

BY TED TAFARO

# BREAK A LEG

THE RISKS OF MOVIE MAKING

When Harrison Ford “piloted” a disabled 747 to a safe landing during the filming of *Air Force One*, everyone with a financial stake in the movie smiled broadly while anticipating a flood of box-office receipts. But at the end of the shooting day, while the rest of the cast and crew piled into cars to brave the Los Angeles freeway, Ford chose to fly above the gridlock by piloting his own Bell

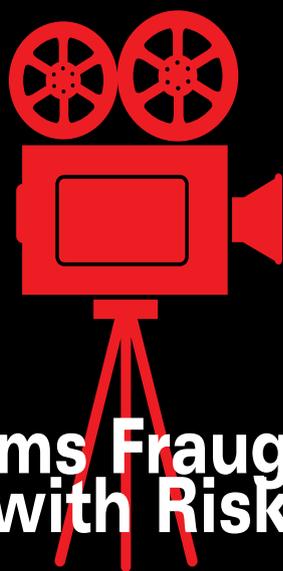
der asking if you wanted a lift home,” the film’s director Jon Favreau told the *New York Post*. While a smooth, easy ride home was the likeliest outcome, the worst-case scenario was frightening: one bad downdraft had the potential to take out an entire cast.

Actors who pilot their own aircraft are fairly common these days. We’ve all seen photos of John Travolta, Tom Cruise, Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt

not an A-List actor is going to land his aircraft safely, certain precautions must be put in place.

### Insuring Pilots and Injuries

When we talk about non-traditional film risks, insurance coverage is already in place when a film production is launched—even before Travolta’s wheels lift off the tarmac and the money guys are heading for group therapy. There are



## Films Fraught with Risk

*Death, weather and crooked financiers are just some of the issues that have set back some high-profile Hollywood productions.*

### APOCALYPSE NOW [1979]

An entire documentary, *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker’s Apocalypse*, was made about the production of Francis Ford Coppola’s Vietnam epic, which was shot primarily in the Philippines. “We were in the jungle, there were too many of us, we had access to too much money, too much equipment, and little by little we went insane,” says Coppola in an on-screen interview. While the problems are too numerous to list, the largest came when Typhoon Olga wrecked sets and halted production for weeks as most of the actors and crew returned to the United States.

### TWILIGHT ZONE: THE MOVIE [1983]

While filming, a low-flying helicopter was unable to avoid pyrotechnic explosions, which destroyed the tail rotor. As it crashed, the aircraft decapitated actor Vic Morrow and Myca Dinh Le, who was seven years old. Renee Shin-Yi Chen, age six, was crushed by

the helicopter. The accident during the making of this Steven Spielberg-produced film is arguably Hollywood’s worst tragedy.

### THE CROW [1994]

Bruce Lee’s son, Brandon, was fatally shot by a prop revolver while shooting a scene that called for the firing of a blank towards the 28-year-old actor. But a bullet had inadvertently been lodged into the barrel due to careless procedures by those working the set, and the resulting gunshot took Lee’s life despite an emergency surgery in a nearby hospital in North Carolina.

### WATERWORLD [1995]

This post-apocalyptic picture that imagined a world without land after the polar ice caps melted was reportedly the most expensive movie ever made upon its release. A large cause of the cost overruns came when a hurricane destroyed a multi-million-dollar set off the coast of Hawaii that was being used to film key scenes. Kevin Costner also reportedly

206 helicopter. That meant that with every whir of Ford’s propeller blade, the film’s backers—the studio, bankers, investors, those holding the lucrative foreign distribution rights—were now turning a whiter shade of pale.

It has even been reported that Ford, while filming 2011’s *Cowboys & Aliens*, graciously offered the cast and crew chopper rides home at the end of the workday. “You’d get a tap on the shoul-

der smiling while strapped into a cockpit. It is probably no different than in the 1960s and ‘70s when Steve McQueen, Paul Newman and James Garner loved the thrill of racing cars at 100 miles per hour, much to the chagrin of the studios. But when a hobby has the potential to put a major motion picture in jeopardy, and an investment of upwards of a \$100 million rests on the shoulders of whether or

a number of specialty insurance brokers within the industry whose sole purpose is to protect a film or TV show’s production costs while shooting.

This insurance also covers risks associated with cast insurance (i.e., injury, death and abandonment). Case in point: Halle Berry broke her foot while on location in Spain filming *Cloud Atlas*, which pushed back shooting two-and-a-half weeks to allow the

actress's foot to heal. (She would then re-injure it during filming.)

Along with injuries to the cast, the insurance also covers delays caused by fire, theft, damaged film and other set-backs, and it typically totals between 0.8%–1.5% of the film's entire budget. This number can fluctuate, however, based on such factors as where the film is being shot or an actor's health. "Traditional insurance can cover

arena are, there are some risks that cannot be underwritten by traditional carriers. "That's when we need to fill the gaps with a specialized underwriter: a company that is able to take on the added risk," he said

An actor wanting to pilot his own aircraft during production of a film would qualify as something left to specialty insurance, and the cost of coverage can vary depending on how

## Drugs and Medicine

There are also cases where insurance is needed when an actor's idea of getting high has nothing to do with soaring in an airplane. There's no shortage of actors whose penchant for party life has the potential to put a film in jeopardy. These actors need the insurance equivalent of hand-holding.

But drugs and alcohol are not the only personal risks that require extra cover-

almost died in a jet ski accident, and his stunt double was lost at sea for hours before being rescued by the Coast Guard.

### TOWN & COUNTRY (2001)

Production delays pushed back filming so far on one the biggest flops in history that *Dharma & Greg* star Jenna Elfman, who appeared alongside stars Warren Beatty, Diane Keaton and Goldie Hawn, was forced to repeatedly dye her hair back and forth from platinum blonde to the strawberry blonde she was known for on the hit television show. "I bleached my hair so many times that chunks were starting to fall out," Elfman told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

### SHORTCUT TO HAPPINESS (2003)

Alec Baldwin gave the *New York Post* a simple reason you've never heard of his directorial debut: "Some of the film's investors are being investigated for bank fraud. They claimed they had the money to make the

movie but it turned out they didn't, so while we were making the movie they were bouncing checks all over New York." The movie was seized by a federal bankruptcy court, purchased by *Crash* producer Bob Vari, and recut against Baldwin's wishes. The \$25 million production went straight to television with the director credited as "Harry Kirkpatrick," a Baldwin pseudonym.

### TROY (2004)

George Camilleri, a bodybuilder and extra, broke his leg during filming. He was operated on the following day but died two weeks later of a heart attack related to a blood clot. Ironically, Brad Pitt, who played Achilles in the blockbuster version of Homer's *Illiad*, also tore his left Achilles tendon during production.

### GANGSTER SQUAD (2013)

A major action sequence had to be re-imagined and re-shot due to the 2012 movie theater massacre in Aurora, Colorado. One scene

in Robert Fleischer's mobster movie featured gangsters shooting up a cinema audience. "Many conversations followed that," Fleischer told the Associated Press, "and we talked about it, and very quickly decided that the appropriate action would be to take the scene out of the movie out of respect for the families who suffered that loss in the tragedy."

### WORLD WAR Z (2013)

This Brad Pitt zombie movie was rife with script and finance issues, but its strangest setback came when a Hungarian anti-terrorism unit raided a Budapest warehouse to seize 85 weapons and assault rifles the filmmakers were storing. The guns, which were supposed to be non-functional, were instead operational. "Guns like these are highly illegal to transport even if they were to be used as stage guns," said a representative of the anti-terrorism unit, according to *Us Weekly*.

—Jared Wade

almost anything that impairs the ability to make the film," said Konrad Dowling, managing director of Arthur J. Gallagher Entertainment Services in Glendale, California.

Dowling's firm insured, in one capacity or another, two-thirds of the films that were nominated at this year's Academy Awards. But as successful as Gallagher and the handful of other insurance brokers that operate in this

many times the star intended to fly the aircraft during filming (everyday or just the last day of shooting?) and where he is flying (over Beverly Hills or Afghanistan?).

But this risk is becoming more and more common. "Last year alone we worked on at least four films that involved having to obtain specialized insurance for A-list actors who were also pilots," said Dowling.

age. Something as simple as advancing age and the health issues associated with it can complicate filming. People are living and working longer these days, and those in the entertainment industry are no exception.

Sometimes factors beyond anyone's control arise. People get sick, for example. Still, it is not every day that a serious illness threatens to shut down a major television production, especially

one aiming to get enough episodes in the can to rake in a lucrative syndication deal. A *New York Post* report, noting that *Seinfeld* has earned more than \$2.3 billion from reruns since it went off the air, highlights just how much is at stake when it comes to syndication.

But this goal was threatened for one major series a few years ago when a well-known actor was signed as the lead before show execs discovered the star was struggling with a potentially deadly disease. Lori Shaw, an entertainment insurance advisor with Aon, remembers it well.

“We were involved with a TV production that was about to be launched when their anchor star was diagnosed with a life-threatening medical condition,” said Shaw. The insurance carrier covering the cast was not willing to take on the medical risk, which would have shut down the series “before the first episode was filmed.” Fortunately for

the show’s future, Aon was able to help solve the problem.

#### **Film Risk of Biblical Proportions**

Everyone complains about the weather, but no one does anything about it. In Hollywood, the insurance industry tries, but there is only so much you can do. Sure, you can avoid the Philippines during monsoon season (see the problems *Apocalypse Now* faced on pg. 24). Or, if you’re going to shoot in Florida, you can choose some time other than hurricane season. But even with forethought things don’t always work out.

Having to contend with a hurricane while filming on Long Island in November seems like an unlikely possibility. But last fall, Hurricane Sandy wreaked havoc on the Northeast, delaying filming of the Russell Crowe biblical epic *Noah* as floodwaters threatened the sets. “I take it that the

irony of a massive storm holding up the production of *Noah* is not lost on Russell Crowe,” noted his co-star Emma Watson on Twitter.

No matter the peril, traditional insurance brokers do an exceptional job protecting film and television productions. It would be impossible to list just how many times that coverage has prevented studios from hemorrhaging fortunes after disaster strikes. But occasionally something arises that is outside the purview of the traditional brokers, and the specialty carriers fill that gap.

“They allow business to be conducted, contracts to be written, commerce to take place within our industry and movies to get made,” said Dowling. “If not for them, many films would never have seen the light of day.” ■

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