



The stuntwoman

She's a diver, a swimmer and a former gymnast and kickboxer but these days **Belinda McGinley** is putting her skills and agility to good use as a film and TV stuntwoman. **Cath Harris** met her



A diminutive, undemonstrative female is zipping up and down the next lane at my local swimming pool. Nothing unusual in that; she's clearly a good swimmer. But when she reaches the wall she drops to the pool floor, sculling vigorously to stay there before emerging 30 seconds later. My curiosity fizzles. The lifeguard looks perplexed. I edge closer, my questions bubbling, and her answers

only increase my astonishment: Belinda McGinley is a stuntwoman in training. Swimming, cliff-top dives and breath-holding underwater are her meat and drink.

If she's not doubling Kylie or showing Keira Knightley how to retrieve the symbolic fragment of vase from a fountain in *Atonement*, she's fending off 007 in *Skyfall* or doing the rounds at Albert Square, where she has 'been pretty much everyone'. And if she isn't Patricia Hodge, tumbling inelegantly into a wheelie bin

Belinda McGinley prepares for a cliff jump in Ireland



in *Miranda*, or Sienna Miller cartwheeling across a bar in *Edge of Love*, McGinley is *Call the Midwife*'s Helen George, clambering up a rope ladder in the dead of night, or behind the scenes teaching the likes of Bobby Holland-Hanton how to swim. Bobby who? Seen that ad in which a muscular bloke with slicked back locks dives hair-raisingly through a car? That's Bond stuntman Bobby, who couldn't swim before McGinley took him on when they were both Legoland acrobats.

'He hates me because I made him work so hard,' she chuckles. 'He was winched up for the advert so doesn't actually dive, because the capacity of the car is tiny and there was too much chance of hitting it.' It's a rare moment when danger crosses McGinley's mind and yet more unusual for her to clock fear, or even madness, or be fazed by her time with A-listers. 'Sometimes, when you're doubling someone, they look you up and down when they meet you because your job is to make them look good,'

she says nonchalantly. 'But as soon as they speak, everyone becomes normal.'

Top class swimmer and diver

If there's anything less like normal, it is the job McGinley so obviously adores. It is one she may never have contemplated had she not been a top class swimmer and diver, largely teaching herself to swim before joining Verulam ASC in Hertfordshire. 'I used to run from school to the pool and be there until it closed, but didn't join >

Belinda as Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider*; opposite (top): Doubling as Dot Cotton in *EastEnders*; opposite (bottom): With her diving coach Derek Beaumont



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◀ the club until I was 13 which was probably too late.' Diving followed a year or two on after she saw and copied a man somersaulting into the pool. She joined St Albans Diving Club, then the Beaumont Diving Academy and coach Derek Beaumont, 'probably the most amazing person in the world. It was his 80th birthday recently and we bought him a bike and an iPad!'

Beaumont had a reputation to maintain - he has coached nine Olympians, a county diving champion in each of the last 52 years and has three times been an Olympic judge - and McGinley didn't disappoint. She was fourth in her first British nationals in 1996 'after messing up my last dive', an achievement that persuaded her to put her swimming career on hold. 'I liked both swimming and diving equally and vowed I would never give up swimming. But the coaches said the two sports were incompatible because they used different muscle fibres and a different skill set. My lifelong dream was to go to the Olympics and I suppose it didn't matter too much which sport it was. But I don't think swimming ever leaves you.'

Stunt school

Both swimming and diving did leave her during three frustrating years studying sport and exercise science at Leeds Metropolitan University. Full of hope that student life would replicate that at inspirational St George's School in Harpenden, where McGinley excelled at every sport (and left with five A levels), university was a huge anti-climax. 'Everyone was so lazy. They all wanted to drink and I wanted to do stuff. And it really didn't challenge me enough.'

More positively, all that downtime gave her chance to think through her plan to visit Australia's Gold Coast and the stunt school she'd seen on TV. 'There were 10 lads and just one woman, which I thought was uncool and wanted to do something about,' a hint of steel now edging McGinley's tone. 'As soon as I finished my degree I went. I was the only girl! but because I was able to do the physical stuff they counted me as one of them. We did high falls, boat drags, fire burns, climbing and abseiling. I had a brilliant time and knew at the end it was what I wanted to do.'

Ambition and success

Ambition and success are very different things in the stunt performance world, however. It takes commitment, determination and between £3,000 and £6,000 to fund the kit, tuition, exams and insurance needed to qualify - and for some, more than 10 years of training. Hopefuls must meet criteria in six sports and ▶

amass 60 days of on-camera experience. McGinley's sports were swimming, high diving, scuba diving, kickboxing, gymnastics and trampolining.

The swim tests are relatively easy, McGinley says, and include 100m fully clothed in two minutes, swimming underwater without

goggles, breath-holding for two minutes and towing an unconscious casualty, all verified by the ASA's principle tutor, Jan Brinkley. As a diver, you must prove aerial awareness by mastering 10 different 10m dives, including reverse, twisting and somersaults. The tests are intended to mirror on set scenarios and the likely succession of filming 'takes'. Dive well and you could be cliff-jumping and plummeting from balconies; hold your breath underwater and you'll play the drowning victim or escape flooded cars and tsunamis. McGinley's mastery of other sports - she is a PADI dive master, a double kickboxing champion and former county-level gymnast - only added to her versatility. 'Once you have all your qualifications you submit them to a panel of





Synchronised diving at St Albans; below: Riding a great white in *Shark Attack*; right: With the bloodied Kate Magowan in *A Lonely Place to Die*



◀ stuntpeople with a video of yourself.' The panel approved and in 2006 McGinley took her first role, as a victim of the 1987 Zeebrugge ferry disaster.

Minogue catfight

Disasters, crashes and suicides featured regularly in McGinley's early schedule but her repertoire grew with her reputation. Today on YouTube you can see her doubling Kylie Minogue in a staged catfight with sister Dannii. The superstar duo hiss and spit, yell and bawl before McGinley steps in, toppling over the sofa and plunging head first into a jangling overburdened clothes rail. 'I filmed the scene with Dannii, then I and another stunt girl did the fight. Simon Cowell and the Minogue family were there. It was pretty good.'

McGinley's CV is now a catalogue of pretty good experiences. Among the most recent is a role in *Skyfall* in which she is caught between Bond and villain Silva on an escalator at an underground station. 'It's not one I'm proud of.



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I'm there with flailing arms and get knocked by Daniel Craig.' Some might envy that close encounter but the incident pales against others she recounts. Like the time she spent teaching Keira Knightley to retrieve the broken porcelain. 'I was in the water with her so that she could ask questions, and demonstrating the dive so the crew could get the light and camera angles. I might have done 50 takes before Keira stepped in. She was absolutely brilliant and quite a lot of fun.' Or the time when she doubled for Melissa George in *A Lonely Place to Die*. 'We were filming in the Scottish Highlands,

canyoning and gorge walking, and I had seven big stunts in two days. It was the most stunning countryside I have ever seen.'

Mermaid

Not all McGinley's jobs are quite so glam and she shudders at the memory of 'dusty, dirty, stinking basements' in London and a 'hideous' experience as a corpse in the Thames. She has achieved her dream of playing a mermaid, though. 'I imagined wearing a nice shiny tail and long flowing wig but instead was in the freezing cold Irish Sea in a net full of dead fish.' McGinley

hesitates before revealing her new ambition, in case that should backfire too. 'I'd like to somersault from the nose of a killer whale, so long as it's fairly well trained.'

McGinley's water skills have been invaluable in many of her credits. In *The Boat that Rocks*, she is trapped underwater 'wearing the most ridiculously heavy woollen jumper', and in *Eastenders* she plays a woman caught in a car as it sinks into a river. She doubles 2004 tsunami victim Naomi Watts in *The Impossible* and is Gemma Arterton in the new film *Byzantium*, jumping off a 60ft cliff.

In some jobs, McGinley plays the character because the part is too small to warrant an actor as well. 'I might say three lines before a train crashes, or there might be a lot of general falling, being kicked and dodging out of the way.' Some of her roles suggest great pain: in *The Bill* her fingers are slammed in a door although collisions with vehicles are routine. 'The wipers will be removed and as the car comes at you, you jump towards it and have to >

Belinda performs a back dive off a balcony; right: With actress Pam Ferris' stunt double in *Call the Midwife*; Doubling as Kylie Minogue for a catfight with her sister Dannii





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◀ work out where to plant your shoulder to break the windscreen. The car is usually going at 15mph or maybe 20mph but I think that’s too fast. It’s good to be a little bit scared because it gets the adrenalin going.’

Unpredictability

The thrill, the unpredictability and the opportunities to travel – she has worked in Thailand, Iceland and the Caribbean – are among the joys of the job for McGinley. She doesn’t crave the stardom of those for whom she deputises, enjoying her contribution ‘without having to deal with the fame and fortune and always having to look beautiful’. The rewards for her training ‘are certainly worth it’, she adds. ‘I’m always excited when the phone rings because I don’t know what the job will be.’

Masters diving

Between those calls McGinley is training hard in the hope of adding to her swimming and diving titles at this September’s European Masters Championships in Eindhoven. She has a bronze from the national swimming championships as a senior and a hatful of county masters 100m fly and backstroke titles. Three medals from the 2010 World Masters Diving Championships are among other trophies. ‘My father told me at eight years old that I should concentrate on one sport if I wanted to be any good. If I’d taken his advice I may well have gone to the Olympics but I wouldn’t have developed the skills for such an amazing career. Nor do I think I’d still have my love and passion for sport in general. Perhaps I could have made it if I had discovered swimming a little earlier, but I wouldn’t want my life to be any different now.’ 📺