

Q & A with Kristina Baskett, the Valley's Own "Game of Thrones" Stunt Double

Written by Kyley Warren

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Maisie Williams (left) and Kristina Baskett (right) on the set of Game of Thrones.

As the dust settles following the jaw-dropping series finale of "Game of Thrones" last night, critics and fans alike are reminiscing on what truly made the show of the decade – and arguably one of the greatest of all time – so special. For eight years, audiences were dazzled by beloved scores and stunning cinematography that seamlessly swept them up in the world of Westeros and the antics of the complicated characters who inhabited it. While the series will be remembered as a pop culture phenomenon, the greatest feat for the show arguably occurred behind the scenes, with an array of talented stunt workers, art designers, producers and bold creatives who worked tirelessly to bring the fantasy world to life and to our TV screens each Sunday.

One of those magicians behind the scenes was Kristina Baskett. A Seattle-area native and a former All-American gymnast, Baskett worked as the stunt double for Maisie Williams, who played Arya Stark, from season six through season eight of "Game of Thrones." Though she is from the Pacific Northwest, Baskett has now found her home in the Valley, often serving as a volunteer coach for the ASU Women's Gymnastics team – when she's not traveling the world or balancing a number of impressive TV and film projects, of course.

We had the chance to chat with Baskett – who we're convinced is a Jill of all trades – about her experience working on the hit HBO series, her thoughts on the USA Gymnastics scandal and how her next professional avenue might just be photography.



Kristina Baskett working as the stunt double for the character of Arya Stark on the set of Game of Thrones, season six.

Before you became involved in stunt work, you made a name for yourself in the gymnastics world, even competing as an All-American gymnast. Was that sport something you always had an interest in? And was that a passion that you wish you could have pursued a bit more?

I was pretty much your stereotypical gymnast as a young child. It took over my life from an early age. I definitely was trying to go the Olympic route, and I was an elite gymnast. I trained at crazy hours, even from a young age. I went to USA Championships and competed, but I never really made it to the Olympic team. But I was very pleased with getting a scholarship to compete at the University of Utah, and I was very happy with my collegiate career as a gymnast.

And now I understand that you're coaching over at Arizona State University, as well. How did that opportunity come about?

Yes, I am the volunteer assistant there. I try to be there as much as I can, but unfortunately my projects do take me away quite a bit. But when I am in Arizona, I am there as much as I can be. I lived in LA for about eight years and now with my stunt career, I travel mostly. So the allure of living in LA was kind of lost on me. My husband and I moved to Arizona about two years ago, just as our choice of where we wanted to live more full-time. Once we moved though, I made a point of reaching out to the team because I had such a great experience in college gymnastics that I really just wanted to be a part of it and stay involved with it in some capacity because it was such a huge part of my life.

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Of course, you love any of the work that you do within the world of gymnastics, but with traveling and crazy schedules, stunt work understandably takes up a huge chunk of your time. With that, do you now consider stunt work to be your 'main hustle' per say?

It has been my life for the last nine years. Once I graduated from University of Utah, I lived in Vegas and did Cirque for a few years. And then I was introduced to stunts, and the last nine years has been full-time stunts for me.

You've made such an incredible career out of that, most recently, working as a stunt double for Maisie Williams (a.k.a. Arya Stark) on "Game of Thrones." Tell me a little bit about your experience working on that show and how that opportunity came about.

Yeah absolutely - a lot of people aren't too familiar with the stunt world. It is a huge show and of course, a huge opportunity because the show is so wildly popular. With stunts, we're known for working on a lot of different projects at once. Usually, we are constantly on a project or multiple projects at once. So, it was really exciting to get an opportunity to work on something like "Game of Thrones," mostly because it's overseas. It's not very common for them to want to bring someone over there. But for this particular character, they really needed somebody with not only the right size to match Maisie, but also someone with the skillset they were looking for.

I started working on that in season 6 of "Game of Thrones," all the way through season 8. It was an incredible experience. Just the fact that it was filmed in Northern Ireland, and I got to do so much traveling. The locations we went to were surreal - I mean the production on the show is just so huge, that it's really incredible. And the best part was truly the people. The stunt team was amazing, the actors were amazing. I had the best time working with the crew, visiting the locations, and the whole production in itself was massive and remarkable. It's no wonder it's so popular because of all the work that's put into it.

Action or fight sequences on screen typically require the help of experienced stunt doubles to do the work behind the scenes. With a show like "Game of Thrones" - and particularly, a character like Arya - that is so reliant on those types of sequences, how much of those memorable series moments were actually courtesy of you? Or of the stunt team?

One of our biggest roles in the stunt department is creating the action design. As a team, before anyone else is really involved, we're working with directors and reading the script and creating the action design - we're testing out the wire gags and creating the choreography. So, as a team, we develop all of that. Once it's set, as in that's what is going to be filmed, we do all of the rehearsing and start bringing the actors in to see how comfortable they are and what they want to do or don't want to do. Every actor is different, and every show is different.

Maisie is really awesome to work with because she is naturally athletic and coordinated. So, it's really easy to teach her how to do a lot of choreography. Obviously, when it's anything that could injure her or if it's beyond her skillset, that's where I come in. We really like them to do as much as they can, and we get a lot of rehearsal time with them so that they feel comfortable with any stunts or choreographed sequences they're doing by the time that they're on set. It's all really dependent on each sequence and who you're working with.



Kristina Baskett sitting on the Iron Throne.

Because you have so much experience working on a number of different projects, have there been any films or television series that you were a fan of before you signed on to working on them?

The biggest one has definitely been "Game of Thrones." I've been a fan for a while, and I read all of the books before it was even a show. But I think you get most excited for things that you have a personal connection with. Like I loved "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" as a kid, so it was exciting for me to work on that movie. A lot of times, it's really just little or personal things that get you excited. We do work pretty consistently, so it's not as big of a deal when you're working on bigger productions.

I personally love working on Disney Channel shows. It seems so silly or so small compared to some of the bigger ones, but I have some of the

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most fun working with kids and comedy stunts often wind up being some of the most fun.

HBO recently did a documentary called, "At the Heart of Gold: Inside the USA Gymnastics Scandal." For you, being someone who was so involved in the gymnastics world, have you had the chance to watch the program? And what are your thoughts regarding the USA Gymnastics scandal and Larry Nassar?

I have not gotten the chance to watch the documentary yet, but I have followed the story very closely. I spent a lot of time at the ranch when I was younger, and I was treated by Larry Nassar. My main stance on it is I personally never had any bad experiences, and quite honestly, I had a very positive experience in the sport of gymnastics. I am very supportive of victims, and I think any changes that are done to help make the more sport safer, I am completely in support of. But me personally, I had a very positive experience in the sport.

Going back to your career, are there any upcoming projects that you're particularly excited to be working on?

To be honest, "Game of Thrones" took a very large chunk recently. I was over there for eight months last year, and then I took some time to stay home and just be a normal person with my husband. During that time, I kind of dabbled in some TV projects. My career now has kind of been taking on big projects and then have a little bit of downtime until the next one. Right now, I'm just focusing on one that I'm currently working on in Atlanta, which will take up most of the year.

You're obviously a very talented gymnast and stunt worker. But when you do get the chance to be home and relax with your husband, what are some things you enjoy in your free time?

I'm very much into photography. It's an avenue I'd love to pursue further at some point. I'm kind of known in the stunt business as the photographer. I get a lot of requests for headshots and other projects. So, any time that I do have, I love to put that into photography. And of course, just spend time with my family and my dogs. [LAUGHS]