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Stunt School

Wire-work for film-fighting

with Ray Anthony

Professional stunt performer, martial artist and fight choreographer Ray Anthony knows film-fighting like the actors know his fists — very well. Here, he explains the ins-and-outs of using wires to film fight scenes.

Over the last 10 years, with the surge of Hong Kong style movies such as *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, *The Matrix*, *Spiderman*, etc., the film-fighting industry has embraced the use of wire work. My experiences working with some of the world's best action directors, including Tony Ching (*Shaolin Soccer*, *Invincible*, *Hero*), *Wo Ping* (*The Matrix* trilogy, *Dare Devil*, *Crouching Tiger and Kill Bill 1 and 2*) and Vic Armstrong (James Bond movies), has given me a lot of knowledge in wire-work.

Wire-work refers to the use of thin metal wires or ropes that are run through pulley systems (photo 1) on top of the roof or on a mobile truss system (photo 3) and then attached to specially made harnesses (photo 2), which are placed under the actors' clothing. This allows actors to leap, float, fly and fight through the air with great ease, like Jet Li and Jackie Chan (photo 4). Almost

all Hong Kong action cinema features some sort of wire-work. The reason we use wires in certain aspects of film work is to enhance the performance of the actors. In movies like *The Matrix*, *X-Men* and *Spiderman*, we're trying to suspend reality so the use of wires in those types of films is understandable.

Wire-work looks easy, but it takes a lot of practice to get used to articulating your body and developing timing between you and the wire team that's pulling. On top of all that, you need to be flexible and able to kick and punch, and you still need the strength to pull your body up into the required positions. Most actors can only spend 20 minutes in a harness before we need to give them a rest and bring them down.

The safety-wire team

The safety-wire team are the backbone of any wire-work done on a film set. They are responsible for lifting, testing, checking, supporting and bringing down the actors safely. They work, rehearse and test the harnesses with the actors very closely and build up a close bond with them. The actors have to trust the wire team to have confidence in their safety. Usually after rehearsals when they are ready to shoot the scene, the first assistant director or fight choreographer calls out "3, 2, 1, action!", which is the queue for the actor to begin and for the wire team to pull the actor up through

the pulley system and hold them there as the action shot is filmed. The wire team must be watching at all times in case of emergencies and accidents and must bring the actors down as soon as the director calls cut.

The equipment

The equipment used in wire-work are mainly 'amspec' harnesses — pulleys with wire, synthetic rope or dynex rope being the most preferred due to the comfort it offers. Other equipment that also play a part are ladders, counterweight systems, hydraulic systems, box trusses and try trusses.

Wire-work takes a lot of practice to get used to articulating your body and developing timing between you and the wire team.

Training for wire-work

There are various methods I have found to train for wire-work, including:

- Trampoline classes, which teach you mostly body control in the air.
- Gymnastics classes, for overall body control and agility.
- Pilates classes, for strengthening the body and core.
- Getting into a harness and practising over and over.

Using mini tramps

The use of mini trampolines (photo 5) in film-fighting has been around as long as wires. They work hand-in-hand to achieve the same results; that is, to create the illusion that the actor can leap, fly and fight through the air. Mini tramps can be hidden behind certain props on a film set and be out of sight of the camera's eye, so the actors look like they have special powers. Mini tramps are not just used for the enhancement of fight scenes, but also for various other action scenarios such as jumping over a car bonnet or over a high wall, leaping over other actors, reacting to an explosion by flying into the air, etc. The best and only way to train for using mini tramps is at a gymnastics club supervised by a coach or professional.

Ray Anthony has 18 years of experience in martial arts, dance and gymnastics. He has worked on over 60 productions, including feature films *Star Wars II*, *Crocodile Dundee*, *Mission Impossible 2* and the *Matrix* trilogy.

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1. A pulley set-up.



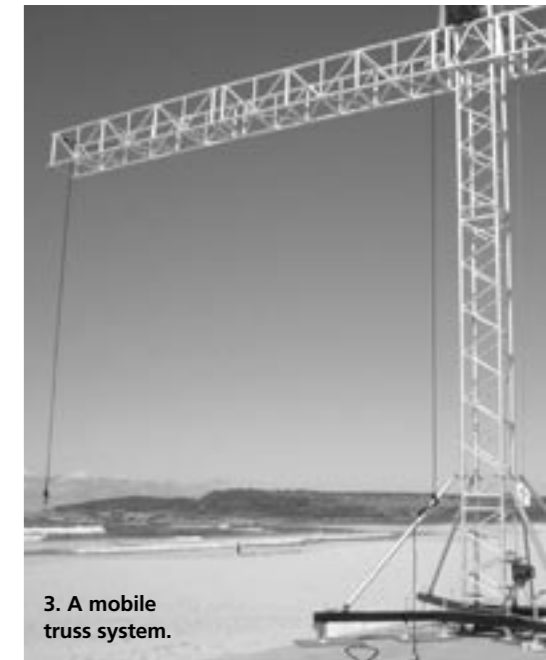
2. Types of harnesses for wire-work (above and below).



4. Hanging around on set.



Using a mobile truss system.



3. A mobile truss system.