



THE YEAR OF THE

action

WOMAN

Step aside 007! This year has seen a roll call of ass-kicking, world-saving heroines to admire on the big screen. We look at the growing trend for female action stars, and discover just how much work it takes to get an actress in superhero shape

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id you know that the three top-grossing films of 2017 were fronted by women? And that two of them – *Star Wars Episode VIII: The*

***Last Jedi*, and *Wonder Woman – Rise of the Warrior* were action movies?**

Excitingly, 2018 is shaping up to be even more promising with a procession of female-led action films to look forward to – from heist movie *Ocean's 8* and a remake of the thriller *Halloween*, to sci-fi films such as *Ant-Man And The Wasp*, and shoot 'em up flick *The Widow* – offering us a whole new generation of heroines (and even villains) to root for, faster than you can say 'Holy feminism, Batman!'

Of course, that's not including the incredible success of box-office hits, such as *Black Panther* starring Danai Gurira, Lupita Nyong'o and Letitia Wright as protectors of the Wakandan throne; *Deadpool 2* with Zazie Beetz as sidekick Domino, or Thandi Newton and Emilia Clarke in *Solo: A Star Wars Story*, with all these female actors being hailed by various

critics as 'the best part of the film'.

That's before we've even mentioned the female cast members of *Avengers: Infinity War*, including Scarlett Johansson, Karen Gillan, Zoe Saldana, Pom Klementieff, Danai Gurira and Elizabeth Olsen as protectors of a galaxy far, far away.

While action films have been historically male-centered, with female characters traditionally kept in the background as the vulnerable love interest to be saved – with the exception of Linda Hamilton as Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2* and Angelina Jolie in *Tomb Raider* – it seems we're stepping into a new era in film. Now, women get to showcase their own skills and talents while fighting side-by-side with men – or kicking ass on their own – and female-led action flicks are no longer predicted to bomb at the cinema.

But why has the tide turned so suddenly? You only have to look at the 13-year gap between the 2017 release of DC Comics' *Wonder Woman*, following the major box-office flop of *Catwoman* starring Halle Berry in 2004, to see how the makers have finally realised they got the tone all wrong and had the courage to try again.

+CHANGE IS GONNA COME

When actress Danai Gurira, who plays the leader of the all-female Dora Milaje army in *Black Panther*, was asked in a panel interview to explain the recent demand from audiences 'for more, and different, kinds of female heroes', she answered that



until *Wonder Woman*, audiences never had the chance to sate their thirst for female-driven action films, because the ‘gatekeepers’ of the film industry weren’t even making the films in order to give audiences a choice. ‘I’m always wondering, what is this representation where women always need to be saved by men? That’s gatekeepers deciding that is what we need to see. And it’s time to change that. Please,’ she said.

ZOE SALDANA:
‘AS A WOMAN, I FEEL IT’S IMPORTANT TO PLAY ACTIVE AND INVOLVED WOMEN’

Someone who very much agrees with Gurira is the critic, journalist, film director and fitness fanatic Bidisha SK Mamata, who, having completed five marathons and 10 half-marathons, has often asked: ‘where are representations of modern, motivated women like us on screen? Nowhere’. So does Mamata think the Me Too movement has had an impact on the increase of female action stars and movies, or was change was already afoot? ‘Me Too started in Hollywood, and what we now know about the way Hollywood operates explains

REGIMES OF THE STARS



In preparation for her lead role in *Red Sparrow* as an ex-ballerina-turned-spy, Jennifer Lawrence trained for four months, five days a week with ballet expert Kurt Froman, who also worked with Natalie Portman on *Black Swan*. Each session consisted of a warm-up, 45-minute ballet barre session, and then three hours of rigorous practice, followed by a 90-minute workout with Pilates expert Kit Rich.



To get ready for her role as *Black Panther*’s Nakia – a street-fighting, *Wakanda* expert in espionage – Lupita Nyong’o endured an intense six-week bootcamp with her co-stars before filming to prepare her for the various physical challenges and stunts in the film. Strength, stamina and flexibility training lasted for four hours a day, in addition to extra time spent to hone her character’s individual skills of jujitsu, capoeira, and using gring blades.



Brie Larson has so far put in nine months of training to get in shape for her lead role as Carol Danvers in *Captain Marvel*. Larson’s Instagram feed has recently been packed with demos of her smashing pull-ups, press-ups with heavy chains around her waist, hanging knee raises and weighted walking lunges in the gym to build her functional strength. She’s also been introduced to plyometrics and is doing box jumps higher than the height of her hips.

why its treatment of women actors, directors, characters, stories and representation is so insulting and so atrocious,’ she says. ‘Audiences have long wanted to see dimensional, strong, vivid, active women characters up on screen, who enjoy the same adventures, rights of passage, athletic feats and action narratives that men do. We are finally seeing women characters who are powerful, who occupy space without apology, who drive their own narratives, who are tough and emotionally independent. I only hope that the capable, clever, strong women we are seeing represented on screen are matched by equal numbers of women directors and writers behind the camera, so we can win our fight to be everything we want to be.’

The positive impact powerful and independent female movie characters have on women cannot be overstated, which is why actress Zoe Saldana, who has played Gamora in various *Marvel* films, plus Neytiri in *Avatar* and Uhura in the *Star Trek* franchise, loves working within the sci-fi genre: ‘I love the fact that in science-fiction movies the women get to be much stronger and tougher, instead of being dependent on men. As a woman, I feel it is important to play active and involved women. These kinds



Scarlett Johansson heads the team as Black Widow in *Avengers: Infinity War*



Danai Gurira as the spear-wielding Okoye in *Black Panther*



three times a day and eat five or six small meals a day for three months, not including their stunt training, they'll get on with it,' he explains. 'This might be because they feel they have more to prove, but also because women in the media gaze are under constant scrutiny to stay in shape, or bounce back after having a baby. Some of the costumes are so skin-tight, showing off every curve (or lump and bump), and often, actresses have to get in shape to fit the costume, as the studio has a clear idea of how they want them to look, rather than the costume being made to fit them.'

So, looks aside, what does it take to get action-ready? 'Stamina is essential

to get through the long days of filming, as well as physical and mental focus, because contrary to popular belief, there can be a lot of standing around on set, but you need to be ready to perform at a moment's notice,' says Wingate-Denys. 'You also need strength, speed, power, agility and flexibility. A dance background is also helpful when it comes to picking up fight choreography. Ideally, I like to have around 12 weeks to get someone in the desired shape, but sometimes studios only give you six weeks, which can be



of characters help educate younger generations of women to be leaders and aspire to great things. I wasn't interested in playing submissive women. I wanted to play characters that not only I could be proud of, but which would offer good role models for young women. If we only play female characters whose point in the story is just to fall in love with a man, that's very limiting to women. We need to provide better images and better stories.'

THE FUTURE IS FEMALE

Of course, with great power, comes great responsibility. Which is why so many actresses are now ramping up their pre-filming training regimes to stratospheric levels in order to live up to audience expectations of how female action characters should look, and convincingly pull off their fight choreography and stunts.

A-list personal trainer Liston Wingate-Denys (listonwingatedenys.com), who trained Thandie Newton for her role as crack-shot smuggler Val, in *Solo: A Star Wars Story*, is all too familiar with the pressure action actresses are under from film studios and movie fans.

'It involves a huge amount of work to get in action-woman shape, and generally speaking, actresses graft harder than the guys. If I tell them they need to train

ZOE SALDANA:

'ACTIVE WOMEN CAN BE STRONG AND FEEL COMFORTABLE IN WHO THEY ARE'

really intense. In some instances, actors can be doing more physical work than learning their lines.'

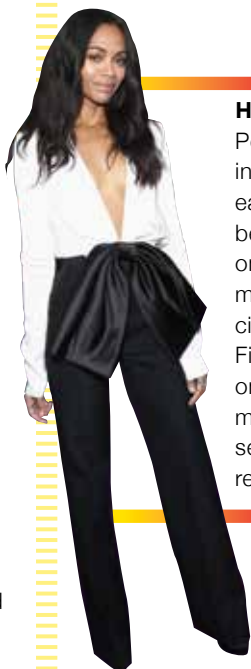
Someone who knows all about the process of getting action-film ready is model, dancer and actress Sarah Smith, who endured a gruelling six-month fitness and fight-training bootcamp to get in peak physical condition to play one of the Amazon warriors in *Wonder Woman*, and is going through the audition process for the second movie due out next year. 'I was pushed to new extremes during training, mentally and physically,' says Smith. 'We were trained in an almost scientific way and the coaches pushed us as hard as they could without breaking us, challenging us to complete tasks that seemed physically impossible. But it's amazing what the body can achieve in the end.'

So with action women lighting up the cinema screens right now, how does Smith feel to be part of the process that's changing attitudes to what women and female characters can achieve?

'It's amazing to be a part of this movement at an exciting time where everything is transitioning,' she says. 'Historically in film, women were always allowed to be slim, but now, active women can be strong, empowered, and feel comfortable in who they are.'

'You only have to look at the poster for upcoming film *Ant-Man and the Wasp* – which not only places Evangeline Lilly's character Wasp in front of Ant-Man, but also shows her with a messy, sweaty, after-gym ponytail suited to someone who's been kicking ass all day, rather than the typical perfectly coiffed hair-dos we're used to on female superheroes – to see positive change occurring.'

And with Brie Larson starring as Carol Danvers in Marvel's first female-led superhero movie *Captain Marvel*, due for release next year alongside *Wonder Woman 2* – plus constant rumours circulating for an all-female Avengers movie refusing to die down – it seems the wait for more and better representations of women in film is finally almost over. ■



GET GAMORA'S BODY

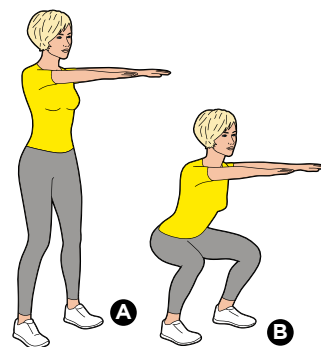
Try this full-body workout from Zoe Saldana's PT Steve Moyer (themoyermethod.com) – used to get her in shape for *Guardians of the Galaxy* and *Avengers: Infinity War* – for a strong, lean figure that's fighting fit.

HOW IT WORKS:

Perform each move in order for 24 reps each, without resting in between exercises. After one circuit, rest for one minute, then repeat the circuit four more times. Finish with two minutes on an exercise bike at a moderate pace, then 15 seconds at full speed; repeat four more times.

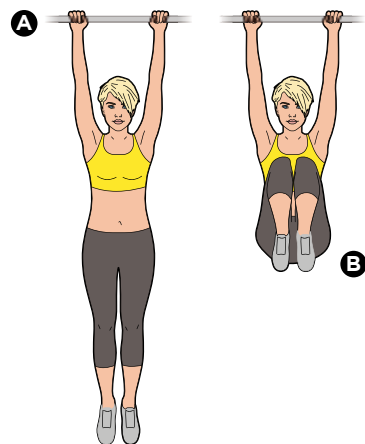
SQUAT

Stand with feet shoulder-width apart and toes slightly out (A). Bend your knees until your thighs are parallel to the floor (B). Extend your arms in front of you for balance, and pull in your abs. Stand up.



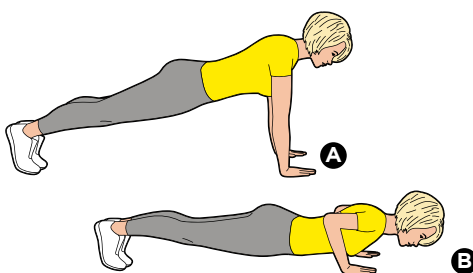
HANGING KNEE RAISE

Grasp a pull-up bar, with your body hanging straight down (A). Gently brace your arms, while holding your body steady and tucking in your pelvis. Raise your knees as high as possible (B), then lower to the starting position.



PUSH-UP

Get in a push-up position with hands slightly wider than shoulders (A) and knees on the floor if you need to. Engage your core, then bend your elbows to 90° (B). Push back up to the starting position.



JUMPING LUNGE

From a lunge position with your core engaged (A), push off both feet into a jump, switching the position of your feet in mid-air (B), and landing with control in a lunge position (C). Continue, alternating your legs with each rep.

