The FightMaster

Spring 2014 The Journal of the Society of American Fight Directors

FIGHT MATTERS
Stand Up for Fight Direction

BUILDING A CAREER AS A FIGHT DIRECTOR

THE MOTION PARALLAX
Choreographing Fights at *The Lost Colony*

SAFE SEX A Look at the Intimacy Choreographer

GIANT NINJA ROBOT BATTLE A Conversation on Collaboration and Mentorship

NEW YORK CITY FIGHT CHOREOGRAPHY What Is Working and What Is Not

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Features

Standards

Editorially Speaking

I'm a firm believer that transitions define us and enable growth. Over the last three years I have spent working on *The Fight Master*, this publication has seen tremendous growth and an insurgence of contributors. When I began, we were lucky to find four or five willing contributors per issue. We now have upwards of 10-13 contributors per issue with additional articles being generated and slated for future publications.

In addition, we now have a solid production schedule, reliable publishing dates and contracts that establish rights and obligations to protect the publication as well as contributors and advertisers. Not only that, the Governing Body has voted to establish subscriptions to the publication for non-SAFD members as part of the rejuvenation of the SAFD website. This step ensures that the publication will maintain the global presence it deserves and that stage combat enthusiasts from around the world will be able to unite through a publication that has been a mainstay of information for the SAFD for decades.

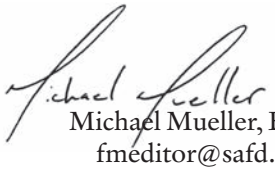
I have been and remain a huge advocate for *The Fight Master* and am overjoyed not only by the strides forward, but also the potential this publication holds. What I don't have, unfortunately, is enough time to devote toward the publication's continued growth. It is therefore, with a sad but hopeful heart, that I have decided to resign my position as Editor-in-Chief and pass along all the wonderful potential of this publication to the next leader.

The Fight Master has endured for years and traversed countless liminal spaces, growing and becoming more professional and sophisticated with each transition. My hope is that this next transition will provide even more growth and expansion. I'm very excited to see where the publication will go over the next few years.

I would be remiss if I didn't take this opportunity to thank those who have assisted me and contributed to the publication over the past three years. Truly, I stand on the shoulders of my predecessors and the countless individuals who have donated time, effort and talent to this publication. Without their contributions, this publication would not exist. I have merely helped chart the course for a relatively short amount of time. This experience and the joy I take from the collaborations and information imparted have left a lasting impression on me that I will cherish forever.

Thank you all for your continued support of this publication and best wishes to my successors.

Best wishes,



Michael Mueller, Editor
fmeditor@safd.org

The Fight Master

Published bi-annually

Contributors

Alberto Bonilla holds a MFA from Rutgers University and is currently the Head of Film and Television at Maggie Flanigan Studio in NYC. He has fight choreographed over 40 productions in theater and film in NYC, is a published playwright and director and Associate Artistic Director of the Queens Players in NYC.

Barbara Charlene is a Certified Teacher with the SAFD, as well as an actor, fight director, and stage manager. She received her MFA in Acting from Western Illinois University, and is a graduate of the International School for Comic Acting in Reggio-Emilia, Italy. She currently lives in Chicago.

Meron Langsner was one of three playwrights in the country selected for the pilot year of the NNPN Emerging Writers Residencies; his work has been performed around the country and overseas. As a fight director, he has composed violence for over 150 productions and films. He received the Award for Outstanding Contributions to Undergraduate Education while pursuing his PhD at Tufts University.

Adam Noble is an actor, professor, director and movement specialist with credits in the worlds of film, theatre and opera. He holds an MFA in Theatre from the University of Washington, is a Certified Teacher with the SAFD, and Treasurer of the Association of Theatre Movement Educators (ATME). Adam is currently a tenured professor of acting & movement at the University of Houston in Texas.

Steven Schwall has been a practicing historic European martial artist since 1974, participating in fully armored tournaments with companies like the Company of St. George. He joined the SAFD in 2006, and has been seen as a regular student and teacher at the Winter Wonderland Workshop, the Eureka Stage Combat Workshop, Carnage in the Corn, and the Lincoln Assassination.

Tonia Sina attended Niagara University for her BFA, and attained an MFA in Movement Pedagogy at VCU. Most recently an Adjunct at the University of Oklahoma, she choreographs Intimacy for the Stage for theatre and dance companies.

John Tourtellotte is a New York based actor/fight director from Birmingham, Alabama. He has worked as an actor at Shakespeare Santa Cruz, the Denver Center Theatre Co., City Lights Theatre Co., amongst others. He is a Level Two Combatant with DAI, and an Actor Combatant with the SAFD. Fight direction credits include: *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*, *Hamlet*, *Dark Play*, *As You Like It* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

Joseph Travers (SAFD Fight Director/Certified Teacher) has been fight directing for over twenty-five years. Recent work includes the Broadway production of *Bronx Bombers* at Circle-in-the-Square Theatre and Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, featured at the 2013 Shanghai International Experimental Theatre Festival.

Angel Veza is a new fight director as well as a performer, painter and educator. She is a graduate of Tufts University and has fight directed and assisted throughout Boston with theaters such as the A.R.T. and Company One. She recently relocated to NYC and is the Middle School Coordinator at Breakthrough New York.

Simon van Lammeren is one of the founders of Xion PG and a professional stunt performer of Dutch origin. Trained in European historical martial arts and the Russian Systema, having a black belt in Japanese Ninjutsu and a background in Rock climbing, Simon started his career as a stuntman in 2003. Simon is the CEO at ActionPact and not only performs stunts but is involved in stunt coordination on a daily basis.

Jenn Zuko Boughn is adjunct faculty at DU, MSU, and Regis University. She teaches courses in writing, literature, visual arts, performing arts, movement, and of course stage combat. She is the author of *Stage Combat: Fisticuffs, Stunts, and Swordplay for Theatre and Film*, out from Allworth Press in 2006.

On The Cover

Pictured: Simon van Lammeren
Photographer: Mariken van Lammeren

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Editorial and graphic content featured in *The Fight Master* is the product of contributions from SAFD members of all levels as well as from the global stage combat community. Participation is greatly encouraged and submissions are accepted on a rolling basis, with deadlines for the Fall and Spring editions occurring on June 1 and December 1 respectively. For submissions by traditional mail, please send a shipping address request by email.

Articles

Submitted material will be edited for clarity and length with the assistance and approval of the author. Articles should include a short biography 150 words or less, as well as contact information. By submitting material to *The Fight Master,* it is assumed the author agrees the following:

- All submissions are subject to editorial discretion
- All work submitted is assumed to be the original work of the author, and *The Fight Master* will not assume any of the author's copyright liabilities and publication rights.
- Submissions must include any and all necessary supporting documentation (bibliographies, etc.)
- Before publication, author must approve all changes beyond grammar and conventions
- Submissions must be written in a clear and professional manner
- No submissions defaming individuals by name will be published
- Authors are assumed to be working toward the betterment of the SAFD and, thus, will not be paid for submissions

Please forward submissions and questions to:
Michael Mueller, Editor
fmeditor@safd.org

Graphics

Both digital and traditional photographs are accepted; however, resolution will play a factor in where, or if an image is used. All photos should be accompanied by the names of the performers w/ roles (if fewer than five are pictured), photographer, play, playwright, fight director, theatre company, and year of performance. Without this information, we can not give proper credit to the contributors and the picture will not be used.

Traditional images/negatives submitted by mail should be sent in an envelope clearly labeled "Photos—Do Not Bend," with larger photos secured between cardboard or foam core. Submissions should also include a return self-addressed, stamped envelope.

Digital images must be submitted in an uncompressed format (RAW, TIFF, PNG or TGA) on a CD or DVD if possible. Images that have been reduced in size to send by email will also be considered as long as a larger version exists that can be requested later. Please do NOT crop or alter photos. Touch-ups and color correction will be performed as needed.

Please forward submissions and questions to:
Jonathan Wieder, Art Director
fmartdirector@safd.org

Fight Matters
Stand Up...*for*

By Joseph Travers, CT/FD

There is an unfortunate degree to which fight direction, being a relatively new profession in the theatre, is treated like the bastard step-child – grudgingly necessary some of the time, but really something to do without whenever possible. Surely, no self-respecting producer would dream of beginning tech rehearsals without a lighting designer. And can you imagine an artistic director asking an actor at an audition: "I see you have carpentry experience. Would you like to design our set?" Yet, it often seems that there is a carte blanche to treat the staging of fights and action as an after-thought; something that anyone with a little stage combat training can handle. Rather like a "my-dad-has-a-barn/my-mother-can-sew" approach to stage violence.

Now, those of us who direct fights for a living find this maddening. We complain about it, but when the call comes in right before opening to "please help us," we answer it. We answer it because we love and respect the theatre and our role in it, because it's work and we don't turn down work, and also because we realize that people who need help need help, not sermons or attitudes.

Certainly, though, the responsibility is ours to stand up for the art form that we love. Those who have trained us worked very hard to develop and expand this craft. Because of their efforts, fight direction has now become more than merely choreographing fights. It is now the art of envisioning and crafting a production's violence as part of an integrated whole, while maintaining the safety of all concerned. Because of them, the fight director, beyond being just a fencer or boxer who coaches actors to "make-it-look-real-but-stay-safe," is now a multi-disciplinary craftsman, adding directing skills, text analysis, kinesthetic awareness and logic, psychology and many more skills to the grasp of various martial subjects he or she had already possessed.

We have been handed a great legacy. Now it's our turn, as its beneficiaries, to stand up for fight directing. Since one of our greatest weapons is our ability to teach, I believe our efforts should focus on educating the following groups:

Our Students

First, let's stop sending mixed messages. Many of us object when inexperienced individuals get hired to direct fights because they have a little stage combat training. Yet the SAFD invites recommendations from "choreography jobs" on applications to the Teacher Certification Workshop. In another example, the organization offers no training in fight direction, has no specific training requirements for someone who wants to take the step from Certified Teacher to Fight Director, yet fight directing experience is expected. The only specific training being stipulated at any point is stage combat training. The implication then is: fight directing doesn't require any additional training.

Instead, we should teach our students that, beyond stage combat skills, being a fight director requires additional, specific training and experience. We should make it clear that as the level of responsibility increases from performer to designer, the level of preparation and experience should also increase. We should clarify and reinforce the sequential steps from actor combatant to fight captain to assistant fight director to fight director. And most importantly, we should *offer students the chance to train*! As an organization, *we should re-establish a National Fight Directing Workshop*, and also establish opportunities for students to apprentice SAFD Certified Fight Directors, and make these both recognized steps toward becoming a fight director.

Other Theater Professionals

If we want the world of theatre to take using a fight director more seriously, it begins with our performance on the job. In the rehearsal hall, the conference room, and the theater, we need to work and listen and communicate the same as every other member of the design team. Without ego or bluster, we need to make sure we get the information, time and attention that our part of the process requires; no more, no less. We also need to give that time, attention and effort as well. No matter how late we are called or how "small" the contract, "a job worth doing is a job worth doing well." We should make sure the actors, directors and producers get everything they hired us for, and more. We should go above and beyond, every time.

We should also actively share with other theatre professionals through every possible medium the broadness into which fight direction has now grown, the importance of bringing in the fight director, like any designer, early and often, and the clarification that stage combat training alone is not a qualification for fight directing,

Fight Directing!

and that an actor combatant "certification" is not *in and of itself* sufficient qualification for staging fights.

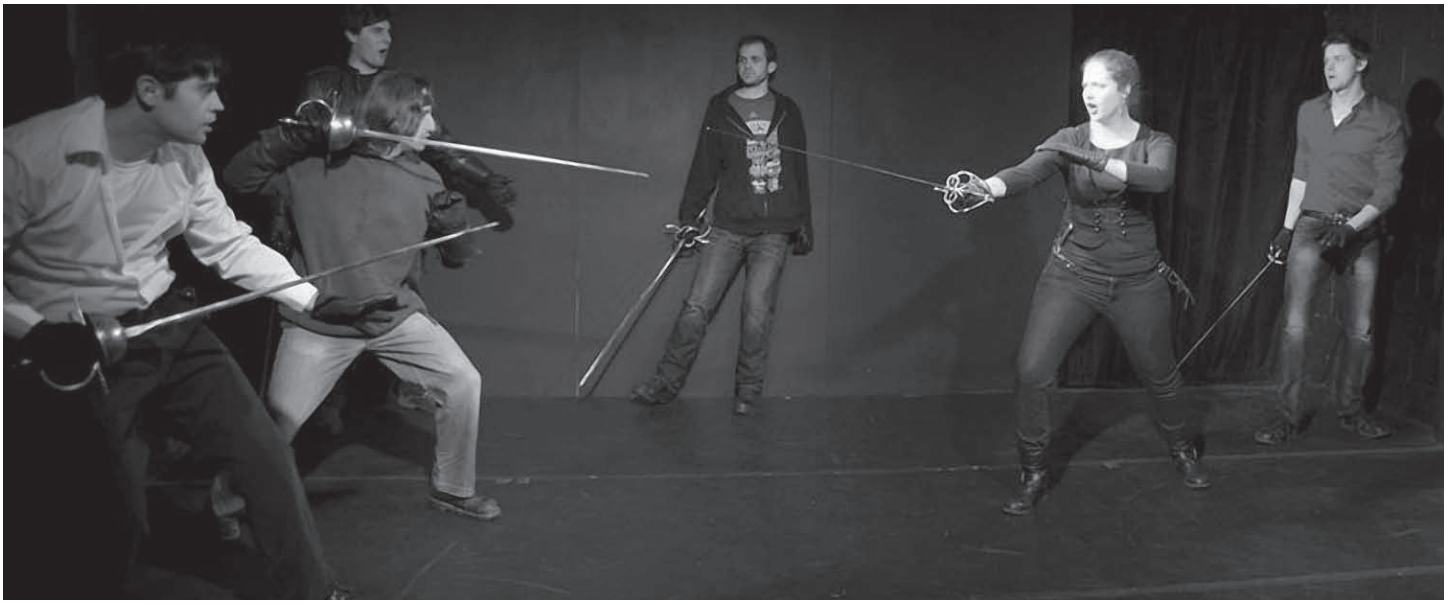
Ourselves

We need to change our own minds. The fact that many of us came to our first professional fight directing gig through the means we now find irksome – being the cast member with the most stage combat experience – does not mean we should shy away from encouraging our students to seek training as fight directors before staging fights. We need to recognize that as individuals who chose this as a profession and are now part of a national organization called the Society of American *Fight Directors*, IT IS OUR JOB to raise the standards. No one should have to "figure out" on his or her own, based solely on some stage combat classes, how to safely, effectively, artistically and responsibly stage fights or action sequences in the theater in this country ever again. We can teach them. We *should* teach them. Then we will no longer be complaining or objecting. We will be competing. And that will make us better.

To end, I refer you to Suddeth & Leong's *Ten Commandments of Fight Directing*, commandment number 7: "Strive to improve the art, and train your whole life."

Building a Career as a Fight Director

BY JOHN TOURTELLOTTE



For a little boy who grew up watching heroes fight for justice and honor with a sword in their hand, a career building sword fights on the stage is a dream come true. Having just finished fight directing my sixth stage production, and my second production of *Romeo and Juliet*, I'm still fairly new at this, but I'm at a point where most established fight directors have been and many aspiring fight directors hope to be. It's a transitional time, but one of the most important with regard to setting a foundation for good things to come. In this article, I aim to share some of what I have learned thus far as a means to furthering the collective understanding of this important transitional period.

So what is the best way to start a career as a fight director? Almost every major regional theatre has a favorite high profile fight director(s) to employ, most of whom have been orchestrating theatrical violence for decades. Most people, like myself, start off by assisting these fight directors both when they teach (at universities, conservatories and workshops) as well as when they build violence for professional productions. By doing so, we continue to our education and gain experience working in professional settings. These are great opportunities, but the goal is to fight direct on our own. With the daunting challenges of breaking into larger theatres, those of us in the transitional phase work as best we can: doing free outdoor Shakespeare, Renaissance Faires, and/or (what I've done most of) independently produced theatre.

I have always learned best by doing, so when I saw that I could benefit from generating my own work, that is what I did. I co-founded a black box theatre company in Los Angeles to experience what exactly it was like to be an independent theatre producer. This gave me my first chance to fight direct on my own, and I was able to fight direct three plays in six months, including my first *Romeo and Juliet*.

The opening fight of *Romeo and Juliet*, presented by The Poetics Theatre Collective in 2013. Directed by Daniel Roberts with fight direction by John Tourtellotte. TOP: (Left to Right) Alex Simmons (Samson), Joe Coppola (Gregory), Ryan Neely (Tybalt), Mark Jennings (Balthasar), Julia Skeggs (Benvolio) and John Maltese (Abraham). BOTTOM: (Left to Right) Mark Jennings (Balthasar), Ryan Neely (Tybalt), John Maltese (Abraham) and Julia Skeggs (Benvolio).

CHRIS NOLAN; OPPOSITE: ALLYSON CAPETTA

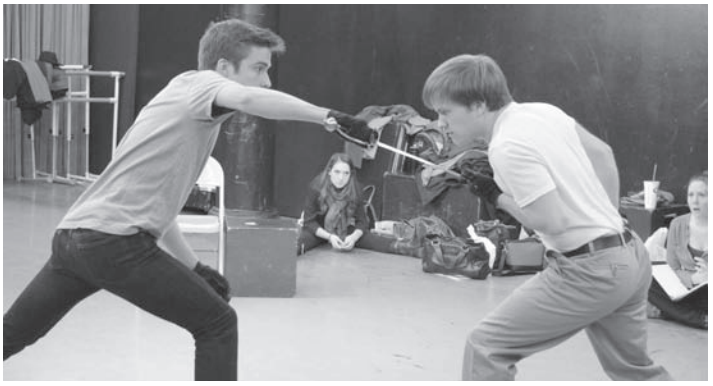
True to the adage, my work begot more work, which was a great blessing. Actors that I hired to work with my company also had companies of their own. Friendships developed and more employment opportunities arose. After a short time, my co-founder and I decided to put our company to rest, having learned a great deal and feeling the urge to move on with our lives. I was ready to move to New York

The final duel in *Hamlet*, presented by Underling Productions in 2013 (Left to Right) Phil Gillen (Hamlet) and Dylan Combs (Laertes). Directed by Meghan Blakeman with fight direction by John Tourtellotte.

to focus on working in the theatre, specifically on classical texts and Shakespeare.

Networking became the next link in my transition. I was fortunate enough to be recommended by a friend for the position of fight director to a producer self-producing an Off-Off Broadway production of *Romeo and Juliet.* I wrote the producer explaining my preferred methods of working on fights and submitted my resume. A few weeks later I booked the job. This experience made me realize the importance of submitting for fight direction work in addition to auditions as an actor. By checking the information on posted projects, even if I am unable to audition or work on a production as an actor, there is potential work as a fight director or consultant. That's how I've come to be fight directing a production of Hamlet. I was unable to audition for the production, but wrote to the team offering my fight direction services. The director of the production contacted me and we are now deep in the rehearsal process.

The world of self-produced theatre has been far more prolific and filled with opportunities for me (professional advancement as well as learning) than I could ever have predicted. Working with my peers, brave enough to strike out on their own and develop their own opportunities to work, learn, and gain exposure has also taught me a great deal about the steps I need to take in order to create opportunities for myself and what to do with those opportunities once I have them. It has given me the confidence to develop my own rehearsal style and working paradigm and implement it in a professional setting. It has put me in a position to design, discuss, and maintain my own contracts (as an actor, fight director, and for the rental of my personal armory). It has emphasized for me the importance of developing and maintaining a diverse skill set, accessing individual skills and resources



(social media promotion, my own armory) and making myself the best hire possible for any given company.

The larger network of regional houses and ever-increasing layers of theatrical echelons into which one can be hired hold some harsh realities of our job market and, for those of us still new to the business of the professional theatre world as well as the world of academia, those harsh realities are best met with creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship. It is not enough to wait in audition lines and tenure application piles of previous generations. We must seek out our own opportunities, develop our own network with which to collaborate, contribute, finance and do the work from the foundation.

For a young actor and combatant, like me, that means acting and fight directing where I can, always doing more than the single or dual job for which I am hired, and always being present, collaborative and creative with my skills. Doing so makes me an asset, and someone who people return to again and again, just like the professionals who trained and mentored me.

The Motion Parallax

Choreographing Fights for *The Lost Colony*

By Barbara Charlene

With a seating capacity of over 1,900, the Gershwin Theatre in New York City is considered to be the largest theatre on Broadway. The stage itself is considerable, with a 37-foot proscenium height, a 65-foot proscenium opening, and 46 feet from the apron overhang to the back wall. In case the numbers are confusing, when compared to a football field, it's a little over the height of one goal post, the width of two end-zones, and the length of how far I can run with the ball before getting tackled by a 300-pound defensive lineman.

To choreograph fights on a stage like this would be a dream come true, not only for what it would mean career-wise, but also for the abundance of space afforded and the possibilities that entails. As fight choreographers, we don't always have the luxury of space. The ceiling might be high, but there's no space to our left and right. Or we could have large wing space, but no ceiling to speak of. And of course

there are always those nasty columns that seem to appear out of nowhere in small venue theatres and storefront spaces. But what happens when you have unlimited height, a half-football field size stage to play with, and an audience of over three thousand? Oh, and did I mention not a column in sight?

This was the experience I encountered this past summer while working as the Assistant Fight Director for the *The Lost Colony*. In production now for 76 years, *The Lost Colony* is the longest-running show in America, written during the Federal Theatre Project in 1937, and commemorating the story of the lost colony of Roanoke. Situated on the Roanoke Island sound and in a national park, everything about *The Lost Colony* is epic: story, scene, and stage. Referred to as a symphonic drama, the costumes are by Tony-award winning costume designer William Ivey Long, the lights are by Tony-award winning lighting designer Paul Gallo, the music comes from hymnals, the acting style is melodramatic and reminiscent of early 40's movies, and the dancing is an amalgamation of historic drawings and tradition. The set takes two weeks to install during eight-hour summer days by a crew of over 20 actor/technicians (AT's), who, by the way, not only build the set, but also take on ensemble roles *and* serve as the scene changers as each location gets peeled away like the pages of a storybook. The stage itself, the Waterside Theatre (aptly named as it sits about twelve feet from the water of the Roanoke sound) is massive: a proscenium opening of almost 80 feet, a depth of 45 feet from the back wall to the audience, and two side stages that flank the main stage that are each around 33'x11'. The last row of audience seating, row 31, rounds out the amphitheatre at over 120 feet from the lip of the stage to the back of the house. When I encountered the sheer scope of this production, I realized that the work I would create as a choreographer had to match with the epic nature of the rest of the production. And this was no easy task.

Above: Payne Hopton-Jones (left) as Captain Dare, Christopher Manns (center) as Wanchese, Alex Bryant (right) as Manteo. Choreographer: Barbara Charlene.

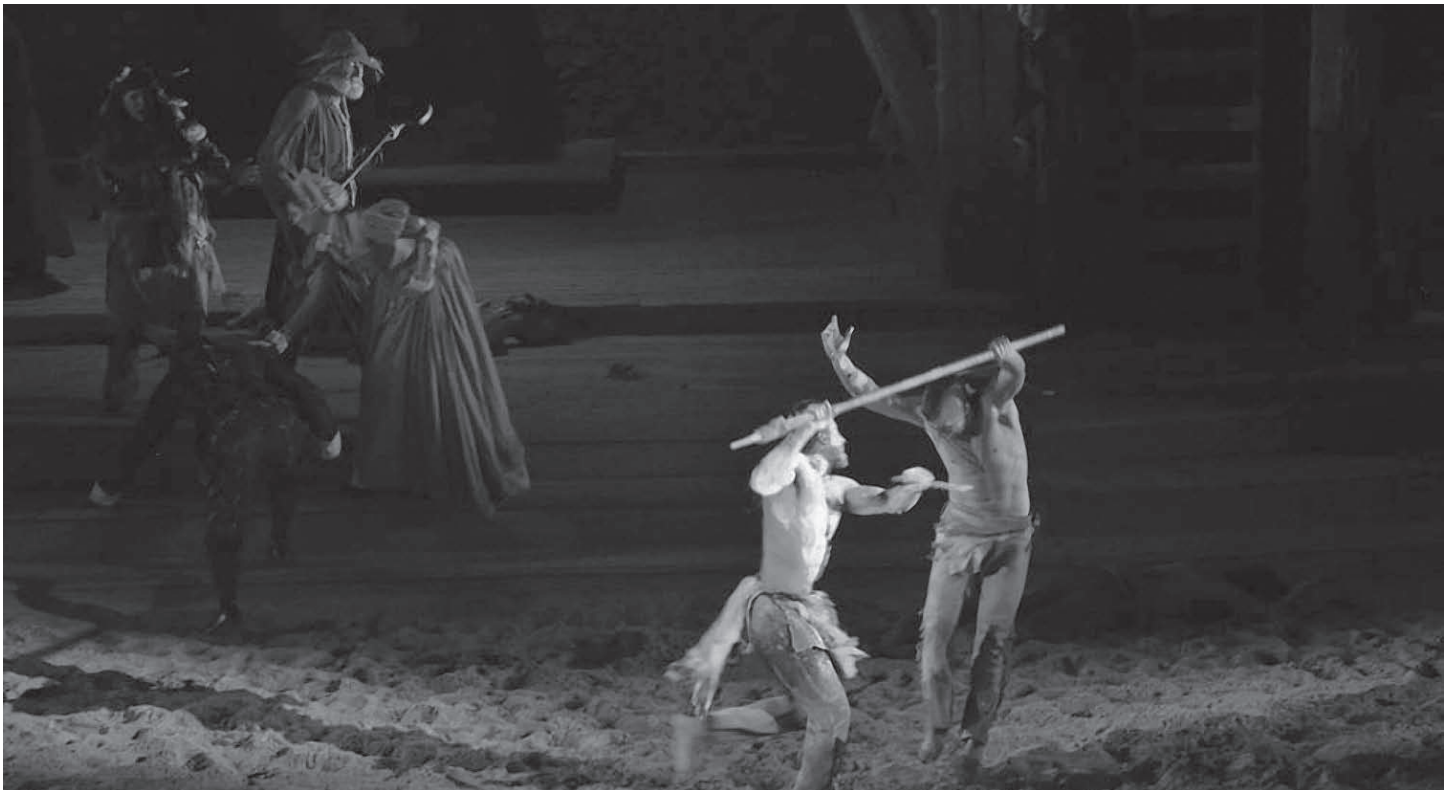
Opposite, top: Panorama of the Waterside Theatre, from House Right Light Tower.

Opposite, bottom: Christopher Manns (left) as Wanchese and Alex Bryant (right) as Manteo. Choreographer: Barbara Charlene.

When approaching a show, I like to begin with the actors, gauging their abilities, finding their comfort levels, and playing to their characters strengths and weaknesses. I lucked out and for the final battle between the good guy (Manteo) and the bad guy (Wanchese), I had two actors of supreme physique, who were willing to try anything I threw at them. I also benefited from assisting a man who had worked on the show for 41 years, in the role of Manteo for 25, and as fight director for six: Robert Midgette. The experience and vision that Bob had was invaluable when it came to shaping the fights. He understood the size and capacity of the stage, and the audience's ability to follow what was happening onstage. With over a hundred actors on stage, cabins on fire, smoke filling the scene, and sound effects scoring the battle, every moment of the fights had to fill the space. "Fill the space" ended up being my mantra not only to the actors, but also to myself. For the first time since I began choreographing, I had room to breathe, room to spread out on the stage, to move the actors wherever I wanted, and what did the fight call for? Knives. Phenomenal cosmic stage…itty bitty weapons.

Traditionally, we are taught that knife fighting consists of small movements, efficiency of energy, and a get-in-get-out attitude. "Knife fighting is the most insidious, most exacting, most precise weapon

ABOVE AND OPPSITE, BOTTOM: BRIAN ELLIOTT; OPPOSITE, TOP: COURTESY OF THE LOST COLONY



discipline for stage combat," says Michael J. Johnson, one of the leaders of knife fighting for stage. "It's also the fastest discipline. Actors must be clearer and more specific when acting a knife fight: the audience will see any phoniness on the part of the actor. Therefore, the actors must submit to the truth of the fight completely, without exception." With *The Lost Colony*, however, everything I had learned about knife fighting for the stage had to be thrown out the window. The emphasis was on size and speed: make things bigger and decrease the speed so that the audience can follow. Instead of small moves with specific targets executed with normal stage speed and intensity, moves became large, sweeping, and cued. The discipline of the weapon had to be sacrificed by the needs of the stage, and the actors had to work harder to commit to the truth of the situation. Then there was that epic stage. I learned that with the *The Lost Colony*, the tradition was that the further away the audience was, the slower the actors had to go in order for the audience to follow. I followed the advice of those who had been doing it for three decades and adjusted accordingly.

I relied heavily on the width of the proscenium, and began the fight with both actors on opposite sides of the stage, Wanchese on top of a house having just thrown a colonist to his death, and Manteo returning from the forest toward his foe. Much to my chagrin, when they met, everything had to slow immediately as opposed to following the force of the speed they were coming at each other with. Were I to do this again, I would attempt a more kinesthetically natural explosive beginning. Hindsight being 20/20, the first phrase consisted of the two actors working moves that I called the "accordion effect". Like two magnets that repelled each other, the fight expanded and then contracted, like a musician playing an accordion. For the second phrase, I played with large avoidances that spanned from stage left to stage right, in order to "fill the space." I also incorporated spins in the second phrase (which garnered the phrase name: "Spinny Spinny"). Finally, in the third phrase, I followed the tradition of Manteo receiving a spear and created a spear vs. knife fight that incorporated all of the techniques I was working with: the accordion effect, avoidances, and spins.

Response to the fights was generally positive. Most audience members enjoyed the work, got into the story, and had a great time. In reviewing Trip Advisor, however, I found one response from a gentleman who was less than thrilled by the fights. He wrote:

> "…The quality of that stage combat left MUCH to be desired. While I am speaking with a background in theatre, even those who were with me with no theatre experience agreed that the stage combat left much to be desired. While it is good for a stage fight to be slow enough to tell a story, the lost colony fights were just a little too slow to be believable, but not slow enough to be slow motion (which could have been a directorial choice). The basic idea of stage combat is to give the illusion that the characters are fighting, while the actors remain unharmed-- unfortunately, there were multiple instances where this illusion was broken, the most memorable being when someone was "run through," but he was not angled properly, so instead of a dramatic death, the audience is presented with a sword under the armpit. If these are their "epic battles," I would recommend going to see your local school's play."

Ouch.

All criticisms aside, I think this audience member has a point. I know the moment of the angle mishap he is speaking of, and although I choreographed with angles in mind, at 72 performances, we were bound to get one wrong, especially when adding in all the technical elements like lights, smoke, torches, theatrical firearms, burning cabins, etc. That's just live theatre. His critique doesn't bother me, because at the end of the day, *The Lost Colony,* like many outdoor dramas and production styles, does not live in the world of theatrical realism. There was no blood spurt when the hero of the show got hit in the back with an arrow, no need for a cast of the actor's head for the beheading scene, and though our theatrical firearms had very real gun powder, our angles had us shooting birds in trees, clear above the actors on stage. This show is marketed for families, after all, and we rely on their ability to willingly suspend their disbelief and invest in the story. Yet the reviewer's comment about the speed made me pause. Going too slow? From where I was on stage, they always looked like they were going too fast. What

ABOVE AND OPPSITE: BRIAN ELLIOTT

was he talking about? This prompted me to do a little research, delving back into eighth-grade science and a concept known as the Motion Parallax.

The Motion Parallax refers to our ability to perceive speed from different distances. For example, you're in a car and looking out the window. The lines in the lane passing by you are going incredibly fast, while the mountains off in the distance don't seem to be moving at all. It's the opposite effect in film. In film, fights done at stage speed tend to slow down. This again has to do with Motion Parallax and our ability to perceive the flickering of frames in front of our eyes. If the stunt performers go faster, they look more real.

I had been instructed by Bob (the fight director) to keep things slower than I would normally choreograph, based on the belief that the audience would have a hard time following if they went faster. The actors did their best to keep the adrenaline contained and not allow speed to take over, yet if we follow the concept of Motion Parallax, the actors probably should have been going faster. Obviously not fast enough to sacrifice safety, but fast enough that the audience members in the back rows would not feel as though they were going in slow motion. What about the audience members in the front row?

If we follow the rules of Motion Parallax, the actors on stage, to the front row, would look like they were going at super speed. This may, then, create the perception of danger. As H. Russ Brown, another dedicated voice in the world of stage combat, put it, "You might be making that front row nervous." This would then have the same effect on the audience as the guy from Trip Advisor, a taking-out of the show, the inability to stay with the story. So what do we do?

The truth is, in theatre, we have to make sacrifices, and we certainly can't make everyone in the audience happy. In my opinion, the idea that making moves bigger to fill the space holds true: small movements from far away are almost unperceivable. This was Acting 101 when I was in undergrad. Actions need to be big to fill the space or else run the risk of looking like a lonely ant in the middle of a driveway. When you add large movements into a fight, the fight will automatically slow down and look cued. Thus, your audience members in the back row are going to perceive the fight as going slower than it usually would in a smaller space. Any faster, and your audience members in the front row may get nervous.

What we did with *The Lost Colony* wasn't wrong. We needed big moves to fill the space, which slowed the fight down. The actor's job got harder when committing to the fight and the danger of the weapon, but both actors succeeded in bringing a truthful intensity to their characters. We used knives because of their traditional use as a weapon by Native Americans, yet the size required larger movements so that the intentions could be seen, resulting in a perceived cued fight. Speed then became relative to the proximity the audience was to the stage.

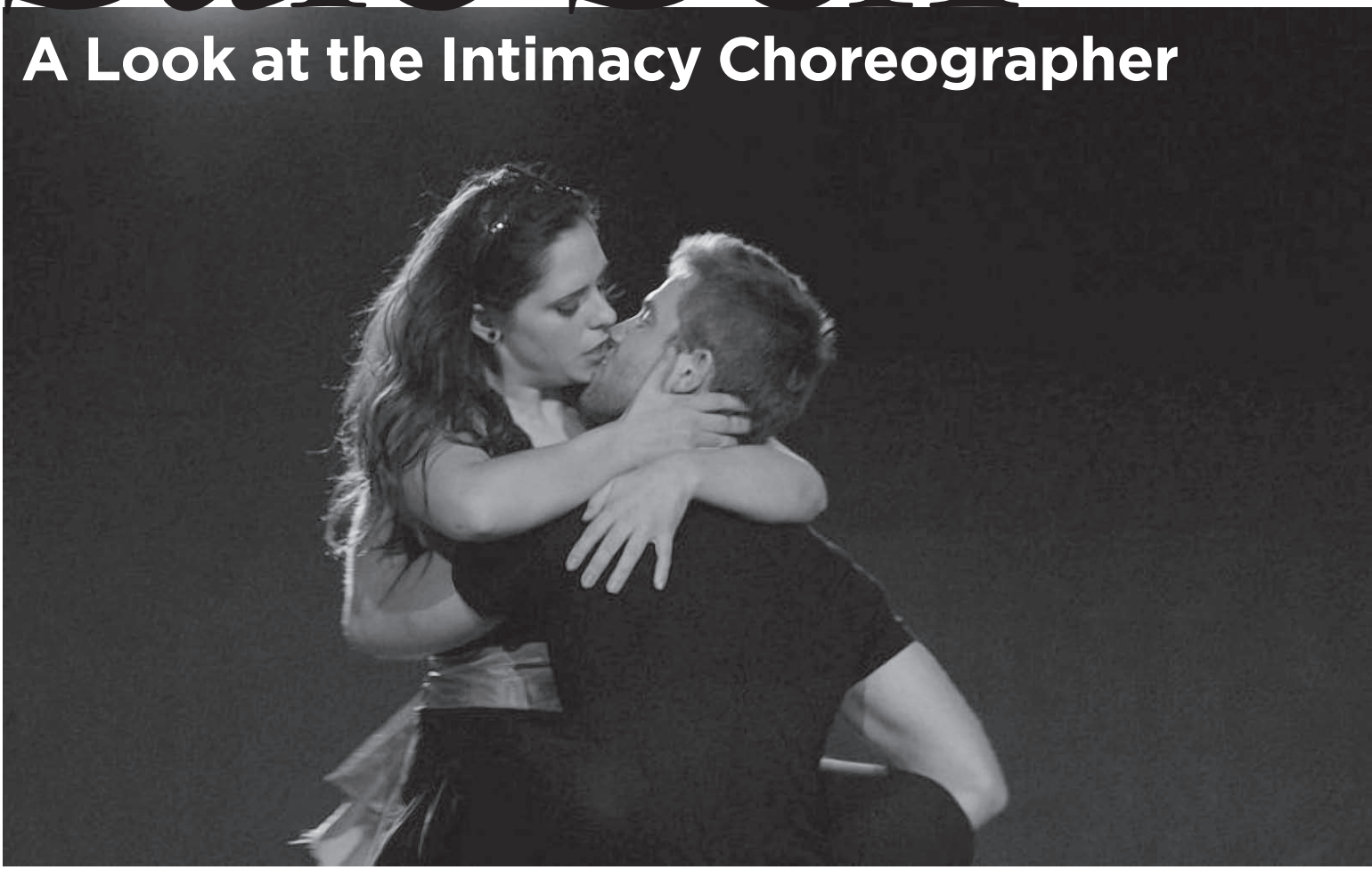
There is no simple answer, only trial and error. The fundamentals of stage combat remain: keep the actors safe and tell an effective story. Ultimately, what you learn as an actor-combatant and then translate into your choreography have to be adjusted accordingly to the director's vision, the style of the show, the actor's abilities, and of course, the space you are in. Using what you know with what you have, and then reminding yourself that at the end of the day, if the actors went home safely with a smile on their face, and the audience can be heard commenting joyfully on what they just saw as they walk back to their cars, you did your job. This is true whether you're in a large outdoor theatre with half a football field of playing space, or a shoe-box-sized storefront theatre with a column in the way.

Opposite: Christopher Manns (left) as Wanchese, Alex Bryant (right) as Manteo. Choreographer: Barbara Charlene.

Above: Christopher Manns (left) as Wanchese, Alex Bryant (right) as Manteo. Choreographer: Barbara Charlene.

Safe Sex

A Look at the Intimacy Choreographer



SANDRA BENT

Alli Trussel and Craig Musser in Between the Lines, written, directed and choreographed by Tonia Sina at the University of Oklahoma Lab Theatre 2010.

By Tonia Sina

For years, Fight Directors have been used to manage actors' safety, to craft the stories of fights, and to ultimately contribute to the theatrical process. When I began graduate school at Virginia Commonwealth University, I started with the lust for all things violent, and I pursued training in fight directing with a passion. But throughout my time there, it was revealed to me that there was a lesser- known need in theatre that was ideal for me to fill. This need is what I have come to call Intimacy for the Stage.

Up until now, Intimacy has been placed under the umbrella of "Movement," so any movement coach has to handle scenes like that.

In my observations, the director often doesn't see intimacy or sexual scenes as a problem worthy of hiring a coach. This can result in even the best professionals skimming over the process, causing awkwardness and anxiety for the actors who have to fend for themselves. This anxiety is unnecessary and can easily be avoided with the hiring of an Intimacy Choreographer; a movement specialist who choreographs, coaches, and directs intimate and sexual scenes. Much like a fight choreographer, an intimacy choreographer uses similar techniques to teach and guide actors towards a safer, more professional, and dynamic telling of the story.

From Violence to Intimacy

When I was in graduate school at Virginia Commonwealth University, I played the role of Suzanne in *Picasso at the Lapin Agile.* The actor playing Picasso was someone I didn't know very well at the time, and we didn't seem to have much chemistry throughout the rehearsal process. There is a passionate and sexual kiss between the two characters at the end of Act One. Our kiss was neither sexual nor passionate for the majority of the rehearsal process. It frustrated the two of us and the director so much that we came to resent the scene. Then one day the director told us to rehearse on our own and "fix" the kiss. It was tech week and there was little time to rehearse such a small detail with him anymore. We trudged into the lobby and decided the only way to make this kiss scene better was to ultimately pretend it was real. Suddenly the kiss perked right up, and the scene changed completely. Unfortunately, because neither of us approached it with the professionalism and outside eye of a choreographer, we now had crossed a line into reality that intruded on our scene. From then on the kiss was a little too easy and very real. Looking back I can't even say if it was a good kiss for the scene because my emotions were wrapped into it in an unhealthy way. Both of us foolishly ended our current relationships to date each other in a month-long "Showmance." Once reality had crept into the scene, the scene had crept into our reality. After this experience, I vowed that I would find a way to make sure this didn't happen to me, or anyone I worked with, again.

Simultaneously in my masters program, there were many graduate student directed projects going on each weekend. Many of them had scenes that needed fight directors and movement coaches. I was the youngest movement graduate student and also a female, so I was not generally the first person chosen to work on fight choreography projects in my first year. One day, a fellow pedagogy graduate student, directing a play that included a sex scene that started with a striptease, asked the movement majors if any of us could help him. The actress was an undergraduate, and he felt uncomfortable directing her so closely in such a sexually charged scene. I volunteered because, after my own experiences, I thought it would be a great opportunity to help this young woman overcome some of her discomfort with the scene. Together we deconstructed the moves into intentions and obstacles, and I supplied her with specific character driven choreography that showcased her body in a positive way. In the end, she gave a sexy and thrilling performance because her striptease was specifically crafted to bolster her confidence. After the experience, other directors began coming to me with other sexual content that needed an outside eye. By the end of my second year I had used all of my fight director training to choreograph stripteases, lap dances, passionate kisses, orgasms, and even sexual tension, some of which were in the season's main stage shows. From these experiences as well as my own, I quickly realized that there was a desperate need for this untapped specialty.

Gender Relations and Heightened Emotional Scenes

After exploring my specialty as an intimacy choreographer, I began to notice the staged sexual scenes that didn't have a coach for intimacy. The actors' bodies would betray them in the small details. Where do their hands rest on each other? Are they breathing enough? Are they looking into each other's eyes? Have these actors rehearsed this enough? These kinds of distractions tend to muddle the performance, and if a sexual scene has any amount of insecurity in the choreography the audience will tend to feel embarrassed for the actors. An embarrassed audience is no longer present in the story of the play, they simply want the intimacy to stop. As with violence, there are so many small details that can affect a scene with intimacy, and the audience needs the story to be absolutely crystal clear.

Part of my time specializing in intimacy involved developing a course that I taught at the University of Oklahoma called *Gender Relations in Performance*. This acting class was solely based on sexual scenes, or scenes with "heightened emotions." Perhaps unsurprisingly, the class filled immediately and we took an entire semester studying, exploring, and choreographing scenes with intimacy and sexual content. We drilled exercises in a similar fashion to a sword technique class. Instead of weapons or fists, we used eye contact, breath, touch, sharing weight, contact improvisation, kissing and even some nudity. By the end of the semester, even the most timid and hesitant students performed a high-risk sexual scene for their final exam in front of an audience. It was an amazing and inspiring sight for such a conservative area of the country as Oklahoma.

As Martha Graham said, "The body says what words cannot." This is a common theme in staged fights. The characters might argue, which leads to a heated scene. When there is nothing more to say and the tension has built up to the breaking point, then there has to be an explosion of energy. That explosion is the fight. Sex is exactly the same. The audience needs the tension to build between these two characters. We need to know how they feel about each other. What kind of needs do they need to fulfill with the intimacy? When the "explosion" of energy happens, who initiates it? Who reciprocates, or resists? In that couple of seconds, the story has to be clear. As with violence, I teach my students that they need to "earn" the moment of intimacy that follows. If there isn't enough built up sexual tension, the intimacy will appear forced and awkward.

"A kiss is a lovely trick designed by nature to stop speech when words become superfluous." –Ingrid Bergman

Safe Sex Techniques

I believe that sexual tension is not something that has to be faked, and my Gender Relations course directly explores this with the students. One of the first exercises I drill in class contains teaching the students how to find sexual tension with any person in the room. The students discuss and observe what happens to their bodies when they are attracted to someone, and apply this breath and movement when interacting with any scene partner with which they get paired. We do this without any touching at first, because the students aren't immediately ready to cross the line into physical contact.

Along with testing boundaries of sexuality on stage, we also spend a great amount of time focusing on safety measures for scene work. For example, one of my "real" rules for intimacy scenes is that the students should never be rehearsing without a third party present. It is far too tempting for young actors to slip out of the characters when rehearsing alone. An outside party simply aids in retaining the integrity of the scene by giving it an audience. Two actors kissing in a room are simply that: two actors kissing in a room. I convey to my students that communication is crucial to enable the actors to leave the onstage relationship on stage. This is the most important aspect, since briefly falling in love with every scene partner and leaving real life relationships for him or her is not a viable option. When we drill other intimacy techniques, the desensitization of the exercises causes the students to treat the scenes as choreography, not sex.

Later in the course I use intensity levels when choreographing kissing or body contact of any kind. For example an intensity level of 1 requires the lowest emotional stakes and 10 is the highest possible investment of emotions (usually the step right before sex is initiated). These intensity levels are very useful in the communication between actors so that it is clear which one of them is leading at all times. Once the uncertainty of who is leading the choreography has been broached, real world emotions and questions can interrupt the scene. The following is an example of an actress's possible dangerous inner monologue due to miscommunication:

Brooke Reynolds (Wendla) and Stephen Ibach (Melchior) in *Spring's Awakening*, adapted by Eric Bentley and directed by Tonia Sina at the University of Oklahoma Lab Theatre 2011.

> "He just grabbed my thigh harder than he ever has. Is he grabbing me like that because he is actually attracted to me? I really like his aggression. Maybe I am attracted to him. I think he wants me to kiss him harder. Next time I am going to moan so he knows being aggressive is ok with me."

This situation can lead to a disaster. This is no longer the story of the play being told, it is the story of these two actors having a real intimate moment. The audience will sense it, detect awkwardness immediately, and they will be lost in the distraction. If the two actors want to pursue a relationship off stage they are welcome to do so, but using rehearsal time for this purpose is unethical and a waste of time. Having an Intimacy Choreographer can prevent all of these concerns before they begin, especially when working with young actors. The following is an outline of the Kissing Protocol that I use when teaching workshops and coaching kissing with students.

BRAD GRAY

Kissing Protocol

1. Talk with your partner about your fears and boundaries
   (Ex. I don't like being touched on my knee, I feel like I'm too short...)
2. Decide the story of the kiss
   Who initiates?
   Who leads?
   Does the lead change throughout?
   Who gives in?
   List objectives of each character
   List obstacles of each character
3. Discuss the energy of the kiss
   Sexual, romantic, angry, desperate, forced, etc
   Each character may have different energy, and that should influence the kiss energy
4. Agree in the intensity levels throughout the kiss
   (On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 is lowest intensity, 10 is most urgent)
   Does the intensity level change throughout the kiss?
   Make sure both partners agree and are clear of any changing intensity
   If intensity changes during, agree on who initiates change
5. Agree on the duration of the kiss
   How do you know when to stop the kiss?
   Technical interruption (lighting, music or sound cue)
   Outside character interrupts
   Kiss gets interrupted from within
6. Be aware of audience proximity
   How close is the audience?
   If extremely close, is tongue needed?
   If audience is very distant, does the choreography need to be bigger?
7. Choreograph hand placement
   Talk through where hands will go beforehand
   No surprises when choreographing
   Run through hand choreography without kissing so you can see where your hands are
8. Rehearse within full sight of a stage manager, the director, or the intimacy coach
   Don't sneak off into a corner together
   Don't pressure your partner to rehearse in a way that makes them uncomfortable
   Keep open communication with the director, the coach, and your partner

Down to the Basics

In conclusion, there might not be as much physical danger to sex scenes as there is in fight scenes, but they share certain aspects. For example, both kinds of scenes need to be choreographed to tell the story in the script, both require the actors to be completely comfortable with their own and their partner's movements, and both require a common language for the choreography. I feel strongly that in scenes with intimacy open communication is more difficult and even more important. Not being able to discuss sexual content freely can be stifling and confusing for young actors. I mainly work with actors between ages 18 and 23, and I find that the majority of them tend to be slightly uncomfortable discussing sex publicly with people other than peers. Many of them are simply self-conscious about their bodies, but others don't feel as if they have a safe space in which they can talk about the details. Unlike stage combat, this is my responsibility to provide as an Intimacy Coach. I spend quite a bit of my coaching time tactfully explaining to the actors what is aesthetically pleasing about their bodies, and teaching them how to showcase those things. I teach them (men and women) how to walk in high heels, and we have to discuss the mechanics of sex in order to choreograph it truthfully. It can be a fine line, but in my experience this exchange helps loosen the actors up and gives them confidence to explore more risky material. At the end of the day, the details of strangling someone are just as important as the details of having an orgasm to an actor that has to perform both.

Just as in fight scenes, one doesn't have to necessarily have had similar life experiences in order to truthfully portray a scene with intimacy. Many fight directors from the SAFD that I know haven't even been in an actual physical fight. A good choreographer can teach good actors how to move as if they have. However, life experience does help to understand the emotions involved in any scene. Likewise, I have often found that just because a person has sexual experience in their social life, it does not make them an onstage expert. No matter what, an audience of one is not the same as an audience of 300. Even now as an actress who specializes in intimacy, I still need an outside eye to help with my own scenes. I simply cannot see my whole body while I am kissing my partner with my eyes closed. This is why Intimacy Coaches are so useful.

In graduate school I had a skeptical professor approach me with a wry grin and ask, "What makes you so qualified to teach this? Where do you get your research from?" And I simply said, "Like any acting coach. Life." I have no time for that to embarrass me. The truth is I have studied all kinds of sexual scenes for years, and my own experiences have absolutely contributed to my knowledge. Chemistry on stage and off stage fascinates me, and I love to choreograph it. So, no, I may not have a black belt in sexual arts. I do, however, have a fabulous collection of heels and sexy belts that happen to be black.

I Do My Own Stunts

BY JENN ZUKO BOUGHN

It's a sign of badassitude to claim to do one's own stunts. It's a mark of admiration and praise in the world of performance. "Daniel Craig did all his own stunts in *Casino Royale*!" "Ooo." I even subscribed to this attitude until recently. Reviewing Vic Armstrong's autobiography, however, changed my mind on the whole do-my-own-stunts concept. It was refreshing to hear Armstrong's stuntman-only perspective (as opposed to an actor-combatant, like me and many of my students), and his view was much different than that of an actor's giant ego. He said that not only was performing one's own stunts unnecessarily reckless and dangerous for an actor, but it takes work away from stunt professionals when an actor makes that choice.

In Armstrong's memoir, he recounts having a conversation with Christopher Reeve during *Superman II*. Reeve was so excited about doing his own stunts until Armstrong pointed out that he was taking money away from him when he did this. Reeve already had top billing, Armstrong reminded him, and when he also did his own stunts, other professionals were out of a job. This changed Reeve's perspective (especially when he then saw how very dangerous the particular stunt in question was); he then only did some of the stunts, albeit under Armstrong's close supervision.[1]

A stuntperson is trained specifically for dangerous stunt work, whereas actors very often aren't. Shooting can stop when an actor gets hurt, which costs a lot of money, especially when the actor is a star. Just imagine how much money it cost when Harrison Ford got hurt doing a stunt during *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.[2] A stuntperson is a) less likely to get injured, being trained for the work, and b) doesn't stop the shooting schedule if she does get injured. If Harrison Ford breaks his back, that's the end of shooting until he recovers. If a stuntperson breaks her back, another steps in and shooting continues.

Why is it that actors feel the need to do their own stunts? Is it because they think that other actors and critics might view them as lazy or poorly trained when they let a stunt double do the hard work? Or perhaps there is a sense that great performances necessitate authenticity, which can only be achieved if the actor does everything demanded of the character they are playing. Such reliance on "authenticity," in addition to being dangerous, suggests that contemporary actors are so focused on realism that they have forgotten how to use their imaginations. "My dear boy, try acting" is my current attitude toward those actors willing to risk life, limb and looks in the name of what they and/or their director thinks is authentic.[3]

In the recent BBC series *Sherlock*, Lara Pulver (Irene Adler) recalled Benedict Cumberbatch (Sherlock Holmes) asking her to hit him as hard as she could with a riding crop in a scene where her character whips a valuable cell phone out of his character's hand.

> LARA PULVER says Benedict Cumberbatch has only got himself to blame for moaning that she whacked him too hard in their whipping scene in *Sherlock* . . . "Benedict said, 'It's all right, Lara, you can hit me harder.'
>
> I was like, 'Oh can I now, Benedict Cumberbatch?'"[4]

Why did Cumberbatch feel the need to be hit harder (or for that matter, hit at all)? By the same token, Cumberbatch should have asked to be drugged, since his character was drugged in that same scene. Why was the authenticity of his performance not in question when acting the reaction to the drug, but somehow was when it came to the violence? Does Cumberbatch have such little imagination that he had to literally feel the pain in order to act it in a way that was realistic? No, clearly he must have a healthy imagination or he wouldn't be such a good actor. He must believe, however, that good acting equals realism, as so many trained actors do.

COURTESY OF FRED FINKE AND BOLDER ACTS

It's a recent theory of mine that the emphasis in American (and British) acting schools on this extreme version of Stanislavsky's psychological realism is stunting actors' imaginations, stopping their creativity. "To hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to Nature" is not actually holding up nature.[5] Acting is a craft, an art. Actors create authentic-feeling moments, but at no time are they performing realITY, only realISM. It's still acting. And when it comes to staging violence, that's what it should be.

In order to delve further into why actors feel the need to do their own stunts, often confusing reality with realism and authenticity, we can hearken back to what Peter Brook called The Deadly Theatre. It's amazing how prophetic Brook's *The Empty Space* is, and how profoundly it speaks to current multimedia and theatrical entertainment. Brook's description of the audience that demands to be spoon fed, that has no appreciation of the aesthetic experience but is content with an anesthetic experience instead, is an apt description of a Reality TV audience.[6]

Something Funny Happened on the Way to the Renaissance Fair **by Chris Barrerra, Directed by Madge Montgomery, Fight Choreography by Jenn Zuko Boughn, starring Jason Boughn and Cody Cessna, 04/21/2013.**

Even in the minds of the conceptual artists, now Hyper-realism or Naturalism equals good acting. It is no wonder that directors and even actors themselves think that if the performance isn't "authentic," isn't realistic in style (to an extreme), then it isn't high quality. At best, this limits the versatility of actorly styles, at worst it puts on display the untrained and even incompetent, in the name of authenticity. Artists forget that they're doing art. Even when one is acting in a realistic style, "the character is still a mask, created by choice and selectivity; it is not the simple revelation of the actor's self, though it may make more use of it [than non-realistic styles]."[7] As audiences, we often see what Brook called the "crude gesture of self-expression" but nothing more skilled or refined than that.[8] In a scene of staged violence, this is a recipe for disaster.

Stage combat needs to be choreographed, performed within safe distance, rehearsed thoroughly and frequently so as to ingrain technique into an actor's body, so that he can feel safe acting while performing potentially dangerous moves. This is also true in film with the added advantage of having a professional stunt person to perform the stunts. Problems arise when the actor and/or director begin to feel that the action "feels rehearsed," and opts for a more dangerous choice because it feels more authentic than the rehearsed one, such as an actor choosing to receive a real slap to the face because a staged slap doesn't "feel authentic enough." This often leads to a bad-looking slap (too quiet, a flinching attacker and/or victim, etc.) but worse, an actor can get seriously hurt. Yes, Virginia, even for something as simple as an unarmed slap.

As artists and audience, we need to understand the difference between reality and realism, between raw authenticity and a skilled, artistic expression of such. Fight scenes are part of the dialogue, part of the physical storytelling, but lapsing into the false belief that only real violence is authentic enough, or that anyone can perform violence for entertainment is a dangerous game. Let stuntpeople do the stunts, and if an actor wants to do her own, she should get the specialized training. After all, the more skills an actor is versed in, the more authentic her performance will be. Maybe when we train our actors, we should embrace non-realistic styles more than in a mere one-semester course, or maybe we should remind our young actors-in-training that they are practicing a craft, not treating the stage as a psychologist's couch. Either way, we should remember: authenticity does not equal quality, and reality in stage combat means danger.

Endnotes

1 Armstrong, 106-109
2 For more stunt stories from *Raiders*, see excellent documentary *Raiding the Lost Ark*. The discussion especially of the famous sword vs. gun scene is informative and highly entertaining.
3 This quote has been attributed to Gielgud, Olivier, and many others as a quip to counter a Method Actor doing his Method thing. It may even be apocryphal, but it is still legend in the theatre.
4 TV Biz
5 Shakespeare, *Hamlet* Act III, 2; 21-22
6 Robinson speaks to this in his stellar TED talk, Changing Education Paradigms.
7 Harrop and Epstein, 189
8 Brook, 19

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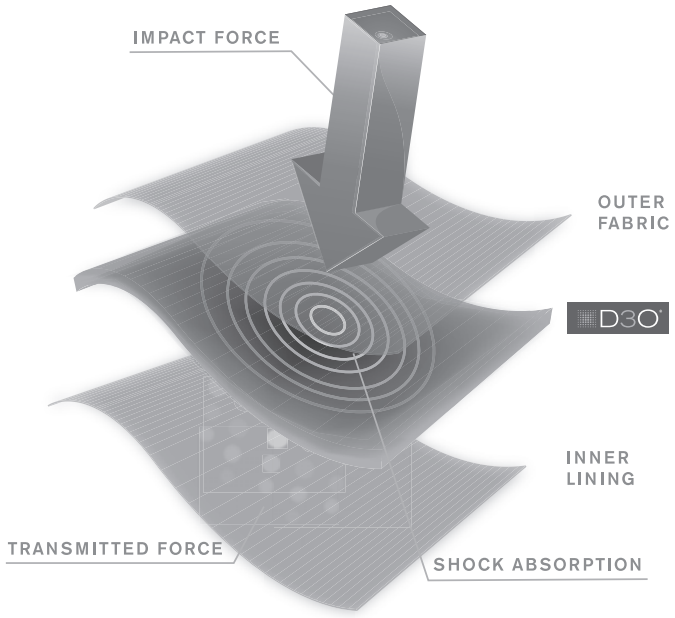
DEVELOPING COVERT PROTECTION FOR PERFORMERS

BY SIMON VAN LAMMEREN

Would you trust thin slices of a rubberlike polymer, weighing around 100 grams each, to protect areas of your body like your knees, elbows or shoulders when you are about to do a stair fall or get hit with a baseball bat? Well, that is exactly what Xion protective gear is designed to do on a daily basis. It all begun when police officer/stuntman René Gaemers and I read an article about a newly invented "smart" polymer, called D3O.[1]



Above: Simon van Lammeren (in the car) performing a car roll for Des Duivels, produced by HotelRebel in 2012. The director was Jasper Wessels, the Stunt coordinator was Chuck Borden, and the photographer was German Villafane.

Opposite: Simon van Lammeren (on fire) in Avantgarde, produced by Eric Elenbaas and stunt coordinated by Chuck Borden in 2011.

As a stunt performer and coordinator, I ran into problems with existing protectors quite often. Most protective gear uses foam, hard shell covers or both. The results are either bulky or inflexible items that still offer limited protection. They restrict motion, and directors often ask stunt performers not to wear stuff like that because it inevitably shows in close shots. When we came across a science magazine article featuring the newly discovered polymer D3O, saw the pictures of these very slim pads, read about its flexibility and miraculous impact-responsive behaviour, we knew this was the solution.

What we learned was that these pads were flexible like rubber until it got hit. Immediately upon impact, the material set itself for a split second, becoming quite rigid-but not hard. By doing so the material absorbed, spread and deflected the bulk of the impact. Once the shockwave of the impact had passed, the polymer reverted back to its flexible state, until the next impact.

The science behind the D3O polymer is that the molecules in a pad can flow more or less freely when the piece is not under pressure. The moment the molecules receive impact, however, they attach to one another and impede each other's movement for an instant. Interestingly, the harder a pad gets hit, the more of its molecules get involved in this process. More molecular involvement strengthens the stiffening of the pad and increases the impact protective effect. This modern magic sparked our imagination with vistas of never seen before protective possibilities.

Together with René I set up a meeting with the D3O people. All the company had at that time was a small office, a few experimental items, one desk and a whiteboard, which we immediately usurped to explain our needs and ideas. D3O has progressed from that point to producing all kind of pads for a host of applications, and Xion Protective Gear was founded with an express purpose to create a line of protective base layers. The choice to specifically focus on base layers was made immediately and never regretted.

Typically, traditional protective gear brands use these type of pads fitted in existing garments, like coats, workers pants, etc. We felt that this did not optimally use its unique properties. For maximum impact protection the pads have to be worn directly on the hard body parts to be protected and must be fixed in that position. If worn loosely, control over the exact area(s) that

Product examples of Xion PG's modular system for body protection.

need to be protected is reduced. If the pads are strapped close to the body there is also a reduction in the effective weight due to decreased leverage between the pads and the body. Lastly, our aim was towards protection with a minimum of hindrance that could be covertly worn so that it does not show when stage and screen performers are wearing it. Those requirements indicate a tight fit too.

The starting point for Xion Protective Gear designs was clear, but implementation proved to be more challenging. Xion Protective Gear's first item produced was a full body suit that covered almost every imaginable body part. That project ran into problems immediately. The main issue was that most people do not have same upper and lower body size; like people with "soccer legs" or conversely with boxers torsos. This meant that production required an unwieldy range of upper/lower body sizing combinations to provide every customer with an overall tight fit.

Moreover, not everybody wants to protect all of his or her body parts all the time with a padded base layer. Actors and/or stunt doubles may have to play roles that require bare legs or arms. Even so, when more applications became evident, it was soon discovered that users might want to wear knee-boots, Life-vests, bulletproof vests, padded coveralls or whatever alongside these protective base layers. On top of that, many sport regulations either rule out certain areas for protection, like with rugby's allowance of only shoulder protection, or prescribe certain types of protective items for certain body parts, as in fencing or taekwondo. So, exit the full suit and enter

the modular system currently employed.

As for the actual design process, it took six consecutive designers and four production partners, not to mention numerous fabric tests and experiments with various types of pads suited for different parts of the body, before a final product was reached. The central issue were the designs. Designers, being professionals in fashion, tended to overdesign the garments and insert their own ideas about functionality, which could not always be followed. To solve this problem, professional tailors were employed rather than designers. This resulted in the garments rather industrial, form-follows-function look, which communicates exactly what they are for and what to expect when wearing them.

Being stunt performers as well as martial artists and certified stage fight combatants, problems of protection within our profession have always had our special attention. At first we thought of these garments as extra protection to go with our stunt work, a side activity to be of service to stunt performers, actors and costume departments. Gradually it became apparent, however, that things were taking a totally different turn. The response from outside the stunt industry, like law enforcement operators and extreme/contact sport athletes, made us reconsider our initial scope and mission. In fact a core group of users have developed a sort of web-based test and design team that provide Xion with continual ideas on to how to improve their garments as well as suggestions for future development.

One good example is Jon S., police sergeant in the Netherlands. Before we met Jon he was restricted in his work due to a car accident, which left certain parts of his body permanently vulnerable. Nowadays, his employer allows him to fully work again, but only when wearing Xion Protective Gear under his uniform or plain clothes. He has worn a full body suit everyday at work for about a year now and has experienced dozens of serious forms of impact. Of his experience with Xion Protective Gear, Jon says, "Low kicks, falls on my knees and elbows, bumping into things; it never bothers me. In fact, I am getting a reputation of going in first with difficult arrests because I rely on my protection to get me safely on the ground, if that is what it takes to restrain a suspect." It is encouraging to see that more and more people who are exposed to physical impact benefit from our efforts

Even with the overwhelmingly enthusiastic response from a host of other professionals outside the stunt-industry, it was still the first users, the stuntmen and women that made the biggest difference. Their feedback has been extremely encouraging, sharing great stories of motorcycle-crashes, stunts, fights etc., always with the same bottom line: Xion Protective Gear saved them from serious harm, even beyond their expectations.

With stage and screen fighting, the Xion garments really achieve their objective. They can be covertly worn and, because of the modular system, only where the script permits. Actors and stunt performers can increase their protection against accidents that are always liable to happen in realistic fight scenes, falls, crashing through furniture and other similar actions. Xion Protective Gear's website provides video demonstrations of some of the testing done on this gear.

For martial arts the picture is not yet clear. Obviously, martial artists already have ways of limiting physical damage in place, by means of rules and protecting body parts or soft-covering striking surfaces, like boxing gloves and shin guards. Various people have been experimenting with Xion garments in martial arts training and their findings are favourable, but it is important to remember that this gear is strictly meant to reduce the risks from injuries with high impact activities, and does not make you invulnerable. Our garments protect your hard structures (bones) quite well, but in the long run soft tissues may still be damaged by repeated exposure to high impact activities. In other words, always use our gear sensibly and responsibly, and never forget that impacting events are always inherently potentially dangerous.

Endnotes

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Fight Direction Under "Interesting" Conditions

Part 2: Choreography

By Steven Schwall, SAFD AAC

Part one of this article examined the parameters with which I work with the Pigeon Creek Shakespeare Company. Those conditions include shortened rehearsal periods, cross-gender casting (in both directions), actors mostly untrained in the use of arms, and working in variable spaces, due to the company's touring nature. I looked at the methodology behind working basic training into an already abbreviated schedule so that the actors can perform the choreography. In this second part, I will examine how these conditions also inform the choreography creation process.

For those who did not read part one, let me briefly recap Pigeon Creek Shakespeare and its performance philosophy. Pigeon Creek Shakespeare is a touring company, which employs an "original practices" approach. For those unfamiliar with the concept, "original practice" refers to the employment of rehearsal and performance conditions that existed

Top: Sean Kelly as Young Siward and Scott Lange as *MacBeth* in Pigeon Creek's MacBeth, 2013.

Bottom: Scott Wright (L) as MacDuff and Scott Lange (R) as *MacBeth* in Pigeon Creek's MacBeth, 2013.

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during Shakespeare's lifetime. Conditions such as universal lighting, short rehearsal periods, variable playing spaces, small casts with lots of doubling and cross-gender casting generate some "interesting" challenges with an "original practice" approach to Shakespeare's work. As I mentioned before, most Pigeon Creek Shakespeare actors are also untrained in the use of arms. All of these conditions must be taken into consideration when creating choreography because choreography that cannot be performed with confidence detracts from the story.

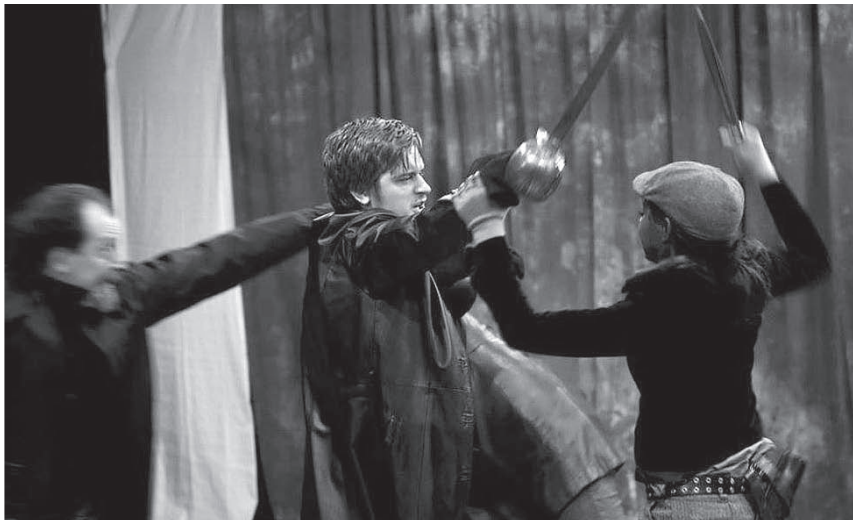
There are two primary types of fights in Shakespeare's work: the duel and the excursion, or battle. The duel, whether formal as in *Troilus and Cressida* or *Hamlet* or violent as in *Macbeth* or *Romeo and Juliet*, is logistically the simpler of the two because it generally employs only two combatants. However, the duel is also usually a climactic moment in the story, or at least serves as a catalyst to heighten the conflict, so it must be given careful consideration. An excursion is a group scenario, like the opening street fight in *Romeo and Juliet*, or the battle scenes in *Henry V* and *Macbeth*. These fights tend to set a tone rather than advance a specific conflict, and although they portray conflict, it is generally in a broader "scenic" sense than in a specific character advancement sense. It is more about the spectacle in these large group encounters than about any particular characters. This requires a slightly different approach.

Let's begin with the excursion. A battle often involves a large number of actors, if not the entire cast. In Pigeon Creek's case, since their casts usually number under a dozen, all the actors must be used, even those who have not had any formal training in arms. Without training, accurate memorization of complex phrases can be very difficult. In order to increase actor confidence as much as possible, I rely heavily on the KISS principle (Keep It Simple, Stupid).

I made an interesting discovery during one of my first jobs as a fight arranger. I got a call from a director who was doing a production of *My Favorite Year* (the musical). He was two weeks from opening and realized that he had a swordfight lesson scene and a musketeer group swordfight to block. Knowing that the second week was reserved for technical rehearsals, I knew that I had only one week to block the two fights, only five evenings. I made the choreography as simple as possible. The genre was also the swashbuckling style of Hollywood in the 40's and 50's, set in the genre of the live television comedy/variety show of the 1950's, so the intention was more playful than deadly. I created one simple phrase and used time and space variations to create different looks visually. The sequences were also underscored with music, which assisted actors in the learning process by moving in time with the props, much like dance choreography. The performances turned out very well and I found a process of manipulating simple choreography to great theatrical effect.

I carried this philosophy into my large group choreography with Pigeon Creek. By teaching the entire company one basic phrase of choreography, I didn't have to spend extra hours of a short rehearsal period teaching different phrases to small groups of actors. Rather, I was able to spend two hours with the entire cast drilling to inform the phrase, and another hour teaching the phrase itself. This left the remaining rehearsal time for slow work, staging, and repetition.

The staging is another critical part of the creation of choreography for group fights. In Shakespearean work, the two sides typically align themselves on opposing ends of the space, much like military practices of the period. I discovered through *My Favorite Year* that the same choreography, initiated at different times and different places created enough visual chaos to give the illusion of being random. I tried this technique again in a production of *Macbeth* a year later with even better success.



Left: Kyle Walker (L) as Laertes and Scott Lange (R) as *Hamlet* in Pigeon Creek's Hamlet, 2011.

Above: The author (L) as Murderer 3 and Dynasty Huckleby (R) as Murderer 2 take on Sean Kelly as Banquo in Pigeon Creek's *MacBeth*, 2013.

In creating choreography, an almost equal part of the process is the design of the "traffic patterns" of the scene. With two sides coming from almost equal distances in the playing space, traffic patterns can be designed so that actors arrive at their fight positions at different moments. Thus, when they begin their phrase, it starts at different times, which gives the illusion of chaos. Vocalizations also assist in creating the chaotic feel. The final element is that each group of combatants has different comfort zones with regard to tempo, which contributes to a random appearance. In battle scenes where the "dead" must be left on the stage, I can allow for the victors to turn and seek out another partner on another side of the stage and initiate the phrase again. Using a single, universal phrase allows me to alter pairings as well.

In my last production of *Macbeth,* due to the deep doubling of the cast, I had four members on the Scottish side and six on the English side. This made sense textually, because Macbeth speaks of all his loyal followers defecting to the other side in act 5, scene 3: "Then fly, false Theigns, and mingle with the English epicures." I chose to have Macbeth lead his soldiers. He directly attacked Malcolm, who was defended by Young Siward before all exited. This allowed me to use the full cast for maximum effect when the battle was joined, but cleared the characters who were either too important to be general combatants or needed to re-enter immediately upon the dissolution of the grand melee. With four on three, one Scottish character engaged in a two on one in one corner, but escaped across the stage to encounter two opponents in an opposite corner. These two were the tail end of the English line and the entrance point into the playing space was only one actor wide, so that timed out as well. The two on one encounters used the same universal phrase, but the side with two simply shared that side of the fight rather than it being a single person. The movement of groups and individuals diagonally through the center of the space and the breakup of fighting groups lent a further chaotic feel to the moment.

Another valuable aspect of using limited choreography is that it allows actors to fight with greater acting intent, because they don't have too much extra choreography to remember (recall that I am dealing with largely untrained actors and an abbreviated rehearsal schedule).

The last benefit of this approach is that large battles can easily adjust to different spaces (recall that Pigeon Creek tours) by adjusting the traffic patterns for time, rather than altering the choreography of the fights; increasing actor confidence in performing the fights in new spaces, without having to assimilate new choreography the afternoon of a show. Pigeon Creek Shakespeare actors are accustomed to altering entrances and exits to suit new spaces, so this kind of adjustment is much easier to assimilate. There is usually time for a couple of runs at load-in and a couple more at fight call before the show to set the patterns and assess any potential problems.

The other type of fight is what I refer to as the duel. Typically this involves only two characters. It can be playful, such as Tybalt/Mercutio, formal, as in Hamlet/Laertes, or dire as in Macbeth/MacDuff. In every case, however, there is a distinct change in attitude or intent before the last phrase. This is an important storytelling point to remember. Typically, Shakespeare gives a dialogue break with which to establish the change, which I then try to enhance in the final phrase. So, I have an opening attitude/tone and a change for the final phrase to consider. In keeping with standard storytelling format, I try to give each fight a beginning, middle and end. Three phrases keep it simple. The opening phrase is based on the opening mood of the fight as described above. The second phrase raises the stakes and either includes or sets up a reversal of fortune. The final phrase plays out the change to its conclusion. In Pigeon Creek's case, since many of the playing spaces are thrust, I also try to change the fight lines with each phrase.

As I mentioned in Part One, I organize my instruction and drills to inform the choreography, thus combining training and teaching choreography into the same session. I also construct drills (and choreography) that are distinctly different from each other. I have found, both in working with untrained actors as well as my own work

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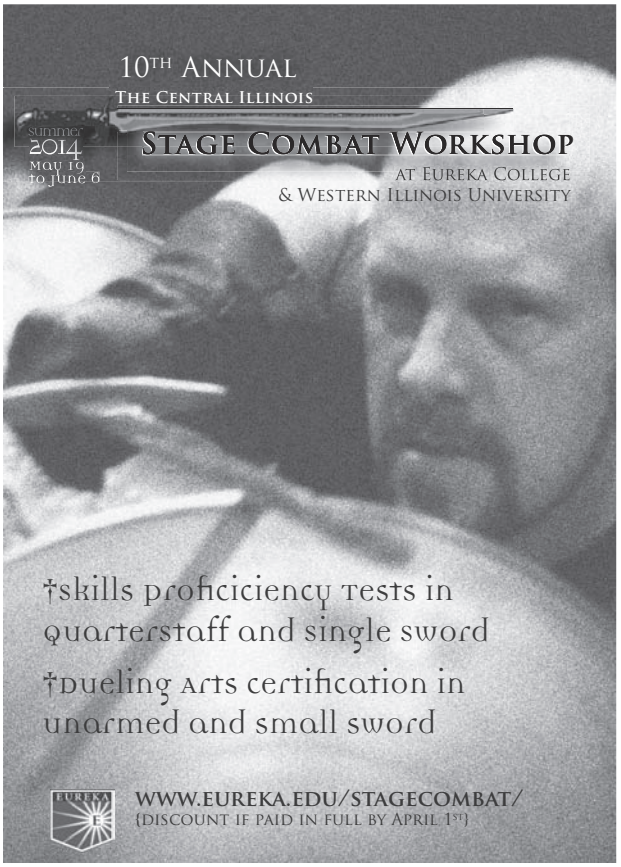
in SAFD renewals (which are a similarly compressed process) that multiple phrases starting with the same move can become confusing under the pressure of a test or performance. There can be a tendency to execute the first move and go into the wrong learned pattern or repeat a phrase already performed. So, I make it a point that every phrase has a different opening. Doing so keeps it easier for the actor to remember. Rehearsing patterns in the instruction phase makes combining them into phrases of choreography a relatively simple process. That gives me precious rehearsal time to refine style, coach intent, and correct spacing.

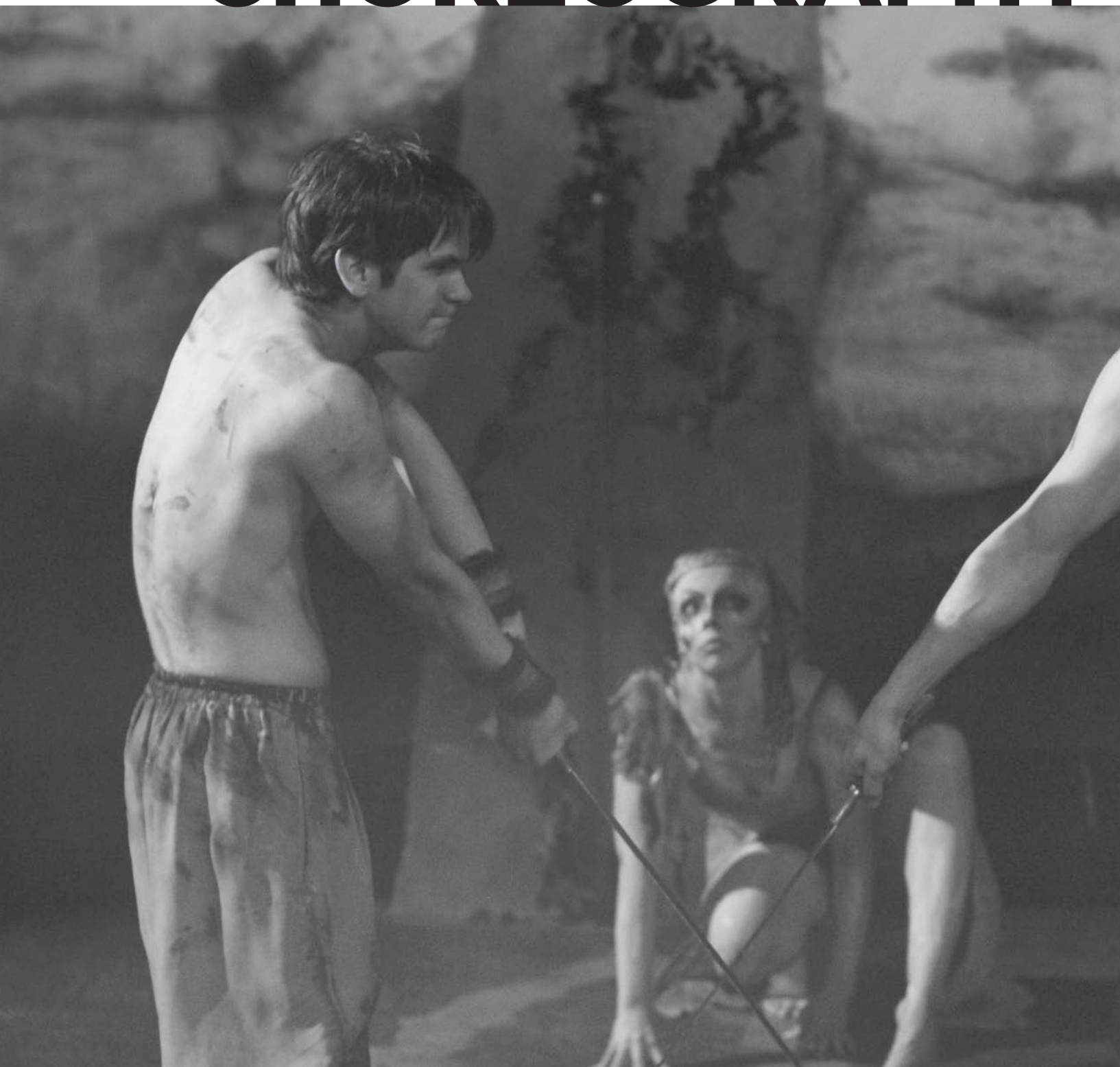
The final element of choreographing the duel is the addition of a "specialty move." As a practitioner of Historic European Martial Arts (HEMA), I try to bring some historical accuracy into my fights. Knowing that the martial techniques cannot be used for real, as they are meant to kill or maim, I adapt the movement style to give the fight an historic "flavor." The "specialty move" might be used to establish the martial superiority of one character over another, like Tybalt over Romeo, or it might be used to create an explosive opening or change the rhythm of the fight. The "specialty move" can also be used to change lines of fight or reverse fortune, or even be a kill move that is somehow out of the ordinary and creates a strong character statement. In coming up with the time and place for such a move, I will often talk with the director (if there is one) or the actors about their character development choices (Pigeon Creek often uses an ensemble-directed approach as well).

Another factor that influences choreographic choice is weapons selection. I am also responsible for the selection of weapons for the show. I have an armory of many different periods and types from which to select. When choosing weapons for groups, I tend to keep them relatively short, due to limited playing spaces, and all of a similar length, although they may vary in style. This gives extra visual interest without compromising the distance training that has gone on before. The universal phrase includes a standard safe distance, which may be retained by use of similar length weapons. With duels, in order to create visual interest and be able to expand/contract space, I try not to match weapons unless specifically called for in the text, such as in *Hamlet*. In one *Macbeth*, Young Siward discovered Macbeth with only his scepter, while the young knight has a two-handed sword. In the fight, Macbeth took Young Siward's sword (a specialty move) to kill him with it. This served to reinforce Macbeth's martial prowess before his final duel with Macduff. Mismatched weapons do present a problem in safe distance, but my methodology for the show allows me to spend a little extra rehearsal time on these factors and creates more visual interest for the audience.

When dealing with the conditions of untrained actors, short rehearsal periods and variable spaces, eliminating as many points of confusion is an approach I have found successful. In duels I try to keep choreography to three phrases, each with one major storytelling point, a unique opening and perhaps one "specialty move." When dealing with large groups, I try to institute a "universal phrase" for the whole cast, and then create visual chaos through movement patterns. Universal phrases can involve the whole company, saving valuable rehearsal time for staging and refining style, and be easily adjusted for small groups. The process has worked rather well, and as my repeat actors grow with each new show, I can give them more complex choreography to execute.

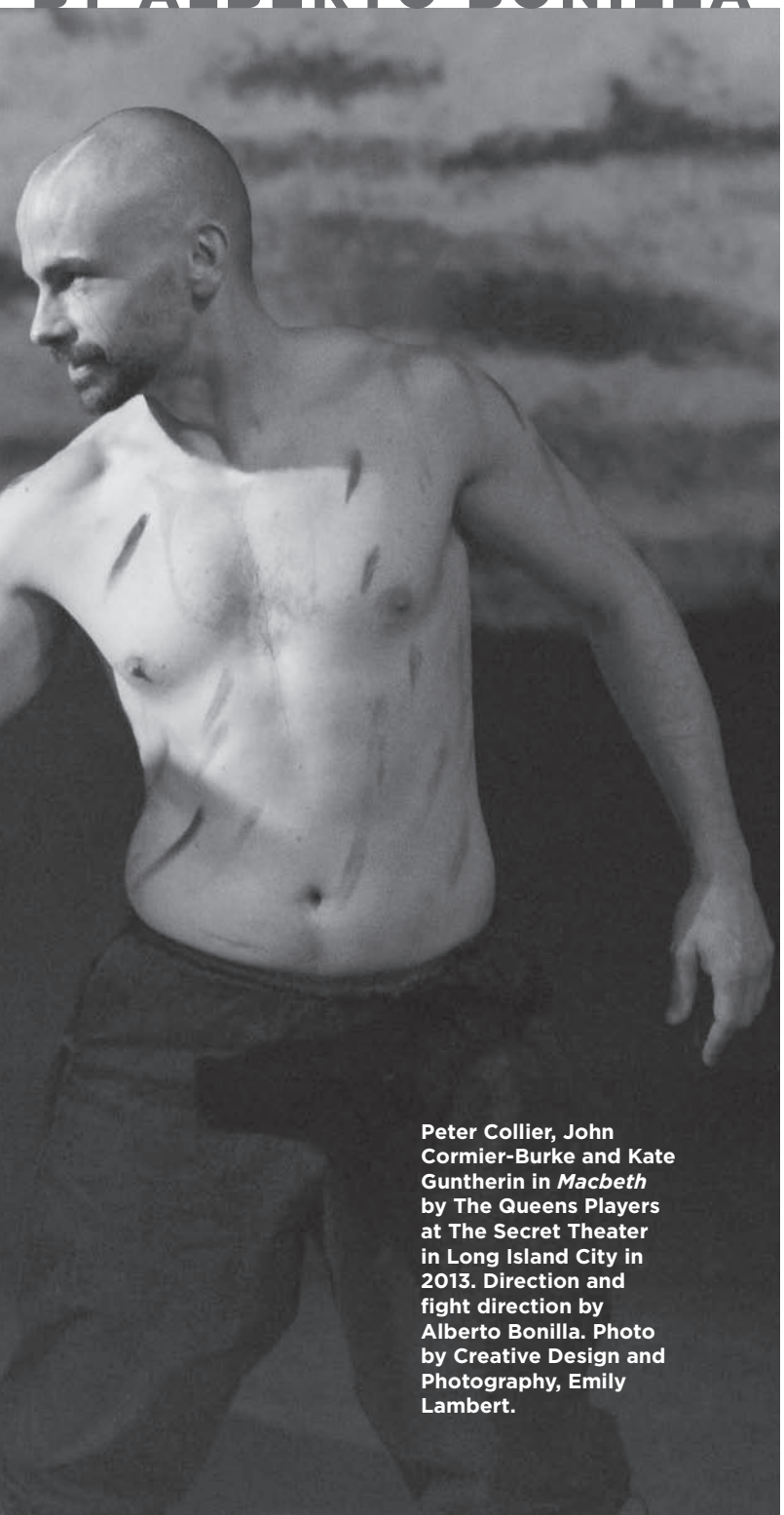


THE STATE OF NEW YORK CITY FIGHT CHOREOGRAPHY



WHAT IS WORKING AND WHAT IS NOT

BY ALBERTO BONILLA



Peter Collier, John Cormier-Burke and Kate Guntherin in *Macbeth* by The Queens Players at The Secret Theater in Long Island City in 2013. Direction and fight direction by Alberto Bonilla. Photo by Creative Design and Photography, Emily Lambert.

As I sat in the nose-bleed seats watching *Richard III* starring Mark Rylance, I was mesmerized. His characterization of Richard was so original; his physicality was that of a man who was not the most agile (either because the actor himself is not agile or because it was a character choice). As Act V started I realized that the big battle at the end of the show might be a problem. Mark Rylance's Richard was not a man of athletic ability and he had no use of his left arm. I had seen many Richards who, while physically deformed, were not as inhibited in their physicality as Mr. Rylance and were able to have a great fight at the end of the show. I was hoping that the last big fight would not be a disappointment.

It was brilliant. Not because of the agile abilities of Mark Rylance, who did not break character and suddenly become a physically fit Richard. There were no double-handed sword fights, no breakaways or high falls to dazzle the audience. In fact, the moves were traditional and basic, classic moves that any undergraduate would learn in Stage Combat 101. What made it so engaging was that every time the fight would begin to get more violent, a ghost of someone Richard had killed would appear and distract him. He would move for a striking blow and just above him was the child he had killed. He would prepare for a swipe and right in his way was the ghost of his brother. The staging and the movement were true to his character, the story was being enhanced and the fight was motivated within the world of the play such that when Richard's distraction created an opportunity for Richmond to strike the final blow it was moving and engaging. Jonathan Waller's fight direction, Mr. Rylance's characterization and the entire cast...got it right.

At another theater, using the same weapons and the same playwright (different play) we had swords blazing, thrown chairs,

near-misses and agile actors. Dynamic choreography that seemed borrowed from an Errol Flynn movie set the stage ablaze in steel. There were complicated sequences that the production team may have hoped would engage the audience. But I was so pulled out of the play by the fights that all I could think of was "Whose fault is this?" Was it the director who wanted to have an exciting fight because he had actors who were expert swordsmen? Was it the fight choreographer who had so many ideas and was let loose to create anything? Whoever was responsible for the glorified, unjustified, overkill fight I was seeing before me... got it wrong.

I have been doing fight choreography in NYC for over 13 years and I have started to notice three distinct trends in stage combat that I will refer to as Overkill, By the Book, and Spot On. It seems that the more theater I see the more I can recognize which of the three trends is at work. I will describe each trend, using examples from recent NYC productions and will offer suggestions achieving "spot on" fight choreography.

I hesitate to praise or blame the fight choreographer. I know too well that a director who wants flashier moves or an actor who isn't capable of basic ones can affect the final product. Lord knows I have choreographed my share of fights where I almost wanted to take my name off the playbill for any number of reasons. Theater is and has always been a collaborative effort in which you can't always fix problems in "post" or cut to a better angle like you can in film. However, as a fight director we should always strive for the highest form of artistic integrity that the situation permits. A flute player does nothing less than his best even when the rest of the band is out of tune or the conductor doesn't know what he is doing. That flute player is still part of the team. Artistic excellence is an individual responsibility that is driven by personal integrity.

Overkill

The "Overkill" work plaguing New York stages feels like it's influenced by film and television; there is an underlying need for productions to make fights more spectacular and dangerous in order to compete for consumers' attention and dollars. The problem comes when the fighting style is completely divorced from the period, situation and characters in the play.

I can't tell you how many times I see a new film come out and then see that same popular fighting style on the stage. I remember seeing *The Bourne Identity* and then seeing almost the exact same hallway sequence in a production Off Off Broadway. The characters in this play would have NEVER used Wing Chun or Krav Maga moves.

I recently saw a black box production that used broadswords; you could feel that the production team wanted a climactic final fight. The entire time I was so worried that the actors were going to hit the lights above them that it took all I had not to jump up and stop the show. Apparently I wasn't the only one distracted by the over-sized fights. Upon leaving the theatre after the show I heard an audience member say "I don't understand why they used such big swords. I thought they were gonna hit the lights!" A small black box is no place to have a broadsword fight if the blades are flying a good two inches deep into the lighting grid.

As a fight choreographer I feel that such a fight is a disservice to the production. I want my audiences coming out talking about the experience, the story and what it meant when he punched him; how "cool" the punch was only means that I pulled them out of the story. Yet all over New York there are productions churning out massive fights with elaborate choreography that does nothing to further the story or the character development.

Above and opposite, top: John Zdrojeski and Marc LeVasseur in *Macbeth* by The Queens Players at The Secret Theater in Long Island City in 2013. Direction and fight direction by Alberto Bonilla.

Opposite, bottom: Alberto Bonilla with the cast of *Macbeth* by The Queens Players at The Secret Theater in Long Island City in 2013. Direction and fight direction by Alberto Bonilla.

By The Book

You're sitting in the audience and the play reaches the moment of a fight. The actors have been engaging, the story has been moving and everything is flowing beautifully. You're wrapped up in the story and then the fight happens. "What? Is that it?" The fight has just interrupted the dramatic action. In the audience you almost laugh or worse – you just squirm. The play has been derailed and has no choice but to muster up and charge on. You might be more likely to forgive a flashy fight (at least there is some entertainment value) than a fight that falls short of the dramatic action.

While this trend seems to be more on the Off- and Off Off-Broadway scene it does still find its way onto Broadway every once in a while. The fighting seems stilted or amateurish. The moves are executed with accuracy but without any justification, context or connection to the situation. This can happen because the fight choreographer is inexperienced, the director didn't want it "too flashy" or the actors simply don't have the agility. So the moves may be done correctly, but have no connection to what is at stake in the play. It can feel like someone got a book on fight choreography or watched a Youtube video and decided "this is where a punch goes."

Spot On

You know it when you see it. The fight furthers the dramatic action, informs the character and pulls you deeper into the play. The movements of the characters are chosen to reflect how they would fight in the given situation; they are executed with precision and are dynamic within the world of the play. Most importantly, your attention is on the story and not the actors.

ABOVE AND OPPSITE: CREATIVE DESIGN AND PHOTOGRAPHY, EMILY LAMBERT

In addition to the *Richard III* example, David Anzuelo's fight direction in the Off-Broadway Production of *The Russian Transport* illustrates this well. There is a moment when Boris (a Russian mob trafficker) threatens a young woman (Mira, Boris's niece) after she realizes he is not who he says he is. The scene could have easily been turned into an overkill of sexual violation. A timid fight director may have shied away from what was required to create the atmosphere of fear. But Anzuelo and team got it spot on. He verbally threatens her and then simply puts his hand under her skirt in a forceful way. There was no nudity, no crazy screams - just a real threat that was clear, effective and terrifyingly theatrical. They didn't lose the play but pulled the audience into a panic for the character, not for the actor. This play's moment could have easily turned into Overkill or By-the-Book but was skillfully executed and choreographed (along with the other fight moments in the play)...it was Spot On.

Another Spot On example was B.H. Barry's fight choreography for the recent Broadway revival of *Golden Boy*. This production could have been By-the-Book by just sticking religiously to the old style of boxing while sacrificing theatricality, but Barry was able to capture the boxing style of the 1930's while making the fights dynamic and theatrical and allowing for characterization in what would be considered "straight" boxing moves. The fighting style of this period is burrowed in our minds from movies such as *Raging Bull*. Without the benefit of close-ups, the temptation can be to make it flashy or move it to a UFC-style. Even the bodies of the fighters felt appropriate to the period, not the ripped six-pack abs of the steroid-created fighters we see on the screen today. The conflict he created in the ring was superb and the fighting on stage defined the physical world of people who participated in the boxing culture.

Where Do We Go From Here

When actors arrive fresh of the bus, plane, boat or train in New York City there seems to be a gleam in their eye: they have reached the capital of theatrical excellence! After a while they realize there is also just as much bad theater as there is good in this town. The same holds true for fight choreographers and fight directors. I believe we, as a community, can contribute to raising the bar in our art form. I believe that we can have as much artistic integrity as a playwright, director, actor, etc. We are not just guys who know how to sell a punch or make the sword fights look real; we have a unique opportunity to challenge and raise the bar of theater so that a fight isn't just "awesome" but relevant and vital to the stories we tell. How do we get more Spot On fights?

Know What You're Cooking and Cook With What You Have

I was interviewed by the Queens Chronicle about a production of *Macbeth* I directed (produced by The Queens Players) that was set in the Dark Ages. I was on an Off Off-Broadway budget with union and non-union actors; some had extensive fight experience while others had never picked up a broadsword in their life. "How did you get everyone to be so... primal?" the interviewer asked. I told her my philosophy about fight directing (and directing in general): "I like to think of directing like cooking. I look at the ingredients I have and make the most of it. If there is a way I can prepare the ingredients to bring out the best, I do what I need to."

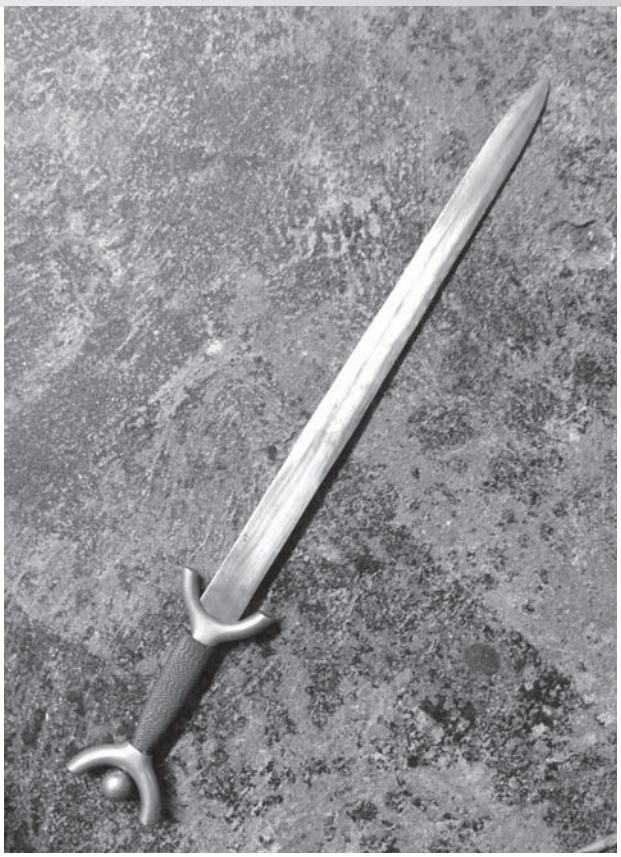
My approach to the physical world for *Macbeth* began during the auditions. I choreographed and taped a simple fight sequence, placed it online and required that the actors learn and perform the sequence during callbacks. The entire sequence was five moves. I can't tell you the number of times I have seen a huge disparity between the skills someone lists on their resume and their actual abilities. The only way to know if they can throw a punch, sling a blade or take a hit is to see them do it. If you can be involved from the get-go in the casting, DO IT. Those five moves was all it took for me to narrow the list down to the actors I could use. I intended for the play to be extremely physical and brutal; I could not have anyone in the cast that I couldn't train.

The second technique I used was to incorporate a boot camp-type workout into the rehearsal process. We do not live in a world where we regularly carry around broadswords so our muscles are not adept at holding, wielding and stopping steel on a regular basis. The first 20-30 minutes of EVERY rehearsal was a Spartan work out: strengthening the forearms, cardio intervals and grounding exercises. After two weeks of boot camp workouts I began to choreograph the fights using

bow staffs, kamas, escrimas and bamboo shinai swords, cost-effective approximations of the rented weapons we would use in the production, which we incorporated just prior to tech week. This allowed the actors to build their strength and stamina while familiarizing themselves with the choreography. After five weeks of rehearsals people were in great shape, comfortable in their bodies and ready to wield the actual steel weapons. As additional bonus, the workouts proved to be an incredible bonding experience for the cast.

I am not suggesting that if a play has one fight sequence you need to have the entire cast do the Insanity workout. But if you are doing a show that you know has extensive fight sequences, you can avoid injuries by getting your "ingredients" into shape, e.g. having your actors strengthen themselves so you can avoid sprains, injuries etc. We had an 18-person sword fight on a thrust stage and for the entire run we never had an injury. I am convinced it was the preparation that saved us from injury. The training period allowed me to become familiar with the abilities and limitations of the cast. Their agility, flexibility, and stamina were being strengthened as I played to their strengths with their bodies. I simply did what a cook does: I prepared my ingredients and used what I had.

I am not against complicated fight choreography or dynamic sequences. It simply needs to be appropriate. If you're going to go big you need to prepare the cast, or else they will be timid and stiff-looking (like they are By-the-Book), or over-zealous, risking hurting themselves and completely out of the world of the play.



Mentoring

I was VERY lucky in my training to have mentors for my acting as well as my fight choreography. Jake Turner didn't just teach me how to sling leather or flash steel; he taught me my first real lesson about fights. "Why do people fight in plays?" he once asked me. I looked puzzled because that seemed like an obvious question but a complicated answer. "People fight when words fail or words are not enough."

To this day I still hear my mentor, Maggie Flanigan, in the back of my head speaking to me regardless if I am acting, doing a stunt, or choreographing a fight. "Are you being authentic in this moment? Does the pinch match the ouch? Is this personal? Because if you are not taking this personally and having a really full response…you're falling short." When I hear her voice in my head while working out a fight, it always brings me back to the honesty of the character I am dealing with, keeping me truthful to the circumstances as well as the world of the play.

Mentoring gives the artist a touchstone that always stays with them. It's very different from taking classes; taking a class is NOT mentoring. It is my belief that the majority of training programs are more concerned with filling classes than mentoring. Class may teach you the technical aspect of a move or stunt but practical application in the field is EVERYTHING. If you are starting out, find a mentor, someone who is more experienced than you. Put your ego aside and LEARN from them.

I cannot tell you how much I learned being on the sets of *All My Children*, *As The World Turns* and *Guiding Light* with Jake Turner. It didn't matter if we were there for a slap, car drowning, or a boat sinking; I was learning. The experienced gained when one is working with a mentor gives you lessons you can't learn in a class. How do you deal with an actor of limited ability? What if the director has no clue what he is looking for in the fight? How do you deal with a know-it-all actor? How do you get the next job?

If you are higher up and not starting out then BE a mentor. Some people feel very competitive and worried that there are not a lot of jobs for us; the community we have is tight and tough to get into. But by us not mentoring the next generation of fighters we are, in fact, hurting our art. We are pushing away an opportunity to raise the bar and garner more respect from the artistic community. Experience brings with it an innate knowledge of when something is too little or too much. It is an awareness that is refined on the stage, one that must be honed

ABOVE AND OPPSITE: CREATIVE DESIGN AND PHOTOGRAPHY, EMILY LAMBERT

Above: Peter Collier and Marc LeVasseur in rehearsal for a production of *Macbeth* by The Queens Players at The Secret Theater in Long Island City in 2013. Direction, fight direction and photo by Alberto Bonilla.

Opposite: Weaponry for a production of *Macbeth* by The Queens Players at The Secret Theater in Long Island City in 2013.

through trial and error. By mentoring we (as a community) secure our work and the history of what we have created.

If I owned a fight school I would run it like a dojo, NOT like a class. Respect, integrity and level of skill are all equally important. I am not talking about the actor/combatant; people who what to learn a skill (rapier and dagger, armed vs. unarmed, etc.) either to move their acting career forward or to be more marketable. I am talking about fight directors and fight choreographers in-the-making. These are the students who stay after to ask questions, the ones who rehearsed three times more to make sure they got it right; they are going to be the next generation. Their first fights will be seen in dumpy old theaters way Off Off-Broadway. Imagine Off Off-Broadway fights meeting the same standard as those on the Great White Way and vice versa.

Go To The Theater, Not Just Movies

Just because it works in the close-up does not mean it works in a 500-seat house. Remember: I am speaking of the theater, not of the big screen. I feel this is more of an issue with younger choreographers. They know the fights by heart from movies such as *The Bourne Identity*, *Matrix*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Old Boy*, and so many more. They are soaking this up and yes, there is absolutely a place in the theatre for this style of fighting. However, Wing Chung does not belong in Sam Shepard's *True West*. Fight choreographers need to go to the theater. It becomes a running joke in New York that when you live here that you are so busy in the industry that you never go to see theater, you just make it. This is a grave mistake on our part as artists.

The small moments in theatre (the simple slaps, hair pulls, etc.) that can create an atmosphere of drama or comedy are just as important (sometimes MORE important) than a three-minute machete fight sequence. Fight choreographers are an integral part of storytelling. How can you tell stories if you don't ever go hear them? We are adding a unique perspective into stage violence for the purpose of the play. We are one pillar of dramatic structure that either supports it or helps it crumble.

Giant Ninja Robot

A Conversation on

By Meron Langsner and Angel Veza

Meron: Whenever I find myself talking about my work as a playwright I seem to end up quoting Edward Gordon Craig's statement from *On the Art of the Theatre* that "the dramatist is not the son of the poet, he is the son of the dancer." I like to tell stories through motion, even (or especially) when I write them. Craig's statement is especially apt when discussing the Giant Ninja Robot Battle scene from *Burning Up the Dictionary* in the context of its first production, because I am both discussing my writing in relation to physical narrative, and how the production was a first solo fight directing gig of a former student of mine.

The Giant Ninja Robot Battle was the last scene I wrote for *Burning Up the Dictionary*, and it was written around the time that Vagabond Theatre Group's workshop production was being cast. I had been formulating it for a few weeks, but I did not set pen to paper or fingers to keyboard on it until fairly late in the process. Earlier versions of the play included some incidental violence and several moments that would benefit from a movement specialist, but no fight scenes on the scale of this one.

The "fight" opens act two, and shows the couple at one of their happiest moments. The play is an anti-love story told anachronologically. The scene shows us what George and Suzy-Fay were like before things went south, and reminds us of why we might root for them.

Around the time that this production was about to open I had been working closely with Angel for several months in the context of theatrical combat; she had assisted me in shows at the ART, Boston Center for the Arts and other venues, and we had been training together privately on a semi-regular basis.

I have not trained many individuals closely outside of an academic context, but in all cases I select both for character and ability (in that order). Character, because theatre is done out of love and we want to do it with the best possible people, and ability because, as theatre is a living thing, anyone in a position to do so has a responsibility to identify and cultivate talent. Fight Directing is an especially sensitive area to mentor someone in, as we are responsible for safety, and because many of our collaborators may not fully understand what we do.

Angel: I always appreciated theater growing up, but it was something in which I rarely participated. During my senior year at Tufts University, however, I was informed that I still needed to fulfill one more art requirement in order to graduate, so I decided to try it out. This was when I first met Meron and was introduced to stage combat. I instantly fell in love with stage combat. Telling a story through movement makes sense to me, and I love the challenge of designing the illusion of a fight and the creativity it requires. For my final, a fellow classmate and I teamed up and decided to choreograph and perform a fight sequence from the play, *Living Dead in Denmark* by Qui Nguyen, which Meron told us about. In this scene, Hamlet, the Zombie Lord, confronts and fights Horatio. After creating an epic series of flips and kicks, we decided to kill Horatio by an eye-gouge and the consumption of his insides, which was a bread roll covered in chili. Best final ever.

Meron: Angel approached me about opportunities about a year after having graduated from Tufts University. As a student she displayed an understanding of the narrative elements of violence composition in both studio work and written assignments, and in at least one paper stated an interest in pursuing fight directing. A few months after graduating but prior to working with me, I called her attention to a workshop with Vampire Cowboys Rabid Vamps Fight Studio in NYC. Since her final scene for my class was from a play by Qui Nguyen, and I suspected that she would enjoy working with him directly. She came back from the workshop with visible excitement over the practice of composing stage violence.

Angel: The weekend with the Vampire Cowboys in NYC changed my life. I was inspired and motivated by the fight directors, their choreography, and the actors that I met. Upon returning to Boston, I was determined to become a fight director.

Meron: Not long after that experience, she approached me about working together. I took her on as an assistant for one show and found that this was a person worth cultivating. So, I asked if she were interested in continuing to work with me on other projects as they came up. This developed into a series of ongoing collaborations and private training sessions that took the shape of a sort of apprenticeship, though we never really defined the experience as such.

Originally I meant to take care of the violence and movement in Vagabond Theatre Group's production of *Burning Up the Dictionary* myself, but two thoughts occurred to me during pre-production: first, that the production and any revisions I would make during the rehearsal process would benefit from a perspective other than my own, and secondly, that it might make a great first solo gig for Angel. The reasons I felt it might make a good first solo gig were: first, she would have her mentor in the room and there was the option of my serving as a safety net if necessary (it was not), second, the movement and violence in the script played to her strengths:

PAUL CANTILLON

Battle

Collaboration and Mentorship

Suzy-Fay (Cassandra Meyer) swings at George (Tim Hoover) in Vagabond Theatre Group's November 2012 production of *Burning Up the Dictionary,* by Meron Langsner. Director: James Peter Sotis, Fight Director: Angel Veza, Costumes: Cara Grace Pacifico, Venue: Boston Center for the Arts

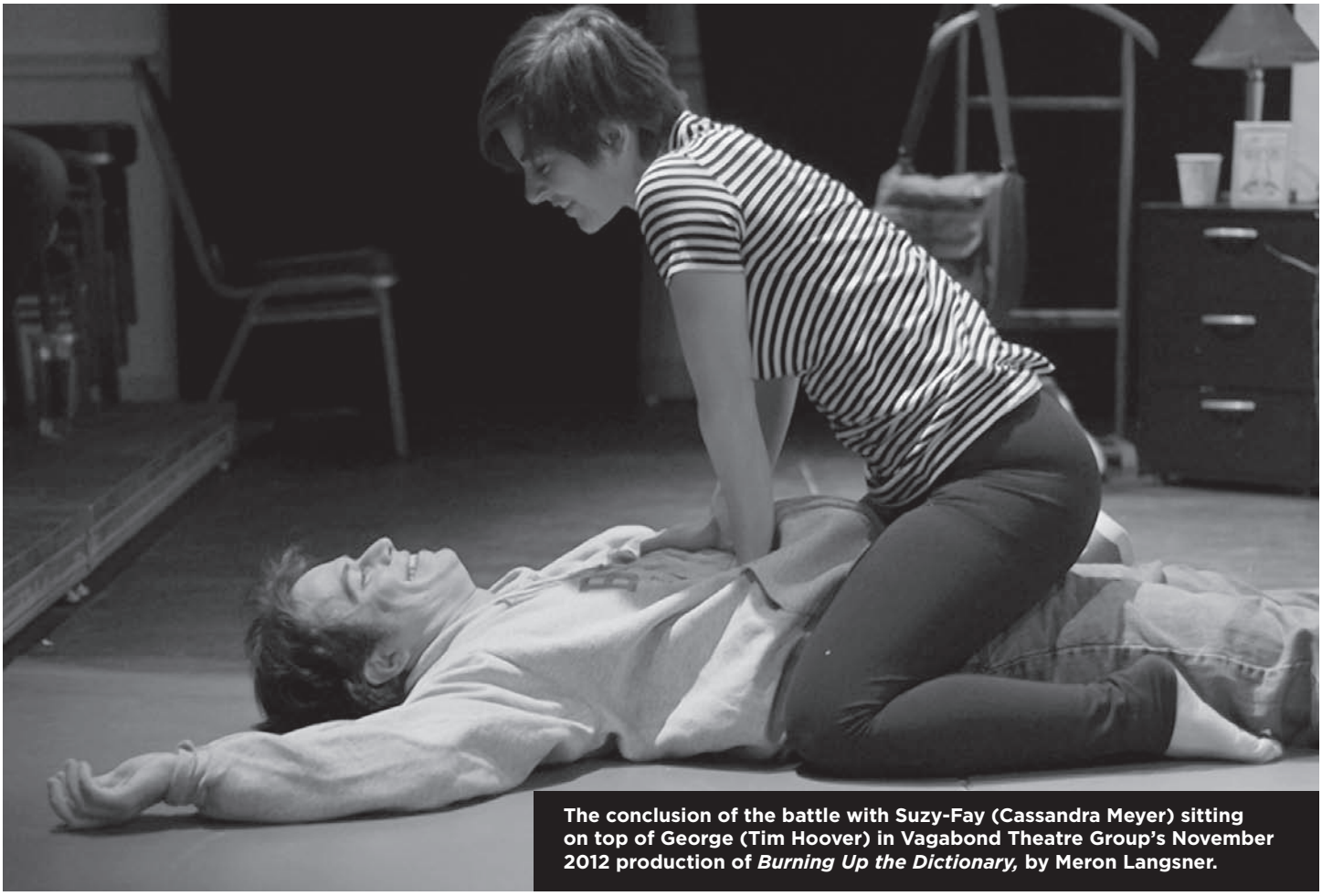
there were combinations of real and abstract movement, moments of dance, the incidental violence was fairly straightforward, and the big fight (that I had already begun thinking about before approaching her) played to her interests (she had just trained with Qui Nguyen after all).

Angel: When Meron gave me the opportunity to be the Fight Director for his play, *Burning Up the Dictionary*, he introduced me to the Director and said, "I expect giant ninja robot battles." Perhaps he was setting expectations pretty high for my first gig, but I was ready, eager, and determined to do well.

It was a unique opportunity for an emerging fight director. I could receive instant feedback from a seasoned fight director, which allowed me to reflect on my strengths and areas for improvement during the rehearsal process. I was also able to demonstrate different types of movement for the actors with Meron, from tango to "play-fighting." Having that dynamic helped established a collaborative environment and a sense of confidence between the actors and me. For my first gig, it was an excellent learning experience.

Meron: Understand that the workshop premiere of my play was something I had a huge emotional investment in, so asking Angel to be the Fight Director was a fairly significant act of faith. It's important for me to say that my faith was repaid. Her work was excellent and added dimensions to the physical narrative that would not have developed had I done the composition myself. She also added physical narrative to scenes that I did not originally envision it, and those became essential to the production.

During the process I mostly treated Angel as I would have any fight director working on my play, with perhaps the exception of sometimes acting as her assistant for demonstration purposes. Most times when I provided feedback on the movement I was speaking as the playwright in the room,



The conclusion of the battle with Suzy-Fay (Cassandra Meyer) sitting on top of George (Tim Hoover) in Vagabond Theatre Group's November 2012 production of *Burning Up the Dictionary,* by Meron Langsner.

albeit the playwright who also happened to be the more senior movement person. I occasionally gave her feedback on her composition from a mentor perspective, but I made a point of doing it privately. Angel was the Fight Director/Movement Specialist and it was important to me that I did nothing that might undermine her authority as such.

Angel: Because I worked so closely with Meron, it has been challenging to create a name for myself as a fight director with my own individualized process and strengths, however, after wrapping up *Burning Up the Dictionary*, I was offered a couple more fight directing gigs independent of Meron. One of the plays was *From Denmark With Love*, a James Bond/Hamlet mash-up, written by John J. King and produced by Vaquero Playground. With the Bond theme thrown into the mix, there were many fights, and because of that, the producer understood that a lot of time needed to be dedicated to them. I took advantage of that time and was able to apply what I learned from my experience from working on *Burning up the Dictionary.*

One of the most important lessons that I took to heart was creating choreography that achieves three things: 1) It complements the actor's movement knowledge; 2) It makes sense for the narrative and moves the play forward; and 3) It's fun for the actors and the audience. Additionally, I found that strong communication and demonstration for the actors is essential. This means teaching them safe ways to execute the choreography and explaining it in terms that makes sense to them. Whether that means using ballet terminology or movie references, I believe a fight director needs to find a form of communication that works for them and their actors. Most importantly, I learned that a fight director must be flexible. Sometimes choreography will not work, and sometimes an actor might show up to rehearsal with their arm in a cast (this actually happened during *Burning up the Dictionary*), but, a fight director who is resilient and creative will make it work. I stand by these lessons and have found that they develop trust between the actors and me as well as with the production team.

The path to fight directing has been a wonderful whirlwind, and I am grateful for and value all the lessons I have had in theater, especially with Meron; but the journey is far from over. Fight directing is my labor of love, and for me, this means that I will continue to widen my movement repertoire, network with anyone that is involved in or even skims the theater realm, and learn from as many people as possible. I am starting a new chapter in my life, and as a brand new resident of New York, I am excited to invest in this city and see where this adventure in stage combat takes me.

Meron: I don't know how much I speak for other educators, but one of my favorite ways to introduce someone I have trained is as a "former student and current colleague." In an apprenticeship system the desirable outcome is that students progress far beyond where individual training leaves them and they become independent artists in their own right. There is also a realization (especially in smaller markets) that instructors/mentors are essentially co-signing the work of anyone we train personally until they've accumulated a significant body of work beyond our initial collaborations. This can be risky for the senior person (for obvious reasons) and potentially uncomfortable for someone just entering the field as they might be seen as an extension of their teacher's "brand" until their own

PAUL CANTILLON

reputation speaks for itself. Several people who worked with Angel independently of me have gone out of their way to essentially congratulate me on training her. In retrospect I see that as being a mixed blessing for someone just entering the field and still pursuing additional training.

All that said, I'm excited to see where Angel goes in the field, and proud to have been in a position to help her start out.

"GIANT NINJA ROBOT BATTLE"
An excerpt from ***BURNING UP THE DICTIONARY***
By Meron Langsner
Act 2, Scene 1

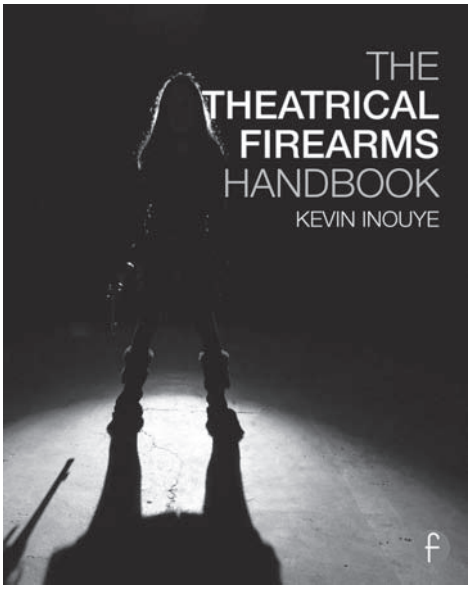
BACK WHEN THEY WERE STILL BUDDIES. AND GIANT NINJA ROBOTS.
GEORGE & SUZY-FAY sit side by side
SUZIE-FAY: Wow. I must really love you. Like. For real.
GEORGE: I am a lucky man.
SUZIE-FAY: You really are.
GEORGE: Suzy-Buddy. I have a question.
SUZIE-FAY: Yes George-Buddy?
GEORGE: What is it, on this particular evening, that makes you so especially aware of your love and my luck?
SUZIE-FAY: That I just sat through giant ninja robots for you.
GEORGE: I sat through that French movie for you.
SUZIE-FAY: That was a great movie.
GEORGE: So was mine. Consider yourself cultured.
SUZIE-FAY: How am I cultured after giant ninja robots?
GEORGE: Were there, or were there not subtitles?
SUZIE-FAY: Subtitles do not equal culture Buddy.
GEORGE: Tell that to the French.
SUZIE-FAY: I don't need subtitles for their movies.
GEORGE: You loved it. You just won't admit it.
SUZIE-FAY: Ok. That thing they did where they call out the moves as they do them. That was nifty. Though I'm pretty sure that they were making up as they went along.
GEORGE: Well, wouldn't you?
SUZIE-FAY: Make up powers? Absolutely. If it worked.
GEORGE: *(standing)* GIANT. LASER. OF AWESOMENESS!
He shoots a Giant Laser of Awesomeness at her.
She dodges. Casually.
SUZIE-FAY: Did you just aim a giant laser at me?
GEORGE: I did. Of awesomeness. It was only your amazing ninja skills that let you avoid it.
SUZIE-FAY: George. Buddy. Do not think that I take giant lasers lightly.
GEORGE: Whatcha gonna do about it. Buddy.
SUZIE-FAY: GIANT LIGHTENING SWORD OF DOOM
She swings a Giant Lightening Sword of Doom at him. He dodges it.
GEORGE: A giant lightening sword Buddy?
SUZIE-FAY: Of Doom.
GEORGE: I'm in trouble now.
SUZIE-FAY: That you are Buddy.
GEORGE: *(in a bad accent)* I see you Fight Well in the Old Style.
SUZIE-FAY: *(copying him)* I see you have a problem on your hands.
They play at being Giant Ninja Robots for a few moments. It is pretty goofy. They make up more moves and shout them out as they execute them. Until...
GEORGE: And now the ultimate weapon...
SUZIE-FAY: Yes. TACKLE-TACKLE-TACKLE
She tackles him.
GEORGE: WRESTLEWRESTLEWRESTLE
SUZIE-FAY: *(overlapping)* WRESTLEWRESTLEWRESTLE
He ends up on top of her (or something). They change positions every few moments from here on in.
SUZIE-FAY (CONT'D): Nice moves. Not very ninja though.
GEORGE: Since when do giant ninja robots tackle?
SUZIE-FAY: Since it's a great way to get their boyfriends into compromising positions.
Pause.
SUZIE-FAY: What?
GEORGE: I guess that's a good strategy.
SUZIE-FAY: Tackling? Or titles?
GEORGE: Both.
SUZIE-FAY: It is true you know.
GEORGE: I guess it is.
SUZIE-FAY: You're not just a boyfriend. You're a Buddy.
GEORGE: You're right.
SUZIE-FAY: I usually am. Took you long enough to realize.
GEORGE: You know, this makes asking you your New Year's plans a whole lot less awkward.
SUZIE-FAY: I expect we'll have taken a whole lot of awkwardness out of New Year's plans for a while.
GEORGE: I love you Suzy-Buddy.
SUZIE-FAY: I love you too George-Buddy.

This play in its entirety is available on Indie Theatre Now.

Between the Motion and the Act
A Review of *The Theatrical Firearms Handbook*

By Adam Noble

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow
T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)
The Hollow Men



I am fascinated by the shadows within our art, by the nebulous dark zones that reside in between the established norms and the innovating vanguard of artists whose work is moving things forward. If you care to look, even in our age of specialization, Internet resources and information overload, there are plenty of places where practice has not quite caught up with theory, or vice versa.

A couple of years ago, just such a gray area incited me to write "Sex & Violence: Practical Approaches for Dealing with Extreme Stage Physicality" (*The Fight Master*, Spring 2011). At that time, I was grappling with the gap between an obvious fight show, where there was no doubt that a fight director would be called in, and all the other shows with "some physicality" in them, where a professional's involvement was far from certain. My fascination with that underserved zone, that nexus where untrained actors and directors (whether students or professionals) were creating without a safety net or established rules of engagement, goaded me into years of leading university workshops, organizational seminars, master classes, and ultimately publication.

In much the same way, Kevin Inouye's very accessible and informative new treatise, *The Theatrical Firearms Handbook* (Focal Press – June 2014), seeks to illuminate a fast-growing, yet incredibly underserved segment of our craft: theatrical firearms. Mr. Inouye is well suited for such an endeavor. Not only is he a Certified Teacher with the SAFD, but he is also one of less than 20 Theatrical Firearms Safety Instructors within the SAFD's relatively new firearms curriculum. He is a qualified sharpshooter, and has studied tactical firearms usage and retention techniques in a myriad of venues and locales. When we first met in Seattle, Washington in 2003, he was already working as an armorer/weapons master/gun wrangler/stunt performer, and running his rental properties/fight choreography company (Fight Designer, LLC). In the decade since, I have witnessed his scholarship, research and practical knowledge all increase exponentially.

> The time has come then for a mainstream effort to educate theatrical professionals in the ins and outs of the use of firearms on stage.
> —Chuck Coyl, SAFD Fight Master
> Foreword, *The Theatrical Firearms Handbook*

It is Mr. Inouye's clear perspective on the subject of theatrical firearms, based on practical experience, that makes the handbook so successful. He is able to speak candidly, and at times even self-effacingly, about many instances where he has already made the mistakes for the reader, allowing them to benefit from the lessons he has learned. The handbook is written in a straightforward, colloquial manner, making it accessible, practical, informative and entertaining. (I believe I laughed out loud a few times! The phrase "GLOCK-blocked" comes to mind…)

Practitioners of all experience levels have something to gain from this book. For the uninitiated, the book serves well as a lexicon of useful tidbits and advice; for novice practitioners, there are straightforward, experience-based bullet points and reference materials to keep on hand; and even for those of us who are already working it the field, there are templates of waivers and practical checklists to reference, as well as a no-nonsense discussion of legislation and applicable laws. And yet, beyond different skill levels, the book also spans different perspectives on this craft, offering advice and information for actors, directors and producers, as well as would-be fight directors, gun wranglers and stunt coordinators.

> We're human storytellers, and the best story isn't the gunshot being fired, it's in the decision to shoot and the reaction to it. Make those your big playable moments, not the little finger twitch.
> —Kevin Inouye
> Chapter 5, *The Theatrical Firearms Handbook*

Mr. Inouye would be the first to admit that this one book cannot possibly cover every topic, nor be everything to everyone, but he has successfully created a handbook that has something for everyone. I would go so far as to say a significant amount. In my experience, it is rare for a skilled practitioner of any specialty niche to be so forthright and open with the fruits of their knowledge. Often these "trade secrets" are guarded with all the devotion of a secret society. Mr. Inouye's willingness to so candidly and generously share his perspective and experience speaks volumes, elucidating his desire to forward this facet of our art, and enable all of us to tell safer, more articulate stories.

Whatever your personal feelings about firearms, we cannot deny their popularity and widespread usage in film, television, and the theatre. Mr. Inouye's terrific book is an important treatise on their safe and proper usage as well as a call for all of us to continue forwarding our artistic understanding of these tools, which have become so ubiquitous in our business.

> Safety first, safety last, safety always.
> —Kevin Inouye
> *The Theatrical Firearms Handbook*

Society of American Fight Directors
Directory

Governing Body

President
J. DAVID BRIMMER
Yardley, PA
(347) 512-3932
president@safd.org

Vice President
CHUCK COYL
Chicago, IL
(773) 764-3825
vice-president@safd.org

Secretary
DARREL RUSHTON
Frostburg, MD
(301) 687-4487
secretary@safd.org

Treasurer
ANDREW HAYES
Greencastle, IN
(765) 658-4596
treasurer@safd.org

Fight Master Representative
IAN ROSE
Philadelphia, PA
(215) 802-3885
rosefights@comcast.net

Fight Director Representative
PAUL R. DENNHARDT
Stanford, IL
(309) 530-3069
prdennh@ilstu.edu

Certified Teacher Representative
T. FULTON BURNS
Mobile, AL
(251) 460-6202
t_fulton_burns@
yahoo.com

Friend/Actor Combatant/Advanced Actor Combatant Representative
ZEV STEINBERG
Lansing, MI
(847) 207-7607
zev@zevsteinberg.com

Regional Representatives

Coordinator
MIKE SPECK
Winona, MN
(507) 429-2636
RegRepCoord@safd.org

International
BRET YOUNT
London, UK
44-020-8881-1536
IntlRegRep@safd.org

Northwest
HEIDI WOLF
Seattle, WA
(206) 548-9653
NWRegRep@safd.org

Southeast
KC STAGE
Raleigh, NC
(859) 492-8215
SERegRep@safd.org

East Central
RAY RODRIGUEZ
Far Rockaway, NY
(646) 373-8106
ECRegRep@safd.org

Middle America
JASON TIPSWORD
Coralville, IA
(319) 530-0416
MARegRep@safd.org

Pacific West
TRAVIS SIMS
Glendale, CA
(312) 282-9296
PWRegRep@safd.org

Southwest
MATTHEW E. ELLIS
Norman, OK
(405) 204-7156
SWRegRep@safd.org

Great Lakes
RACHEL STUBBS
Chicago, IL
(773) 655-9128
GLRegRep@safd.org

New England
ROBERT NAJARIAN
Cambridge, MA
(617) 413-7817
NERegRep@safd.org

Rocky Mountain
BENAIAH ANDERSON
Denver, CO
(720) 624-9868
RMRegRep@safd.org

College of Fight Masters

GEOFFREY ALM
Seattle, WA
H: (206) 365-3870
C: (206) 920-1047
gbald@juno.com

J. DAVID BRIMMER
Yardley, PA
(347) 512-3932
jdavidbrimmer@aol.com

Emeritus
DAVID BOUSHEY
Everett, WA
(425) 290-9973
BUSHMAN4@prodigy.net

BRIAN BYRNES
Houston, TX
(713) 446-4004
bbyrnes123@yahoo.com

MICHAEL G. CHIN
New York, NY
(546) 246-4061
chinmichaelg@gmail.com

CHUCK COYL
Chicago, IL
(773) 764-3825
chuckcoyl@prodigy.net

DREW FRACHER
Highland Heights, KY
(859) 760-6230
vern10th@fuse.net

ERIK FREDRICKSEN
Ann Arbor, MI
(313) 944-0116
hannis@umich.edu

DALE ANTHONY GIRARD
Kernersville, NC
(336) 993-3255
dale.girard@ncstunts.com

MARK GUINN
Ruston, LA
(318) 614-1636
fmguinn@me.com

k. JENNY JONES
Cincinnati, OH
kj_jones@msn.com

DAVID S. LEONG
Richmond, VA
(804) 986-4890
dsleong@vcu.edu

SCOT MANN
Macon, GA
(478) 787-7691
mann_sj@mercer.edu

Emeritus
J.D. MARTINEZ
Lexington, VA
H: (540) 463-3756
W: (540) 463-8005
martinezj@wlu.edu

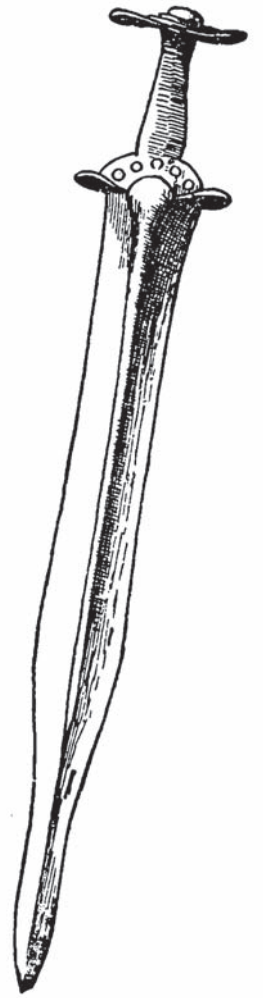
RICHARD RAETHER
Rockford, IL
(815) 540-4717
rraether@me.com
www.rraether.com

IAN ROSE
Philadelphia, PA
(215) 802-3885
rosefights@comcast.net

RICHARD RYAN
Charlotte, NC
(323) 209-5240
richard@stagefight.com
www.stagefight.com

J. ALLEN SUDDETH
Glen Ridge, NJ
H: (973) 748-5697
C: (973) 223-5056
nyfgtdirctr@aol.com

DAVID WOOLLEY
Chicago, IL
C: (312) 560-5448
W: (312) 344-6123
guido@theswordsmen.com
dwoolley@colum.edu
www.theswordsmen.com



Fight Directors

GEOFFREY ALM
Seattle, WA
H: (206) 365-3870
C: (206) 920-1047
gbald@juno.com

AARON ANDERSON
Richmond, VA
(804) 683-3483
adanderson@vcu.edu

JASON ARMIT
Atlanta, GA
(404) 964-1957
jasonarmit@gmail.com
www.jasonarmit.com

JOHN BELLOMO
Philadelphia, PA
H: (215) 334-1814
C: (215) 262-1591
jvbellomo@verizon.net

J. DAVID BRIMMER
Yardley, PA
(347) 512-3932
jdavidbrimmer@aol.com

PAYSON BURT
Norristown, PA
(610) 389-7898
paysonburt@gmail.com

BRIAN BYRNES
Houston, TX
(713) 446-4004
bbyrnes123@yahoo.com

JAMIE CHEATHAM
Racine, WI
(262) 595-2522
cheatham@uwp.edu

MICHAEL G. CHIN
New York, NY
(546) 246-4061
chinmichaelg@gmail.com

CHARLES CONWELL
Chester Springs, PA
H: (610) 827-7707
W: (215) 717-6454
CConwell@uarts.edu

PAUL R. DENNHARDT
Stanford, IL
(309) 530-3069
prdennh@ilstu.edu

DEXTER FIDLER
San Francisco, CA
(415) 810-3476
dexfid@yahoo.com

BRENT GIBBS
Tucson, AZ
(520) 621-9402
brentg@email.arizona.edu

Emeritus
MICHAEL JEROME JOHNSON
Jackson, WY
(202) 258-1177
jjohnsonmichael@gmail.com

JEFF A.R. JONES
Raleigh, NC
(919) 325-2842
jarjones@nc.rr.com

k. JENNY JONES
Cincinnati, OH
kj_jones@msn.com

COLLEEN KELLY
Staunton, VA
(540) 849-8870
colleenkhome@gmail.com

GEOFFREY KENT
Denver, CO
(303) 877-2670
geoffrey@thefightguy.com
www.thefightguy.com

RICHARD LANE
San Francisco, CA
(415) 336-8765
richardlane@pacbell.net
www.academyofthesword.org

BRUCE LECURE
Miami, FL
(305) 903-9250
Blecure@aol.com

DAVID S. LEONG
Richmond, VA
(804) 986-4890
dsleong@vcu.edu

ROBERT MACDOUGALL
Seattle, WA
(206) 522-2201
clanrdmacd@aol.com

MIKE MAHAFFEY
Hollywood, CA
(818) 749-8393
mike_mahaffey@hotmail.com

SCOT MANN
Macon, GA
(478) 787-7691
mann_sj@mercer.edu

JOHN MCFARLAND
Brookfield, IL
(708) 955-8767
mcfarland.john@sbcglobal.net

DR. ROBIN MCFARQUHAR
Urbana, IL
(773) 398 9500
rmcfarqu@uiuc.edu

TIM PINNOW
Grand Junction, CO
(575) 496-2369
tpinnow@mesastate.edu

RON PIRETTI
New York, NY
(917) 385-9750
ron.piretti@gmail.com

RICHARD RAETHER
Rockford, IL
(815) 540-4717
rraether@me.com
www.rraether.com

RICKI G. RAVITTS
New York, NY
(212) 874-7408
rickifights@yahoo.com

IAN ROSE
Philadelphia, PA
(215) 802-3885
rosefights@comcast.net

RICHARD RYAN
(323) 209-5240
richard@stagefight.com
www.stagefight.com

NICOLAS SANDYS
Chicago, IL
(773) 274-0581
Voice: (773) 398-3034
npullin@depaul.edu

JOHN TOVAR
Geneva, IL
(630) 330-4293
john_tovar@sbcglobal.net

CHRISTINA TRAISTER
Eaton Rapids, MI
(310) 213-2558
traimez@gmail.com

JOSEPH TRAVERS
New York, NY
(212) 726 2400
swordplay98@hotmail.com

ROBERT "TINK" TUFTEE
Brooklyn, NY
(718) 788-4957
Tink@fights4.com
www.fights4.com

STEVEN VAUGHAN
Grand Island, NY
(716) 474-1160
svsv55@yahoo.com

ROBERT WESTLEY
New York, NY
(617) 620-5057
rtwestley@gmail.com

DAVID WOOLLEY
Chicago, IL
C: (312) 560-5448
W: (312) 344-6123
guido@theswordsmen.com
dwoolley@colum.edu
www.theswordsmen.com

JACK YOUNG
Houston, TX
(610) 737-5092
jackyoung59@hotmail.com

Certified Teachers

GEOFFREY ALM
Seattle, WA
H: (206) 365-3870
C: (206) 920-1047
gbald@juno.com

LACY ALTWINE
North Hollywood, CA
(818) 749-8394
lacy_altwine@hotmail.com

AARON ANDERSON
Richmond, VA
(804) 683-3483
adanderson@vcu.edu

MICHAEL ANDERSON
Bloomington, MN
(612) 759-9711
JackMikeAnderson@gmail.com

LERALDO ANZALDUA
Houston, TX
(281) 732-4708
leraldo_a@hotmail.com

JACKI ARMIT
Gretna, LA
(404) 408-2221
jackiarmit@gmail.com

JASON ARMIT
Atlanta, GA
(404) 964-1957
jasonarmit@gmail.com
www.jasonarmit.com

JONATHAN BACA
Cincinnati, OH
(513) 295-4788
jbaca@newedgecliff.com

TIM BELL
Orlando, FL
(954) 401-3445
stuntbell@earthlink.net

JOHN BELLOMO
Philadelphia, PA
H: (215) 334-1814
C: (215) 262-1591
jvbellomo@verizon.net

ANGELA BONACASA
Castine, ME
(207) 610-9970
goodhouse@hotmail.com

IAN BORDEN
Lincoln, NE
(616) 826-3506
ianmborden@yahoo.com

BOB BORWICK
Athens, TN
(423) 381-9972
bobbyborwick@yahoo.com

J. DAVID BRIMMER
Yardley, PA
(347) 512-3932
jdavidbrimmer@aol.com

H. RUSS BROWN
Whitehouse, TX
(903) 360-1026
hruss@revengearts.com
www.revengearts.com

JAMES N. BROWN
Wyomissing, PA
(267) 258-2341
JNBrown12153@aol.com

JAY BURCKHARDT
Chicago, IL
(312) 450-4173
jkchoreography@yahoo.com

T. FULTON BURNS
Mobile, AL
(251) 460-6202
t_fulton_burns@yahoo.com

PAYSON BURT
Norristown, PA
(610) 389-7898
paysonburt@gmail.com

BRIAN BYRNES
Houston, TX
(713) 446-4004
bbyrnes123@yahoo.com

JOHN CASHMAN
Clermont, FL
(352) 208-2449
johncashman@cfl.rr.com

GINA CERIMELE-MECHLEY
Cincinnati, OH
(513) 200-5866
swordlady@zoomtown.com

BARBARA CHARLENE
Macomb, IL
(703) 216-7532
bseifert82@gmail.com

JAMIE CHEATHAM
Racine, WI
(262) 595-2522
cheatham@uwp.edu

MICHAEL G. CHIN
New York, NY
(546) 246-4061
chinmichaelg@gmail.com

JONATHAN COLE
Salem, OR
(503) 798-2783
jon@revengearts.com
www.revengearts.com

CHARLES CONWELL
Chester Springs, PA
H: (610) 827-7707
W: (215) 717-6454
CConwell@uarts.edu

J. ALEX CORDARO
Philadelphia, PA
(267) 496-1497
jalexcord@yahoo.com

CHUCK COYL
Chicago, IL
(773) 764-3825
chuckcoyl@prodigy.net

BRUCE CROMER
Yellow Springs, OH
(937) 775-2430
bruce.cromer@wright.edu
www.brucecromer.com

TED DECHATELET
McMinnville, OR
(503) 560-0636
ted@revengearts.com
www.revengearts.com

NATHAN DECOUX
New York, NY
(718) 683-0303
mrfightguy@yahoo.com
www.gothamarmory.com

PAUL R. DENNHARDT
Stanford, IL
(309) 530-3069
prdennh@ilstu.edu

CHRISTOPHER DUVAL
Moscow, ID
(208) 310-2828
cduval@uidaho.edu

ROBERT RADKOFF EK
Champaign, IL
(850) 322-4577
radkoff@yahoo.com

MATTHEW E. ELLIS
Norman, OK
(405) 204-7156
mellis@ou.edu

BRIAN EVANS
Athens, OH
323-397-4952
evansb1@ohio.edu

DEXTER FIDLER
San Francisco, CA
(415) 810-3476
dexfid@yahoo.com

AL FOOTE III
New York, NY
(917) 710-1226
alfoote3@gmail.com
www.alfoote3.com

DREW FRACHER
Highland Heights, KY
(859) 760-6230
vern10th@fuse.net

ERIK FREDRICKSEN
Ann Arbor, MI
(313) 944-0116
hannis@umich.edu

TIZA GARLAND
Gainesville, FL
(407) 256-9215
TizaG1@aol.com

BRENT GIBBS
Tucson, AZ
(520) 621-9402
brentg@email.arizona.edu

DALE ANTHONY GIRARD
Kernersville, NC
(336) 993-3255
FightGuy@earthlink.net
dgirard@NCARTS.edu

DAN GRANKE
Richmond, VA
(734) 340-0602
Dan.granke@gmail.com

DR. STEPHEN GRAY
Chicago, IL
(312) 420-0197
sgray@Elgin.edu

MARK GUINN
Ruston, LA
(318) 614-1636
fmguinn@me.com

ROBERT HAMILTON
Venice, CA
(310) 367-7396
ftnv21@gmail.com

ANDREW HAYES
Greencastle, IN
(765) 658-4596
amhayes@depauw.edu

MICHAEL HOOD
Indiana, PA
(724) 357-2282
mhood@iup.edu

ROBB HUNTER
Fairfax, VA
(917) 604-3008
robbhunter@preferredarms.com
www.preferredarms.com

DENISE ALESSANDRIA HURD
New York, NY
(212) 243-4867
DAHurd2000@gmail.com

KEVIN INOUYE
Richmond, VA
(804) 405-2695
kevin@kevininouye.com
www.kevininouye.com
www.fightdesigner.com

JONATHAN JOLLY
Waco, TX
jonathancjolly@gmail.com

JEFF A.R. JONES
Raleigh, NC
(919) 325-2842
jarjones@nc.rr.com

k. JENNY JONES
Cincinnati, OH
kj_jones@msn.com

CASEY D KALEBA
Washington, DC
(703) 568-7657
casey.kaleba@earthlink.net
www.toothandclawcombat.com

COLLEEN KELLY
Staunton, VA
(540) 849-8870
colleenkhome@gmail.com

GEOFFREY KENT
Denver, CO
(303) 877-2670
geoffrey@thefightguy.com
www.thefightguy.com

DR. MICHAEL KIRKLAND
Virginia Beach, VA
(757) 226-4730
michhil@regent.edu

MARIANNE KUBIK
Charlottesville, Virginia
(434) 825-1071
marianne@virginia.edu

MICHELLE LADD
Los Angeles, CA
(818) 438-8342
HRHmladd@aol.com

RICHARD LANE
San Francisco, CA
(415) 336-8765
richardlane@pacbell.net
www.academyofthesword.org

CRAIG LAWRENCE
Fairfax, VA
(240) 277-3850
FightGuyCL@gmail.com
fightguycl.weebly.com

BRUCE LECURE
Miami, FL
(305) 903-9250
Blecure@aol.com

BILL LENGFELDER
Rockwall, TX
(214) 768-3539
lengfeld@smu.edu

DAVID S. LEONG
Richmond, VA
(804) 986-4890
dsleong@vcu.edu

BRIAN LETRAUNIK
Chicago, IL
(773) 805-0926
brian.letraunik@gmail.com
www.brianletraunik.weebly.com

GREGG C. LLOYD
Newport News, VA
(757) 594-8793
glloyd@cnu.edu

ROBERT MACDOUGALL
Seattle, WA
(206) 522-2201
clanrdmacd@aol.com

MIKE MAHAFFEY
Hollywood, CA
(818) 749-8393
mike_mahaffey@hotmail.com

JENNIFER M. MALE
Columbia, MD
(410) 428-5482
female_fights@yahoo.com

SCOT MANN
Macon, GA
(478) 787-7691
mann_sj@mercer.edu

NEIL MASSEY
Brookfield, IL
(708) 485-2089
neil@roguesteel.com
www.roguesteel.com

JILL MARTELLI-CARLSON
Greenville, NC
(252) 412-7887
carlsonj@ecu.edu

JOHN MCFARLAND
Brookfield, IL
(708) 955-8767
mcfarland.john@sbcglobal.net

DR. ROBIN MCFARQUHAR
Urbana, IL
(773) 398 9500
rmcfarqu@uiuc.edu

ADAM MCLEAN
Boston, MA
(804) 938-2222
mcleanadamb@gmail.com

NATHAN MITCHELL
Chelsea, MI
(586) 530-7353
natemitchell2004@hotmail.com

MICHAEL MUELLER
Boise, ID
(208) 570-3096
mjmueller3@gmail.com
www.mjmueller3.com

DOUGLAS MUMAW
Statesville, NC
(704) 880-0819
drmumaw@gmail.com
theswordsmen.com

ROBERT NAJARIAN
Cambridge, MA
(617) 413-7817
neregrep@safd.org

ADAM NOBLE
Bloomington, IN
(812) 272-4148
nobledynamic@gmail.com

MARTIN NOYES
Savannah, GA
(714) 473 6279
bignoyes@hotmail.com

DAN O'DRISCOLL
New York, NY
(646) 228-6878
Dan35051@aol.com
www.swordandtherose.com

Emeritus
MARK OLSEN
New York, NY
Meo1005@aol.com

CORY ROBERT PIERNO
New York, NY
(516) 993-7915
Corey.Pierno@gmail.com
CoreyPierno.com

TIM PINNOW
Grand Junction, CO
(575) 496-2369
tpinnow@mesastate.edu

RON PIRETTI
New York, NY
(917) 385-9750
ron.piretti@gmail.com

CHRISTOPHER PLUMMER
Suffern, NY
(845) 598-1501
shaxpear@me.com

NIGEL ADAM POULTON
New York, NY and
Brisbane, AUSTRALIA
US: (212) 941-7696
AUS: 61-423-865-839
kaboom@powerup.com.au

RICHARD RAETHER
Rockford, IL
(815) 540-4717
rraether@me.com
www.rraether.com

RICKI G. RAVITTS
New York, NY
(212) 874-7408
rickifights@yahoo.com

CARA RAWLINGS
Blacksburg, VA
(540) 449-2877
crawlings@vt.edu

ANDREW DYLAN RAY
Shreveport, LA
(859) 552-8785
ard612@gmail.com
a-rayfights.blogspot.co.uk

DAVID REED
Waco, TX
(214) 458-0866
davidandreed@yahoo.com
davidreed-director.com

ANDREA ROBERTSON
Phoenix, AZ
(602) 384-7775
andrea@fightcall.com
www.fightcall.com

RAY A. RODRIGUEZ
Far Rockaway, NY
(646) 373-8106
ranthrod66@yahoo.com

IAN ROSE
Philadelphia, PA
(215) 802-3885
rosefights@comcast.net

DARRELL RUSHTON
Frostburg, MD
(301) 687-4487
dsrushton@frostburg.edu

RICHARD RYAN
(323) 209-5240
richard@stagefight.com
www.stagefight.com

NICOLAS SANDYS
Chicago, IL
(773) 274-0581
Voice: (773) 398-3034
npullin@depaul.edu

JOHN PAUL SCHEIDLER
Staunton, VA
(646) 337-7124
jpdoe@earthlink.net

EDWARD "TED" SHARON
Fredonia, NY
(716) 673-3597
edwardbsharon@gmail.com

LEWIS SHAW
Towson, MD
(410) 340-1461
Lonniesc@aol.com
www.lewisshaw.com

LEE SOROKO
Miami, FL
(305) 458-9306
lsoroko@miami.edu

KC STAGE
Raleigh, NC
(859) 492-8215
SERegRep@safd.org

JIM STARK
Hanover, IN
(812) 866-7262
stark@hanover.edu

PAUL STEGER
Lincoln, NE
(402) 472-7014
psteger2@unl.edu

DAVID STERRITT
Atlanta, GA
(770) 883-0168
dsterr20@gmail.com

ELIZABETH STYLES
Chicago, IL
combat-ebeth@comcast.net

J. ALLEN SUDDETH
Glen Ridge, NJ
H: (973) 748-5697
C: (973) 223-5056
nyfgtdirctr@aol.com

STERLING SWANN
Putnam Valley, NY
sswann9@aol.com

JASON PAUL TATE
Lexington, KY
(502) 330-7299
jasonpaultate@gmail.com
www.jasonpaultate.com

JASON TIPSWORD
Coralville, IA
(319) 530-0416
jason.tipsword@gmail.com

JOHN TOVAR
Geneva, IL
(630) 330-4293
john_tovar@sbcglobal.net

CHRISTINA TRAISTER
Eaton Rapids, MI
(310) 213-2558
traimez@gmail.com

JOSEPH TRAVERS
New York, NY
(212) 726 2400
swordplay98@hotmail.com

ROBERT "TINK" TUFTEE
Brooklyn, NY
(718) 788-4957
Tink@fights4.com
www.fights4.com

STEVE VAUGHAN
Grand Island, NY
(716) 474-1160
svsv55@yahoo.com

BRAD WALLER
Springfield, VA
(571) 334-7060
GlobeFG@aol.com

ROBERT WALSH
West Newton, MA
(617) 448-5083
robertwalsh@rcn.com

ROBERT WESTLEY
New York, NY
(617) 620-5057
rtwestley@gmail.com

MATTHEW R. WILSON
Washington, DC
(347) 247-0755
WilsonMatthewR@gmail.com
www.matthewrwilson.com

HEIDI WOLF
Seattle, WA
(206) 548-9653
nwregrep@safd.org

DAVID WOOLLEY
Chicago, IL
C: (312) 560-5448
W: (312) 344-6123
guido@theswordsmen.com
dwoolley@colum.edu
www.theswordsmen.com

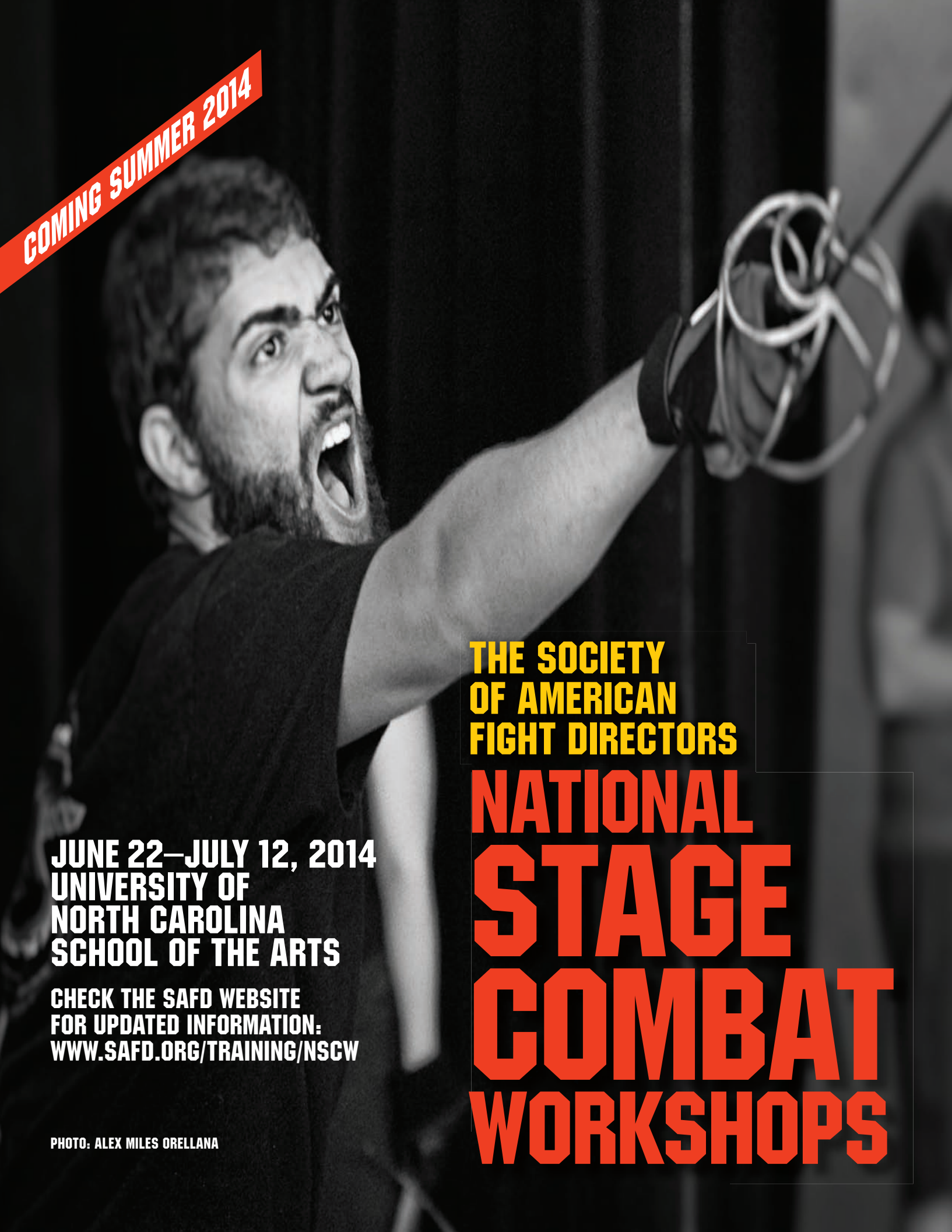
D.C. WRIGHT
Macomb, IL
(309) 333-3438
DC-Wright@wiu.edu

MIKE YAHN
New York, NY
(832) 928-7577
yahn.mike@gmail.com
www.mikeyahn.com

DAVID YONDORF
Chicago, IL
(773) 983-5156
davidyondorf@hotmail.com

JACK YOUNG
Houston, TX
(610) 737-5092
jackyoung59@hotmail.com

BRET YOUNT
London, UK
44-020-8881-1536
IntlRegRep@safd.org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