*Peter Bryant, filmmaker, is active with the British Columbia Film Industries Association and has contributed regularly to **Cinema Canada**. His first feature film, **The Supreme Kid**, should be released this fall.*



Pre-rigging safety cables for John Kemeny's **Shadow of the Hawk**

ment, and to allow the actors to work safely that high, is self-evident. The fall can be seen in **Russian Roulette**.

John had acquired most of the standard equipment an effects man needs over a three-year period. By the time of **Buffalo Bill and the Indians**, John had his boxes together. He took them with him to Alberta. It really wasn't standard procedure but he did not want to miss the opportunity to have someone of the calibre of Logan Frazee look at his equipment and offer his advice. After a couple of weeks they started to look at his boxes and he had the feeling that if he hadn't been accepted as a fellow effects man Frazee wouldn't have bothered looking at his gear. "So what's this for?" and "why don't you have one of these?" kept coming up. For the rest of the time it was John asking why, and where, and how can I get it, and the others did everything they possibly could to tell him and passed on some specialized equipment.

John also appears in the film as an "effects man" in the Wild West Show. His is the hand that reaches out and jerks in the flaming arrow that didn't quite make it down the piano wire. The hand jerks back with scorched fingers, and if you see it in the film, that's John, doing his number for once in front of the camera.

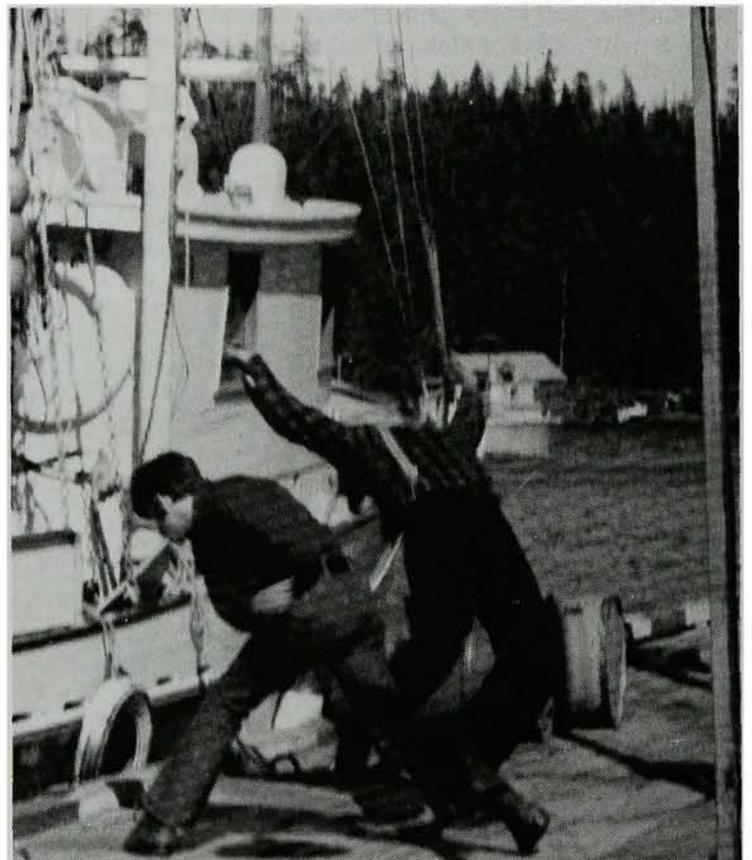
He was itching to get in front during another scene in the Wild West Show. He wanted to be one of the Indians circling the wagons and to do some saddle falls. However on a film like that you only work one side of the street. Stunt work is on the other side and to the Hollywood effects men, the twain shall never meet. So John stood on the effects side, content with his hand getting a shot at stardom (we all know how Altman makes actors) while secretly hoping they would run

out of Indians. For the effects men on **Buffalo Bill** John was a walking contradiction, because he was involved in stunts and effects. But John knows there is no way he can make a living in the Canadian film industry by walking too narrow a road. Here he can combine the two and offer a package deal to producers, and he can also be adaptable to the economics of the situation.

John would like to see a situation where a group of stunt and effects men work together, along the lines of Stunts Unlimited, but adapted to the Canadian scene. This requires work and experience and room to bring others into the business. John is backing up his belief by his investment in every conceivable kind of gear he can see being called upon. There will no longer be situations where a production manager has to make calls to L.A. for esoteric, and sometimes not so esoteric, pieces of equipment and materials.

John makes his boxes available to others working in the field in Vancouver, and he also offers his advice. In fact when someone is doing a gag, John will often be in the background, in on the act but not on the payroll. There is a small nucleus of people waiting to go in stunts effects. But since the industry is not quite big enough, they work (like others in the industry) on several sides of the street. Keith Wardlow is a painter, while his cousin John Wardlow does production work. Sean Gorman is also an actor. Lon Katzman has a chemical supply business. John has been fortunate in that he has been able so far to make a living doing exclusively stunts and effects. Last year he worked as many features as he could handle.

Photo: Bob Elliott Productions



Doubling for Johnny Yesno in dockside fight sequence from **The In-breaker**

John started by doing stunts. He worked with Alex Green at rodeos and live shows doing saddle falls, tomahawk throwing, bull whip numbers and other crowd pleasers. His first gag was some fancy bike riding on a Suzuki commercial, and from there it was don't look back. Somewhere down the line he became more and more involved in effects work; in order to do effects he needed the gear.

Perhaps it was an incident on *The National Dream* that brought it home to him. The gag required native railroad workers to hang over a cliff face to set off dynamite. John was called on a Sunday to do the gag on Monday. He was supposed to "train" native actors for the gag, but they never showed up. He was asked to do the stunt without adequate preparation time or proper equipment. He rigged ropes from the beams of Panorama studios to get used to working off the ground, since the scene required the blasters to carry heavy equipment and to use it. He contacted Bob Henderson of International Fire Systems who was fighting a fire outside Revelstoke and the rigging equipment arrived on the 6:20 a.m. train for a 7:00 a.m. call. Although there was no time to chip the loose rocks from the 200-foot cliff face, the gag was accomplished, but the frustrations in achieving it led John to be more dependent on his own resources and gear. It is axiomatic that the more time spent up front in pre-production the less time will be wasted on set. Perhaps it was the C.B.C.'s unfamiliarity with the complexities of the stunt that created problems.

The "slammer home" for moving into effects was on **Mustang Country**. John had to rig a rain storm, and during the storm a stroke of lightning had to hit a fork in a tree splitting it in half and causing a horse to bolt. This was done in the studio. John found a plumber and went to work setting up the gag. He found out that if things are carefully thought out and tested, it is a matter of follow-through. If the solution isn't known, he takes the time to think, and asks what will be the safest, most effective, and quickest method.

In the early history of the business, if one stunt man wouldn't do a gag there was usually an extra or two who would be willing to give it a shot. And the fact is that men have died to bring the audience some glorious and not so glorious moments in film. Directors, then and now, sometimes have the unfortunate attitude that anything is possible, and that risk is what is being paid for. The stunt man's attitude is to make the gag work, with as little risk as possible. This is where the knowledge, the equipment, and the rehearsal are important. This is where objectivity in mea-

suring danger, placing an emphasis on safety, and working with top professionals comes into it.

There is a horror story in **Stunt** by John Baxter about a novice who does a fire gag. He wore an asbestos suit, had on breathing apparatus, and had extinguishers standing by. Underneath the suit he wore leather gloves to protect his hands. He did not know that the intense heat of the fire effect vaporizes moisture. The leather trapped the sweat, and the moisture scalded and destroyed both his hands. He did not know that absorbent wool gloves were worn for this particular gag. You are paying a stunt man or effects man to know what kind of gloves to wear, what kind of rigging to use. John Thomas never jumps into the water without knowing how deep it is. Even in the best of situations accidents can and do happen, but without the right attitude stunt and effects men do not last long.

John Thomas has been fortunate. He has had the opportunity to work on a number of films with some of the best in the business. They have given him advice and encouragement and experience. He has had the opportunity to coordinate stunt and effects work on his own.

His boxes and gear are the external tools of his work, but he has the internal tools as well: mechanical knowledge, aptitude, common sense, boundless enthusiasm, and an overwhelming love for films and his work. □

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## Credits

**National Dream** stunt rigger, performer; **Beachcombers** stunt co-ordinator, performer; **Christina** stunt performer; **The Inbreaker** stunt co-ordinator, performer; **Supreme Kid** special effects, stunt co-ordinator/performer; **Sally Field-good and Co.** special effects, stunt performer; **Journey Into Fear** Best Boy, Vancouver special effects; **Russian Roulette** Best Boy, stunt rigging and effects; **Hey I'm Alive** Best Boy, special effects, rigging; **Mustang Country** special effects, Vancouver section; **Buffalo Bill and the Indians** Best Boy, special effects; **Food of the Gods** Best Boy, special effects.



The aftermath of a rigged explosion seen in **Russian Roulette**

Photo: Jay Morrison