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The Society of American Fight Directors

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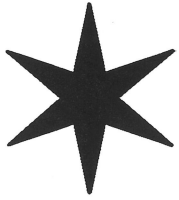
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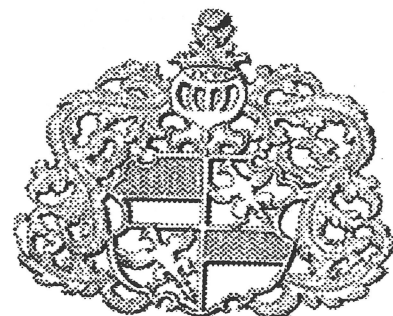
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MOULINET: An Action Quarterly

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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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* * *

DAVID WOOLLEY is one of ten Fight Masters in the Society Of American Fight Directors and an instructor at Chicago's Columbia College. For twelve years, he has traveled the Renaissance Faire circuit as "Guido Crescendo", where, along with Douglas Mumaw, aka "Dirk Perfect", they comprise the comic-fencing act of The Swordsmen.

* * *

MICHELE DIMASO is an original member of the Babes With Blades. As an actor, she has appeared in several productions with Footsteps Theatre, Yugen and Timeline Theatre Companies and Red Hen Productions. As an actor-fighter, she originated the role of Poison Inimann in Defiant Theater's long-running *Action Movie*.

* * *

CAITLIN O'CONNELL is a costume designer for the Taradiddle Theatre Company in Prairie Du Chien, Wisconsin, and a member of the Brian Boru reenactment society.

BOLD AND STUPID MEN INVADE CHICAGO!

David Woolley and Doug Mumaw, aka Guido Crescendo and Dirk Perfect, aka The Swordsmen, will play INDOORS for one night only, August 15, at the Noble Fool Theatre, 8 East Randolph Street, at 7:30 PM. No word on ticket prices as yet – Fool's usual damage is in the \$20 range. For further information, phone (312) 630-2631.

BARTER, HIRE & BROADSIDES

RIDE NEEDED to and from Holly, Michigan, the weekend of August 24-26 to review fight acts at Michigan Renaissance Faire. Will pay for gas, along with a stipend for driver. If interested, phone Mary Shen Barnidge at (773) 871-3932 or e-mail at fightingwords@hotmail.com

THE GALLERY BOOKSTORE at 923 West Belmont Avenue. For information and inquiries, phone (773) 975-8200/(773) 281-9999 or e-mail ChgosOldst@voyager.net. Open every day. William C. Fiedler, proprietor.

FIGHTING NATURE

by Mary Shen Barnidge

Safety concerns are always a factor in theatrical combat, with the dimensions of the stage, the number and density of bystanders and the abilities of the participants all playing a part in determining the shape of the fight. But environments such as one encounters at Renaissance Faires, Wild West Shows, Shakespeare-Under-The-Stars and other outdoor entertainments add another variable to those already faced by fight choreographers and their charges. Lacking the climate-control devices enjoyed by conventional playhouses, a region's peculiarities in regard to heat, humidity, terrain, and even plants and animals must be taken into account when planning the athletic fantasy spectacle to be enacted therein.

Water presents major problems with summer events whose schedules extend into spring or fall—two seasons prone to volatile climate changes. Wisconsin's Bristol Renaissance Faire, opening at the end of June, and Massachusetts' King Richard's Faire, opening just after Labor Day, are both located in low-lying marshlands where even moderate rainfall can produce severe flooding. The latter, especially, is plagued by hurricanes off the eastern seaboard that drive moisture inland, making for steady rains of monsoon duration. On soil already so damp that costumed Faire employees are cautioned not to go barefoot for fear of hookworm, saturation is swift and groundwater soon reaches swamp conditions.

Where you find rain, you often find lightning—no small hazard for men and women whose act consists of waving thin pieces of metal in the air. ("We don't joust when there's lightning." declares a knight from the New Riders Of The Golden Age, "Those swords turn us into one giant lightning rod!") And nowhere is electricity a more sensitive issue than with pyrotechnic effects. Asked about the number of stunts at the Pennsylvania Renaissance Festival utilizing explosives, fireworks master Ron Keller shrugs, "Usually our only problems are the neighbors complaining about the noise. But we don't do [the explosions] when there's an electrical storm. It can scramble the circuit box so that all the flashpots go off at once—and the actors might not all be in *place* when that happens."

Water is a nuisance, but heat can be dangerous. The Wybreg Village Renaissance Festival in Bonaparte, Iowa, made its debut on a June weekend

simmering with a heat index of 98 degrees that transformed the event's river basin site into a muggy, breezeless oven. The opening week of *The Three Musketeers* at the 2000 Illinois Shakespeare Festival in the midstate town of Normal was no better. Drew Vidal, that show's fight captain, looks back on the production's final dress rehearsals. "It was about 90 degrees with a 90% humidity. Our costumes had been originally designed for indoor theatre, so the cardinal's guards were wearing three layers of wool, along *with* a shirt and undershirt!"

Finally, there are the flora and fauna. Festival grounds are usually cleared of standard summer-camp bogeys like poison ivy or fireweed, but animals not driven off by the crowds and the noise (at least until nightfall) also have a way of introducing an indecorous reality to the most carefully-crafted illusion. Recounts an actor from a 1998 outdoor production of *Macbeth* staged in Chicago's far northern suburbs, "One night, this *raccoon* fell out of a tree right in the middle of the dagger scene! It didn't land on the stage or on an audience member, but it was still the star of the show for the next twenty minutes."

In short, Nature obeys no stage manager. So what can you do?

1. PLAN FOR IT. The same weather conditions that so cripple the Bristol and King Richard's Faires are familiar to residents in and around New Orleans. The site for the Louisiana Renaissance Festival in Hammond has its Skulls Creek to drain off rain accumulations that would otherwise reduce the sandy soil to a pit of yellow mud in minutes. But a coating of gravel maintains traction on the promenades, much as scattered hay keeps pedestrians from miring down in mudholes at the Pennsylvania Renaissance Faire and a thick layer of sand on the jousting arena at the Greater Pittsburgh Renaissance Festival prevents horses from slipping on that region's hard, clay-like surface. (Of course, sometimes the opposite conditions prevail, with drought making for dust so thick as to obscure the action. At these times, water-wagons are employed to sprinkle down the soil before each fight.)

2. ENLIST THE AID OF PROFESSIONALS. The minimal heat-related casualties at the first Wybreg Festival were in great part due to a large and aggressive first-aid presence—even down to the squad of paramedics armed with ice packs and oxygen tanks who stationed themselves at the tiltyard gates ready

to intervene at any perceived sign of distress. Since large public events are required by law to have medics and equipment on hand, wise fighters take advantage of their proximity.

3. ENLIST THE AID OF INDIGENOUS PERSONNEL. *Musketeers'* Vidal recalls, "Usually the wigs and hats stayed on backstage, but this time, the costume people—who had all been given a crash course in first aid for heat injuries—were right there at the exits to remove them and hand out water and cold towels. At intermission, Michael [Burns, playing D'Artagnan] had five or six people getting him out of his gear and taking care of him."

4. ACCEPT THE AID OF INDIGENOUS PERSONNEL. Serendipitous volunteers sometimes come forth of their own accord. A knight with the Hanlon-Lees Action Theater remembers a doctor once charging out onto the field, in the belief that someone had really been wounded. And the Knights of Gloriana recall the year they were approached by the actor playing Bristol's African Ambassador, Prince Abd Ahamad ech-Shieke Mesloukh, who revealed himself to be a trained paramedic, and offered his services in case of emergency. ("I'm here for every joust anyway, as part of the queen's court. If you have first aid equipment backstage, just come get me at the Royal Pavilion")

5. DO IT YOURSELF. "At the 2000 Bristol Faire," recalls Hanlon-Lees commander Kent Shelton, "the week before opening, we had a torrential rain that put everything under six inches of water. The first thing we wound up doing after arriving was to dig a trench around the tiltyard so that we could rehearse."

6. LIVE WITH IT. This is often the only solution to problems involving wild animals. "There was the year we had the locusts—so many that they drowned out the actors," grumbles Vidal, while the soldiers of Malcolm's armies still speak of "Mosquitoes that bit right through the armor". And a New Rider complains, "What's really bad is when you get a mosquito inside your helmet. You try to blow into the visor and chase it out, but there's nothing else you can do."

16th-century scientists divided the universe into earth, air, water and fire. The troubles engendered by these few elements, however, refute their seeming simplicity. But with the proper measures taken, they need not spoil what so many people have worked so hard to create.

ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS

BRISTOL RENAISSANCE FAIRE

Russell Road west of I-94: Bristol, Wisconsin

In recent years, the Bristol Renaissance Faire has shown an increasing diversity, expanding its period replication beyond the limits of its northern European origins: the queen's court now, for example, includes foreign ambassadors from Spain, Italy, Germany and, significantly, West Africa (making for a few burnoose-clad Saracens seen strolling the grounds). The scenario established last year by the Hanlon-Lees Action Theater likewise displayed a savvy awareness of audience demographics, in the process acknowledging some of its own members now approaching AARP status, but still active in the 23-year-old company.

The four-man squad of competing knights once again features a swaggering adolescent in the WB mode, a masked superhero, and a mature warrior of years not exceeding those of baby boom-generation parents — this last motif emphasized all the more this year by the introduction of a Haley Joel Osment-sized squire, ostensibly the son of Sir Ewain of Essex.

Commercially, you can't go wrong with a child in the show, especially when the child is the actual son of stunt-choreographer Taso Stavrakis (aka Sir Ewain) and thus already well-schooled in vaults, falls, pounces, long-jumps and being tossed around by larger men, even while enveloped in dust clouds that severely impaired audience visibility on opening weekend. Together the real father-and-son team create a dynamic for their fictional counterparts that makes the most of the final joust's message of glorious combat and inglorious death.

Other fights acts at this year's faire included the ever-popular Swordsmen, and the peripatetic Sea Dogs, a crew of ruffians more often stumbled across than sought out on the 25-acre site. The Bristol Renaissance Faire is open through August 26. For further information, phone (847) 395-7773.

BUFFALO BILL'S WILD WEST REVUE

Veterans Park: Milwaukee, Wisconsin

The traveling branch of the Baraboo Circus World Museum that sets up camp for a week during the summer along Milwaukee's lakefront would

appear of interest only to children and historians, but for its inclusion of the Royal Hanneford Circus Performance and the Buffalo Bill Wild West Revue. The latter is a bowdlerized version of Hanlon-Lees Action Theater's usual guns & horses extravaganza, the Circus World Museum's no-violence policy mandating, for example, that the climactic stage-coach robbery be foiled with guns fired into the *air*.

But even with these restrictions, the displays of frontier skills – rope-spinning, whip-snapping, stunt-riding, a “pony express” obstacle race and sharp-shooting exhibitions, some performed by Hanlon-Lees professionals and some by reenactment-society amateurs – still made for a thrilling exhibition. Kent Shelton's Buffalo Bill Cody is, of course, the star of his own show, but the crowds cheered enthusiastically for Chris Mitri's Chief Rain-In-The-Face as he swallowed fire from the peace pipe, gymnast-vaulted atop a galloping mount and easily prevailed in a rodeo-style triathlon. Kathy Wagner's Annie Oakley, sporting a sunny smile that shone clear to Sheboygan, shared target-fire time with Bill himself, while Ivan The Black contributed Cossack-style horsemanship and Mme. Maria Von Vanderloo some sidesaddle eye-candy. Playing emcee Ned Buntline, Jimmy Ellis' whip-work was sabotaged in the early shows by the wind, as was cowboy-singer Ranger Rick's lasso-twirling (though the week-long event boasted otherwise flawless festival weather).

Hanlon-Lees supporters may lament the corporate hamstringing of their champions, but with live-action spectacle becoming increasingly rare in this electronic age, audiences welcomed this up-close-and-interactive addition to the Circus World Museum's summer-show line-up.

A NIGHT WITH THE FIGHTS

FOUR WOMEN OF THEBES

fight choreography by
Stephanie Repin & T. Clay Buck

Ester Lebo's account of the Cadmus family's sad history – Oedipus, Antigone, and all of that unlucky clan—from the perspective of its women could still have come off as an academic chick-flick if not for its two battle scenes – including one in which we see Antigone herself swinging steel on the field at her brother's side (an important dramatic point, since her status as a popular war hero affects her later fate).

And though the Athenaeum's third-floor studio stage makes for a cramped battleground, Stephanie Repin and T. Clay Buck utilize what SAFD Fight Master David Woolley has dubbed Stupid Sword Tricks In Small Spaces—swords engaging high in the air, supine enemies stabbed with downward thrusts, lots of full-body grappling, and maximum “alarums” accompanying minimal “excursions”. The resulting martial conflict gives all the appearance of epic-sized fury, rendered all the more poignant for its being condensed into so small a picture of bloody strife.

TOUGH!

fight choreography by Brian LeTraunik

BIG violence – belly-punches, crotch-kicks, full-nelsons and other sadistic pain-inflicting stratagems—is a standard part of a fight choreographer's training. But the teenagers in George F. Walker's sketchy play are fundamentally good kids, not streetsmart juvenile delinquents. To be sure, feisty Jill is prepared to defend—with fists, if necessary – her pregnant girlfriend Tina when the latter confronts the slacker who may be responsible. But Brian LeTraunik amplifies the ingenuous context by having his scrappers fight like *children*. For example, when Bobby restrains Tina, he does so with a bear-hug like one might use on a roaming toddler, whereupon Jill charges to her companion's aid, body-slammng the stunned captor and then sitting on his prone body. She also loose-arm slaps him, twists his ears, and, as he sits on the ground with his feet stretched before him, scornfully kicks the sole of his shoe – petty moves reflecting maximum humiliation while inflicting minimal damage. The results allow us to revel in Bobby's comeuppance without fearing for his sustaining any serious injury.

BALL OF JUSTICE

fight choreography by Matt Walley

That's *Bowling* Ball of Justice, by the way – the prize that the Alley Rats of Rogers Park must recapture from the archevilenemy and his army of roller-rink minions. Matt Walley and his stunt-skaters look to be capable of a hell-on-wheels showdown – Czarina Mirani's dance choreography reveals most of them to be physically agile and Ashley Hugen even handsprings and toe-dances in his inlines. But in order to convert the long, narrow Strawdog studio into a facsimile of lanes-turned-arena, it must also house a bar in its corner, an audience seated around

its perimeter and two hip-hop narrators in full footwork at center stage. This doesn't leave much room for strategic maneuvering or clear sight-lines (I *think* the day is saved by our champion taking the inside track in the Big Race, but so cluttered is the stage that his coup is barely visible.) Given the originality of the spectacle offered by Adam Joyce and Doug Nagel's text, its derailment due to spatial restrictions is doubly disappointing.

A BRIGHT ROOM CALLED DAY fight choreography by Kathrynne Rosen

Once upon a time, a fight choreographer might be hired for a show involving complicated sword-play – *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *The Three Musketeers* – but savvy directors nowadays are acknowledging the wisdom of calling in specialized help for plays requiring even minimal physical conflict. (A case in point is *Art*, with its three-second grapple-and-ear-box sequence.) Tony Kushner's exhaustive historical drama demands no more onstage violence than one friend shaking another impatiently in one scene and a motherly crone wrestling a frightened girl onto the sofa in another, but the risk of actors injuring themselves on an already cluttered set alerted director Richard Cotovsky to the need for further instruction. So though audiences, seeing Babe-With-Blade Kathrynne Rosen billed in the program as "fight choreographer", might have wondered where the fight was, the notable absence in the cast of twisted ankles, barked shins, sprained fingers and other incidental impairments attest to Mary-Archie Theatre's commendable awareness of safety issues.

MACBETH fight choreography by R & D Violence Designers

In addition to the usual obstacles associated with citronella-circuit theatre (see feature article this issue), the First Folio company's textual focus, while well-serving the narrative with its precise enunciation and exaggerated inflections, tends to retard the progress of this most streamlined of Shakespeare's plays. To be sure, the production's pastoral setting permits armies to mount massive charges across the green before taking the stage. The high castle wall that dominates the set allows the battle action to be partially concealed behind their ramparts – a concession to the family-oriented aesthetic prevalent in this entertainment genre, rendered more expedient by a cast that includes few fight-trained actors. Richard

Gilbert and David Gregory's "violence design" has more fun with inanimate objects, however, as when Banquo's shield catches fire from a murderer's torch. And a jointed skeleton that pops up out of the Weyrd Sisters' cauldron, flanked by a number of shrouded ghosts that spring up from the ground like so many mushrooms, provide a refreshing adrenaline boost in an otherwise contemplatively-paced interpretation.

AMONG THE THUGS fight choreography by Robin McFarquhar

In the Next Theatre's 200-seat space, *Among The Thugs* easily generated hormonal revelry to infect its audience while still sending them home with fodder for rumination. The Goodman Theatre's Owen Bruner Studio has a capacity more than twice that, however, and the cast still numbers only ten. Sound designer Lindsay Jones pumps in floods of fan-faronade. The chilling White-Supremacist scene is now punctuated with the music of the Dead Kennedys, along with a massive projection of a swastika. And two balconies permit hooligans to literally swing from the rails. But the real secret is director Kate Buckley's keeping the action downstage, allowing actors to simulate eye contact with their invisible viewers. This primal challenge reinforces the psychological bond between actor and spectator, so that when a bottle gets smashed – even though the noise is recorded and the bottle never actually touches the ground – we flinch as if actually sprayed by flying glass.

TAKE IT DEEP fight choreography by Frank Dominelli

Even if the plot did not revolve around a frozen meat-delivery scam, the language in Ben Byer's play is so brutal that any bodily injury seems gratuitous – especially when the characters are uniformly unfit both physically and mentally to administer it with any efficiency. But when small-time crooks conspire, sooner or later the leader must subdue one or more of his cohorts with some Rough Stuff. Though Frank Dominelli and Matt Scharff both boast records with a number of ensembles renowned for their virtuoso violence, the former opts to have the bellicose Balls (that's his *name* – honest!) intimidate the sadsack Roger with deliberately unsophisticated moves – belly-punches and uppercuts – even more sickening for their lack of finesse, heightening their milieu's general ambiance of sordid desperation.

FIELD DISPATCHES

LIGHTNING REFLEX

We had incorporated what we called a “lightning count” into the outdoor Swordsmen shows, calling for audiences to time the seconds between the flashes and the thunder in order to estimate the storm’s distance. When it was down to “two”, then out go the metal swords, and in come the wooden ones. But then one night we saw a program on the Discovery channel that said that it doesn’t *matter* how far away the lightning is – if we can see it at *all*, it can get us! So now at the *first* sighting, we put away the steel.

– David Woolley

BOWLED OVER

This happened in Footsteps’ production of *The Taming of The Shrew* – the part where Petruchio comes home, and the servants are racing around fetching dinner for him. I was supposed to run into the kitchen and bump into another servant. I’m carrying slippers, she’s got a wooden bowl, it all falls on the floor, she tries to put the bowl on his feet and I run out of the room with the slippers. Old joke, right? *Easy* joke, right?

It was a benefit night – packed house, tickets more expensive, and it’s Sam’s *birthday* [Dawn “Sam” Alden, the show’s fight choreographer]. We do the scene, but as I was getting ready to fall, the bowl hit the floor and bounced back up in such a way that it hit me on the bridge of the nose. Since I was playing the scuzzbag servant, all my hair was in front of my face, so nothing showed and *I* thought I was just sweating. I ran backstage to the dressing room for the quick costume change, threw open the doors, ran to the mirror, pulled back my hair—and Anastasia [Basil] sees all this *blood* running down my face, and she lets out the *biggest* girly scream I’ve ever heard in my life! There was no time, so someone put a butterfly bandage on me and I finished the show.

As it turned out, we had a doctor in the house. Well, Sandra Storrer’s girl friend is a heart surgeon, but even so. She looked at it and said “You have to have stitches, but don’t let just *anyone* sew you up!”. That meant we spent that whole night – until 6

o’clock in the morning – at Rush Presbyterian waiting for a plastic surgeon to come and operate on me. I got three *tiny* little stitches in my nose, and now I’ve got this *little* tiny scar.

All this time you would have thought I’d have gotten hurt in a *fight*, and here a *salad bowl* takes me out! And poor Sam ends up celebrating her birthday waiting in the ER with me! How’s *that* for a joke?

– Michele DiMaso

WEDDING CUTLERY

The groom worked at the Schaumburg Medieval Times and the bride was into Celtic folklore *big* time, so their wedding was *very* historical-themed. The grooms’ attendants were stunt-fighter knights, the Best Man was an armorer who works the RenFaires, and the altar was made up of one *big* altar and five *little* altars, each with special symbolic objects on them—which the bridesmaids were expected to assemble while the bride was off getting photographed.

We were doing pretty well, actually, except there were all these draperies and ribbons and *nobody* had brought scissors. But the Best Man’s wife heard us complaining, and she began pulling all these itty-bitty *knives* – two or three inches long at the most – out of her dress! There was one in her collar, one up her sleeve, *two* in the skirt hem and who knows where else.

She explained that in the Medieval period, women weren’t allowed to carry weapons (that was one of the things that got Joan of Arc put in prison, you remember) but that they *were* permitted a small dagger – usually worn at the waist on a belt – with which to defend themselves against attack. Since women also couldn’t *learn* fighting, their main advantage if they should ever have to use this weapon was that nobody *knew* they were armed.

So this lady’s husband had made a whole bunch of daggers – all legal size, of course – that could be concealed in a woman’s clothes, and she would *demonstrate* these at the faires where they sold them. She’d worn one of her work costumes for the wedding, and had forgot to remove the arsenal before getting dressed – but it was lucky for *us* that she hadn’t!

– Caitlin O’Connell



“Let not the awkward squad
fire o'er my grave.”

– Robert Burns

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