

Alice Watts

Loren Janes:

A Stuntman's Stuntman

Being a stuntman is risky. The potential for injury is ever present and even death can result if a stunt goes wrong. Stuntmen and stuntwomen stand in or "double" for a star when the action becomes too dangerous or requires skills the star does not have. Loren Janes is now retired from that profession.

"I was a stuntman for 50 years, appeared in over 500 movies and over 2,200 television shows, and never broke a bone," he declared, his strong voice coming clearly over the telephone. Sitting in his study in his home in southern California, Janes, 81, willingly shared his story.

From his first stunt in 1954 in the Esther Williams' film, "Jupiter's Darling," to his last, in "Spiderman" in 2002, Janes was the consummate stuntman. He studied his stunts, then "just did them." He credits his coaches, his acrobatic background and staying in shape, plus never smoking, drinking or using drugs, and his faith in God for his lack of serious injuries, according to his published biographical sketch. He worked for almost every major director in Hollywood and doubled for many of the leading stars including Kirk Douglas, Michael Douglas, Yul Brynner and Steve McQueen.

Janes well remembers his first stunt, an 80-foot dive off a cliff at Catalina Island off the coast of southern California. He had been teaching calculus and trigonometry in a Los Angeles high school for three years to pay for operatic singing lessons. One day one of his students, whose father worked for MGM, told him that the producers were looking for three divers, said Janes. Since he had done a lot of diving, he said yes. When he got to the site, he asked, "Has anyone checked the water below?" They told him it was all right, but Janes insisted. He had learned never to do a dive without checking the water first. And it was a good thing he did, for there was a shallow shelf beneath the water that would have killed him if he had landed on it.

The trip down the cliff, inspection of the site, and back up the cliff took two and a half hours, but it was well worth it. They chose another site and Janes did the dive safely.

He had been diving for a long time, through high school and college. "I had done a 60-foot dive, so knew I would do one for 80 feet," Janes recalled. "I kept my form for the extra distance, and did the dive." The other two divers weren't as fortunate. One landed on his back, the other on his head. Janes saved their lives by holding their heads above water until they were rescued.

So began his stunt career, though it was not a full-time career at first. Janes continued teaching for another year while doing stunts part-time. He kept getting more and more calls for stunts, though, and eventually had to decide which career to pursue. He chose the world of the

stuntman. In addition to paying better than teaching, it offered more challenges and adventures. He was able to make a good living as a stuntman, Janes said. Work may be sporadic for some stuntmen, but not for Janes. Once he got started, he worked every week.

However, that wasn't the beginning of his adventurous life. His adventures actually started early. Between the ages of 10 and 17 he would go into the mountains, living off the land, barefoot, clad in a loincloth and carrying only a hunting knife. He also hiked the 220 miles of the John Muir Trail four times. Living in the mountains gave him confidence, he said. It was a confidence that would stand him well throughout his life.

He needed that confidence in performing what he describes as his scariest stunt – jumping off a moving train in the epic movie “How The West Was Won” (1962), landing on a cactus and then falling down a cliff. To ensure a safe stunt, Janes singed the needles off the cactus where he would land. He also dug down four feet into the ground around the cactus and cut the cactus part way through so it would fall over instead of bouncing him back into the path of the train. When the time came to perform the stunt, it worked perfectly. “How The West Was Won” was his favorite movie and favorite western. He enjoyed making westerns and had no problem with horses, Janes said, “I did that (riding horses) since I was born.”

His two favorite actors were Steve McQueen and John Wayne. Janes doubled for McQueen for 23 years, and the two became good friends. McQueen gave Janes a Rolex watch with the inscription, “Loren Janes, the best stuntman in the world,” which Janes stated he was wearing during the interview for this story. It was tough when McQueen died (1980), said Janes.

Janes also thought Wayne was a “great guy.” “Wayne loved stuntmen,” Janes remembered. “Whenever they would have a meal, Wayne would eat with the stuntmen.” Janes worked in 14 Wayne movies, though he never doubled for Wayne because at 6'4" Wayne was taller than Janes.

Janes' last stunt was in 2002 in the movie “Spiderman.” It was a fire stunt in which he went up and over an obstacle and fell 20 feet to a pad. He did the stunt three times so the cameras could catch it from different angles. “They loved it,” Janes said. “All the stuntmen stayed and watched to see if I still had it.”

Janes has received numerous honors, including the Golden Boot (the equivalent of the Oscar, for Westerns) in 2001 and the Silver Spur award in 2003. The most recent honor was the Taurus World Stunt Awards Lifetime Achievement Award in 2010. The Taurus award is his favorite “because that's my whole career,” Janes said. He is most proud of doing a great job, and doing it without injuries.

He attributes part of his avoidance of serious injury to staying in shape. He kept in shape by running, swimming and skiing. When he was home in southern California, he would run 10 miles a day in the mountains. When he was on set, “I just ran every place I went,” Janes said.

However, as successful as Janes was professionally, his personal life has not been without hardship and tragedy. He lost first wife Celia to a freak choking accident, and second wife Beverly to breast cancer. His personal life took a turn for the better, however, when he became reacquainted with an old friend some years ago. He proposed to concert pianist Jan Sanborn by singing "Yours Is My Heart Alone." "She asked me to sing a high G," Janes said. "I did, and she married me." They have been happily married for 14 years. Janes has two grown children, Eric and Erica, and is proud of the successes they have achieved in their lives.

Janes may be retired from stunt work, but he is not retired from movie-making. He is planning to direct a film later in 2013 about two Medal of Honor winners from the Viet Nam era, men he knew well. He also lectures and shows films he took of the movies he worked in. He relaxes by swimming every day and skiing on weekends.

Janes has worn many hats throughout his life: Korean War veteran, teacher, swimmer, diver, skier, runner, high school and college gymnast, and two-time Olympic pentathlete in addition to the many he wore while doing stunts. He chose stunt work over teaching and singing because "it was a big thing to do," said Janes. "I loved a challenge and it was a big challenge for me."

Janes' advice to someone wanting to be a stuntman? They have to be a gymnast and know their way around the air, he said. "You can't have any fear 'cause that's when you get in trouble." Advice he certainly has lived by.