**Hollywood’s long history of animal cruelty**

**“Luck’s” horse injury-related cancellation shows how far the film industry has come in treating non-human stars**

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When HBO's "Luck" was [canceled](http://www.salon.com/2012/03/15/luck_ending/) after a third horse died during production, it was natural to ask what was going on. Were animals being abused? Were people being careless?

The truth was nothing was that simple or savage. Apparently the horses were [being treated well](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/25/us/death-and-disarray-at-americas-racetracks.html), with greater care than actual working racehorses. The third horse was reportedly in good health and high spirits the day it died. It was in such spirits that it reared up as horses sometimes do. This time it fell over backward, and landed on its head. Just an accident. All you can blame is the fragile frame of the thoroughbred horse, which was created for racing.

But that didn't keep the show from being canceled – or critics from speaking out. Even before the third horse death, PETA [charged](http://www.peta.org/b/thepetafiles/archive/2012/01/27/Nothing-But-Bad-Luck-for-Horses-in-_2700_Luck_2700_.aspx) that “two dead horses in a handful of episodes exemplify the dark side of using animals in television, movies, and ads.” Like all filming in the U.S., "Luck" was shot under supervision of the American Humane Association's Film & TV Unit, the people who certify that “No animal was harmed in the making” of a film or TV show. (That's a statement about animal welfare, not animal rights. If you don't think animals should be filmed for entertainment at all, you're not going to like AHA. Founded in 1877, it also promotes the welfare of children.)

Moreover, this latest incident shows just how much the treatment of animals has changed in Hollywood since the motion picture industry began.

 The early days were rough. Take Thomas Edison's elephant electrocution as a starting point. Topsy, like the producers of "Luck," was charged with causing three deaths. The third was a cruel trainer who tried to feed her a lighted cigarette. Naturally, she killed him. Edison electrocuted Topsy with alternating current to show how dangerous it was, part of his feud with Nicola Tesla, and released ["Electrocuting an Elephant"](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkBU3aYsf0Q) (1903). This seems unfair and crass to most people today, but the idea was to find the most merciful way to kill Topsy.

Beginning in the 1920s the motion-picture industry boomed, developing new genres as it went. In those days you could do almost anything to an animal (or an actor, for that matter). As many as 100 horses died in the making of the 1926 version of "Ben Hur." Early Hollywood was an anarchic world, with upstart production companies launching grandiose projects on every side. Filmmakers did whatever struck them as a great idea.

With the advent of sound in 1927 profits took off. The studio system arose, concentrating filmmaking in a handful of dictatorially efficient corporations employing thousands and turning out movies at a tremendous rate. Animal actors were part of the process. Dramas, comedies, adventure stories, musicals, biographies – all would use animals, but the genre that used the most was the western.

The popularity of westerns was particularly hard on horses. Westerns were a staple in '20s and '30s Hollywood, and then boomed in the 1940s. In the early days, people were more familiar with horses, more attuned to the dangers of a runaway team, or the dangers of a horse and rider falling. Directors showed lots of falls. They used pitfalls, or tripwires to make horses fall, and there were also some stunt horses, who would fall at a signal. Trained horses jumped through windows or through flames. They leapt over wagons. They rampaged through saloons. All this was at the regular cost of injury or death.

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Sometimes individual horses became known, and they were protected because of their fame, and because the actors loved them. Western star William S. Hart had a famous pinto, Fritz. Beautifully trained, Fritz would fall on command, lie down to act as a shield in a gunfight, even play scenes with a monkey. ["Singer Jim McKee"](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0014473/) (1924) had a scene in which Hart rode Fritz off a cliff into a gorge, but the actor didn't want to risk Fritz, or a stunt horse, so a fake Fritz was constructed. Hart was filmed galloping to the edge on Fritz, at which point, on cue, the horse did a fall to one side. Then he was led away and replaced by the fake Fritz, held up with wire. When the wires were cut, the two toppled into the gorge. Hart was “badly shaken” by the fall, wrote Petrine Day Mitchum in "Hollywood Hoofbeats," but once edited, the footage of falling man and “horse” was chillingly spectacular – so much so that the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Organization, aka the Hays Office, called Hart in to explain why he had been so cruel to Fritz.

Fritz was one of the exceptions to the rule. Most Hollywood horses were less famous, less recognizable, and often disposable. In 1939 two horses were killed in the filming of "Northwest Mounted Police" and two more in "Jesse James." The horses in "Jesse James" were wearing movie blinkers with eyes painted on them. Unable to see, the horses had no idea they were running off a 75-foot cliff over white water until it was too late. The footage was impressive, the stuntman was well-paid, and the horses were dead.