



THE REAL ACTION HEROES

EXPLOSIONS, FLAMES
AND FLYING CARS – IT'S ALL
IN A DAY'S WORK FOR THE
VAUXHALL STUNT TEAM AT
DISNEYLAND RESORT PARIS
WORDS: CHRISTIAN SYLT
PICTURES: ANDREW SHAYLOR

Even the less adventurous of us might, at some point, have dreamt of being stuntdrivers. The thought of performing death-defying feats behind the wheel that even A-list film stars can't pull off is enough to set anyone's pulse racing. Mike Kavaliauskas had this dream too but, unlike most of us, has put it into reality.

Kavaliauskas leads a team of Europe's finest stunt drivers in a half-hour movie-quality spectacle at the Moteurs...Action! stunt show in Disneyland Resort Paris. The team performs 365 days a year. "The only time I can relax is when I get home," he says. "I need to be alone without any noise, without any talking for at least 15 minutes. I can think of nothing, I must empty my brains – and get ready for my family!"



the show takes place in a model village complete with shops, cafés, and a hidden team making it happen



The action takes place in a full-size set modelled on a Mediterranean village and plays to a sell-out crowd of 3,000, up to five times every day. The pastel-coloured clapboard of the buildings and worn-looking bricks are film-set standard. But it is the stunts that steal the show.

Cars chase after motorbikes that pirouette perfectly, missing each other by what feels like millimetres. In a giant leap across the set, a car crashes into a market stall and is pulled off backwards. The action continues as a bike rider slides through an oil slick, ending up engulfed in flames – but this doesn't stop him from blowing up a car along the way.

It's all part of a plot that involves the hero delivering a letter to the village with the bad guys in pursuit. Of course, the good guy's car is red and the villains' cars are black. The live drama is filmed, edited and played back on a giant screen that keeps the audience right in the centre of the action and every day thousands are enthralled by the events unfolding before them. In fact, the show has become so popular that a duplicate opens soon at Disney World in Florida.

It's 100 per cent entertainment for the crowds, but each day is a whirlwind for Kavalias. "You just don't have time to get scared during the show," he explains.

The stuntman has plenty of experience under his belt – he was motorbike racing for 15 years before launching the spectacle in 2002. But even so, he spent the six preceding months training with Remy Julienne, stunt coordinator for various James Bond films and the car chase classic, *The Italian Job*.

Disney worked closely with Vauxhall to develop the prototype show car, and it has ended up as something unique – a sort of cross between the ECO-VX220, Tigra and Vectra. But as you would imagine, under the curvy glass fibre cloak, it's nothing like a production car.

The car's steel frame has been strengthened and beneath the bonnet is a mid-mounted super-powered engine for increased driver control. The whole lot weighs

CARS CHASE AFTER MOTORBIKES THAT PIROUETTE PERFECTLY, MISSING EACH OTHER BY WHAT FEELS LIKE MILLIMETRES



despite villains, oil slicks and flames, the hero completes his mission

just 650kg – meaning that the hero's motor can hit 60mph in just 4.5 seconds. Standard production model Astras, Agilas, Zafiras and Tigras also appear in the show, so spectators might just get the chance to see how their own cars could perform – or perhaps just an idea of how not to drive them.

Pulling off the most daring stunts involves a certain amount of trickery. For one backward jump, the body of the car is positioned the wrong way around with a panel cut away so the driver can see. There's also a switch on the steering wheel enabling him to limit his speed and not take off too fast from the hidden ramps. The climax of the show couldn't be done without it. In a huge emotional crescendo, the hero's car jumps through a truck and lands inside another one onto a hidden airbag. "We call it the 'touch and go' sequence," says stage manager Nathalie Lombardi. "The scene is



© Disney

WIN A FAMILY WEEKEND BREAK

Fancy getting in on the action? **VM** is giving you the chance to win a family weekend break at Disneyland Resort Paris. The prize is for a family of four (two adults and two children), and includes travel to Paris via Eurostar, three nights at a Disney Hotel (including a continental breakfast) and tickets to both Disney Parks (Disneyland Park and Walt Disney Studios Park) for the duration of the stay.

For your chance to win this magical prize, simply tick the relevant box on the letter that accompanies this magazine.

Terms and conditions: holiday must be taken by no later than September 2005. Accommodation is in a standard room at a Disney Hotel (excluding The Disneyland Hotel). Tickets to both Disney Parks are subject to capacity. Any costs incurred in addition to the prize package elements listed above (e.g. telephone charges, room service etc) are the guests' own expense. Travel insurance and UK transfers are not included. Winners are responsible for their own passport and visa requirements. The prize winner, if under 18, must be accompanied by an adult on the holiday. There is no cash or prize alternative. **VM** terms and conditions can be found on page 9.

"YOU MUSTN'T GET COMFORTABLE OR FEEL WHAT YOU ARE DOING IS WITHOUT RISK. BUT THERE IS NO ROOM FOR FEAR - IF SOMETHING HAPPENS, YOU JUST REACT"

incredibly complex." She goes on to explain that, for the stunt to work, the two trucks must be at exact locations with the airbag inflated and the ramp at a precise angle. The final scene lasts just three seconds. "It is impressive but very demanding," she adds.

But with the glamour of the show comes the graft. With just an hour between each performance, the show's 12 mechanics are under race-like conditions. At the end of the day, the cars must pass a vigorous 30-minute



inspection and are then tested on set just to be sure. Meanwhile, the drivers have two-hour dress rehearsals each week plus a 15-minute practice before every show.

"You have to be in excellent physical condition," says Kavaliauskas, adding that no matter how experienced a driver is, complacency is the biggest danger. "You mustn't get comfortable or feel that what you are doing is without risk," he explains. The adrenaline keeps him on edge and Kavaliauskas admits that it's impossible to relax between shows, because of the noise of the engines and the number of people working around the set. "You are in the action," he says. "There is no room for fear at the time. If anything happens, you just react to it."

"One of the most challenging, and best, parts of my job is training new recruits. I have to bring them to top level in three months and get them integrated within the existing team. A united team with a united spirit."

It's all about teamwork in the end – when you're trusting others with your life on a day-to-day basis. Even so, it sure beats a desk job.

with just an hour between shows, the team is under race conditions. Mike Kavaliauskas works hard to keep the team focused but says adrenaline helps

