

On high alert

By Barbara Harding
Thursday March 20 2008

Movie portrayals of bodyguards often belie the reality — and the fact that risk assessment and planning usually take precedence over a gung-ho approach. Electronic and counter [Surveillance](#), explosives searching and bomb disposal, firearms training and bullet-proof vests, diplomacy, intelligence and personal security — it's all part of the training Dublin-born Lisa Baldwin received when she forged an international career as a bodyguard seven years ago.

Baldwin, who is in her mid-20s, is head of the women's division at the International Bodyguard Association (IBA) — the biggest such organisation in the world. She started

her career as a professional swimmer in Holland and Spain, before getting into the area of personal training in Dublin. Through contacts in the industry, she was offered employment in event security for concerts and celebrity-packed parties, and it was here she learned about the work of the IBA.

She explains: "The association has a base in Ireland, but the bigger courses are done in the UK, so I had to travel there and undertake 100 hours of training in order to get my IBA badge. This included a basic master class for five days, then a course in protective driving, explosives searching and electronic surveillance with a former member of MI5. Once I completed that, I undertook firearms training in Slovenia."

To the average employee, this form of training is likely to sound incredible, given it is rarely witnessed outside of Hollywood blockbusters. Ironically, Baldwin says one of her fellow instructors (who has since passed away) was the inspiration behind the character Q from the James Bond movies.

The market for bodyguards, or 'close protection surveillance' as they're otherwise known, is limited here, as our celebrities tend to be left alone when out in public. So the majority of Baldwin's work takes her abroad. However, she believes some Irish elite are short sighted when it comes to personal security. "In Ireland, many top business people or celebrities have the old-fashioned attitude of 'I'll be grand', but a lot have poor security and are prime targets, particularly for kidnapping. The Arabs are the complete opposite when it comes to personal security. Sometimes the [Vip](#) will only have a secure driver, but he will spare no expense when it comes to protecting his family. Over there, they see the potential threat their wealth can bring."

Baldwin is regularly employed by rich Arabs living in or visiting the UK, who, because of their beliefs, tend to prefer hiring female bodyguards. "They don't like



having men near their women,” she says. “Also, females tend to blend in more with the family set-up and are not as easy to spot. People assume we are personal assistants or nannies. In the UK, we call the period from May to September ‘Arab season’, as that’s when our services are required the most, in terms of protecting princesses and their children.”

Baldwin continues: “There is obviously a big Hollywood stereotype of bodyguards with ear pieces or that secret-service vibe, but we prefer a more covert way of communicating with each other without drawing attention to ourselves.”

Her line of work is not without danger, but Baldwin says preparation is key. “You look at each client and assess where the potential threat could come from — is it the paparazzi, a kidnapper, an assassin? The risk assessment helps me prepare for each role; that way, there shouldn’t be any surprises.

“We plan what routes to take when going out, so we can throw people off the scent and not let our patterns become predictable. Sometimes we will bring in a counter-surveillance team if we feel we are being watched.”

Baldwin says the role of a bodyguard does not include taking a bullet for a client if the situation arises. The emphasis is on her security as well as that of the VIP — again, this is underlined by meticulous daily preparation.

“If I’m not happy with the security, I don’t take the contract. I’ve also threatened to walk off jobs because of a potential lapse in security, for example, a really bad driver.”

The main downside to the bodyguard role is the inflexible hours and being away from family for months. But Baldwin says it is also a lucrative career with plenty of scope for travel.

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