

Time to give up the day job

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"Let's say I'm chasing you out of the window with a propane mortar, which is, you know, a fireball ..." Talking to Mike Gunther about his average day at work makes any desk job seem dull. He has fought Jackie Chan, Bruce Willis and Keanu Reeves, been set alight in Van Helsing and gone through a sliding glass door for Ralph Fiennes. Now one of the industry's most sought-after stuntmen has decided to hang up his jumpsuit and move behind the camera to write and direct his own feature film.

"Like any professional athlete, you can't be on the field forever," says Gunther, 38. "Eventually, you have to get on the sideline and coach. I'll still perform if the gig is fun and I don't think it's ever out of me for good, but you've just got to be smarter, you know. It takes me longer to recover if I get injured now than when I was 25."

And like other stuntmen-turned-directors before him - notably, Hal Needham, who directed Smokey and the Bandit and The Cannonball Run - his 13 years on Hollywood sets working on major films with top-notch directors means he has already learned a lot about what does and doesn't work. "You're getting the experience on someone else's money. It's like my film school," he says.

Two years ago, Gunther set up his own production company, Gunny Entertainment, which produces action-based content for film, TV and the internet, and has just finished filming his first feature film, 6th and Santa Fe, which he wrote and directed. He was, he says, keen to get an indie feel in his new project. "I come from the comic-book world of the Matrix, Catwoman, Elektra and Van Helsing, where it's all CGI and wire-work," he says. "In 6th and Santa Fe, it's all realistic action. This is just me and my buddies, there are no special effects and it's shot on 35mm film. It's getting back to the basics."

6th and Santa Fe is about three best friends who attempt a diamond heist. They pull it off, but one friend betrays the others, who then go on a mission to settle the score. Gunther describes the film as "kind of like Reservoir Dogs". Shooting took place in June in LA and the Mojave desert and, as you would expect, it contains a lot of action. "We did a little car-jacking, where we shatter a window, and we had some gunfire, we shot some people," he says. "But there were no fire explosions or car rolls - that's all Die Hard 4 stuff." The film will star his friend and former colleague Will Yun Lee, from Bionic Woman and Elektra, who, in 2002, was voted one of People magazine's 50 most beautiful people.

Gunther has just finished doubling for Keanu Reeves in The Night Watchman and he now faces his next challenge - sitting still at a desk long enough to edit 6th and Santa Fe. But he says he is enjoying the more sedate life. "I love performing, but I think at some point

you've gotta know when to step away from it. I'm enjoying writing and directing - you get to entertain the world and film lasts forever. It allows you to be the painter instead of the paint for a change."

- 6th and Santa Fe is due for release next year