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Fight Scenes Electrify 'Elektra' Audiences

by Sara Fogan

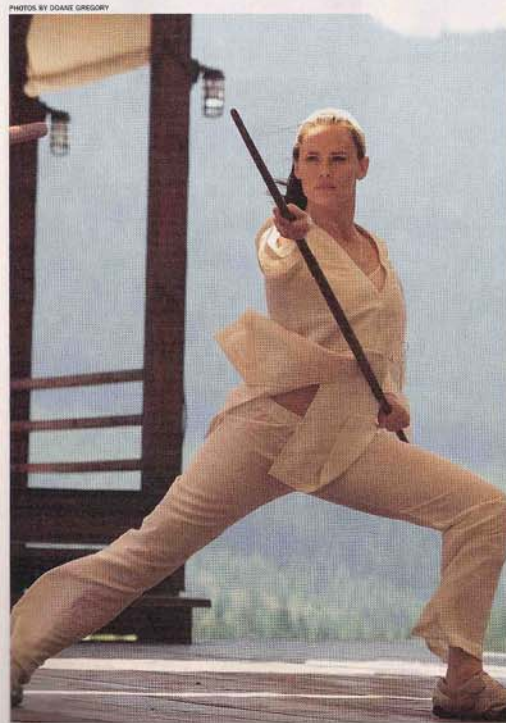
HOLLYWOOD—Martial arts techniques and wire work have become staple ingredients in creating edge-of-your-seat thrills in action films. Even television

shows regularly incorporate a plethora of martial moves to spice up their fight scenes. Imagine what kind of action you'll see when you take the star of a

popular TV series—*Alias*' Jennifer Garner—and drop her into the lead role of a bona fide thriller titled *Elektra*. Quite simply, it's electrifying.

Credit for all that excitement goes to stunt coordinator Mike Gunther, the man responsible for crafting the action sequences. He landed the job because, rather than hire several experts to create the big-screen battles, studio executives decided to select just one person with a demonstrable track

Jennifer Garner received extensive training in the use of the bo and sai for her role in Elektra.



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record to helm the stunt coordination. His previous work on 2004's *Cat Woman* and nearly 12 years of experience as a stuntman fit the bill perfectly, and the 36-year-old Los Angeles resident was in.

Elektra Natchios, the Marvel Comics character at the center of the movie, first appeared in 2003's *Daredevil*. She survived the seemingly mortal injuries she sustained in that film and has been assigned a new mission: to kill a father and daughter on the run from *ninja* assassins. Although the character doesn't possess superhuman abilities, she's a superb fighter and can see into the future. Those attributes prompted Gunther to remain open to using any technique that would help the story, he said. In addition to "wire fu," he selected techniques from *wushu*, boxing, kickboxing, several hard styles and *capoeira*. Elements from gymnastics and *Tae-Bo* were also incorporated into the action, he added.

Gunther and his team—stuntman Marcus Young, sai expert Don Lee, *Black Belt* Hall of Fame member Larry Lam and Garner's stunt-double, Shanna Douglas—worked hard to create action sequences that would complement the personality of each character and remain consistent with the story line. For example, Garner's character specialized in the sai and bo, while her nemesis, taekwondo expert Will Yun Lee, focused on the *katana*.

"Depending on what the character was, we emphasized what they were actually going to film, as opposed to training just to train," Gunther said. "We had approximately eight weeks to put it together."

He worked them every weekday and focused on fight choreography on weekends. He also had Garner undergo regular sessions with a personal trainer to build her core strength and endurance, as well as an additional one to two hours devoted to weapons training.

"Technically, I was putting together three or four fights per sequence, yet [director Rob Bowman] would only pick one," Gunther said. Rather than overload

the star by having her learn routines that wouldn't be used in the final cut, he taught Garner only the choreography that had been selected for the movie.

Because authenticity demanded that the stars use real weapons and perform their routines at full speed, martial arts action sequences took weeks to perfect. Subsequent filming took about a week, Gunther said.

One of his greatest challenges was ensuring none of the actors got hurt. "Between wire work and weapons, pyrotechnics and all that, there's a lot of moving things going on at the same time," he said. Further complicating things, the leads would often have to take on three or four opponents at once.

"I wanted to send everyone home safe," Gunther said. "[I] also wanted to push the envelope and not cheat the audience. The audience wants to be fulfilled."

Despite the grueling schedule, every person involved in making the movie gave 100 percent, he added. "I've got to give a hats-off to Jennifer and Will and all the other actors. It's the first movie I've ever done where everyone really wanted to be there."

He was particularly impressed with Garner's attitude. She performed 95 percent of her own stunts, including fights, water scenes and the finale with Lee's character. "With her background from *Alias* and acting, I think she understood what it takes," he said. "She probably set the bar for everyone else. You couldn't quit on her, and she never quit."

Elektra opened nationwide on January 14, 2005. For more information, visit <http://www.elektramovie.com>.

Jet Li a Family Hero in Asian Tsunami

MALDIVES—On December 26, 2004 kung fu film star Jet Li, who recently headlined *Hero*, was injured when a tsunami crashed into a hotel in which he and his family were vacationing. The actor was reportedly hurt when debris smashed into his leg while he