



Introducing: Sean Cawelti of ‘Happy Fall’

Kurt Kanazawa and David Ellard in "Happy Fall: A Queer Stunt Spectacular." (Photo by Ramon Garcia)

When Sean Cawelti grew up in Los Angeles, his grandma frequently took him to Universal Studios. There, he discovered his love for movie magic and stunts.

“There was something about going to the park and seeing how movies were made that really made a lasting imprint on my child brain,” he said.

This week, that love for cinematic action evolves into Rogue Artist Ensemble’s “Happy Fall: A Queer Stunt Spectacular.” The show produced in partnership with Los Angeles LGBT Center and Contemporary American Theater Festival tells the story of the professional and romantic rise and fall of two, queer stuntmen in Hollywood. The duo navigates toxic masculinity and the acceptance of identity with the help of puppetry, live video filmmaking and action-packed encounters.

“The audience not only is seeing this live stunt show experience, but they’re also essentially going to witness this love letter to Hollywood and how movies are made, and all the complications and challenges there,” Cawelti said.

Cawelti, the director of “Happy Fall,” originally pitched the concept years ago and has had the show workshopped over the past few years. Now, it is set to premiere this month at Renberg Theatre in Hollywood. The coming-of-age story is based on and inspired by real interviews with stunt people in Hollywood, centering on the wrestle for acceptance in a hyper-masculine industry.

“Happy Fall” utilizes what Rogue Artist Ensemble calls “hyper theater,” a term referenced since the company’s inception. Hyper theater is the meshing of various theatrical elements to tell a story. In this instance, it comes through with puppetry, technology, dance, physical theater and stunts (of course).

For example, when a battle gets too intense, the performers turn to miniature puppets. The scale changes live on stage as the miniature puppetry performance is captured by a camera and projected onto a large screen to achieve “larger than life” emotions and action more authentically with the help of cinematic language.

“To me, a good movie — a good stunt show — is one where the action and all of the fighting and stage combat is done with intention and purpose,” Cawelti said.

When writer Lisa Sanaye Dring joined the project, she and Cawelti worked together to craft the language of the narrative, both written and physicalized. One of the biggest challenges was fine-tuning those physical moments to ensure they translated. At least a quarter of the show is stunt-based. In the rehearsal process, there were days spent solely working on the physicality alongside fight and intimacy coordinator Celine Lee Surniak.

“Her [Surniak] and I have long conversations about what each moment needs to be and how that moment is serving the story,” he said. “What we’re trying to articulate in terms of the character beats and story beats?”

“Happy Fall” is one of the more personal projects Cawelti has worked on. As a queer person who came out later in life, he is moved and honored to share the similar paths to self-discovery that stunt people in Hollywood navigated.

“Seeing that navigation of how to be who you are and how complicated and challenging that can be, that’s something that I’ve always been moved by,” he said of the show.

Witness the heart and action come together this weekend for previews or during the shows run from Aug. 17 to Sept. 8. There will also be a series of free programming alongside some of the performances, from a behind-the-scenes look at the fight choreography to a pre-show stunt puppet-making workshop. Find out more on the show’s website.

LOCATION: 1125 N McCadden Place, Los Angeles, CA 90038

DATES: August 10 - September 8

PRICE: \$39 - \$69 (with additional pay-what-you-can nights)

LINK: <https://rogueartists.org/Happy-Fall-A-Queer-Stunt-Spectacular>