

A stunt performer is silhouetted against a sunset sky, hanging from a large metal beam of a bridge. The background shows a city skyline with various skyscrapers. The word "ACTION" is written in large, stylized letters across the middle of the image. The letter 'A' is blue, 'C' is white, 'T' is orange, 'I' is a vertical bar with a cityscape pattern, 'O' is white, and 'N' is blue.

# ACTION

STUNT PERFORMERS PUT ACTION  
AND EXCITEMENT IN THE MOVIES.

*Jessie Graff, stunt professional,  
checks out downtown Los Angeles,  
California, from the 5th Street bridge.*

@OMEGA BLISS (3), GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO (2)

By Don Vaughan

# THE HERO

**T**he stunt was tricky: Jump 22 feet from a bridge onto the top of a moving train. Stunt performer Jessie Graff and her colleague wanted to make sure the scene was safe and consistent, so they decided to practice the leap using sandbags. Their first toss fell short; the second was right on the money. The director was ready to shoot, but Graff and her colleague wanted to try it a final time. They tossed the sandbags yet again and hit their landing pads dead center.

“We didn’t know if the second toss was just a fluke, so we needed to make sure our timing was perfect,” Graff says of the stunt, which was for an episode of the television series *Leverage*. “We finally jumped, and it was one of the most fun things I’ve done. It went perfectly.”

Graff has worked as a stunt performer in movies and TV for more than 12 years, with numerous high-profile credits to her name, including the new *Wonder Woman 1984*. She also is one of the most popular athletes on NBC’s *American Ninja Warrior*. **CONTINUED >**



Graff in a military contractor costume. Below: Sometimes stunts involve a 45-foot drop into an airbag (timelapse photo).

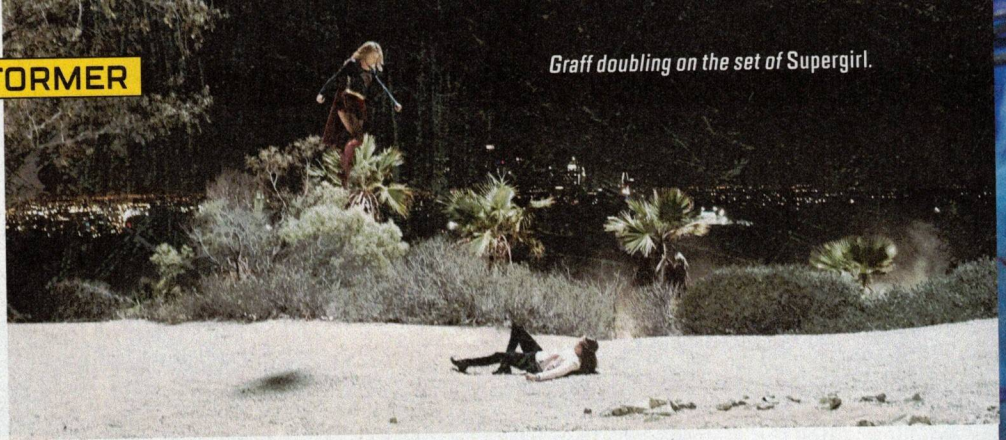


### Getting Started

Graff started circus training at age 6, using makeshift equipment in her garage. At 12 she took up gymnastics and, along with pole vaulting, competed throughout high school. Graff got athletic scholarships to Georgia Tech, where she majored in aerospace engineering, and the University of Nebraska, where she majored in theater.

While in college, Graff met with a theatrical agent but accidentally gave the woman the resume she had written for the circus. The agent glanced at it, suggested Graff become a stunt performer, gave her the card of a stunt professional named Johnny Becker and ushered her out the door.

Becker met with Graff and her family, explaining what stunt work entailed and what Graff would have to do to join the profession. Enthused, Graff studied martial arts to improve her physicality, had headshots taken and put together a demo reel that highlighted her athletic skills.



*Graff doubling on the set of Supergirl.*

“Every vacation during school, I would make a scouting trip to Los Angeles to introduce myself to training facilities, learn a little bit, then go home and practice,” Graff says. “The moment I finished my final exams, I jumped in my car and drove to California.”

### Breaking Into the Business

Graff taught gymnastics by day and trained by night at the gyms where stunt people gathered.

“I was making contacts, but also they would see my persistence,” she says. “The fact that I would hit the ground hard, get back up and keep trying, and how quickly I learned and took direction — those are important qualities for a stunt person.”

Breaking into work in movies and TV can be challenging. Graff encourages newbies to produce their own video reel highlighting the stunts in which they are proficient. This shows a stunt coordinator — the person who usually hires stunt performers — what you can do. Live shows are another opportunity for new stunt performers to hone their craft. Before breaking into movies, Graff performed at Pirates Dinner Adventure, Six Flags and Disneyland.

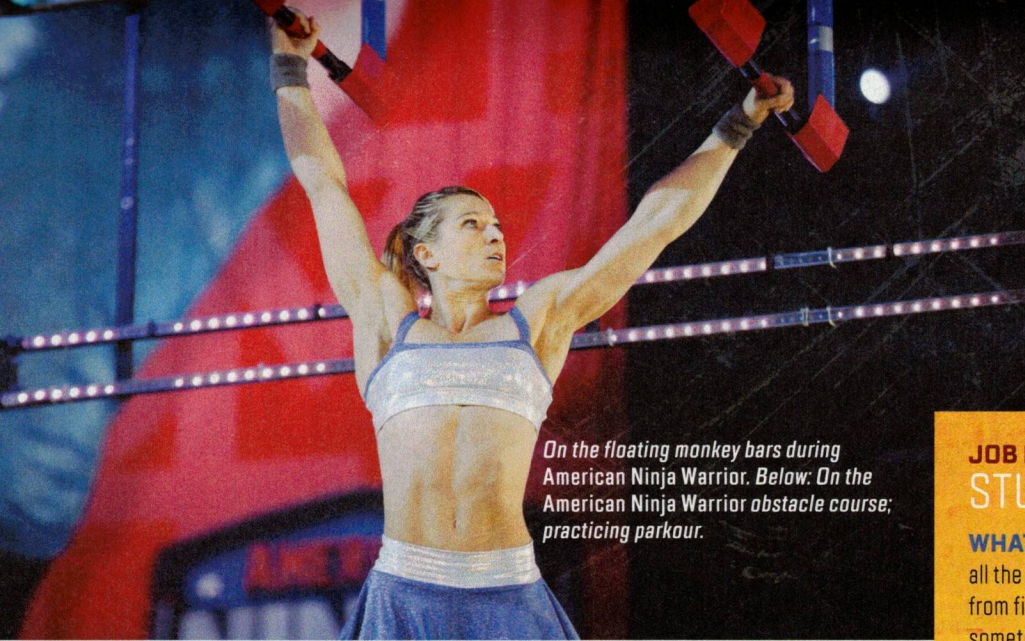
“You get used to performing, and with live shows, things happen and you have to adapt on the fly,” she says. “It’s a good way to build experience.”

With stunt work in TV and movies, every job is different — being in a

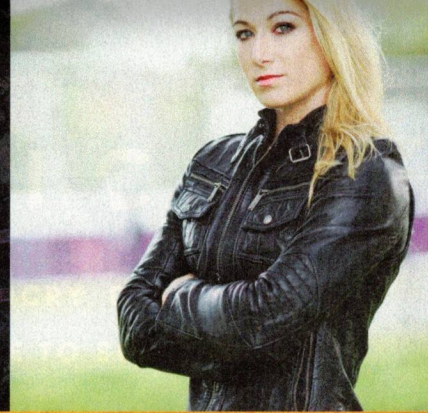
*Graff tackles the sonic steps at the national finals for American Ninja Warrior.*



*SUPERGIRL: NBC/MATTHEW WARD; NINJA: TONY CHU@OMEGA-LEISS*



On the floating monkey bars during American Ninja Warrior. Below: On the American Ninja Warrior obstacle course; practicing parkour.



fight, riding a motorcycle, skydiving. Graff loves it all.

“Some days you’ll get no explanation of what you’ll be doing,” she says. “You show up and the stunt coordinator tells you what you need to know. Sometimes it’s a lot and sometimes it’s just ‘pick a partner, have some kind of scuffle. There are 20 extras around you, so make sure no one gets trampled.’”

Some of Graff’s favorite stunts involve heights. She recalls one job in which she had to scramble up a reinforced rope ladder to a hovering helicopter.

“I was on the beach and the ladder was whipping around from the wind,” Graff says. “As soon as I grabbed it, it started lifting me up, so I climbed the ladder as we flew over the ocean. It was so cool!”

### Safety Is Job One

Stunt work can look extremely dangerous, but safety is paramount.

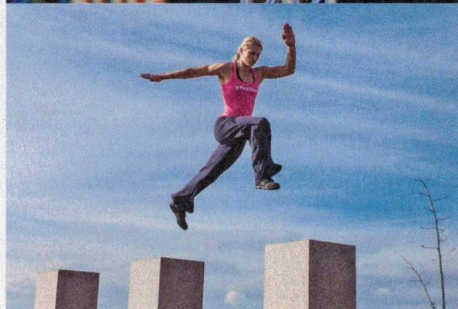
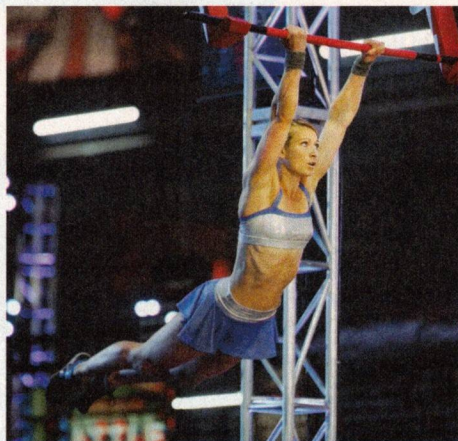
“One of the most common misconceptions is that stunt performers are all crazy adrenaline junkies,” Graff says. “We’re actually more like the safety monitors on set. We’re the ones who check everything and make sure it’s as safe as possible.”

Nonetheless, injuries do occur. Over the years, Graff has experienced small fractures, torn ligaments and displaced ribs.

“There is definitely a bit of danger in what I do,” she admits. “I consider myself an expert at recovering from injury.”

Stunt work isn’t for everyone, but it promises an exciting career for those who have what it takes.

“It’s one of those careers you shouldn’t get into just because you think it might be fun,” Graff says. “You have to love it, because you are going to get beaten up, and it is hard. But if you love the training and overcoming obstacles, it’s worth the challenges you’ll face.” ✦



## JOB FACTS: STUNT PERFORMER

**WHAT TO EXPECT:** Stunt performers do all the dangerous work in movies and TV shows, from fighting to jumping off buildings. They also sometimes double for actors when a stunt is deemed too hazardous or teach an actor how to perform a particular stunt so it looks realistic.

**JOB OUTLOOK:** Most stunt performers work in movies and TV, and are members of the Screen Actors Guild. Those new to the profession often hone their skills by performing in live shows at amusement parks and elsewhere.

**EDUCATION/TRAINING:** Graff recommends taking acting classes, because stunt performers are often required to deliver lines during a scene. Acting also teaches you how to react in a given moment and to be aware of the camera. Participation in athletics such as gymnastics and track also can help develop useful skills.

**SALARY:** Stunt performers who are members of the Screen Actors Guild typically receive the same pay as actors, which is usually based on length of involvement in a particular film or television project. The daily rate is around \$850, and the weekly rate is a minimum of \$3,200. Performers who engage in extremely dangerous stunts or possess special skills commonly receive a higher rate.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

[go.boyslife.org/stuntperformer](http://go.boyslife.org/stuntperformer)

[go.boyslife.org/stuntpersonhowto](http://go.boyslife.org/stuntpersonhowto)

[go.boyslife.org/stuntlegends](http://go.boyslife.org/stuntlegends)

### WATCH JESSIE GRAFF IN ACTION:

[go.boyslife.org/youtubejessiegraft1](http://go.boyslife.org/youtubejessiegraft1)

[go.boyslife.org/youtubejessiegraft2](http://go.boyslife.org/youtubejessiegraft2)

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