

Taking truss to the extreme

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Switchblade Films explains how quality trussing has increasingly become an essential tool for on-location production equipment

Story courtesy ProAVL MEA ([See: https://www.proavl-mea.com/details/71794-taking-truss-to-the-extreme](https://www.proavl-mea.com/details/71794-taking-truss-to-the-extreme))

“Dermot [Brogan, stunt and rigging coordinator] and myself – who both come from a river guiding and outdoor background – run the company’s reality TV projects together with Johann Spilhaus,” explains stunt and rigging coordinator Francois Grobbelaar. “Dermot is an avid rock climber and I worked for an outdoor adventure company before joining the industry. We have both been rigging and coordinating for over 20 years and both did many years of stunt work as well. There is a very

close bond between stunts and rigging and it made sense to pursue both careers from the start.”

“Stunt ideas originate from a lot of different sources,” continues Brogan. “Sometimes we think of a stunt and then we design the build around that. On other occasions we see a great location and then think of a nice stunt that we can do there. We also sometimes get ideas from things we’ve spotted on other shows and tweak them, or we take two stunts and combine them into something new. Every show and every country has different stunts and the client usually has some ideas of their own that we then design the build around.”

South Africa might not seem the obvious choice for on-location filming but, as Grobbelaar explains, a combination of unique factors provides a convincing argument for international productions: “South Africa, and Cape Town in particular, has amazing crew and equipment, which is a big reason for so many productions coming here,” he says. “Cape Town has a lot to offer when it comes to unique locations and, because we are in the Southern Hemisphere, it means our summer attracts a lot of shoots when it is too cold elsewhere. The exchange rate is also in our favour when it comes to international productions coming to shoot here.”

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For most people, the mention of truss conjures visions of complex and unsightly portable stage setups. But, as South Africa's Switchblade Films increasingly demonstrates, one man's awkward rigging system is another man's opportunity to get creative.

Established in 2011 to support the increase in reality TV productions taking place globally, Switchblade Films, also known as Pyranha Reality, is a Cape Town-based company specialising in rigging solutions for TV in tandem with its sister company, Pyranha Stunts, which specialises in movie stunt work, also in addition to rigging. Pyranha Stunts started out small by deploying basic stunt and rigging equipment from the home garages of partners Grant Hulley and Franz Spilhaus, but quickly grew and assembled a dynamic team that has enabled the company to offer a professional service with a commitment to every production. The result is that Pyranha Stunts has become one of the biggest preeminent stunt companies of its kind in South Africa. Today, it works both nationally and internationally, providing professional stunt teams, rigging and necessary related equipment to the feature film industry. Meanwhile, sister company Switchblade Films

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offers similar services specifically for reality TV productions. The two companies share resources and service both industries separately as the demands are not the same for TV and movies.



A firm belief in staying at the cutting edge has seen the team consistently developing and investing in the latest equipment, ranging from cable cams to fully programmable winches and a wide variety of camera gear. As one might expect, Switchblade's focus on stunt shooting sees it deploying truss in ever more intriguing ways, and the pair's outdoor backgrounds also bring a unique perspective for on-location filming. What many probably don't appreciate is just how integral trussing has become to these operations when, because of the safety element at play, choosing the right solution becomes paramount.

"We brought our first Prolyte truss in 2011 after landing a big Fear Factor India contract," recalls Grobbelaar. "Prolyte was the obvious choice after assessing all the options, and the fact that DWR was the distributor in South Africa made it a lot easier to get hold of stock. When it comes to shows such as Fear Factor, trussing forms the foundation of most of our stunts and all our builds are designed around the structure. Whether it is suspended off a crane, standing on the ground or hanging off the side of a building or moving vehicle, we massively rely on Prolyte to set up the stunts safely."

Following the pandemic, the on-location film industry in South Africa has been enjoying a huge surge in popularity which has seen members of the Switchblade team hanging from bridges, mountains and sky-high buildings in a bid to capture that picture-perfect shot for TV. “Some particularly unique builds that we’ve created include one where we needed the structure to look like an asterix symbol,” Grobbelaar furthers. “The only way we were able to achieve that was to fabricate offset steel plates that bolted onto the Prolyte corner blocks between the levels. This allowed us to still keep the entire structure locked together, thus strong and stable. A lot of our build requires moving or rotating platforms and we have to therefore build all our motors into aluminium and steel structures that bolt straight onto the Prolyte truss sections. This way we are able to hold it together as a single solid structure.”

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“We also did a very interesting build for a German show called Global Gladiators which was filmed on-location at Vingerklip Lodge in Namibia,” recalls Brogan. “Contestants were pushed towards the drop-off on a captive track which was secured to a Prolyte base. Their safety line was attached to the helicopter above them, so when they reached the end of the track they went into a drop before getting lifted by the helicopter. To create the curved track we fabricated steel truss sections that connected to the Prolyte truss by means of truss eggs and pins, and fabricated pivot plates used along with truss to give us two back braces from the end of the structure to the wall/cliff face of the mountain. This was needed to support the weight and prevent flex on the trussing with the big overhang.”

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This sudden burst in filming has seen the company increase its already sizable stock of Prolyte equipment, the largest orders of which include 16m x 3m, 9m x 2m, 13m x 1.5m, 8m x 1m and 1m x 50cm sections. “In total, we now hold more than 40 corner blocks and 30 0.5m, 1m, 1.5m, 2m and 2.5m sections each,” notes Grobbelaar.

“Safety always comes first as no risk is worth our careers, and this is one area where Prolyte shines above the competition,” adds Brogan. “It is very easy for us to look at the Prolyte manual, catalogues and website to check the loads and therefore we’re always able to stay within the safety specs. And we are always able to pick up the phone and call someone at DWR to discuss any concerns we have with damaged truss, certain builds and loads. If we can’t get the information from the catalogue, they are always ready to assist.”