

SAG-AFTRA member and stuntwoman Michelle Shock: “How can we survive if all the money in the world is being taken by corporations?”

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Tens of thousands of writers, actors and other performers in the US voted overwhelmingly for strike action earlier this year and eventually carried out months-long, militant, determined walkouts against the giant entertainment conglomerates.

They were seeking solutions to what many perceived as “existential” problems: sharp losses in income due to previous concessions contracts, the impact of streaming and, more recently, the damage done by soaring inflation; the dangers that Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology in the hands of predatory corporations represent to jobs and entire professions; the ongoing “gigification” of the entertainment industry; and, more generally, the corporate stranglehold over film and television production.

Despite the self-congratulatory claims of Writers Guild of America (WGA) and Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) officials, writers and performers achieved none of the “transformative” changes they were seeking. On the contrary, on every issue the union bureaucracies capitulated, helping fix the income losses in place and opening the door to a bloodbath on jobs.

WGA and SAG-AFTRA leaders, backed by and allied with the Biden White House, did everything in their power to suppress opposition to the corporations and their attacks on workers’ jobs and livelihoods, as well as their stifling of artistic and cultural life. The union officials’ actions were principally aimed at wearing down and discouraging the striking writers and actors, ensuring that the companies’ essential objectives were achieved.

There is a widespread understanding among SAG-AFTRA members in particular that they were betrayed by the union officialdom. The tentative agreement received yes votes from less than 30 percent of the membership, with a massive abstention.

We recently spoke to SAG-AFTRA member and stuntwoman-actress Michelle Shock about the contract and the general situation in the film and television industry.

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DW: The SAG-AFTRA contract vote results were announced last night. But that doesn’t end the issues or the struggle.

Michelle Shock: No, it doesn’t. In fact, I think it makes things worse. Since now we’re not working with a blank slate. We’re working with terms that the companies can manipulate.

DW: First, could you explain how you got into this field and what your background or training is?

MS: I am a professional stuntwoman. When I first started in this industry, I was pursuing acting. I started like most people do, I was working background, I did stand-in work. I did a bit of body doubling. I was meeting more and more people on set, doing speaking roles and

progressing naturally.

I did a bit of PA [production assistant] work too, and eventually I started meeting stunt people and that’s when I was introduced to that world. I was getting hired for what they call “special skills” work, which I later found out is basically the studios’ way of getting semi-stunt work out of you without paying you or having a coordinator present. So someone educated me on that.

Alan D’Antoni was the first stuntman that I met back in Florida. He was on this particular project, crashing a truck through a barn. I went and stood with him for a bit, and it was just me and him. I said, that sounds like fun, and he goes, you’d do that?

We started talking and he asked, do you do any sports? I was a national champion equestrian. I ride motorcycles. I drive a bit, I surf. He said, you should do stunts! I said, I don’t know, I like acting.

So I tried a few more years of acting and then moved to California, and the same scenario happened again. I ended up getting introduced to a man named Tony Vella at Bay Area Stunts. I said, someone told me to contact you and said I should do stunts.

He said, all right, I’ll keep it on my radar. It was only two or three days later he called me and he goes, you’ll never believe this. I got a call for a motorcycle job. They need a female motorcyclist and we don’t have any. So do you want to try this job out and see how you like it?

I said, yeah, sure, let’s do it. So we went. I had a great time and I did really well. He pulled me aside, I know you want to act, but you really should do this. Because if you focus on this, you’re going to do really well and you’re going to have an opportunity to act again in the future. “Okay, I’ll give it a shot.”

Within a few years I made it down to L.A. and started working immediately and very, very quickly started becoming a stunt double and working a lot of bigger shows and movies. I had my dream career opportunity happen when I got to work with Christian Bale on a film, *Pale Blue Eye* [2022].

I doubled for Gillian Anderson. I did a whole sequence with Christian. He didn’t use his double, so it was just me and Christian, where he dragged me out of a burning building. So I thought, this is a dream job. I’ve now been pursuing stunts and starting to do more stunt coordinating.

I was really looking forward to a long future in this career. But it’s kind of a bleak period for stunts now. The natural progression is you’re first a stunt person and a double, then you go into stunt coordinating, and then might work your way into second unit directing and production. But I look ahead now and I see only a handful more years for doubling and coordinating.

I don’t know if the community or the climate of film is something I still

want to be in. It's changing. The technology is changing. Independent film might be something that I would still have the heart for, but creativity seems to be getting drained out of filmmaking quite heavily.

DW: Backtracking one second. Do you think that stunt work attracts a certain kind of personality, a certain kind of person, aside from having bravery?

MS: I definitely think there's a certain type of personality. You have to have a certain number of screws loose to do what we do. But it's not being crazy. Many people think stunt people are just big brutes or cowboys or rednecks, and while such people definitely have a place in our community, it's not the overall tone.

Many stunt people are very educated, well-spoken and highly, highly trained, specialized athletes. They're very creative people. The performance of action is an art and I know quite a few people who have come out of careers such as being lawyers or doctors, scientists, nurses, who somehow end up in this career as well because it takes a very passionate and active and dedicated personality.

DW: And obviously safety must be an obsession.

MS: It is. I have a six -old-daughter. I tell her all the time everything is risk assessment, right? So when she tells people her mommy's a stuntwoman, I say, no, no, no. What am I? And she knows to say, you're a safety expert. Because that's what we do. While we are stunt professionals, our real profession is in safety.

We are high-risk assessment specialists. We're better than the insurance adjusters that evaluate these same things. That's our job. We learn how to do high-risk actions with the lowest risk possible, while making it as real and as impressive as a human performance.

DW: Have you had serious injuries?

MS: Nothing serious, thankfully. The worst thing I've had happen is some pretty bad whiplash, in a rehearsal where I just got pulled a little hard on a wire. Those things happen and injuries definitely do happen. It's the same risk if I go compete nationally on my horse. That's more dangerous in many ways, or those high-performance athletes who are racing open wheel cars, or X Game specialists. It's extraordinary humans doing extraordinary things.

DW: I don't know precisely what the origins of stunt work are. In the earliest days, people like Buster Keaton did their own stunts. Amazingly. He was also an extraordinary athlete. But stunt work obviously has been indispensable to film production and, as you say, to the impression that films make on people.

MS: I think so, yes. We're also some of the highest grossing performers within SAG-AFTRA.

Something that has always rubbed me the wrong way is that, historically, in film we've always been the shadow of other performers, you know? Like often how a ghostwriter for music is used. We're kind of the ghost performers, and that's hurt us in many ways moving forward, because as actions become even more sought after in film, we've given away a lot of our rights by giving stardom and power and finances to people who don't acknowledge us.

There are some performers in the A-list category who do a better job these days at acknowledging their stunt doubles and the effort and risk that we dedicate to them in the production. But it's still very rare.

While we do get paid well, those payments have greatly reduced over the years. Residuals have dwindled. Our senior performers haven't been properly taken care of. If there's anyone that deserves to retire at 55 and take a pension, it's not [SAG-AFTRA National Executive Director and Chief Negotiator] Duncan Crabtree-Ireland. It's stunt performers who have wear and tear on their bodies for decades.

It's astonishing what some of the older stunt people can do. I have a podcast called *Lights Camera Action* and I recently had Corey Eubanks on there, who is the car crash king. He's just extraordinary and he's in his 60s and you would never be able to tell. He looks like a 45-year-old man.

A lot of the guys are conscientious about their health and want to have long-term careers. They take phenomenal care of themselves, and the women as well. Debbie Evans, a mentor of mine and the most talented driver in the world, she's 65, working on the *Fast and Furious* films and many other films.

We still have our contribution to make as senior performers when we take care of ourselves, but we're only able to take as much care of ourselves as we can afford to. There's a lot that goes into that.

DW: You just spoke about residuals and related issues. Can you explain what streaming and other changes have meant?

MS: So my mentors made most of their money from network television residuals, and those paid very, very well at one time. They were able to easily afford their families, and ex-wives, and continuing their training and providing for their skill sets, taking care of their families when they traveled. I have noticed that that's almost impossible for a lot of us now, the younger generation of performers.

With streaming, we got screwed in that manner because we were working from the assumption that, "Hey, let's see how this goes." But then 12 to 15 years passed by and nothing ever got properly renegotiated.

Here we are dealing with it now. We were talking about getting a 15 percent increase for our residuals and we end up with 7 percent. Such a huge reduction from what we were aiming for. That's 20 or 30 extra dollars on a paycheck, that's nothing. Our streaming residuals are already sitting very, very low.

It's not a sustainable structure, especially with their raising our insurance caps. Just during the strike alone they raised it \$500. While we're all on strike! So now the minimum to qualify for insurance is even more expensive, but we're all making the lowest amount of money we've ever made.

I talked to some of the highest-earning performers in this industry and this year they didn't make enough to qualify for health insurance. So it's a mess.

I've got my own household that I have to take care of; my daughter, my pets. I'm a single mom, so I have to be able to afford to care for my family. This career path doesn't seem promising in its sustainability, you know?

DW: On the one hand, there's the streaming residuals issue, basically the corporations have made billions of dollars and paid next to nothing. Now nobody's going to get anything retroactively from the billions of dollars the companies made over the last 15 years.

But there's also the impact of artificial intelligence on stunt work, on voice work, on background actors. This is from an article that appeared in August. It cites the comments of director Neill Blomkamp, "whose new film *Gran Turismo* hits theaters August 25 ... The role AI will soon play in generating images from scratch is 'hard to compute,' he told AFP. *Gran Turismo* primarily uses stunt performers driving real cars on actual racetracks, with some computer-generated effects added on top for one particularly complex and dangerous scene. But Blomkamp predicts that, in as soon as six or 12 months, AI will reach a point where it can generate photo-realistic footage like high-speed crashes based on a director's instructions alone."

"At that point, 'you take all of your CG (computer graphics) and VFX (visual effects) computers and throw them out the window, and you get rid of stunts, and you get rid of cameras, and you don't go to the racetrack,' he told AFP. 'It's that different.'"

Are you concerned about that particular aspect?

MS: Oh, yes, absolutely. The beauty of filmmaking has always been that we're telling these stories, and we're taking the audience on these adventures and these excursions that they would not really have access to otherwise. And while, yes, we want them to engage imagination, there's a level of reality that we want and need to bring them.

So when we take everything digital and remove the human element of it,

then it might as well be a cartoon. But these corporations, these big networks and these streaming companies, that's not what their concern is. Their concern is revenue. They're money-driven. They're not creativity driven. So you have this phenomenal community of artists versus these cash cows.

So my concern is that when you have an industry that's now dominated and controlled by people whose main concern is revenue and not integrity to the audience, then they're going to cut every corner they can as long as they maintain a certain level of believability. They have been training audiences already through different kinds of content released to get them used to it, so that the transition wouldn't be this sudden shift into nonhuman performance.

DW: Our argument would be that these are fantastic technological advances with extraordinary potential. But under the profit system where you have conglomerates driven by revenue, as you say, it's going to mean the destruction of jobs, the destruction of incomes. Wall Street and the companies are only concerned with lowering costs and eliminating jobs.

MS: It's a matter of when it becomes cheaper for them to make films with this technology, that is, once it becomes affordable. Right now the big argument is that it's not there yet, but it won't take long. Tech advances a lot faster than we do. Technology advances in three months what takes us a year.

So, before you know it, it's going to become very accessible and very affordable. It's already pretty simple for students and the general public to do deepfakes. What the studios will have accessible to them we probably can't even imagine or wrap our heads around.

Once AI is affordable and generates more revenue than it costs them, they're going to dive into that as much as possible. I do know people who have said that's already occurring. I spoke to a coordinator recently, part of a very well-known group, who informed me that his crew of 50 performers was reduced to a crew of four because of the AI and CGI they were able to utilize to replace them.

So it's already happening. That's what's frustrating, when people go, "Oh, it's not happening yet. They can't do that yet." They're already doing it.

DW: There are a lot of soothing words being said intended to put people to sleep.

MS: I agree. I worry about other industries, too. What does everyone do when there are only a limited number of jobs? You have to start considering a more socialist structure to things because how else can we survive if all the money in the world is just being taken by corporations?

Then what do we become? Corporate slaves. They're going to have to create a different social and economic structure for humans to survive and have their basic needs met.

DW: In a rational society, you could eliminate 20 or 30 hours of work, but pay people the same.

MS: It's interesting, because it could go one way or the other. It could become a dystopian future, but it could also become a utopian future. These technologies could allow people to have more time for their families, more time to enjoy themselves, more access to travel, a better, higher living quality.

DW: Absolutely. For that, you have to have a different social and economic system.

What about the contract itself? And SAG-AFTRA's role in this contract negotiations? We think it's a rotten deal, a sellout. But you now have million-dollar union officials telling you everything's going to be fine.

MS: If you have a pack of dogs and you starve them long enough, then throw a bone at them, even if it doesn't actually give them anything except the illusion that they're being provided for, they're going to accept that bone, but they're also going to fight each other. I think that's exactly what they did with this contract.

Historically, SAG-AFTRA has never properly fought for us. They have

always given us nothing.

DW: It's not just SAG-AFTRA either. The UAW has sold out auto workers and not lifted a finger to defend jobs for decades. That's why Detroit is the poorest city in the country. It's a general problem with unions that don't represent workers. People in these bureaucracies are an extension of management. They don't speak for the 80 percent of actors, for example, who are making less than \$26,000 a year.

MS: If you look at like Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, he's not even part of our union. He's just a paid representative and he makes almost \$1,000,000 a year. Our residuals are paying him. He's making more money off our residuals than we are. It's absolutely insane. We're working for him. He's not working for us.

It's sad to me. There's nothing in place within the union to prevent conflicts of interest either. When you look back at the streaming residual contracts, we had a board member who had conflict of interest issues in relation to one of the streaming platforms.

There's nothing in place to prevent anything like that from happening. So it would not be surprising to me at all if some staff in SAG had similar conflicts of interest currently.

DW: It doesn't even necessarily depend on individual corruption. They hobnob with the elite, they hobnob with the billionaires, the Bob Igers and company. They are part of that milieu, whether they're actually taking money under the table or not, they think and look at the world with the same viewpoint as the enemy.

MS: I think they often want us to fight each other, and that's kind of politics as a whole. American politics are historically known for doing that. If we're busy fighting each other, we won't see the corruption that's happening at the top.

DW: This contract is rotten. But things are not over. There are going to be big struggles over jobs. In our opinion, there have to be different kinds of organizations, rank-and-file committees democratically controlled that take the leadership of these struggles out of the hands of these million-dollar union officials. The power has to be brought back to the rank and file, and the union officialdom has to be put out of business.

MS: It's such a low feeling today, because it's the day after the ratification. Of course, I'm processing. It's sad to think something that I really was hoping and looking forward to having a long career with may be over. I now have to try to navigate, potentially to pivot, I don't know what the future looks like for us.



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