



Volume 31, Number 36 Thursday, September 17, 2015

Life on the Edge

Man with Local Ties is Respected Hollywood Stuntman

by Andrew Tallackson

When Tom McComas Jr. was 14, he did something that even today, he recalls with an air of disbelief in his voice.

He took his father's prized possession — a BMW R60 motorcycle acquired after his service with the U.S. Marine Corps ended — out for a joyride one night without his father's permission. He'd learned that if you stuck a nail into the ignition, the bike would start...and start it did. Being a freshman in high school, though, meant he didn't have his license, which also meant he was riding it illegally. The headlights weren't working either. He was chased by police, but eluded them, abandoned the motorcycle and made it back home.

The police later called his father, inquiring if he owned a motorcycle. They'd recovered one involved in a high-speed chase. Ironically, police reported, there was no damage to the bike. The "thief" also properly parked it, leaving the kickstand in place.

"That's amazing," his father told police. "I'll be there in a minute." He then addressed his family, including Tom Jr., who remembers barely being able to look at him. "A thief stole my motorcycle," he announced, "and there's no damage to it."

It wasn't until years later that Tom Jr. fessed up to his father, easing into the revelation with, "Remember when that guy stole your motorcycle? Uh, that was me."



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At 45, Tom McComas Jr. is one of Hollywood's most hard-working stuntmen.

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Published and Printed by
THE BEACHER BUSINESS PRINTERS

Delivered weekly, free of charge to Birch Tree Farms, Duneland Beach, Grand Beach, Hidden Shores, Long Beach, Michiana Shores, Michiana MI and Shoreland Hills. The Beacher is also delivered to public places in Michigan City, New Buffalo, LaPorte and Sheridan Beach.

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His father, Tom McComas Sr. of locally based TM Productions, creator of the wildly popular "I Love Toy Trains" series, shook his head and said, "Ugh."

It's a wild story, one Tom brings to a close with a "what was I thinking" laugh, but it makes something crystal clear about him. From an early age, his fascination with speed, motorcycles and vicarious living paved the way for a career in Hollywood.

At 45, McComas is one of the industry's most respected and hardworking stuntmen and stunt coordinators. In the past five years, he's worked on movies such as "Mission: Impossible — Rogue Nation" "Terminator Genisys," "White House Down," "Star Trek Into Darkness," "Identity Thief," "Gangster Squad," "Men in Black 3" and "Fast Five." On the small screen, his work has appeared on "Sons of Anarchy," "House," "NCIS," "Two and a Half Men" and "The Mentalist." He's also developed a working relationship with two-time Oscar winner Ben Affleck that spans "Armageddon" to "The Town."

"I am 45 and living my dream," he said in a recent phone interview. "It couldn't get any better. I don't go to work. I go to play. I love it."



Tom (left) on the set of "Reindeer Games" with Ben Affleck (right) and director John Frankenheimer.



Tom (left) with Ryan Gosling on the set of "Gangster Squad."

Born in Evanston, Ill., motorcycles were his world entire, a love cultivated by his father and his father's BMW R60 motorcycle — the first motorcycle he ever sat one...at age 2.

"As a kid, I was interested in anything that went fast," he said. "As soon as I learned that if you twist the throttle and you go faster, all I did when I was riding with my dad was put my hand over his hand on the throttle and twist it faster. There was something inherent inside me that made me love two wheels. It struck a chord inside me."

McComas graduated from Georgetown Preparatory School in Rockville, Md., then attended Loyola University Chicago for one year. He also was working at the time as a bike messenger. By the fifth time he was hit by a taxi cab, he says, along with weather that made for difficult riding conditions, he decided to change plans and headed for California, taking extension classes at University of California, Santa Barbara. A lecture by acclaimed professor Roderick Frazier Nash in Environmental Science 101 was so "electrifying and magnetizing," McComas recalls, that he ended up graduating with a degree in environmental science.

Still in love with motorcycles, his gameplan after college, McComas said with a laugh, was "racing to save the environment." He raced for six years, even winning a national championship in 1994. In 1995,

however, he was in a terrible accident at Road Atlanta, a 2.54-mile course near Braselton, Ga. He crashed amid speeds of 110 miles per hour. He was black and blue from his neck to his ankles. He still owed \$14,000 on a loan he'd taken to buy the motorcycle, yet all that was salvagable from the wreck was the motor.

Devastated, and "lost for a while," McComas said, he came to Michigan City to work with his father and TM Productions. His time here involved work on the locally produced "Yoga Kids" videos.



Tom and his father on motorcycles in the late 1980s.

But it was in 1997, after he saw the Bruce Willis sci-fi action film "The Fifth Element," that he headed back to California, specifically Hollywood to become a stuntman. He met with the William Morris agency, and it was his skills as a motorcyclist that struck a chord with the human resources representative whose husband was into stock car racing.

Things moved pretty quickly from there. Right off the bat, his first job as a stuntman was as David Hasselhoff's stunt double on "Baywatch." He did what's called a "bulldog," or a tackle. He ran around a building as the bad guy ran around the opposite side of the building in his direction.

"We meet, and I tackle him," McComas said. "That was my first job."

His next assignment: Michael Bay's "Armageddon," the second of two comet/asteroid disaster movies in 1998 after "Deep Impact." It was a huge hit in the United States and overseas. McComas was Affleck's stunt double.

"That is probably my favorite work memory. I was the man, or, I was doubling the man," he said, laughing. "I got to do everything. I jumped off a building, smashed through windows, got into fights. I was living the dream."

It also was the start of a long working relationship with Affleck that has included the films "Reindeer Games," "Pearl Harbor," "Changing Lanes," "Paycheck," "Jersey Girl," "Surviving Christmas,"

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"State of Play" and "The Town." He has nothing but praise for Affleck.

"We look very similar," McComas said. "People always say to me, 'You look a lot like Ben Affleck.' I call that job security."

Other projects over the years included "Zoolander," "American Wedding," "Poseidon," "Live Free or Die Hard," "The Dark Knight," "Horrible Bosses," and "Super 8," as well as "Grey's Anatomy," "Ally McBeal" and "Hart of Dixie" on TV.

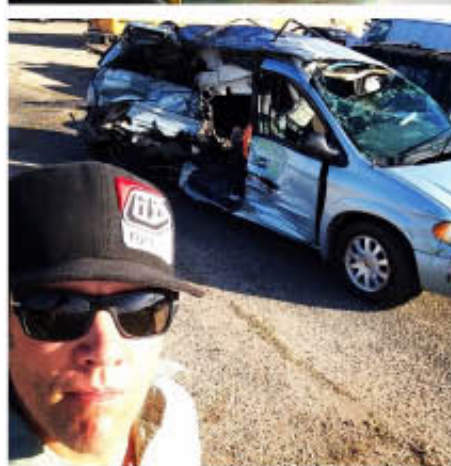
After all these years in the industry, does he still get nervous before a stunt? He replies to that question in detail.

"A lot of things can go wrong. Death is a reality. I could get seriously hurt or killed," he said. "But when they say, 'Ready. 3. 2. 1. Action,' I say to myself, '#!@% it.' I have done everything I can do. I've visualized it (the stunt) and gone over it hundreds of times in my head.

"There is a moment when I experience sheer terror, but then, I believe the true metal of a man is determined not when things are going right, but when they are not going well. But when I come off the set successfully, that is euphoria.

"The stunt could last one second, it could last seven seconds, but it's during that time and when I realize, that's why I do stunts. That to me is living. Even if it's half a second, it might feel like 30 seconds in my mind, and I can't get enough of it."

Over the years, McComas has suffered from 13 concussions. Nonetheless, when he's working, he is truly happy. An example he gives is his recent work as Charlie Hunnam's stunt double on FX's "Sons of Anarchy." The show's stunt coordinator was Eric Norris, son of beloved action hero Chuck Norris. Eric, McComas said, is "one of the nicest guys you'll ever meet. No ego. A real hard worker. Just a great



Tom was involved in one of the most dangerous stunts, set on the Golden Gate Bridge, in "Terminator Genisys."

guy." Norris guided him and the other stuntmen through the series finale that involved cars, motorcycles and semi-trucks in a toy factory.

"It was non-stop. The day was crazy," McComas said, "but I love days like that. It's non-stop and you're doing big stunts all day long."

Sometimes, those stunts don't appear in the finish product and he's not credited for it. That is part of the politics of working in the industry, he said.

Take, for example, McComas' work on "Terminator Genisys." He was involved in a chase sequence on San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge. He was driving a mini-van involved in a spectacular collision with a bus driven by Sarah Connor. His vehicle, McComas said, was almost sliced in half.

However, reshoots were required during post-production, which brought in different stunt people to work on the shots. Those individuals were listed in the credits, not McComas.

"In my opinion, it's not right," McComas said, "but that's just politics. I can't let that bother me, although my friends go to these movies, and they don't see my name in the credits and they are disappointed, so that's kind of a drag. I'm out there four months risking my life, and I don't get credit."

Nonetheless, McComas has no intention of slowing down, nor permanently shifting from stuntman to stunt coordinator. He'd rather be in the thick of the action



than be the one orchestrating it.

He also credits his father with instilling in him the drive to pursue his dreams.

"What I learned from my dad is that you can set out to accomplish everything you set your heart out to do. That's what drives me," he said. "I don't listen to what other people tell me. People told me when I was racing that there were a million reasons why not to race, that I could get hurt, that it's dangerous, that it's time consuming.



Tom (right) appears with Charlie Hunnam on the set of "Sons of Anarchy."

"But I knew then I was truly living the dream. I was doing exactly what I wanted to do. I think it's amazing when I see people who have a calling in life and they follow their passion. I have very little fear, very little jealousy and I live in the moment. I love it."



Tom manning a machine gun on the set of one of his movies.

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