

**THE CONTEMPORARY COMPANION**

# HAPPY FALL

## A QUEER STUNT SPECTACULAR

BY LISA SANAYE DRING  
WITH ROGUE ARTISTS ENSEMBLE

**DIRECTED BY RALPH B. PEÑA**

A WORLD PREMIERE PRODUCED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH  
ROGUE ARTISTS ENSEMBLE AND THE LOS ANGELES LGBT CENTER

SPONSORED BY MINA GOODRICH & LAWRENCE DEAN,  
HANK WILLARD & JEFFREY GREER, AND ALAN B. GIBSON

# THE CONTEMPORARY COMPANION

for *Happy Fall* by Lisa Sanaye Dring

CREATED BY HARRIS KIERNAN AND AMRITA RAMANAN

**THE CONTEMPORARY COMPANION** is a dramaturgical component designed to enhance your **CATF** experience. We've designed Volumes to act as counterparts to the five BOLD, NEW PLAYS, in this year's Festival. You can sample, survey, or study these online offerings—with no fear of spoilers!

Each companion will give you—

- An introduction to the creative teams
- An exploration of the world of the plays
- A deep-dive into the themes and conversations surrounding the plays

Come and join us as we **thinktheater** and **talktheater** at CATF in 2025.



**LISA SANAYE DRING** is a writer and director from Hilo, Hawaii and Reno, Nevada. Her play *SUMO* was produced by La Jolla Playhouse and Ma-Yi Theater Company in 2023 and The Public with Ma-Yi in 2025. She was the 2024 Tow Foundation Writer-in-Residence with Ma-Yi. Her play *Kairos* is receiving a Rolling World Premiere with NNPN. Lisa has won an Edgerton Award, Broadway World Award, and PLAY LA Stage Raw/Humanitas Prize. They've been a finalist for the Relentless Award, O'Neill Playwrights' Conference (2x), Seven Devils Playwrights Conference, and a 2x finalist (one honorable mention) for the Bay Area Playwrights Festival. Fellowships include MacDowell, Blue Mountain Center, and Yaddo. They received an Emmy nomination for Outstanding Interactive Programming for co-writing and co-directing a project with Matt Hill.

---

## INTERVIEW WITH PLAYWRIGHT **LISA SANAYE DRING**

*Conducted and edited by Sharon J. Anderson*

**CATF:** The “high fall” in the industry is described as the most dangerous stunt of all the stunts; fraught with danger and excitement not unlike, as you have said, “the journey of love.” Why a love story in the context of two queer Hollywood stuntmen?

**LSD:** “Happy fall” can also mean a horrible thing that’s really wonderful, or it’s a bad thing that’s really great. There’s a paradox inside of stunts because they are dangerous, but they are done safely to make it look like someone is actually in danger. As safe as you try to make it, it’s still quite physically dangerous. The love in this play is a thing that is so beautiful, and toxic, and hard. One person may see love as a way to freedom – this access to sovereignty and joy—while another person is simply afraid.

**Why did you choose to tell this story so visually, through live stunts, video, cinematic illusions, and puppetry?**

I make theater because it is based in the body, which is a corporeal aesthetic experience.

My play is physical and visual because that’s the way we make theater. Our bodies enhance our thoughts and our feelings. In many ways, my play is a love letter to L.A. and Hollywood, which explains the use of technology and screens. Puppetry captures the idea of “the double.” The stunt people are doubles for the famous bodies, and the puppets are doubles for the bodies of the stunt people. The reasons for these different ways of presenting my play are discreet; they all have their own reasons.

**In your play, you write, “Violence happens at the end of language. Just like sex. When words just can’t do it anymore. Our bodies have to touch.”**

What is it in the world that could push you to resort to violence is something that I’m thinking about a lot, especially in the world we’re living in now. There’s that guttural need, but also that passion. Eros holds sexuality, but it also holds passion, drive, love, and this physical magnetism. I’m essentially looking at eros, which is that which the body wants or needs that the mind is not driving. Words in that way are a metaphor for logical, rational thought and

exploration; and that which we know of ourselves that is in our control or known to us. Carl Jung talks about the “shadow,” so I think the body is part of the shadow; part of non-rational consciousness. There’s energy in the shadow, so in a play I am always trying to see that boundary of that which we know and that which is totally unknown and foreign which is us.

**You started this play seven years ago. How has it changed over seven years?**

This play has gone through so many drafts, and it’s been beautiful to live with it for that long. Originally, I wanted it to be a two-hander with just two people. In many ways, I started this when I was just starting to call myself a writer, so it’s grown up as I’ve grown up. As I put on more plays in the past few years, I try to get better. But this play is still a mystery for me, because it really can’t be found until you’re embodying it.

**Your play *Sumo* at the Public Theater in New York featured sumo wrestlers—why these plays about men?**

I’m writing as many plays about men as about women, but my male plays are getting produced. I hope the others get produced. The question I have is, “are these plays better because they are my shadow and I’m not as close to them?” I’m interested in men. I don’t understand men and am curious about them, but my work is not as gendered as it may seem. I have faith that all my female, non-binary plays will get produced as well.

**You said in an interview: “All of my plays are secretly about capitalism. The verticality of power versus the horizontal connection in power; a society based on subjugation and oppression.”**

Personally, capitalism is a hegemonic lens for me. It’s the way I see the world, and it’s also the thing that causes me and our community a lot of stress. By capitalism, I mean this idea of expansion based on subjugation and oppression; the denial of the ebbs of life and interest in conquering others for personal gain. Capitalism feels like a knot, at least in the way I see the world. It’s there and I’m trying to untie that

knot for myself and hopefully share my thoughts and feelings around that with others. I’m not trying to see it as “other.” We created it. It’s really something that we made up and are working with. I’m trying to figure out what in me has resonance with that in my chosen field so we can see it as something that doesn’t devour us, but something we can reframe, should we desire.

**You have said, “I want to provide a space for sacred and profane things.” Is this play that kind of space?”**

If the profane is in your work, the sacred is also your work because the work can be a temple for that which you love. But when your interpersonal love becomes more important or bigger than the temple of the work that you do, you should be able to see the love; identify that which is the greater love in your life and pursue that. The character, Clay, in my play, should give up his love of his career for the love of his partner, because it is bigger and more important. He’s not able to stop worshipping his career. I don’t think sacred and profane are all that different. It has to do with that which is the body seen as profane and that which is spirit seen as sacred—it’s the Cartesian split; the transcendent ideologies versus ideologies based on immanence. Anything can become sacred and anything can become not sacred. That which is sacred is ineffable and can’t be changed, so you need to change your life according to this quiet whisper of the things that can’t be named.

**“Writing is my deepest well,” you have said, “where most of my energy is . . . things about the way I was raised led me to inhabit a silence, so I had to describe my voice as a writer and found language in the dramatic arts; not just a tool to express myself, but also a tool to find meaning; a way to understand and shape the world.”**

I became a writer because of my parents’ deaths and in some ways that happening in my twenties propelled me to write. In theater, we can talk about the proximity to death in a way that other art forms can’t, because it’s so ephemeral and goes

away in a very palpable way. I didn't live in a very safe household as a child so there were things that were unsaid. I came into this work as an actor first because it was a place for me to be safe and in my body and for me to be intimate—not necessarily physically intimate but in a container that felt safe. The desire to be seen was also underneath all of this. I get tremendous joy from writing. It feels like the truer part of me than the part of me that goes out in the world. You're in your body and you're in your world and you realize, "This is why you are here!" It's like surfing when you catch a wave. I am grateful that I have this personal practice that gives me access to myself and others in a profound way.

**Herman Hesse said, "Everything becomes a little different as soon as it is spoken out loud."**

Once you tell someone that you love them for the first time, it really changes the feeling. Before something is out in the world, it is in its infinite stage of potential. That's actually what this play is about. It's the "eternal youth" thing. Clay is getting older and is not accepting it, as are many actors, I find. The thing about *puer* or eternal youth is that you live in infinity because you haven't done anything in this world and possibility is so big that in choosing your path, you lose possibility and some of those things die. Some of that infinite potential goes away when you actually enact your life and that's why so

many people get stuck, because they are afraid of the death that happens when you make a choice. In many ways, this play is about a man who has passed his *puer* stage, but is unable to give up this idea of "Hollywood, infinite potential, I can be everything. I am strong."

**You have cited the last lines of Herman Hesse's poem, "Stages" from *The Glass Bead Game* as among your favorites: "And life may summon us to newer races./So be it heart: bid farewell without end."**

Let life take you where it wants to go. I'm so grateful for the things I've had to let go of. I think theater asks you for something that is a little more than you have. It asks 100% of you and from that comes something new. That alchemy is such a blessing.

**I am asking each playwright to comment on this line—a recurring theme—from Samuel Beckett's novel, *The Unnamable*: "Words are all we have."**

Words are in some way our primary technology. 1.25 million years ago, we got fire and our mandibles got smaller so we could chew smaller things and our brains got bigger. Then we could make words. This technology is inherently human, because fire enabled us to have the brains we have. One of the first things we did with this technology was emit sounds to one another, and that is so beautiful.

## HERE ARE A FEW OF THE PLAYWRIGHT'S SOURCES OF INSPIRATION FOR THE PLAY:

- Toni Vaz, Stuntwoman and Founder of NAACP Awards (<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/19/arts/television/toni-vaz-dead.html>)

**Learn More about Toni Vaz**  
<https://www.becauseofthemwecan.com/blogs/news/toni-vaz-actor-creator-of-the-naacp-image-awards-has-joined-the-ancestors>

photo credit: Because of Them We Can



- Black Stuntmen's Association ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black\\_Stuntmen%27s\\_Association](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Stuntmen%27s_Association))
- *The True Adventures of the World's Greatest Stuntman* (<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/9555566-the-true-adventures-of-the-world-s-greatest-stuntman>)
- This Gay Stuntman Smashes Hollywood Stereotypes (<https://www.advocate.com/film/2016/5/11/exclusive-gay-stuntman-smashes-hollywood-stereotypes>)

**DAVID ANZUELO** is the founder of UnkleDave's Fight-House, which is a 3-time Drama Desk Award-nominated team of fight/intimacy directors. CATF credits: *What Will Happen To All That Beauty*. Broadway credits: *Jaja's African Hair Braiding*; *Kimberly Akimbo*. Off-Broadway: *Prince Faggot* (Playwrights Horizons); *Bath House PPTX* (Flea), *The Hours Are Feminine* (Intar); *Catch As Catch Can* (Playwrights Horizons), *On The Grounds Of Belonging* (Public Theater); *Oedipus El Rey* (Public Theater). Film: *Home*.

---

## AND INTERVIEW WITH INTIMACY DIRECTOR **DAVID ANZUELO**

In the world of art-making, relationships are always intimate, across various vectors of exchange: the playwright might be writing from a deeply intimate place, lighting and set designers have to find some language of communication, and of course the actors must embody this world. With certain stories—especially with Lisa Sanaye Dring's *Happy Fall: A Queer Stunt Spectacular*—predicated on liberation, and set in the world of stunt performers, deliberate measures must be in place to protect those who step into our collective imagination to create something wholly new and believable for an audience. Though conventional wisdom (and countless stories of actresses throughout the torrid history of filmmaking) would suggest that it is the actor's responsibility to develop and invent forms of intimacy for an audience, in recent years, the role of intimacy director has gained prominence in the wake of trying to rectify the historic imbalance. In this conversation with David Anzuelo, we explore how he came to inhabit this role and talks about his craft throughout the history of this vital role in theater.

**CATF: How did you get into intimacy directing?**

**DA:** I began working in a way that would eventually become called Intimacy Direction way back in 1992. This was long before there was a term for this kind of work or its place in the theater/film/tv world. I was already involved in the kink community in NYC and was familiar with the concepts of consent, safety and agency.

I was working with an experimental downtown theater company called Tiny Mythic Theater. They specialized in devised pieces inspired by American literature, such as the works of Nathaniel Hawthorn. They asked if I knew how to safely stage the flogging of an actor while a 20 voice choir sang gospel songs behind the altar where the flogging would take place. I knew how to do this. People in the theater community (directors) saw this and over the years I was asked to continue helping with scenes that involved intimacy. I had studied psychology and religious studies in college (and continue) and I

combined these studies with my knowledge of kink and theater magic. This is how I began.

**How do you think your craft has evolved over time?**

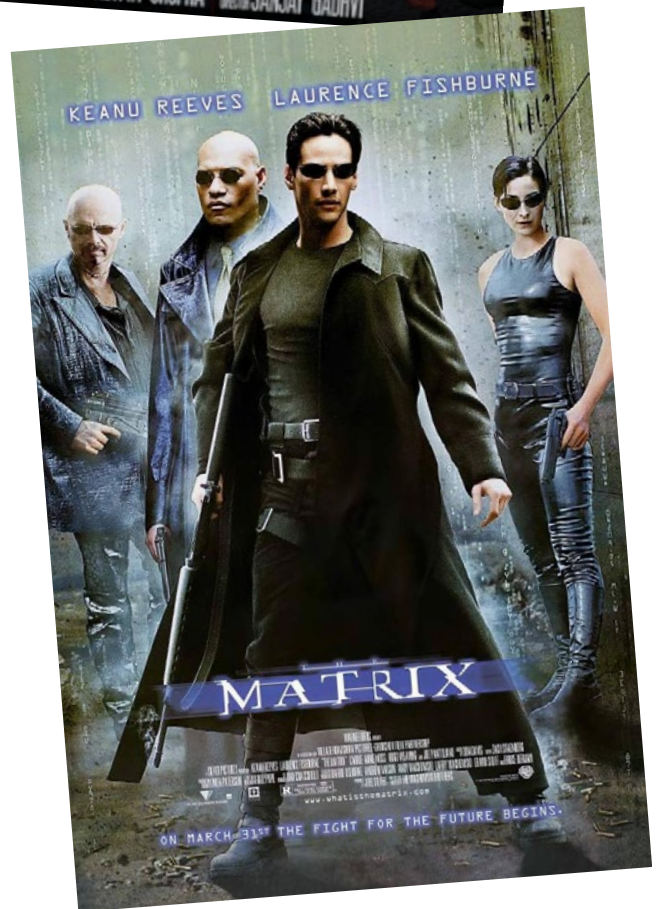
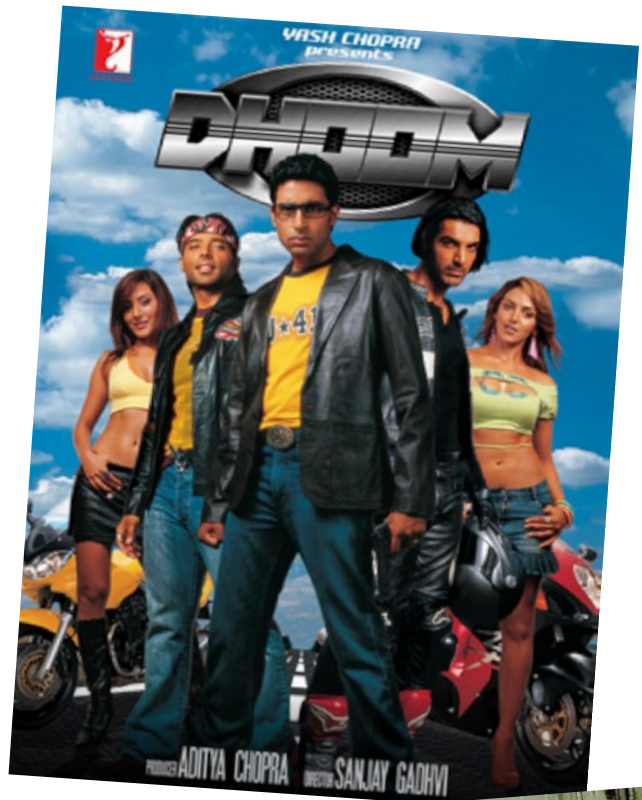
My work has evolved in perspective and vocabulary. I am a Queer Chicano theater maker. So my work has grown in sensitivity towards the cultural, racial, and gender components of a project I've agreed to work on. The way People of Color engage with physical and emotional intimacy can be different from White People. There are different cultural norms and interactions that must be taken into account. Dancing is different, hugging at social events is more prevalent. Gay men often kiss each other when greeting friends. Physical contact in public for people of color is more acceptable. All of this should be taken into account and respected when working with actors from these groups and when working on plays with characters from these groups.

In terms of vocabulary, we now have words to help create scenes of intimacy that we didn't have in the 90's. We now have words that are more inclusive regarding gender identities. Instead of saying "Hey guys" or "Ok, boys and girls," we can use more welcoming terms like "folks," "friends," "humans," and "people" when working with the company as a group. I also like learning what the preferred pronouns of each company member is.

When building moments of intimacy I like to work slowly. I speak of the dramaturgical place of the intimacy in relation to the scene, the play and the entire arc of the characters involved in the intimacy. I think in terms of sculpting images, shapes and rhythms that support the plays aesthetic. I like seeing/letting the actors acclimate to each other and I help them feel trust. I use place holders instead of kisses for a good while, in order to allow for the inner words of each actor to find each other instead of colliding into each other. I keep in mind that the body of each actor houses a heart and a spirit, so I need to let all of those parts have time to emerge towards each other. I work with nudity, if called for, incrementally. First discussing the text. Listening to the actors' boundaries for the scenes. Talking about the journey of the scenes. They start offering a composition of the scenes to the director and actors. If everyone feels good about the architecture of the choreography then we can begin the physical mapping. I find with this approach which puts the agency in the actors hands and speaks to them wholly as story tellers and artists, the scenes have a chance to live.

**How does your process intersect with research, given that our story in *Happy Fall* takes place in the 1980's. Does directing a period piece change your process in any way?**

I like to do a lot of research. For *Happy Fall*, I read the play several times, I watched movies that were referenced, I researched the cast to see what kind of work they had done in the past. I researched the history of stunts.



**The *Dhoom* and *Matrix* series of films took cinematic stunts to new heights and influenced the work of the *Happy Fall* artists.**

studio posters from IMDB

I was born in the 60's, so the 80's are still imprinted clearly in me. I remember the political climate towards Queer people, I lived through the AIDS plague, I remember being told to stay closeted by my agents as a young actor, I remember the danger and fear towards gay people because of AIDS. I remember the movies, music, clothing, attitudes, art, music videos. It's all very much a part of who I am. The time period of *Happy Fall* did inform the process. I had to help conjure that sense of "hiding" in plain sight for the actors playing Felix and Clay.

As a retired martial arts tournament fighter, I was very familiar with being a Queer person in overtly masculine/macho spaces: gyms, dojos, dressing rooms, fighting rings.

**How has it been working with the actors—specifically Glenn and Aubrey?**

Fantastic! It's been an absolute pleasure working with both of these actors. They are wonderfully collaborative, professional and intrepid.

**Where does advocacy and activism sit in your work today?**

I only offer intimacy coordination for plays by playwrights of color or Queer playwrights. When I started working in intimacy direction, there were very few people doing it. But now there are so

many people doing Intimacy work that I can take a step back and choose plays that really speak to me. I can be selective and work on plays that uplift Queer stories and stories for people of color. This is how advocacy lives in my work. And if you're advocating for a certain people who have historically been marginalized, that makes it activism. My very presence as a Queer Chicano theater maker who has worked on 16 Broadway shows, has a team entirely comprised of people who are Queer and/or of color, and has cumulatively worked on over 400 plays is political and is a form of activism.

**What do you hope audiences take away from the intimacy in *Happy Fall*?**

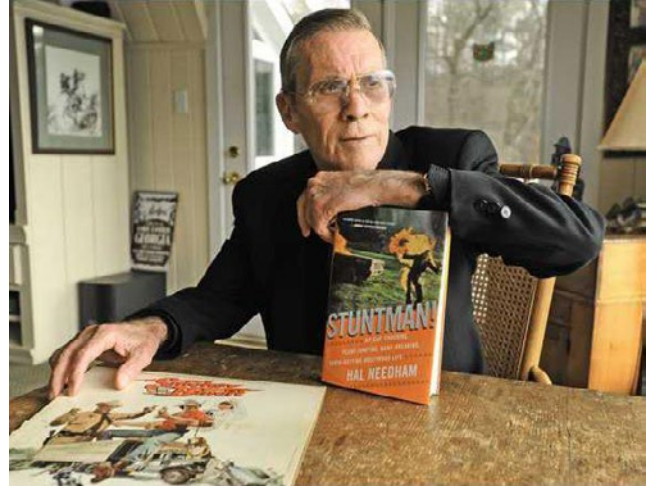
First and foremost I hope the Queer audience members who see *Happy Fall* feel seen. Audiences in general are accustomed to seeing heterosexual intimacy every day on stage, film and tv. Only recently have Queer depictions of intimacy been seen in mainstream media. So mostly I hope the Queer folk see themselves represented authentically on stage in *Happy Fall*, but I also hope the audience members who are not Queer start to recognize the humanity of the characters and how intimacy is necessary to become a fully developed human. That suppression, oppression or criminalization of Queer people's intimacy is harmful, dangerous and dehumanizing.



## A NOTE ON EMBODIMENT AND MOVIE MAKING

Lisa Sanaye Dring's *Happy Fall: A Queer Stunt Spectacular* is in many ways about embodiment. Literally, given the subject matter: an ambitious young man sneaks his way onto a film set in the 1980s with dreams of becoming a professional high faller. Our cast is full of beautiful stunt performances from just about every person on stage. Our set decorator and lighting designer have also made manifest the filmmaking style of the 80s: a moment in Hollywood that aligned peak capitalistic gain and cultural significance. Felix, our young not-so-hired-gun, wants to be a part of this legacy, even if it might cost him his body. And in that way, *Happy Fall* also covers disembodiment. Our other main character Clay—a veteran stuntman in the mold of Hal Needham and other iconic action movie legends—spends his time trying to reckon with his own desires and his commitments to the world around him. In this way, *Happy Fall* is also about filmmaking, where the distance between actor and character are on display for a cast and crew and the makers of the magic of cinema.

To bring that to life, our director, Ralph Peña, has gone to great lengths to demonstrate the bombast that seeks to be created and contained inside of a filmmaking process. And that dynamic between what is created and what is contained is also the central tension at the relationship between Clay and Felix. When his feelings for Felix grow too strong, a puppet might show up to take Clay's place, demonstrating the lengths he is willing to go to



**Legendary Stuntman Hal Needham wrote a book called *Stuntman* which influenced the creation of the show.**

photo credit: Gainesville Sun

separate himself when things are too much. Clay has a version of himself that is carefully calibrated by the years of interactions and negotiations he has been making about his life and career. This puppet comes to represent a part of all of us that might hold something back from others. Felix, conversely, steps into this new world unsure of who he wants to be and iterates on that with every new experience, his identity has not yet found its center of gravity.

*Happy Fall: A Queer Stunt Spectacular* is bracing in its attempts to expound and hold all that we dream ourselves to be, and what we're willing to offer in getting those things.

# KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING A HISTORY OF STUNTS IN 5 MOVIES

## THE CAMERAMAN

**(1928) director Edward Sedgewick, Buster Keaton**  
(<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0018742/>)

This is the last of that stupefying run Buster Keaton went on, where he plays a klutz who finds himself working as a cameraman to hopefully get closer to his crush. Full of fantastic stunts, especially one on a bus. Keaton is widely considered to be the greatest and grandfather of stunt performance.



**Buster Keaton in *The Cameraman***

photo credit MGM Archives

## DHOOM

**(2004) director Sanjay Gadhvi**  
([https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0422091/?ref\\_=fn\\_all\\_ttl\\_1](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0422091/?ref_=fn_all_ttl_1))

Setting aside the feats of the *Mission Impossible* franchise, the most exciting action and stunt making is happening in Bollywood, where set pieces there are regularly setting the standard American films are chasing. Varied stunts are on display in this heist thriller, from motorcycle chases, to pyrotechnics, and the film still leaves room for a dance break!

## HOOPER

**(1978) director Hal Needham**  
([https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0624102/?ref\\_=fn\\_all\\_nme\\_1](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0624102/?ref_=fn_all_nme_1))

Hal Needham, originally a stunt performer for Burt Reynolds, goes behind the camera in this story about a stuntman and the push-pull adaptations he's reluctant to make in a changing industry. Astutely drawn and full of great stunt set pieces throughout.

## THE MATRIX

**(1999) director Lana and Lily Wachowski**  
([https://www.imdb.com/name/nm4210667/?ref\\_=fn\\_all\\_nme\\_1](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm4210667/?ref_=fn_all_nme_1))

A mind-bending action thriller with some of the most inventive stunts of all time. As a fun fact, Keanu Reeve's stunt double in this movie, Chad Stahelski, is the director and keeper of the *John Wick* action movies!

## SEVEN SAMURAI

**(1954) director Akira Kurosawa**  
([https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0047478/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_srsq\\_0\\_tt\\_8\\_nm\\_0\\_in\\_0\\_q\\_seven%2520sam](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0047478/?ref_=nv_sr_srsq_0_tt_8_nm_0_in_0_q_seven%2520sam))

Akira Kurosawa, famous Japanese director whose work in ambition would today still be considered epic, updates the framework of the American western genre for a story of how one village protects itself from the rest of the world. Visceral action sword fighting scenes help to expand the dynamic camera movements available at such a large scale.



**Toshiro Mifune stars in Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*.**

photo credit: AllStar