Moulinet: An Action Quarterly, Volume 1, Issue 3

Moulinet Staff

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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 some fighting words? Send them to Moulinet: An Action Quarterly.

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

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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.

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Mark Rector is an actor, fencer, stage combatant and fight choreographer. He is the author of Medieval Combat, the first English translation of Hans Talhoffer’s 1467 Fechtbuch, to be published by Greenhill books in September, 2000.

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Bebe Swerdlow is an Animal Rights advocate who spends his time viewing storefront theatre in Chicago. He travels widely and will be attending the Oberammergau Passion Play in September.

RINGSIDE COMMENTARY

To the Editor,

What a swell publication! I enjoyed reading Moulinet tremendously, and would be delighted to contribute to it.

Sincerely,
Mark Rector

To the staff of Moulinet:

Working fight directors and actors are usually too busy to go see each other’s shows and articles on stage combat are few and far between. For those of us in the “boonies” especially, Moulinet’s overview of the various fight venues is very welcome. Thank you for your interest.

Sincerely,
Lincoln Davis White, Jr.

COMING UP IN OUR NEXT ISSUE!

SAFD fight master David Woolley offers advice on how to make a living as a fight choreographer. Mercenary writer Mary Shen Barnidge talks to stage combatants about tactics for avoiding offstage violence. Reviews of fights both indoors and outdoors, stories and profiles from the front lines of theatrical warfare and MORE!
LOOKING FOR THE REAL DEAL:  
THE CHICAGO SWORDPLAY GUILD  
by Mark Rector

Every Sunday morning, I rise early. I want to get going. I’m eager to get going, because I’m off to join the dedicated group of men and women making their way to Pulaski Park in Chicago’s River North area. We are members of the Chicago Swordplay Guild, an association of fencing enthusiasts, historical re-enactors, martial artists, theatrical performers and students of the sword. Founded in 1999 by longtime martial artist Greg Mele and myself, the CSG offers a safe and friendly venue for the study and practice of historical European swordplay.

CSG’s curriculum is rooted in a thorough study of authentic fencing texts. Rather than attempting to impose modern fencing methods on historical weapons, we go directly to the source, approaching each weapon from the viewpoint of the people who actually fought with them and wrote about their use. This combination of scholarship and practical application is designed to develop exceptional all-around fighters.

In the park’s art nouveau auditorium, we unpack our equipment and show off newly-acquired toys: a steel helmet, cup-hilt rapier, buckler or wooden backsword.

“All right! Circle up!” Greg calls. It is 11 am and time for warm-ups, which include lots of stretching, as well as grappling, joint locks, grips, counters and break-falls (also called “getting acquainted with the floor”). The warm-ups end with a rollicking round of stick wrestling, an ancient tug-of-war game that combines sensitivity, leverage, footwork and partnering.

We’re out of breath, but energized. The real work is about to begin. CSG currently conducts three separate classes: a beginner’s class on the longsword, and two intermediate classes, one in sword-and-buckler, and the other in rapier-and-dagger.

CSG longsword study is based on the works of Hans Talhoffer, Sigmund Ringeck, Filipi Vadi and Fiore dei Liberi, all 15th century fencing masters. The longsword (or hand-and-a-half sword) is a good weapon for beginners, because it teaches fundamental principles of swordplay that may be applied to every other weapon: footwork, timing distance, measure, cuts, thrusts, avoidance and the principle of “stesso tempo” (parrying and riposting in one motion).

The sword and buckler class derives its lessons from the oldest extant swordplay treatise, the 13th century German manuscript known to scholars only by its catalogue number, “I.33”. From the 15th century teachings of Hans Talhoffer. And from the writings of George Silver, a contemporary of Shakespeare. The rapier class studies the 16th century techniques of Giacomo Di Grassi, Joseph Swetnam and Vicente Saviolo, whose book was the very first on fencing to be published in English. Each class lasts 45 minutes and is composed of extensive drills and partnered set-play work.

Once the classes wrap up, we grab a quick drink of water before moving on to open fencing. Looking around the auditorium, you might see someone with rapier-and-dagger fencing an opponent armed with rapier-and-cloak, or a pair of sword-and-buckler combatants, or perhaps even a dagger fight or two. Along the wall, people wearing jackets and fencing masks—or gorgets, chain-mail hauberks, quilted-cotton gambesons and steel helms—fight with the wooden practice swords called “wasters” or with blunted-steel replica weapons. And over in the corner, you may catch Greg and me figuring out how to use the dusak, an ancient Bohemian sport-fencing weapon that looks like a wooden cutlass.

CSG sparring is closely monitored and all combatants are required to wear extensive protective gear. Its purpose is to put the lesson from the class into practice, treating fencing as a martial art rather than as sport. The emphasis is on control and precision of technique.

After everybody has fought the good fight, we gather up our gear and caravan off for perhaps the most important element of the CSG method: Social practice! Over frosty beverages at the Four Moon Tavern, we recap the day’s events—re-fighting fights, letting muscles relax and aches recede into memory, while we make plans for the next Sunday’s session.

The Chicago Swordplay Guild has been extremely valuable to me as a stage combatant and fight choreographer. If stage combat is the delicate art of faking it, I feel it is important to understand the “it” that we’re trying to fake! In the CSG, I have the luxury of being able to explore actual techniques with a variety of weapons, and apply the insights gained from the “real deal” to my work on the stage. This has enriched my fight choreography and stage fighting, and helped to make them more visually and emotionally exciting.

Membership in CSG and attendance at practice sessions is free of charge. All you need to participate is a sincere desire to study historical European swordplay as a living martial art.

The Chicago Swordplay Guild meets Sundays from 11 am-2 pm at Pulaski Park Auditorium, 1419 West Blackhawk Street. Phone: (773) 276-9425.

E-mail: www.angelfire.com/il/swordplay or swordplay@angelfire.com
BASHERS, BRUISERS AND BULLYBOYS: AMONG THE THUGS
by Mary Shen Barnidge

He is lying supine on the ground, surrounded by seven standing men—some big and bearlike, some small and scrappy, some lean and spidery. They are taking turns kicking him in slow motion, grinning in glee as their victim recoils from the impact, writhing feebly until the next shoe smashes into bone or body organs.

Suddenly a shrill whistle, as of a referee, is heard. The action immediately switches to full-speed, as all of the attackers close in on their target, kicking him in unison, seven individual sneaker-clad feet moving exactly the same distance, in the same direction, at the same time. The picture of savage animals bringing down their prey is quickly and absurdly transformed into one of a Riverdance chorus performing an ensemble time-step.

Fight captain Scott Cummins winces and shakes his head, as does director Kate Buckley. Among The Thugs, adapted for the stage by Tom Szentgyorgyi, is based on American journalist Bill Buford’s exploration of mob violence among British soccer fans. Its theme demands simulated mayhem delivering all the awe-inspiring shock of a terrorist bombing. And there are only eleven more days until its opening at Evanston’s Next Theatre.

The eight actors are now on their feet, relaxed but alert, awaiting instructions. Cummins surveys them thoughtfully.

“You, John, you kick once,” he calls out, pointing. “Mark, R.J., you both kick three times. Dominic, Andy, you kick twice. Brad, you’ve got the whistle—you kick once. You, too, Eric. And John, when you’re through kicking him, cross downstage a few steps. Now let’s take it from the last two slow kicks—John and Dom, that’s yours—and see how that looks.”

Aaron Christensen, the “beanbag”, positions himself on the ground again. After he receives his two slow kicks, the whistle sounds the cue. There is an immediate flurry of jerking feet, and just as rapidly, the attackers break formation and run away, leaving their battered victim unconscious. Cummins and Buckley both nod. “That’s better.”

“When I first spoke with [fight choreographer] Robin McFarquhar, I said I wanted the fights to look as realistic as possible.” Buckley tells me, “Most stage fights are set up with a complex series of moves. I didn’t want long-bout, punch-jab-and-thrust duels, but something that happens—bang!—in a split second. Robin is English himself, and he went to the matches. So he’s seen this kind of movement, and he said that’s exactly the way it was.”

“Most real fights don’t last very long.” Cummins remarks, “The idea is to hurt somebody quick, and get away before they hurt you. In that way, what we’re doing is different from regular stage combat. And also, we’re actually hitting people.”

Seeing my startled expression, he explains further. “The audience is too close for ordinary stage fighting, so we’re using full-contact techniques. For example, one of the actors gets kicked in the stomach—but it’s a pulled kick. You start it from the hip, and you don’t follow through with your body. It’s pretty safe. But you do have to take the hit.”

Christian Kohn, who plays Buford, places himself on stage, along with John Sierros and Andrew Micheli for what everybody calls the “scusi, scusi” fight. In this scene, Buford and Mick, his rough-and-ready guide (played by Sierros), are waiting for the bus to take them to the semifinals match between Manchester United and Turin’s Juventas teams. Suddenly a stranger (played by Micheli) trots up, enthusiastically greeting them, “Scusi! Scusi! You English? I? I Italian.”

Mick slowly turns, throwing a friendly arm around the stranger’s shoulders. Just as casually, he kicks the Italian boy in the crotch, spins him upstage and punches him once in the face before bringing his knee up in an uppercut to the chin. He then releases his dazed victim, who drops to the ground. As Buford watches in horror, Mick delivers one last brutal kick to the figure now lying still, and turns back to Buford, who has retreated from the assault. (“Did you see that?” Kohn will later ask Cummins. “I backed away. Is that all right?”). His fellow cast members, laughing, will assure him “Yeah, Christian. You’ll get a Joseph Jefferson award for that moment.”

Asked to distinguish between American and English brawling styles, Cummins frowns. “The only difference we saw in some of the documentaries we watched is that they [the English] do a lot more kicking than Americans. But that’s their culture. It’s more to do with the English football, [what we call] soccer, as opposed to American sports—baseball or basketball, that use the hands more.”

The cast is rehearsing the “krak” fight, a scene in which Buford is speaking to us while simultaneously being bludgeoned by police officers. He has curled up into a defensive ball, telling us “You can’t beat up someone who’s already surrendered. Maybe they’ll trunchone me once on route to the others. I’ve been trunchone before. It stings, but the sting goes away.”

As the uniformed guard strikes him a blow, the other
cast members beat the ground once with kendo-style sticks to punctuate the sound of the impact. “Okay, so I was wrong!” Buford admits. Another guard hits him, the chorus again striking the ground with their staffs once, then three times, then five, then seven. Soon the noise is deafening as Buford grimaces in agony, rolling helplessly like a rag doll under the barrage.

Responding to my query about the hazards in this type of fight, Cummins shrugs, “Getting carried away, like in any fight. If someone follows through on a kick, somebody else gets a serious rib injury. But we’ve got ten guys in the cast, everybody’s involved in a fight at one time or another, and there’s been no accidents yet.”

“Buford makes the point that the crowd violence is a drug, and we have to see the drug working at different levels—the good and the bad, the high and the low,” says Buckley, “But we don’t want to take it so far that the audience is alienated. They have to understand the attraction of the violence.”

Cummins concurs, “Buford’s written a terrific book, and Tom has made it theatrically exciting for us to work on. But the action in a play has to flow from one idea to the other. The fights are there to help that flow.”

(reprinted from TheaterMania.com)

**ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS**

**PENNYSYLVANIA WILD WEST SHOW**

Highway 72 at Mansion House Road: Manheim, Pennsylvania

Too many high-tech F/X and what you get is Medieval Times with six-shooters. Too few, a Roy Rogers restaurant. Too much talk makes for a museum lecture. Too little equals a Road Runner cartoon.

But a permanent site on the Mount Hope winery’s estate (home of the Pennsylvania Renaissance Faire) and a full-time acting company allow for a balance of all these elements, with resident fight choreographer Greg Ramsey’s sensitivity to proportion making for action spectacle delivering dramatic suspense while never becoming uncomfortably intense. This is especially evident in the “Legends Of The West” reenactments of famous historical gunfights, including the immortal gangland slaying at the OK corral, with all eight Blackfryar Action Company fighters participating in the bloodshed.

Blackfryar is joined this year by the Hanlon-Lees Action Theater, performing their Buffalo Bill’s Wild West line-up of equestrian and ballistic stunts. The current cast of characters exhibits an increased ethnic diversity, with major roles for Christopher Dynneson and Joseph D’Arrigo, playing, respectively, Sioux Chiefs Sitting Bull and Rain-In-The-Face. For Lionel Lee, playing black cowboy-hero Nat Love. And for Heather McConkey and Barbara Burinski, whose Cattle Annie and Calamity Jane pull their full share of stagecoach-guarding and outlaw-bagging duties.

Framing the kinetic display is a scenario involving bigoted villains falsely accusing Sitting Bull of an assault on the lovely Miss Kitty Lamour. All is resolved and frontier justice meted out in a full-company melee with blazing firearms, flying fists, runaway horses, high falls, and Big Booms (the latter courtesy of resident firebug Ron Keller, whose pyrotechnics add the extra bang for the buck to even as generic an exercise as a slapstick saloon brawl).

Though only running one weekend in this, its second year, the Manheim-based Wild West Show is almost certain to become a significant regional attraction in the coming years. In the meantime, look for Blackfryar and Hanlon-Lees to collaborate on the Pennsylvania Renaissance Faire, opening August 18 and running to October 15.

**BRISTOL RENAISSANCE FAIRE**

12550 120th Avenue/Russell Road west of I-94: Kenosha, Wisconsin

After thirteen years, the Bristol bosses have disbanded their resident company of stunt-jousters, opting instead to contract out. Thus do the Hanlon-Lees Action Theater, jousters for the Wisconsin festival from 1982 to 1991, return in 2000 with a new script freshly choreographed by founding member Taso Stavrakis. It might not be Shakespeare, but nevertheless succeeds in conveying a storyline of astonishing complexity in a severely abbreviated playing time.

Where most fight acts are content to reflect the facelessness of video-game robots, the Hanlon-Lees knights project a variety of characters designed to appeal to, literally, the whole family. For the youngsters, there is Sir Joseph, a “masked crusader” bearing no small resemblance to one of the Mutant Ninja Turtles. The baby-faced Sir Erik projects a WB cuddliness, while the gruff, gray-bearded Sir Stephen and heartily paternal Sir Thomas lend an avuncular note to the proceedings. Acting as referee for the mischief and mayhem is Sir Roland, the blustering Master of Arms.

These contrasting personalities facilitate the three-part progression from fighting as playful sport to fierce competition to merciless bloodshed. And if the crowds, caught up in the excitement and suspense generated by
the swiftly-paced spectacle, applaud the unsavory tactics of the slow and gruesome joust-to-the-death (in which every hit is a sneak attack, and even an innocent squire is picked off by a stray arrow), the message they carry home after the heat of the moment fades is that though combat might be fun, killing is always ugly.

Enhancing the dramatic dynamic are the London citizens who bear vocal witness to the martial display: Jane, the royal Foole, whose exhortations during the games inspire the four noble knights to slapstick clowning (N.B. Hanlon-Lees began its existence as a commedia troupe). Sir Edmund Tilney, the queen’s representative, who presides over the final carnage with weary urbanity. And Elizabeth Regina herself, a monarch who chastises her warriors with the severity of a school principal scolding a pack of unruly school-boys before washing her royal hands of the sanguine showdown. (Running through August 20)

A NIGHT WITH THE FIGHTS

THE THREE MUSKETEERS
fight choreography by Paul Dennhardt

In this adaptation by Eberle Thomas and Barbara Redmond of the popular sword-and-cloak yarn, the characterizations are anything but subtle and the fighting anything but realistic, but from the twists and turns of Dumas père’s intricate plot and our own recollections of Richard Lester’s 1974 film, Paul Dennhardt has forged a series of buckles whose swash is no less thrilling for being well within the skills of a largely young cast. The simplicity of the Illinois Shakespeare Festival’s playhouse—configured in imitation of the venerable Globe—and the flimsiness of this production’s scenery (with walls frequently opening up along with the doors attached to them) do not allow for stunts more hot-dogging than D’Artagnan’s slide down a rope, but the first act includes a jim-dandy eight-man melee with enough simultaneous action to offer even the spectators in the cheap seats a clear view of the spectacle. And though the swordplay and fisticuffs might be fairly standard classroom stuff when broken down move-for-move, Dennhardt provides a novel touch of humor by having his fighting characters occasionally battle while still nursing aches, pains and injuries from previous skirmishes. A sore shoulder that affectionate buddies keep accidentally punching is something with which everyone in the audience can empathize.

THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL
fight choreography by Rick Sordelet

Frank Wildhorn’s adrenaline-pumping score has just enough period ambiance to locate us in our romantic universe without miring down in ersatz-operatic pomp, and the first act includes a dancerly prison-break melee. But after the hero and his side-kicks are forced to nelly it up for four scenes (a ruse to deceive their enemies, of course), we expect some manly-man stuff before the night’s over. Not to worry—by the time the innocent pawns are rattling around inside a speeding carriage (into a trap, naturally), we’re ready to buy anything. And though the anticipation raised by the sandbags and hanging ropes on Andrew Jackness’s set remains unfulfilled, Rick Sordelet has forged from a series of relatively simple moves—mostly two/three engagements and circle parries, with a few cuts and crosses—a duel with sufficient suspense, variety and surprises (even the heroine gets in a few licks with a rapier) to make the Big Showdown a satisfactory one.

GODBABY
fight choreography by Joe Foust

Godbaby proposes to survey the entire 2000-year-and-counting history of Christianity in two hours, with the assistance of twenty-three actors playing some four hundred characters. Though the script boasts a 70-volume bibliography, Joe Foust’s fight choreography leaps centuries at a single bound—zipping us from Lucius Tarquinius to Caesar Augustus in a three-minute game of King-of-the-Mountain, for example, or depicting the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) as a Gladiatorial fight-off—while personnel sprint across the stage faster than speeding locomotives without ever missing a step or a line. Defiant Theatre, the company who gave us Action Movie in 1998 and Action Movie: The Director’s Cut in 1999 (both also choreographed by Foust), has always prided itself on putting the impossible on stage, and this reaffirms its status as the Harlem Globetrotters of Chicago theatrical combat.
SANCHO’S STORY

As a squire, it’s my job to choose the female audience members who tie the ribbons on the knight’s lances. Usually I pick ones that I guess to be about twenty or maybe as old as thirty, but at least sixteen. But this one time, a whole family began pressuring me—“Come on! She’s always wanted to do it!” and all that—to pick this girl who couldn’t have been more than thirteen years old max. Time was running out, so I said she could be the ribbon-maid.

It was all right—except that my knight doesn’t wear his contact lenses when he fights. Since he couldn’t see her all that well, he was doing his usual flirty is-this-your-first-time—I’ll-be-gentle speech. Suddenly we hear this guy in the audience—who I hope wasn’t a father or a brother—yell, “She’s too young for you!”

Everybody laughed, the girl ran back to her parents, and we escaped out on stage before we got into any trouble. My knight’s supposed to be a bad guy, but a child molester would have been going way too far.

LAST-MINUTE DETAILS

Too many directors don’t realize how much practice goes into stage fighting. I used to get work sometimes by calling a theatre when I saw that they were going to be doing a play with fights in it, and asking, “Do you need a fight choreographer?” Most of the time, they’d say, “We hadn’t thought about that yet”. And it’s I Hate Hamlet!

THE FIRST TASTE OF BLOOD

There was a kid sitting next to me at the Bristol Renaissance Faire. He was grilling me about the blood effects in the joust, but he was asking smarter questions than you’d expect from somebody that young, so I wound up giving him the whole course in Stage Blood 101—bags, bulbs, caps, squibs, sponges, hollow blades, spits, slaps, sprays, do-it-yourself corn syrup and order-by-the-gallon premix. Throughout all this, his mother sat looking like she couldn’t wait for the discussion to be over, so as not to leave her out of it, I told her, “Be careful. Next year he’ll want to sign up as a squire!”.

And it wasn’t until the joust was about to start that I saw that the kid had braces on both his legs. Not the big steel contraptions you used to see on the Red Cross posters forty years ago, but made of clear plastic so you’d hardly notice. My partner wondered later if it might have flattered a disabled boy to hear me speculate on his someday taking up stunt-fighting. But I reminded her that there’s lots of useful backstage jobs a non-ambulatory squire could do. Making up the blood bags, for example.

FIGHTING LIKE A GIRL

Fighting isn’t gender-specific—a good fighter is a good fighter. But that doesn’t mean that men and women don’t often fight differently.

Men’s history of chest-thumping frequently helps them in stage combat, because they’re used to the idea of fighting to look good. But sometimes [the fight choreographer] can run into problems when somebody has to lose a fight. Then you have to explain to the actor that just because he wouldn’t do this or take that, it doesn’t mean that his character wouldn’t. And most of the time, you have to put in a few extra moves so that the defeated fighter doesn’t lose too easily.

Now when women imagine situations where they might fight, it’s usually a situation where they’d kill. Remember that nearly all the fights in Babes With Blades were to-the-death. It’s very serious, with no room for scuffling just for the fun of it. So women might arrive at the fight more slowly, but once they do, they tend to go for blood.

BARTER, HIRE & BROADSIDES

CHICAGO SWORDPLAY GUILD INTENSIVE SWORDSMANSHIP CLINICS. Offering safe and expert hands-on training. Ideal for students, actors, ensembles and theatres engaged in theatrical swordplay. Clinics may be customized to fit individual needs. “Actors who understand real sword fighting are more secure, more safe, and more effective on stage”—Greg Mele

THE GALLERY BOOKSTORE is scheduled to reopen Labor Day, 2000 at 923 West Belmont Avenue. Its telephone numbers and e-mail address will remain the same: (773) 975-8200/(773) 281-9999 or ChgosOldst@voyager.net. Open every day. William C. Fiedler, proprietor.
“A country with women in its army has never lost a war.”

— Andrew Hantgos