



Primed for Pain: How Stunt Actors like Garrett Warren are the Super-Survivors of the Movie Industry

by Chitra Ragavan · 15 Sep 2022 · 11 min read

__A Viral Insights Column On Super-Survivors

I am the first to admit that despite having birthed two boys, I'm a wuss when it comes to pain and a sucker for pain avoidance.

Garrett Warren, on the other hand, appears to be primed for pain, building a death-defying career as a stuntman extraordinaire.

“You know, I jump out of helicopters onto moving trains, I jump from moving semis onto horses that are on the side of the road,” Warren notes ruefully. “It’s not a healthy occupation, let me put it that way.”

Warren has escaped the Grim Reaper’s call on more than one occasion, both on and off the set.

“I think I've gone through something like sixty-six surgeries in my lifetime. That's a lot of broken bones, a lot of organs that have been stitched up, fixed, put back in. I'm Frankenstein's Frankenstein.” — Garrett Warren, [When It Mattered](#)

Warren and I recently had a deep conversation about the ins and outs of stunt performing on my leadership podcast, [When It Mattered](#), where I’ve been exploring what makes super-survivors who they are (you can also read my [related columns](#) on SWAAY).



Garrett Warren is a tough act to follow

I've had a lifelong fascination with the world of stunts, having grown up in Mumbai, the home of India's movie industry, Bollywood, which is replete with zero-plot B movies featuring bloody, gory, hero-defeats-villain, "*dishum-dishum*" fight sequences. And, thanks to my older brother, I also became steeped in Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan movies.

So, I was delighted to get a glimpse into Hollywood's stunt world, from Warren's perspective.



Making it real, Garrett Warren, with actor Hugh Jackman

The Wizard Behind the Curtain

Warren is a relic of the golden age of classic action flicks, an endangered species in an era dominated by mediocre action scenes watered down by CGI.

Today, Tom Cruise arguably is one of the few moviemakers carrying on the expensive and risky tradition of stunt action sequences, in his breathtaking *Top Gun* and *Mission: Impossible* series, many of which he performs himself or partners with the greats like Warren.

In this green screen era, it's easy to forget the extraordinary contributions of these stunt performers as they toil in the shadows, risking their lives and limbs for high-paid actors, only some of whom are willing to acknowledge their stunt doubles and give them their due in public.

Warren shrugs it all off, saying he's not in it for the fame.

“I was born to be the wizard behind the curtain trying to make someone else look good. And, when that person is out there getting clapped on the back, [hearing], ‘Man, you did a good job falling out of that window on fire,’ I say, ‘Yeah, he sure did,’ even though I know it was me.” — Garrett Warren, When It Mattered



A life lived defying the odds

“Ripped Through My Right Orbital”

Astonishingly, Warren, who has spent more than two decades in stunt performing, directing, and choreographing, has done much of it with just one eye.

He lost his right eye to a hit man who was dispatched by his ex-wife who was enraged by the custody battle for their daughter. (Warren’s ex-wife is the actress [Claudia Haro](#), who is also the ex-wife of the actor Joe Pesci.

She pleaded no contest to the charges and was sentenced to 12 years and four months for the crime. She was released in August 2019)

It was May 20, 2000. Warren was hanging out with his mother in his home in Westlake Village, California, when the doorbell rang, insistently. Warren opened the door. What happened next was no stunt scene, nor were the bullets that the hit man pumped into Warren.

“Struck me four times. One in the chest, one in the neck, one in the hips. I had fallen to the ground. He'd come in the door, and he put the gun to my forehead and was about to fire the last time when I flinched. And, I turned my head sideways, and the bullet went straight through the corner of my right eye and came out of my left ear, just below my left ear, actually...ripped through my right orbital.” — Garrett Warren, *When It Mattered*

Warren survived (as did his mother, who narrowly escaped two bullets the man fired at her as he fled), but, despite extensive surgery, he lost his right eye.

"You know, someone puts stitches in your eyeball," Warren says, "trust me, it hurts like heck!"

Parade of Hits

Despite losing an eye—a massive liability and a usually career-ending incident in an industry that is life-threatening even to those with both eyes intact—Warren has only managed to become more and more successful as a stunt performer, stunt double, fight coordinator, actor, and unit director.

His parade of hits includes *Avatar*, *Mission: Impossible III*, the *X-Men* movies, *Logan*, *Iron Man 2*, *Agents of SHIELD*, *Spider-Man 2*, *Alice in Wonderland*, the *Transformers* movies, *Divergent*, *Alita: Battle Angel*, and *Lincoln*.

A fifth-degree black belt in tae kwon do, Warren has won three world martial arts championships. He is a personal trainer to many stars and has taught martial arts and fight choreography to celebrities such as Jessica Alba, Jada Pinkett Smith, John Travolta, and Dwayne Johnson, aka “The Rock.”



Filming *Real Steel*, with Garrett Warren and actor Hugh Jackman

“A Special Kind Of Stupid”

For a man of such derring-do, Warren is thoughtful and articulate about his craft and the cognitive dissonance that comes with the job description.

"Someone says, 'Hey, I want you to come over here and get hit in the face with this chair. Ah, that was not bad. But could you do one more, and this time, snap your head sideways? Could you do one more?' And you go, 'Yeah, sure thing. Let's do it again.' That's a special kind of stupid. And, I mean, that's right in my wheelhouse. My mom never made me pretty. She made me to be a machine." — Garrett Warren, *When It Mattered*

In addition to the hit man episode, Warren had another near-death experience while shooting the movie *Chill Factor*, in which the motorcycle he was riding was hit head-on by an eighteen-wheeler.

"Threw me, like, sixty feet and tore my right leg to shreds. They had to find pieces of me on the side of the road," Warren recalls. "And, they had to revive me. I was pretty much dead. And then, they put me on a helicopter and airlifted me to Colorado, where the doctors had to put me back together. And within a week's time, I was back to work."

There was also the scene in *Double Team* in which Warren, doubling for Jean-Claude Van Damme, was told he had to hold on to a cargo net package that was hanging out of a C-130 cargo plane with the hatch open, with only a cable on him, then had to pull a quick release and fall off the net into the plane and start to fight with no parachute on.

Making the stunt even more dangerous was the language barrier; the scene was shot in the South of France with Warren and his fellow American stunt coordinator, along with a predominantly Asian film crew and an Italian safety stuntman who spoke little English but was tasked to save Warren if he got into trouble—which, to Warren, was small comfort.

And then, there are the car hits, a staple for stunt actors, in which they, you guessed right, get hit by a car—driven at roughly twenty-five miles an hour.

Warren waxes poetic about the art and science of the car hit. He explains that the stunt performer's car of choice is the BMW. Because of its low nose, it can toss an actor so that he can "kiss the hood" and when the driver gasses the car, "you skip off the hood like a stone on the water," and you go right off the hood, up to the roof of the car, and you go off the backside of the car and you go down the backside and it should be all good."

“But let me tell you something right now, I don't think I've ever done a car hit where I haven't fractured something, broken something, or tore something up. Car hits are the nastiest things in the world, man. They are demons like no other.” — Garrett Warren, When It Mattered



In the zone with Garrett Warren

Ballerinas with Broken Toes

Why does he take such risks, I ask, noting the sixty-six surgeries, the near-death stunts-gone-wrong, the sore jaws, scraped palms, busted knees, cracked ribs, and more.

“I wasn't made pretty. This is my pretty. People look at Kimberly Kardashian. They say, ‘Oh, there's a beautiful woman.’ Me, on the other hand, I look at ballerinas who have broken toes and I say, ‘Man, that's a beautiful woman,’” says Warren. “I like seeing the road marks of trial and error and forged in the fires of will. That, to me, is my sexy. And that's where I live.”

A deeper answer surfaces when Warren describes how, when he is asked to redo a stunt and does not want to reveal he's been injured, he uses Krazy Glue, of all things, to stanch the bleeding of body parts, to get through take two and beyond.

“How do you then take it off?” I ask, about the Krazy Glue stuck to bloodied skin.

“You just peel that sucker off,” he replies, calmly.

But then he adds this revealing coda:

“It all heals back anyway. Just remember something: Bruises go away. Bones mend. But that shot, that moment, will live in infamy. It’s the closest thing to immortality that I will ever know in my lifetime.” — Garrett Warren, When It Mattered



Making indelible celluloid memories, one stunt at a time

As CGI becomes more and more prevalent and liability insurance more and more pricey, Garrett Warren is acutely aware that he and his brethren in the stunt world may someday become just celluloid memories.

It's clear that Warren intends to fight to the finish and continue putting his life and limb on the line to make sure that those memories, even if finite, are indelible ones.

You can find Garrett Warren's full episode on When It Mattered, [here](#) on my YouTube channel or on your favorite podcast platform at [this link](#). I hope you can subscribe to both so you don't miss future great episodes.