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As Tom Cruise is pushed to his physical limit in 'Fallout,' so is the audience

56-year-old actor still doing his own stunts in latest film of 'Mission: Impossible' series

I'm worn out," a disembodied male voice announced from the darkness as the credits rolled following a screening of "Mission: Impossible — Fallout."

This declaration was met with appreciative laughter in the packed summer theater.

What with all the lightning storm skydiving, martial arts pugilism, rooftop vaulting, cliff scaling, car chases, motorcycle crashes, helicopter dogfights and all-around Usain Bolting, who could blame the guy for being exhausted?

"Fallout" is the sixth movie of the "Mission: Impossible" franchise, based on the popular 1960s television series with the most enduring theme music ever.

Tom Cruise once again plays the Impossible Missions Force covert operative Ethan Hunt, who is in pursuit of a Cold War-worthy MacGuffin: three globes of plutonium.

The villains — or at least some of them — are peacenik terrorists

who call themselves the Apostles.

"There's never been peace without a great suffering," the anarchists reason, "the greater the suffering, the bigger the peace."

Their maniacal plan includes blowing up the Vatican, Mecca and Jerusalem. To get the job done they will need plutonium.

Ethan's mission — should he decide to accept it — is delivered via a self-immolating reel-to-reel projector cached in a hollowed-out volume of Homer's "Odyssey."

The strain of the physical exertion is evident in his mien during and after the countless sprints and leaps and crashes.

Joined by his loyal seconds, master of disguise Benji (Simon Pegg) and master technician Luther (Ving Rhames), Hunt must prevent the Apostles from getting to the plutonium, by any means necessary.



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Switcharoos and fiery explosions abound.

IMF head Alan Hunley (Alec Baldwin) "gets" Hunt's need for autonomy. But the icy CIA chief, Erica Sloan (Angela Bassett in a Judi Dench "M" turn), is having none of it.

She's been burned by Hunt's freewheeling ways before, so she saddles him with a CIA watchdog, August Walker (Henry Cavill,

Superman in the DC Universe) to keep him in line.

Walker's goon status is signaled by his Snidley Whiplash mustache. And his shoot-first-interrogate-later MO throws a wild card — or lots of them — into the movie's mix.

Writer-director Christopher McQuarrie and cinematographer Larry Fong effectively use light and dark to dramatic effect. The chiaroscuro darkness of underground caverns, the sterile white starkness of a Parisian men's room, the gloomy slate gray of a dizzying escarpment are all coded to correspond with the level of danger and who has the upper hand at any given moment.

What is unusual about this superhero movie — which, unlike the TV series, celebrates the Herculean escapades of one individual, not the flawless efficiency of a collaborative team — is that it acknowledges the toll suffered by the killer in the taking of human life.

"It's the job," Sloan is there to remind us.

At once vulnerable and invincible, Cruise charms us with Hunt's earnestness and shames us with his tireless can-do work ethic and willingness to sacrifice happiness for duty.

Now 56, Cruise still famously insists on performing his own stunts. The strain of the physical exertion is evident in his mien during and after the countless sprints and leaps and crashes.

If the missions aren't exactly impossible for him, they sure aren't easy either. And when Cruise is pushed to his physical limit, the audience is as well.

It's the vulnerability that puts us inside his skin. We are breathless, too, because as he careens through this thrill-ride of a movie, we realize that we have forgotten to breathe.

Man, I gotta get into shape.