Moulinet: An Action Quarterly, Volume 1, Issue 2

Moulinet Staff
Feature Stories:

When The Sword Gets Heavier  
by Mary Shen Barnidge

Dances With Deafies  
by Karin McKie

Testing Mettle  
by Anthony G. Fiala

Field Dispatches:

Facing Down Goliath  
by Ned Mochel

Change The Duty Roster  
by Chris Morrison

Reviews:

Killer Joe  
Grand View  
Among The Thugs  
Tommy Gun’s Garage
MOULINET: An Action Quarterly

Publisher - Charles J. Likar
Editor - Bebe Swerdlow

Contributing Writers
Mary Shen Barnidge
Anthony G. Fiala
Karin McKie
Ned Mochel
Chris Morrison

Consultants
JoElla Cicero
Duane Sharp
H. Gregory Mermel

Copyright © 2000 by Charles J. Likar

CALL FOR COPY

WE WANT YOUR STORIES! Our goal is to bring you news, information and anecdotes on the topic of stage combat. We can’t do it without your contributions, so tell us what you want to know or what you think we should know. Got a fightwrite article growing cobwebs in the trunk? Send it to MOULINET: An Action Quarterly.

Articles, interviews, features - 300-1000 words. Reviews - 100-300 words.

Mail all submissions to MOULINET, P.O. Box 1265, La Grange Park, Illinois 60526.

Payment in copies. All rights return to the authors.

DEADLINE FOR NEXT ISSUE IS 31 July 2000

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISEMENTS - $5 for 1-25 words, $10 for 26-50 words. (Boxes, graphics, etc., $10 with camera-ready copy.)

About the Authors

Mary Shen Barnidge is a freelance writer and theatre critic for the Chicago Reader and Windy City Times. She is a member of the American Theatre Critics Association, Poets & Writers, Inc, and a Friend in the Society Of American Fight Directors.

Anthony G. Fiala is a freelance writer who travels extensively and gives his address as “the East Coast”.

Karin McKie is a member of Babes With Blades and Footsteps Theatre, for whom she adapted and directed Shakespeare’s Lovers And Fighters. She recently choreographed the fights for, as well as performed in, Stage Left Theatre’s Jeff-nominated Police Deaf Near Far.

Ned Mochel has choreographed fights for McTeague, The Song Of Jacob Zulu, The Fair Maid Of The West (for which he was awarded a Joseph Jefferson citation) and all three incarnations of A Night At The Fights. He has acted in The Talisman Ring, Cyrano de Bergerac and Xena Live!. And he has served as director and choreographer for productions of The Two Towers and The Beaux’ Stratagem.

Chris Morrison is currently choreographing fights for The Wake-Up Crew somewhere in California.

RINGSIDE COMMENTARY

To The Editor:

Seneca, the Roman historian, once wrote, “Ask me for a true image of human existence, and I will show you the sack of a great city.” The implements of war are now too terrible for entertainment and the world too large to inspire the comprehensible legends it once did. The heroes we have do not engage in single combat. No bards sing. Contemporary life has lost an enriching component.

The men and women celebrated in MOULINET: An Action Quarterly are the only remaining romantic fighters. They are comprehensible, their goals are worthy, their romance still palpable. I am grateful for the chance to become acquainted with them. Violence is implicit in human nature, but we are drawn equally to quests and deeds of derring-do. More! More! More!

Sincerely,
Aurelia Knossos
WHEN THE SWORD GETS HEAVIER: A CHAT WITH NED MOCHEL
By Mary Shen Barnidge

Like athletics and dance, stage combat has traditionally been a young person’s game. While this is mostly governed by the physical demands of the occupation, popular perception—both on the part of the audiences and the participants—also plays a role in making actor-fighters reluctant to admit their age, lest they be dubbed, “Pops” (or worse, “Gramps”) by their junior colleagues.

“Fighters are like actors,” says David Woolley, himself a senior Fight Master with the Society Of American Fight Directors, “When they don’t do it any more, they direct, they teach, they write a book. I’ll probably be writing mine soon.” Dawn “Sam” Alden, former resident fight choreographer for Footsteps Theatre, observes, “The age helps the wisdom aspect of it. Actors trust you more. They acknowledge your authority.”

In a field of artistry recognized in America for only a little over two decades, aging fighters are rare, and those willing to talk about their future are rarer yet. Jeff citation-winning fight choreographer Ned Mochel offered to talk about the options open to stage combat specialists of—um, a certain age. (For the record, Mochel is thirty-four years old and was first certified as an actor-combatant with the SAFD in 1988.)

MSB: In what ways does age affect fighters differently than it does actors?
NM: The good thing about fighting is that it’s tangible. Actors never know if they’ve lost it or not, but a fighter knows, for sure, what he can do and when he can’t do something. I was a bit of a crazy young guy myself. I remember, when I was twenty-three, jumping off a ten-foot platform, landing on my feet, and going right into a sword fight.

MSB: Youthsful enthusiasm. Everyone thinks they’ll live forever.
NM: You can’t stop the young guys. They’re going to want to do the risky stuff while they can do it. Last summer [choreographing Macbeth at Oak Park] two actors fresh out of Columbia College wanted to jump off the highest platform—twelve feet with rocks and tree branches below—at the beginning of the sword fight. And they showed me they could do it, numerous times. I didn’t put it in the show, but it was a tough choice.

MSB: The toughest part was probably explaining to the kids why you weren’t going to let them do their Evil Knieval stunt.
NM: The trick is to figure what’s dangerous for that actor, as opposed to what’s dangerous for you. That’s half the job of being a fight choreographer. When someone tells me, “So-and-so got hurt in a sword fight you choreographed”, I feel responsible.

MSB: What have you learned from working with other old fighters?
NM: Working with Kevin [Gudahl] last summer inspired me because (laughing sheepishly) he’s OLD. [“how old?” I ask. “I don’t know—maybe in his early forties.”] He’ll complain about aches and pains, but he moves like a twenty-five-year-old kid, he can fight like a twenty-five-year-old kid, and he handles language like a mature actor. And doing Xena Live! with [choreographer] David Woolley. David is like a Viet Nam field medic. If somebody falls down, and says “oh, the side of my leg hurts a little”—David will know the name of the bone, he’ll know the name of the muscle, he’ll know the stretching exercise that will heal it, he’ll know hot, cold and how to put the ice on. He will, literally, dress the wound right there on the spot. Watching him, I’m aware of how much more I could stand to learn.

MSB: What do you do differently, as a fight choreographer, when working with older actors?
NM: At the first rehearsal, after I introduce myself, I’ll pass out a piece of paper and say, “write down everything that’s wrong with you”. That way, I know who has the bad knee, and who has the bad shoulder. And as I put together the choreography, I’ll make sure I don’t have an actor do anything to himself that’s too stressful.

MSB: Do actors appreciate this?
NM: One of the best things about being older is that older actors start thinking, “hey, this guy’s thirty-five. He knows how this can hurt, or that can hurt”. And so that actor tends to give more respect to the older fight choreographer. When you’re a young director doing an equity show with old actors, they’re probably going to say, “well, this young guy has a lot of great new ideas, and I’m willing to go wherever he wants”. But if you’re a young fight choreographer, you tell an older actor that he’s going to jump off this platform or...
swing on this rope, he's going to tell you, "Forget it, young guy!".

**MSB:** An actor who has already invested several years in his career has to look out for his future.

**NM:** Most actors are gung-ho about most things, but when it comes to stage combat, they want to make sure they're working with someone who keeps their profession in mind at all times. When I was choreographing *MeTeague* at the Lyric [see FIELD DISPATCHES], an opera singer who had to do a stunt said to me, "I can't risk my voice. It's my entire livelihood". And right there, I said "I understand". It's not about *this* particular production, the passion of the moment or any of that. It's whether he'll be able to finish this show and then go on to another one right after.

**MSB:** What's in your future as an old fighter?

**NM:** A lot of fighting roles are older men, especially in Shakespeare. I can play Macbeth or Richard the Third. Macduff, whom I played last summer, is a role I can play until I'm fifty. *The Three Musketeers* has fight roles for characters from D'Artagnan, who's a teenager, to Athos, who's—what, fifty-five, getting up there in years. [I mention Old Capulet, who calls for a sword in the first scene of *Romeo and Juliet* and could exchange a few blows with Montague before the brawl is broken up. Mochel concurs, saying "and they would know how to use those swords"]

**MSB:** So you still foresee a long career ahead as a fighting actor.

**NM:** (laughing) If I take care of myself, and don't do any more fifteen-foot jumps. Seriously, the things I did in *Fair Maid Of The West*, I can't do any more. But new things are opening up for me. The opportunities are there.

**TESTING METTLE**

*by Anthony G. Fiala*

The building at 927 Noyes Avenue in Evanston was once a high school, and the walls of the athletic facility are composed primarily of windows—fixed, clerestory and casement, the latter recalling a time before the advent of air-conditioning. But there is no sunshine this rainy evening, and the five men and one woman in their mid-twenties now doing warm-up exercises are toppled out in sweat pants, tee-shirts and long-overdue haircuts. They comprise the enrollment of a stage combat class at what is now called the Actors Gymnasium, a training center for clowns, acrobats, jugglers, and other practitioners of the performing arts.

Distinguishable from their pupils only by their ages and clip-boards, fight instructor Joe Dempsey and Fight Adjudicator David Woolley confer over the evening's agenda. Dempsey's students are here to take their final examinations for certification as actor-combatants in the Society of American Fight Directors, and once the testing period begins, any delay can scuttle weeks of careful preparation. Tonight, the six hopefuls must demonstrate their ability to do battle within a dramatic context, in a variety of styles, using a variety of weapons—all devoid of any movement that might result in injury to the fighters, other onstage personnel or offstage spectators.

The first segment of the two-part exam consists of pre-rehearsed two-person scenes, each of them lasting seven minutes. Whether composed by the participants or drawn from the repertoire, they must include, however sketchily presented, all the principles of dramatic literature, i.e. narrative, characterization and dialogue. More important, they must incorporate into their action conflicts involving rapier and dagger, quarterstaff, and hand-to-hand fighting techniques. Woolley, one of eleven SAFD Fight Masters, will then review their performance, pursuant to deciding who will—or will not—be certified at this session.

As the first pair of neophytes take their places, Woolley frowns at the floor. Permanently covered with foam-rubber to accommodate the many gymnastics courses in the center's curriculum, its spongy, foot-gripping texture is not unlike that of a mattress. This springiness offers no handicap to Dempsey and his flock, however, whose "sea legs" have long since acclimated to walking on its wobbly surface.

More hazardous is the immense size of the playing space. Actors instinctively station themselves at the
center of their environment, but this show's minuscule audience—Dempsey, Woolley, myself and Gymnasium manager Tony Adler—is seated well to one side at the mat's very edge. "Remember not to start too far upstage." Dempsey warns his pupils, "and speak up loud and clear!"

The reason for his caveat soon becomes evident. As the Edward-Edmund recognition scene from King Lear proceeds, the action gradually eases the performers farther into the room's back corner and away from the viewers, obscuring the details of what—at this distance, anyway—looks to be a passable rapier duel. At least the neophyte combatants, acknowledging their considerable height differences, have had the foresight to align the shorter of them downstage for most of the scene (a consideration not lost on Woolley, himself part of a Mutt-and-Jeff fencing act popular on the Renaissance Fair circuit).

The second scene pairs a lanky young man with the class's lone female, the top of whose head barely reaches her partner's nose. Their scene appears to have been adapted from a folk tale dealing with a jealous husband, but their words are all but unintelligible in the echo-riddled room. What makes the story even more difficult to follow, however, is the propensity of the adrenaline-fueled players to leap, rather than step, through their paces, making for a stage picture resembling that of tennis match more than a physical engagement (at one point, Woolley calls a warning to a rapidly retreating combatant to beware of a pile of gym equipment at stageside—the unheeding fighter backs into it anyway, and barely avoids tripping.)

The final pair of fighters take the stage, announcing a self-authored scene featuring characters from Star Wars. ("What these students do is the opposite of normal acting procedure." says Woolley, "Instead of the fight supporting the script, the script is tailored to fit the fight.") Unlike the other teams, who—intricate choreography notwithstanding—seem to have been introduced to one another minutes before the start of their scenes, these two have the relaxed rowdiness of longtime comrades. Noting that both are left-handed, I wonder how large a part the reluctance of right-handed fighters to be paired with southpaws played in forging this alliance.

Whatever the answer, Woolley is not about to let it continue. For the second part of the exam, he orders the students to change their ranks, adding jovially but firmly, "Everybody's gonna get partnered with a leftie, sooner or later!" When the three couples have taken their places, he gives them a short sequence of movements that he and Dempsey have formulated during the mid-session break. The students then practice their abbreviated new fight as Woolley strolls between the flying rapiers, offering a bit of coaching here and there.

To my uneducated eye, each individual performer displays much the same strengths and weaknesses as in their prepared scenes, so I am puzzled when Woolley stops one fighter and proceeds to give him extra stage business designed to slow the execution of the sequence. ("After you lunge and your partner retreats, you stop, you do a take at the audience—can you do any Eyebrow-Acting? Yeah, that's good—and then turn back to your partner and only then do you advance.") The student carries out these instructions but Woolley has him repeat them several times before going on to the next team.

I learn the reason for this later, after the students have been banished outside to rest and await the adjudicator's verdict. "These aren't meant to indicate who's a better fighter than whom," Woolley tells me as he carefully hand-letters the names onto the blank certificates, "What these are meant to communicate is that the fighter is someone who can work with anybody, anywhere, with nobody getting hurt." And I recall the "Safety First" mantra universally invoked by fight choreographers.

Waiting in the hall, I reveal nothing of what I have heard as each student is called in for a private critique and—for all but one of them—their induction into the SAFD. Neither, I note, do the classmates discuss their own performance evaluations among themselves, there or at the "graduation party" that follows at the nearby pub, to which all are invited.

Close after "Safety" in the fighters' code of conduct is "Sportsmanship." Or perhaps the chivalry exhibited by the characters so often played by actor-fighters makes them reluctant to humble the comrades who did not make the grade this time. Whatever the answer, a stranger observing the company would never guess the sanguine occupation inspiring the laughter and camaraderie. More than in any other occupation, men and women who make their living by the sword—even if only make-believe—know when the show's over.
DANCES WITH DEAFIES
by Karin McKie

The world premiere production of Polcie Deaf Near Far at Chicago's Stage Left Theatre recently gave me the opportunity to choreograph some fisticuffs.

One of the two deaf actors in the cast had a scene with a hearing actor, a confrontation in front of a hospital where a deaf activist was protesting the controversial cochlear implant operation that was going to be performed on a hearing-impaired child. My challenge was to communicate my vision of the scuffle to someone who can't hear.

I don't know American Sign Language (ASL), but my eagerness to learn new languages gave me at least a rudimentary knowledge of speaking with my hands. Robert Schleifer, who plays Martin Cronin, is also expert at reading lips, so our physical lexicon was off to a good start.

At one point in the scene, he throws a punch at the child's father. We solved the problem of the knap by returning to the very basics of fighting onstage. As in every fight, eye contact is an absolute necessity in order to achieve safety and credibility.

In some ways, it was easier to teach this fight to a deaf actor than it would have been with many hearing actors. The initiator of this fight was already accustomed to speaking through his body. Indeed, both of the "deafies" (what they called themselves, as we were the "hearies") seemed to have an innate command of their physicality.

The choreography process was smooth and vigorous, and the resulting fight made audiences wince. I highly recommend the experience of working with deaf actors.

SYNOPSIS OF POLICE DEAF NEAR FAR: Based on an actual 1996 incident, David Rush's play tells the story of hearing-impaired activist Martin Cronin, "Sting" to his associates. Angry, cynical and charismatic, his antisocial impulses are channeled into civil disobedience in the name of Deaf Rights. Resentful of his dependency on a hearing girl friend, he quarrels with her one day and then, still emotionally agitated, presides over a protest demonstration at a hospital offering the controversial cochlear implant surgery—touted as a "cure" for deafness, but resented by many in the deaf community. A physical confrontation with the parents of the child receiving the operation leads to Cronin's arrest and detainment. Driving home after his release, he is stopped by a patrol officers, who misinterpret his gestures as a threat and proceed to open fire, killing him.

A NIGHT WITH THE FIGHTS

KILLER JOE—fight choreography
by J. David Brimmer

From Chicago to London to New York, critics have commented at length on the violent resolution to this creepy comedy of filial murder-for-hire. J. David Brimmer has twice claimed the credit, first in the cramped quarters of Lower Manhattan's Cornell-box Soho Playhouse, and again in the larger, but equally awkward, confines of the former St. Nicholas Theater space for the Chicago production. The shallow but wide stage allows for broader horseplay of the casual variety—a small man elbows a larger one to gain his attention, a women scrambles up on the back of the sofa to slap at the sitter thereupon, a girl watching an action-TV program dances about in kinetic response—to foreshadow the bloodbath to come. And when it finally does, the resulting melee (which includes a table being thrown across the stage to clear space in the center) exhibits not only an escalation of the preceding brutality, but a dynamic of confusion and despair sufficiently intense to keep our disbelief suspended even with the choreography transpiring a bare ten feet from the front row of spectators.

AMONG THE THUGS—fight choreography
by Robin McFarquhar

When the play's theme is the spontaneous mob violence of British soccer fans, and the audience is sitting in proximity as close as that of the auditorium at the Noyes Arts Center, you can't pull your punches—almost literally. Certainly the standard long-bout, punch-jab-and-thrust technique will not do to replicate the blitzkrieg tactics of a thousand crazed and drunken louts engaged in hand-to-hand brawling. But Robin McFarquhar, himself English and a personal witness to the mass mayhem described in author Bill Buford's first-hand account, takes an expressionistic approach to the kinetic spectacle—slow-motion melodies, multi-image movement (as when the blows from two policemen's clubs are echoed by seven more batons striking the floor and walls)—occasionally punctuating the dance-like movement with sudden bursts of full-contact combat to create a seductive ambiance of savage brutality and Dionysian bloodlust belying the mandatory safety of its construction.
GRAND VIEW — fight choreography by David Woolley

The main conflict in William Kennedy’s play is one of political intrigue, so a simple fifteen-second scrap between irate adversaries would seem an easy assignment. But when neither of the two middle-aged combatants are in the best of shape and one has a sciatic condition that prevents him raising his arms above shoulder-height, the task gets more difficult. Fortunately, veteran Fight Master David Woolley has amassed a wealth of experience in dealing with lesser-supple players. (This is the choreographer, after all, who made sure Zach Grenier didn’t lose an ear scuffling with Colin Stinton and Michael Gross in Art.) The do-si-do by which one geezer overpowers the other in this show might look more like a botched ballroom-step than a successful hammerlock, but nevertheless conveys the scene’s intent without crippling either player in the course of its execution.

TOMMY GUN’S GARAGE — fight choreography by Jim Bionski

On the holiday weekend where most dinner-and-entertainment establishments are pouring on the hearts and flowers for sentimental lovers, this roaring-twenties theme club celebrates with—what else?—a re-enactment of the gangland slaying popularly called the St. Valentine’s Day massacre. The authentic Thompson submachine guns (carefully stored between show times at the police station up the street) that usually serve only as menacing props are showcased in action, as a bevy of actors, hired especially for the occasion, are lined up against the wall behind a likewise vintage automobile, where they proceed to discharge their blood-bags before collapsing into a pile of carnage-soaked stiffies. Easy duty, until you consider that these unlucky extras are not allowed to stir from the wet, cold floor until every last audience member willing to pay for the privilege has had their Valentine wish granted—a souvenir photograph of himself (or herself, or grandpa, or even the whole family) posed triumphantly, Tommy in hand, above the gruesome tableaux.

FIELD DISPATCHES

FACING DOWN GOLIATH
by Ned Mochel

You hate to have to go a director and tell him he can’t have what he wants, because you’re confessing your own inadequacy. A perfect example was the show at the Lyric Opera a few years ago—McTeague, that Robert Altman directed. When I was hired, they told me “Bob Altman’s directing”, but I never made the connection.

There was this enormous sugar-glass window—about ten feet by ten feet and raised up about four feet in the air—with a woman and a bed on the other side. Altman wanted the opera singer to climb up on a ladder, right in the middle of singing this beautiful aria, and then smash the window, jump though it onto the bed, and strangle the woman.

So I went up to this scruffy, bearded, surly director and told him “This is never going to happen! There’s no way this singer is going to crash through that window”. Of course, everybody else is cowering in the corners, with these are-you-insane looks on their faces.

At first, Altman said, “No, this is how we’re going to do it”, but I said, “No, it’s not”. And finally, he said, “You know what? Okay!”. We got costumes in there, they put in some padding, and the singer broke the window with his forearm, and then climbed through it. And a week later, Altman and I were getting along great.

You have to trust the director and do what you were hired to do. Even if I had known who he was, I would have done the same thing.

CHANGE THE DUTY ROSTER
by Chris Morrison

My résumé reads “Romeo And Juliet, Abram, Boston University”, “Romeo And Juliet, Abram, Theaterworks”, “Romeo And Juliet, Abram, Concord Players”.

Who’s Abram? Come on, you know Abram! Act one, scene one. “Do you bite your thumb at me, sir?”. As soon as the director sees the words, “fight experience”, he says, “Good! You’re playing Abram!”. I’ve played that role so many times that I’ve stopped listing it in my bios.
“To knock a thing down, especially if it is cocked at an arrogant angle, is a deep delight to the blood.”

— George Santayana