

NY Times on Kim Kahana

Authored by Al Martinez, Times Staff Writer on February 4, 1982

Kim Kahana is squinty-eyed and somber, with an actor's facility for looking like either a Chinese bandit or a rich Mexican lawyer. It is not difficult to assume, even in his bandit mode, that one can challenge him with impunity, for he is 52 years old, slim and barely 5 feet, 7 inches. Sometimes he even smiles, which adds to his generally shy and in offensive appearance, like a rabbit at the water hole that, by its vulnerability, invites the pounce of a bigger and stronger predator.

But don't be fooled. The rabbit is a stunt man, the quintessential street kid, a war hero, a martial arts expert and a gun-packing bodyguard. He has killed two armed men who were trying to assault a woman in a parking lot - one with a karate kick - and a dozen others while winning the silver star as a paratrooper during the Korean War.

Once captured by the Communists and left for dead, he dug his way out of a mass grave and escaped, and before the war was over he had added two bronze stars and two purple hearts to his uniform. Kahana may be the last rabbit in the world you would want to pounce on at the water hole. They call him The General at his Chatsworth stunt school where, for about the last eight years, he has taught high-falling, the rolling of cars, cliff-hanging and a horror of other film stunts that civilized people avoid. "If your friends tell you you're a little crazy," he says to those who sign up for his course, "then you're for me." Privately he adds, "Because I'm a little crazy too." Some might agree with him, including the physician who, after treating him for a broken back, told Kahana he would never be a stunt man again.

He had been in a body cast for about three months, but after listening to the physician, he promptly walked into the men's room, smashed against a wall until the cast shattered, took it off and walked out. "I get a little impatient sometimes," he explained. "I don't like to be told I can't."

Demanding absolute attention, Kahana leads his students through their paces like a Marine drill instructor, warning, threatening, cajoling, blind in one eye, angry in the other. There is nothing they do that he hasn't already done in about 300 movies over the last 25 years. If they don't believe that, he proves it. "You don't tell them," said the man who has free-fallen 120 feet into water. "You show them!"

Kahana teaches seven sessions a year, each limited to about a half a dozen students who pay \$2,000 a piece for a six-week course. He guarantees them no jobs, tolerates no disrespect and throws them out if he feels they are incapable of learning what he is trying to teach.

Challenge his authority, and you're liable to have 150 pounds of Kahana flying at you feet-first, although he is trying to curb that instinct.

There's a year-long waiting list to get into Kahana's school. He limits the size of his courses to ensure individual attention, and won't take just anyone who walks in off the street.

"Money isn't everything," said the third-grade dropout who once had to steal to eat and now figures his net worth at over \$1 million. Broken Arms "You've got to have a stunt man's instinct or you're gonna be hurt. Even with it, I've broken my own arms 60 times." Kahana is enraged by those who encourage amateurs to try stunts best left to professionals. And complains about producers and directors who use inadequate safety standards for the pros.

"You know what they want now?" he demanded, on the sun-drenched edge of a 65-foot cliff in the Santa Susana Mountains.

"They want an Academy Award for stunts!" He shakes his head in disbelief. "Watch the death toll rise."

It is Sunday. "Be afraid!" Kahana is telling four students who are learning to rappel down the face of the cliff. "Always know fear! When you stop being afraid, you're dead!" He is dressed in camouflaged dungarees and combat boots, feet apart, hands on his hips. Part Hawaiin and part Japanese, he calls himself "a half-assed Oriental."

"I don't want nobody getting cocky," he warns them. "You get cocky, you get killed. You get killed, that makes me mad." Pause. "You don't wanna make me mad."

Controlled Tension

It was meant as a joke, but there is a tension to Kahana, tightly controlled. He is not proud of his hair-trigger temper but understands its necessity.

Rage kept him alive on the streets when, at 13, he was alone and bumming his way across the country. It kept him alive in war, clawing his way out of a grave after an enemy firing squad had buried him for dead. And it kept him remembering the daylight, and wanting it back, when an exploding grenade blinded him totally for two years, and left him permanently sightless in his left eye. "I'm no angel," he says, preparing to rappel, "but neither is nobody else."

He walks down the face of the cliff with the ease of a stroll on the beach, stops halfway and looks up at his students. "You lean back," he shouts, dangling like a spider on a web-strand, "and you keep your body

straight! Keep your brake hand on! Let go with that hand and it's aloha!" ("I can teach a dummy to jump off a building," he says later. "But once you jump, you're on your own.")

Kahana figures he has put about 250 students through his school and no one has ever been seriously hurt. About half of them are working as movie stunt people.

Bodyguard Agency

He also has a bodyguard agency with a staff of 30 (he packs a 9-millimeter automatic in a shoulder holster), but won't talk about who he guards or why. "Just say," The General says, "I've never lost anybody." His three sons all hold black belts in Karate. So does his daughter. "Someone tried to mug her once," he says. "She broke his nose." Kahana learned his stunt business by doing it. "I took the job because there's not a hell of a lot else you can do when you can't read or write.

"I'm not trying to prove nothin'. It's work. Like I said, I'm a little nutty." He thinks about that for a moment. "I'm a little lucky, too. In 1955, I was on a plane that crashed in Texas. Thirty-two people were killed. I walked away without a scratch. Maybe I'm right where I ought to be."

He looks up at the cliff face. "All right, you people, down you come, slow and easy, all together, take your time. . ."