

THE EIGHT-LEGGED ACTOR

— THE CHARACTER WE ALL LOVE TO HATE

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Mexican Redknee Tarantula (*Brachypelma smithi*), the most common tarantula used in films. (Photo: Jan Andries Neethling)

Typecasting is defined as “assigning (an actor or actress) repeatedly to the same type of role, as a result of the appropriateness of their appearance or previous success in such roles.” Some actors, for example, always play the hero in a film, while others are always cast as antagonists. The latter has, unfortunately, been true of our arachnid actors since their earliest days in the film industry. They have been cast, almost exclusively and to great effect, as creatures to be feared, regardless of the facts. For example, if you need a cave scene to be extra creepy, simply add a whipspider crawling in the shadows, or a spider crawling over a skull to create a feeling of instant uneasiness. It is this almost universal feeling of uneasiness towards arachnids that we humans share that has led to their success in the film industry and their demise as soon as they are discovered in your house.



Emperor Scorpion (*Pandinus imperator*) showcasing its large robust claws and slender tail. (Photo: Piyathep)

Scorpions are most often portrayed as large black creatures with deadly stings that congregate in large groups in abandoned ruins or caves, often in wasteland settings. The scorpion commonly used in these scenes is the Emperor Scorpion (*Pandinus imperator*), a true giant that reaches 20 cm in length. In fact, this scorpion is one of the most docile species, with a sting no more venomous than that of a bee. But this usually does not matter to the average person. To them the important thing is that scorpions look scary and some of them are capable of killing you. However, of the more than 1 500 species worldwide, only a handful are capable of delivering venom that can kill a human.

So how does one determine whether a scorpion is as dangerous as it is portrayed? During one scene in the 2008 film *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, the lead character, Indiana Jones, gave this advice to Mutt Williams, Indiana Jones' son, when the actor was stung by a large scorpion: “When it comes to scorpions, the bigger the better. Small one bites you, don't keep it to yourself.” This advice is partly accurate. Larger scorpions usually prefer to crush their prey in their large claws (pedipalps) and only use their venom to subdue prey, while smaller species rely on their venom to kill prey quickly. A better rule of thumb to follow is to look at the size ratio between pedipalps and tail. When a scorpion has large robust pedipalps and a thin tail, its venom is usually mild. If, on the other hand, the scorpion possesses narrow pedipalps and a thick robust tail, you are better off not getting stung by it.

Spiders are, of course, the most widely used arachnid in films and those of one group in particular have become infamous

due to their imposing size, large fangs and hairy bodies. These are the tarantulas. Tarantulas, or baboon spiders as they are called locally, are a group of ancient, robustly built creatures with hairy bodies and parallel, backward-facing fangs. Most are opportunistic burrowers, although some species are tree-dwelling.

Just like their human counterparts these actors can be quite temperamental and it often requires a lot of patience from both the spider handlers and the director to get the perfect shot. In the 1981 film *Raiders of the Lost Ark* there is an early exploration scene where Indiana Jones' companion Satipo (played by Alfred Molina), stops to remove a couple of large spiders crawling on the former's back. Indiana then proceeds to check Satipo's back which is crawling with dozens of large tarantulas. The tarantulas used during filming were Mexican Redknee Tarantulas (*Brachypelma smithi*). Director Steven Spielberg wanted them to crawl all over Molina's back, but at first they remained perfectly still. All the spiders on Molina's back were docile males, and it was only after the crew introduced a female that the males became active, giving Spielberg the shot he desired.

In *Arachnophobia* (1990) two pivotal spider species were used. Playing the part of a newly discovered deadly giant tarantula from Cambodia was the Goliath Birdeater (*Theraphosa blondi*), which holds the record of being the world's heaviest spider. With a leg span of up to 28 cm, it dwarfed its co-stars, the *Delena* huntsman spiders, which played the role of the deadly hybrid between the Cambodian Tarantula and Common House Spider. Although it was already fearsome in appearance, the producer wanted to enhance the tarantula's intimidation factor and it was therefore fitted with a prosthetic abdomen to give it more girth, as well as makeup in the form of purple striations on its carapace. To get them to do what the director wanted the crew implemented a myriad of techniques, including knocking the spiders out with carbon dioxide and attaching very fine threads to their abdomens with wax, attaching small metal plates to the underside of the spiders and using electromagnets to move them up walls, chasing them with hairdryers, and using a household polish called Lemon Pledge to line an area in which they wanted to keep them.



The 'deadly' tarantula that 007 actor, Sean Connery, had to face in the 1962 movie *Dr. No*. (Photo: Eon Productions)

Although the hero of a movie is often fearless, the actor playing the role is often not. This was the case when Sean Connery, the actor who played James Bond in the 1962 movie *Dr. No*, was faced with the task of letting a 'deadly' tarantula



Actors face off against a giant arachnid in the 2002 film *Eight Legged Freaks*. (Photo: Warner Bros.)

walk over him. Morbidly afraid of spiders, Connery refused and ultimately a sheet of glass was placed on the actor for the tarantula to walk on. When these shots did not look realistic enough, additional close-ups were shot using a stuntman. Once again, rather than being a 'deadly, eight-legged assassin', the spider was a harmless Pink-toe Tarantula (*Avicularia* sp.) that belongs to a group of tree-living spiders native to the rainforests of tropical South America. These spiders are a favourite among tarantula keepers because of their metallic colouration, small fangs and reluctance to bite.

When giant spiders were needed, producers of early movies simply used macro shots of the creatures. Modern movies have turned to computer generated imagery (CGI) to create their monstrosities. A good example can be found in the 2002 comedy *Eight Legged Freaks*. In this movie the spiders become mega-sized due to unwittingly being fed irradiated crickets.

Of course the above examples were in the interests of entertainment. They were never meant to be realistic representations of arachnids and their behaviour. The problem is that people tend to believe these representations and films have (intentionally or not) perpetuated these urban legends to the point where many people would much rather kill every arachnid they see instead of appreciating their wonder. It then falls on men and women of science to dispel these misrepresentations!

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