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Moulinet: An Action Quarterly

The Society of American Fight Directors

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2002

## **Moulinet: An Action Quarterly, Volume 3, Issue 1**

Moulinet Staff

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# MOULINET: An Action Quarterly

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## MOULINET: An Action Quarterly

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## 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 some fighting words? Send them 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 or e-mail to [fightingwords@hotmail.com](mailto:fightingwords@hotmail.com) (include ground-mail address and/or telephone number, please)

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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*.

**Richard Gilbert** and **David Gregory** together comprise the "violence design" team of R and D Chorography as well as the resident faculty of the Fight Shop and associates of the Hanlon-Lees Action Theater stunt performers.

**Brian LeTraunik** is a certified as an instructor in the Society of American Fight Directors and is the founder of the Chicago Stage Combat Academy.

**Dawn "Sam" Alden**, former resident fight director for Footsteps Theatre, is a founding member of and senior choreographer for the Babes With Blades fight troupe.

**J. David Brimmer** is one of New York City's foremost Off-Broadway fight choreographers and an instructor with New York's Fights 4 school.

**Michele DiMaso** is an original member of Babes With Blades and recently choreographed fights for *Absolution* at the Steppenwolf Garage.

**Jason Bingham** is the grandson of veteran Shakespearean actor Arnold Bingham and an avid theatregoer.

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# FIGHTING ROOM

## Fight Instructors Talk About The Ideal Training Space

Their debut on the Green Mill Lounge's bandstand had accustomed The Swordsmen to working in cramped quarters, but the storefront where their comedy swordplay was to inaugurate Noble Fool's Wild Card Wednesday series was putting them both to the test. Every safe-swashbuckling stratagem devised by David Woolley and Doug Mumaw had been successfully employed – short swords replacing the 36-inch rapiers whenever possible, and stances initiated at the downstage corners of the playing space for maximum distance. With great relief, they concluded their last duel, Woolley punctuating the finale with a victorious straight-up rapier thrust – right into one of the acoustical ceiling tiles!

Unlike film fights, in which a series of individual moves are afterward spliced together, live stage combat requires sufficient space to view in full every move dictated by the script and the choreographer's interpretation thereof. This is even more important in the classroom, where the margin of error is escalated by novice fighters struggling with complex physical drills.

Fight classes are typically attached to other curriculums and housed in facilities designed accordingly – lecture halls, dance studios, dojos, ballrooms, gymnasiums or athletic fields. With two schools dedicated exclusively to theatrical combat recently opening in Chicago, however, the question of what constitutes "fighting room" becomes more than simply a matter of making do with whatever the hosts permit.

"Floor area is the key!" declares Richard Gilbert, half the team of R and D Choreography, whose Fight Shop is a fourth-floor loft in the old Fulton Market district. "Everything else – well, nearly everything else – is negotiable! When you're choreographing fights for a specific play, you want to have a space as large as the stage you'll be working on, but it's different in a classroom. There you might have two students sword-fighting every six feet. Two guys standing still can be interesting for a while, but sooner or later, they're going to have to move their feet and then you'll need *more* room."

"Our space here is only eighteen feet wide, which is pretty narrow," notes his partner, David Gregory, "but it's a hundred-five feet long, so that's sixty feet where you can drill students in a row down the room. And if we have a long fight that covers twenty-five feet or more, we turn it ninety degrees

and use the length of the room."

The Chicago Stage Combat Academy, located in a storefront on Lincoln Avenue across the street from the former American Blues Theatre, is small by comparison, with a fighting area approximately sixteen by twenty feet, but Brian LeTraunik is satisfied. "The first thing I fell in love with [when I saw this space] was the ceiling!" – a handsome thirteen-foot-high tin structure – "The square footage you need really depends on how big you want your classes. But a ceiling height of around twelve to fourteen feet is necessary for most sword work. A six-foot person with a three-foot sword takes up a lot of room."

Gilbert and Gregory agree, with reservations. "Twelve to fourteen feet is the ideal – high enough that you can swing a quarterstaff and not hit anything. But if you don't have it, you can work without it. When we moved in here, we thought we'd have to remove the heating duct [down the middle of the room], but class after class, no one's hit it yet. Besides," they both chuckle, "we need the heat."

J. David Brimmer, an instructor with New York's Fights 4 school, adds that the particular activity being taught makes a difference, "For an unarmed-combat class of eight to twelve students, you could get away with a nine to twelve foot ceiling. But for sword work, your needs increase to a minimum height of twelve to fourteen feet and room dimensions of twenty-five by thirty-five to fifty feet."

Dawn "Sam" Alden, fight choreographer for the Babes With Blades troupe, also reminds teachers that "a bullwhip class requires extra ceiling clearance", while Brimmer cautions, "It's preferable to have the lights reflecting *up*. There's nothing like a fluorescent tube exploding after being struck by a quarterstaff! Nothing more tedious than the clean-up afterward, either."

Of paramount concern to artists whose primary exercise consists of falling down, however, is a comfortable place to land. LeTraunik's first project in adapting the CSCA was to cover the concrete floor with plywood laid over two-by-fours. "Concrete does terrible things to the knees and lower back," he warns, having himself rolled and dropped to the ground many times in the process of testing his floor's surface.

"You can't fight on concrete!" Gilbert asserts, "And most of the time, linoleum is laid down on top of concrete, so that's almost as bad. *Asphalt* is softer than concrete – really! Actually, the best fighting surface in the world is *grass*. There's nothing more forgiving than turf on dirt – and ceiling height is *never* a problem!"



Gregory comments, more seriously, "You can tumble on concrete if you already know how. But when you're working with students, you need mats. Hardwood is a great teacher – Smack! You did it WRONG! – but that's for honing your techniques, not learning them."

Sometimes fight instructors face the opposite problem. Alden recalls, "I once held auditions in a band-rehearsal room – shag carpeting, cables all over the floor, low-hanging dim lights – it was ludicrous!". Speaking of band rooms brings up the topic of noise, with all fight instructors in unanimous agreement on the undesirability of nearby concert music, gymnasium or fieldhouse acoustics coming in a close second. "You have to *shout*, and after an hour, you can't talk any more." grouses Gilbert.

There are also occasions when an ideal space will undergo a sudden change for the worse. "We taught classes for awhile in an aerobics studio," remembers Gregory, "Big empty room, hardwood floors, nice high ceilings, mirrors along one wall. Then this year, we walk in and there's a row of exercise bicycles running the length of the room! These will *not* stand up well to being beaten on."

With all these other concerns, one would think decor would be negligible. Instructors are quick to dispel this notion, however. Says Alden, "I want walls as *bare* as possible, so we can work with them – throw people against them, or slam heads into them. If there's all this froufy crap on them getting in the way, people get caught on it."

Gilbert agrees, "What you want is at least *one* wall with nothing on it – flat, with no windows, doors, conduit, electrical outlets sticking out, nails holding up pictures – to use when you want to teach twenty students how to throw themselves against it. Of course, *every* wall doesn't have to be a fighting wall. You need *another* wall somewhere for coat racks, first aid kit, maybe a bulletin board."

So a place for *not* fighting, whether a coffee machine in the corner or a pub up the street, is also important. Adrenaline does not cease flowing immediately in energetic young students, making it advisable to set aside time for the specific purpose of allowing heartbeat rates to return to normal. And since even classes *not* dedicated to the replication of violent conflicts risk falling prey to competitive hostilities, periods of camaraderie may also be viewed as a preventative as well as recreational measure. Taking up arms is a gallant thing, but only as a preface to laying them down again.

## TOO MANY PEACEKEEPERS

recounted by Michele DiMaso

Kim Wade and I were hired by a magician named Danny Orleans to do a fight originally created by Vicki James and Jen Albert at a Christmas party. The event was in a banquet hall with a bar, so we set up a scenario where we would be part of the catering staff, with me as Kim's supervisor. The other waiters gave us trays so that we could go out on the floor, bring drinks and take away plates, all to convince the diners that we were really part of the food service.

When the time came to start the scenario, I went into another room and called Kim on her pager. After it went off, I asked if she needed to use the telephone, but she said that she had to leave right away. We start this "You can't go, not *now*, we're understaffed" argument at the back of the room, and the plan is for us to gradually work our way to the front where we've got an area cleared around the bar, with a broadsword hidden behind the fireplace mantelpiece and another one behind the bar.

While we were doing this, the crowd – who are all pretty drunk by then – started getting real quiet. Finally, Kim threw a glass of water in my face and we started a push-and-shove. But then a man in the audience jumped up, saying, "Break it up! Break it up! Take this outside! We don't want any trouble here!". Orleans stepped in from the sidelines to tell him very discreetly that we were entertainment and ask him to keep quiet so as not to spoil it for the others. As soon as we start throwing punches, however, a *different* man jumped in. He was so upset, he had *tears* in his eyes! He was *pleading* with us not to ruin their Christmas party!

Well, we stayed in character, telling him to mind his own business and stay out of it. But after we exchanged some more punches, when I push Kim down and we're rolling on the floor – the same guy breaks in *again*. He comes up behind me, grabs me in a bear-hug and *lifts* me six feet into the air! My back was up against his chest, so I couldn't kick him or even *see* him. And Kim's flat on her back, watching me just *levitate*, while the guy's shaking me, and yelling, "Knock it off! Settle down!"

Then two *more* guys come up, hollering, "Put her down! Put her down! It's fake!", and Kim and I run to get our broadswords. But by then, the women in

the front row are screaming, "What's going on here? What do you mean this is fake? This has *got* to be real!". They seemed more scared than angry – afraid that the tables would be knocked over, I guess, or that their boyfriends would get hurt. Meanwhile, Orleans, and the man who hired *him*, and some of the other waitstaff are all still trying to be *discreet* about letting anyone know this is staged. And the two drunk men are *still* trying to get between us – broadswords and all! – and break up the fight.

Eventually, Kim disarms me and pulls me out of the room by the hair. One of the guys followed us into the hall, saying he was going call the police and have us arrested. We came back out and smiled, and bowed, and hugged each other – but everyone still seemed to be nervous, like they weren't really sure what they'd just seen.

Orleans was really pleased with how it went, but we told him that next time he'd have to stay in control of it a little more. Spectators *never* should have been able to break into it like they did. Since I was the more aggressive of the fighters, *I* was the one most likely to get hit, but we both could have been knocked unconscious.

We talked to Sam [Alden] about this, since the Babes have gotten more requests to do this fight in other places. At first, we thought the rest of the catering staff could be recruited to hold the audience back, but actual waitresses might get hurt if someone pushes them out of the way. So we've discussed adding a *third* Babe, to play a waitress who *doesn't* fight, but instead tries herself to break up the fight. That way, the audience members don't feel like *they* have to do it. And if somebody says "You need any help, sister?", she can tell them no.

But I'd be lying if I said it wasn't still awfully exciting, having them really *believe* it, even after we took our bows. You *know* you're doing something right when *that* happens!



## A NIGHT WITH THE FIGHTS

### ALI

fight choreography by Joe Kahn

Geoffrey Ewing and Graydon Royce wrote a show about Muhammad Ali with no fighting, its cast consisting only of the aged Ali and his youthful self. But if we are to believe an actor's portrayal of this legendary sports figure, we must *see* him float like a butterfly and sting like a bee. Providing the necessary kinetic ambiance is coach Joe Kahn, brought in for daily three-hour workouts to ascertain that Javon Johnson's agile sparring form (and that of Ron OJ Parsons, for a dramatic moment when the crippled Ali breaks free of his physical constraints in a burst of the old fire) never flags even during eloquent monologues requiring verbal timing as intricate as his persona's foot-and-fist work. And while simple accuracy in technique would by itself be satisfactory, the added verisimilitude that comes of Kahn's having himself learned his craft under the tutelage of Angelo Dundee, Ali's trainer, guarantees that this Congo Square production's portrayer not only boxes like a heavyweight champion, but boxes with the unique style we first encountered with *this* particular champion.

### GO AWAY, GO AWAY

fight choreography by Joe Foust

Revenge speeches written as roll-calls ("And *this* is for my father! And *this* is for my mother!", etc.) present difficulties, and not just making sure that the names are recited in correct order. Such moments usually provide a dramatic climax and thus have the audience's full attention. And when the hero is little-guy Kirk Anderson standing up to big-bully Tim Donovan, the emotional investment is even greater. But Joe Foust has assembled a near-perfect sequence that more than lives up to the moment: Anderson first closes in on Donovan to deliver a belly-punch that doubles the larger man over, bringing his face into range for an uppercut. Anderson then slams his opponent's unguarded head into a table, causing the latter to drop to his knees, the more easily for Anderson to catch him in a headlock followed by a kidney punch, leaving Donovan on the ground for the *coup de grâce*, a kick to the ribs. It barely takes a minute, but packs as much power into its brief duration as a twenty-minute clash between Titan armies.

## BOXING 2000

fight choreography by Darryl Pierre, Richard Maxwell, et al.

Describing the match in *Boxing 2000*, one critic declared, "No sports event has ever generated less adrenaline than [the one] shown here". That's because Maxwell and his troupe have stripped the *sell* from their dialogue to expose what another critic labeled "the Raging Bullshit" that constitutes your average ringside-drama, aka bash-and-bawl, action flick. The first two rounds of the Big Show-down consist of the opponents backing each other around the ring and grappling like lambada dancers until one falls from a swing that comes nowhere close to connecting. ("I like it better when they hit each other", his trainer notes wryly.) Eventually a punch or two finds its target – easy enough with outsized gloves that make a hit anywhere else near-impossible. But in the end, we know who wins only when the referee tells us. It's meant as satire, of course, but also offers would-be Rocky choreographers a timely lesson in clichés to avoid.

## THE MILLIONAIRESS

fight choreography by Scott Cummins

She's accustomed to getting her own way, of course, but this is 1935, and just because George Bernard Shaw had the title character's father insist on boxing lessons for his daughter doesn't mean that this urbane lady (who resorts to fisticuffs only when feminine stratagems have proven unsuccessful) is to brawl like a common thug. Fortunately, Scott Cummins has devised a scuffle in which the athletic heiress – clad in high-heeled pumps and a Schiaparelli suit – fells a wimpish gentleman with a right cross, afterward twisting his arm behind him to push him to the door, through which she then propels him with a push-kick to the trousers. The entire sequence is executed with a raffish aplomb that leaves no doubt in our minds that hers is the only appropriate course in dealing with the situation

## SCI-FI ACTION MOVIE IN SPACE PRISON

fight choreography by Joe Foust

Whether it's prison films' inherent homosexual theme made manifest, or the realization that the play's dialogue is more brutal than any physical violence, Joe Foust's fights in this third and latest in

Defiant Theatre's Action Movie series seem somehow gentler, relying less on bloody mayhem than on acrobatic acumen. Casting the seemingly-boneless Jim Slonina in the lead role of Johnny Protagonist encourages this change in Defiant's usual take-no-prisoners ethos. Slonina is primarily a gymnast, his chief attraction being the ease with which he can be volleyballed through the air. And while Richard Ragsdale reprises his many anthropophagous roles in previous productions, playing a prisoner nicknamed, "Armidore the Carnivore", his appearance is reduced to little more than a cameo. Playgoers demanding copious displays of guts-and-gore for their satisfaction, however, will not be disappointed by Sam Muñoz' glossolalic robotug, who continues fighting even after he's *literally* disarmed. And for sheer thrills, you can't beat the group-fight to end all group-fights atop a speeding train as the prisoners flee their captors.

## FIELD DISPATCHES

### QUICKER THAN THE EYE

It was the final scene in *Othello*, after he's killed Desdemona, and Emilia has called the police. Maybe Brian [LeTraunik] had planned it this way, but I think it must have been an accident.

I don't remember if the guards took Othello's commando knife along with his sidearm, or if it had fallen out of its sheath sometime earlier, but he was left minus one dagger. He probably realized it right about the time he wounded Iago with his boot-knife and the guards took *that* from him. But even if they'd left him that one, it's too small a weapon to kill someone with a single strike.

So what the actor did was to circle up behind the bed, and behind the body lying there, and suddenly stick his hand under the mattress, bring it up again fast, and hit himself in the chest with his fist, so it *looked* like he'd stabbed himself with something. And the actor playing Cassio, seeing Othello fall to the ground, exclaimed, "Another knife! He had it hidden there!". The action went on from there like everything was normal. Was that some recovery, or what?

—Jason Bingham



## HAPPY LANDINGS

I was part of a touring lecture-demo show, and we would perform in a lot of different spaces. In one fight, I'm supposed to be beating on this big guy while riding him piggyback, until he flips me over his shoulders onto my back. But there was this one place we were doing it, where I was up off the ground getting ready for the flip. And I look down at the floor, and I see *concrete!* My partner saw it at the same time – which was right while he was grabbing the back of my neck—but he did it in time to halt the throw, and instead slo-o-o-wly pull me over his head and lower me to the ground. I knew he was a strong guy, but I was never so glad that he was *that* strong as I was at that moment!

—Richard Gilbert

## TRAINING MANUALS

### BURNS, FALLS AND CRASHES: INTERVIEWS WITH MOVIE STUNT PERFORMERS by David Jon Wiener book review by Mary Shen Barnidge

This volume includes no information on whether David Jon Wiener is a journalist, scholar or fellow stuntman, but many of these interviews – perhaps conducted earlier by a less experienced reporter – appear to have been transcribed almost intact, with little evidence of editing. Ex tempore speaking is not a special forte of fighters, however, and so his subjects often show a tendency to repeat themselves or to employ jargon unfamiliar to those outside the profession. And former WW II pilot turned stunt-flyer James S. Appleby might have later regretted admitting to using a Playboy centerfold as his target for the plane crash into the house in *The World According To Garp*.

But where else can we read that Debbie Evans, who doubled for Lynda Carter in the *Wonder Woman* television series, vowed early in her career, “I’m only going to do motorcycle stunts because the rest of this stuff is nuts.”? Or Martin Grace, Roger Moore’s double in six of the James Bond films, reveal that in *A View To A Kill*’s mine-explosion, many of the stunt-extras who ordinarily would be thrown into the air were instead dropped from the ceiling? (“In a small area like that, with so much debris flying around, the audience doesn’t really

know where the bodies are coming from, anyway.”) Or Paul Stader recount how he named what is now a standard hand-to-hand move in male-female fights the “Pussy Galore”, after the villainess who originated it in the film *Goldfinger*?

We also have pioneering stunt-woman Polly Burson talking about the sometimes hazardous working conditions during the 1940s and 50s, before many of the stunt-safety reforms practiced today, and J. David Jones, about the extensive aerial coordination for *Apocalypse Now*. John Cade on car-stunts in *The Dukes Of Hazzard*. Tony Cecere on fire-stunts in *Nightmare On Elm Street* and *The Terminator* (“When I see my burns on film, they amaze me. When you’re moving, you don’t have any idea that you’re trailing twenty feet of fire.”). Leslie Hoffman debates the relative landing-surface comfort of cardboard boxes vs. egg cartons. John, Jeannie, Gary and Stephanie Epper discuss stunt-work as a family business. Walter W. Pine pays homage to Frank Tallman and Paul Mantz, founders of Tallmantz Aviation and often called the fathers of stunt-flying. There is even Los Angeles physician Robert T. Rosenfeld acquainting us to the types of injuries most often sustained in this line of work.

Now most likely out of print, this exhaustive 1996 anthology of first-person accounts is an invaluable aid to instructors and students considering a career in the field. It's well worth the search.

## BARTER, HIRE & BROADSIDES

Classes re-commence at the **CHICAGO STAGE COMBAT ACADEMY**, 3856 North Lincoln Avenue (across the street from the American Theatre Company) in April 2002. For information, phone (773) 805-0926 or e-mail [chicagostagecombatacademy@hotmail.com](mailto:chicagostagecombatacademy@hotmail.com).

The **FIGHT SHOP** at 648 West Randolph Street (enter behind the building off DesPlaines Avenue) offers ongoing classes designed to fit your schedule. Phone (847) 333-1484 or e-mail [randd@theatrechicago.com](mailto:randd@theatrechicago.com) for further information.

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**“Have you ever been knocked out  
by a punch in the solar plexis?  
It doesn't put you to sleep like a  
punch in the jaw.”**

**– Epifania Fitzfassenden**

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