

Born To Do Stunts

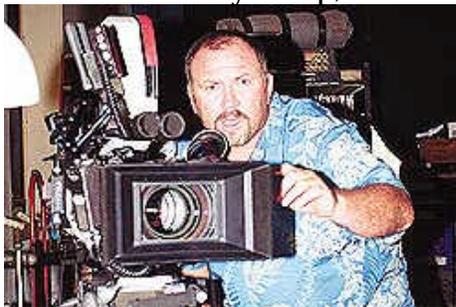


By CHAD PATA

In the stunt man industry there is an old joke used in retort to the oft-asked question, "How do you get into the stunt business?" The response, "You fall into it."

If we are to believe this old industry witticism, it has been one heck of a fall for *Lost* stunt coordinator Mike Vendrell. In the past 30 years he has not only doubled for the industry greats (think Nicholson and Connery) but also taught them how to fight (think Carradine and Schwarzenegger).

But maybe the old adage is wrong; maybe you are born to be a stunt man. After all, when Vendrell was born his mother cut out a clipping from the newspaper to put in his baby scrapbook. It was an article about Davy Sharp, a stunt man.



"So I asked her why she cut it out and she said, 'I don't know, I just thought it might be interesting so I put it in your baby book,'" says Vendrell, who later worked for an apprentice of Sharp's in Hollywood.

Either way, it has been a magical trip through Hollywood's tough man business. Training since the age of 3 in the martial arts of kung fu and karate, his specialty came in Yee Chuan Tao, a defensive and healing art, in which he became the world's only remaining master at the age of 16.

He spent the next three years going undefeated in the underground world of no-rules cage fighting, but this acumen for fighting was not

the aspect of the chi that would lead him to the stunt world.

At 19, faced with going to Vietnam, his father asked him not to go and offered to get him a job in the movie business, driving a truck. Vendrell accepted and worked on the show *Barnaby Jones* driving around props, wiling away the hours between moves working a heavy bag in the back of the truck.

His moves caught the eye of the show's star, Buddy Ebsen, with whom he formed a fast friendship. One day he received a call that shooting was canceled due to Ebsen developing phlebitis in his leg and that they may have to amputate it.

"So I went to the hospital and told them I was Dusty Ebsen, Buddy's son, and Buddy told me what was going to happen," recalls Vendrell, still smiling about this turn of fortune. "I told him I was only 20 years old but was a doctor of Chinese medicine and could save his leg."

Using acupuncture and his knowledge of chi, he had Ebsen out of the hospital in a week and completely healed in two. Feeling deeply indebted to Vendrell for saving his limb, Ebsen used connections to propel Vendrell into the movie industry.



He soon met David Carradine and prepared him for his role in the cult classic *Kung Fu*, where he taught him not just to walk the earth, but how to kick butt passively as well. He followed this by training Hawaii's own Pat Morita for the moves that

propelled *The Karate Kid* to the top in the box office.

Other students have included now-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Farrah Fawcett, Timothy Dalton and Bruce Lee's son Brandon. It was his relationship with Lee, among all these big stars, that had the most influence on his life.

A 17-year-old Lee was hired to do a fight sequence on the film *Kung Fu: The Movie* against Vendrell. Despite his pedigree, Lee had eschewed martial arts his whole life because he never thought he could measure up to his dad.

With only the weekend to prepare, Vendrell hid his enormous collection of Bruce Lee memorabilia and invited the young Lee to his home. Without a single reminder of his late father about, Lee trained all weekend and aced the fight scene in front of some of Hollywood's biggest stars who had come out to see their idol's son's first fight.

"Afterwards, I was walking off the set and from this dark corner I

heard someone call my name,” says Vendrell, who had taken the side of the loser in the on-screen scrap. “I went over and it was Brandon, and he said, ‘All my life I’ve tried to live up to my father’s expectations, and tonight I feel my father is smiling at me.’ With that he gave me a big hug and said, ‘From now on, you are going to be my dad.’

“I started crying, and for the next 10 years he was like a son to me. And when he was killed on the set of *The Crow* it took me a lot of years to get over that, but I feel like everything I did in my career was for that (first) day.”

Emotional events like these, not to mention the general wear and tear the stunt industry exacts from your body, led Vendrell to some land in Hilo his father had purchased for him many years prior.

“My folks lived on Maui for 25 years, but I’d never been to Big Island,” says Vendrell, who moved to Big Island five years ago. “But the instant my feet hit the tarmac, I said ‘This is home, I gotta live here.’”



Pulling back from the industry he refocused on his martial arts, opening an academy in Kona and practicing his Chinese medicine. But he kept his foot in the door by becoming a member of the Hawaiian Stunt Connection (see accompanying story).

When the producers of *Lost* began looking for a stunt coordinator, HSC submitted his resume.

“I got a call with a guy asking, ‘Are you available to work next week?’ and I was like, ‘Who is this?’” recalls Vendrell of the call out of the blue.

“So they flew me over to view the pilot, and I thought this is unbelievable, this show is going to go on for 10 years.”

Back in the business full time again, he now puts his focus on increasing the size of our stunt man work force in the Islands, which he estimates to be at about 20 completely qualified stunt people.

“My goal is to hire 100 percent Hawaii for the show,” says Vendrell, who in his down time conducts seminars on stunt techniques. “It’s important to me that Hawaii benefits from *Lost* being here. The seminars give me a chance to see who has ability, and gives them a chance to learn something they didn’t know how to do.”

So he continues his work, always behind the scenes, always the bridesmaid never the bride. Does he ever regret not being the star of

the show?

“Personally, I think I have the best job in the world,” says Vendrell, who has seen the world over several times in his film career. “I wake up every morning feeling truly blessed.”

Hawaii's Homegrown Stuntmen

The Islands are full of esoteric groups, but few are as exclusive or entertaining as those in the Hawaiian Stunt Connection.

Formed in 2002, it provides a training ground and support group for the Hawaii residents who do that most dangerous and least heralded of movie and TV productions: stunt men.

“It’s a union like you would have for any trade,” says group president Achilles Gacis, who doubles as Locke on the ABC hit *Lost*. “We train ourselves, we perform our stunts, but we are not a stunt school.”

This is not to say you cannot join the organization; you just have to earn your stripes. Gacis says it generally takes about 10 years to make it as a stunt man.

“You need to start off as an extra, learning on-set protocol, learning the business,” says Gacis. “You have to get out there and pound the pavement.”

Mike Vendrell, a 30-year veteran of the business and stunt coordinator for the show, agrees and admits that in the stunt industry it is the squeaky wheel that gets the oil. He calls it “hustling,” an action whereby prospective stunt people just hang around sets, repeatedly asking for work and handing out pictures.

“All stunt coordinators hate to be hustled, but we all have to admit it is the only way to get ahead, its the way that we got ahead,” says Vendrell, who despite his disdain for being hustled on the set, admires the tenacity.



Organizing and streamlining this hustling is what the HSC is all about. Instead of single guys on their own, they have banded together a talented group of



together a talented group of varied people to provide a stunt service to the industry.

“We make sure that we are all very different so that we don’t take jobs from one another,” says Gacis.

Right now, fortunately, fighting for jobs isn’t a problem. The success of *Lost* and the anticipation of two feature films to be shot here this summer has industry insiders hungry for more talent.

This is good news for Gacis and his guys because most have to work day jobs to supplement their stunt careers.

“It’s a business; you have to learn it like any other profession, but you have to ask where are all the jobs, they are in L.A.,” says Gacis, who works as a professor of humanities when he isn’t falling off buildings.

But with the industry growing in Hawaii, the HSC hopes to grow as well. Not as a stunt school, but with more members as there is more work. To this end, he encourages parents to not discourage their daredevil children.

“If kids start exhibiting stunt behavior, don’t suppress it,” says Gacis. “Because one day, they may be buying you a new car with it.”

—**Chad Pata**