

# Her Job Is Falling Down

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PHOTO BY AARON PAUL ROGERS

Elisabeth Carpenter '03 ran away from school to join the circus. Eighteen years later, she was fighting alien monsters in “Avengers: Endgame.” In fact, she was also a monster in that film — and *The Wasp* — and . . .

Such is the life of a Hollywood stuntwoman.

“I got a call for reshoots for “Endgame”; they needed someone with the right skill set and body type to fit into certain costumes,” Carpenter says, relaxing at home for a few weeks between movie assignments. “One day I doubled for Brie Larson (Captain Marvel), another day I was a motion-capture as a monster, another day I was Evangeline Lilly (*The Wasp*).”

The lithe and limber Carpenter, a former gymnast and Cirque du Soleil acrobat, has performed stunts on dozens of television shows including “Fear the Walking Dead” and “NCIS: New Orleans,” and in films like “Aquaman” and “Captain Marvel,” where she doubled for Annette Bening. Watch for the scene where Bening is blown backwards from the jet: That’s Carpenter.

Her specialties, she says, are somersaults and falling from great heights. Her resume also lists her as a “ground pounder” — meaning she’s willing to take hard hits.

“I’ve fallen off balconies and fallen backwards down ladders,” she says. “On a recent Netflix film, I was suspended on wires 150 feet in the air, then dropped onto a fake rock cliff, where I flipped off the rocks to the ground below.” She pauses a moment. “When you think about it, I guess that was pretty dangerous.”

Other dangerous stunts are “car hits” — smacked into and then rolled off the car hood — and motorcycle crashes, which, after doing just one, prompted her to promise herself she would think twice before doing another.

“In this business, you must learn what’s unsuitable for you and when to say no,” she says. “There are people who’ll do anything because they need the job to make money. I talk to younger stunt performers about the importance of making sure they know their comfort level.”

Her biggest disappointment? When a great stunt is left on the cutting room floor. “When I’m doing something, I’m thinking, ‘Oh my God, this will be amazing!’ Then, when I watch the movie and the scene isn’t there, it’s like, ‘Oh, well, what can you do?’”

And the greatest thrill? “When I’m recognized by my peers, or when an actor says, ‘Hey, thanks for making me look like such a bad-ass!’”

Born in Little Rock, Arkansas, Carpenter’s family moved to Vermont when she was a youngster. Her mother enrolled the energetic kid who loved climbing and jumping around in a gymnastics class, and at 7 years old she was competing locally. At 13, she began studying with coaches from the Moscow Circus, and later performed with the traveling troupe Circus Smirkus.

“My mom encouraged me to audition for the circus,” Carpenter remembers. “She told me, ‘If you really love something and put your mind to it, you can do anything.’”

She chose UNH because she was impressed with its gymnastics team and was a squad member in 1999-2000. Then she moved to Los Angeles to perform with multiple entertainment companies including Cirque Mechanics, which toured internationally, and Cirque du Soleil.

It didn’t take her long to book her first stunt work job in a film, playing the role of an acrobatic elf in 2004’s “The Polar Express.”

“It was a wonderful experience that gave me some great insight to how the film/TV business worked,” she says. “I did various jumping, flipping and human pyramid stunts in motion capture, which was very new at the time. I remember that at first I was

amazed at how much downtime there was, but then when we got into rehearsing and shooting, it was a lot of fun to see what tricks and skills were chosen for which parts.”

Carpenter’s goal is to eventually move into a managerial role as a stunt coordinator. But that maneuver may be trickier than falling off a ladder. “There aren’t many women today who work in that capacity,” she says. “In our industry, it’s still a man’s world.”

- WRITTEN BY:  
[Benjamin Gleisser](#) | Freelance Writer

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