

Marshall University

**Marshall Digital Scholar**

---

Moulinet: An Action Quarterly

The Society of American Fight Directors

---

2003

## **Moulinet: An Action Quarterly, Volume 4, Issue 2**

Moulinet Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://mds.marshall.edu/moulinet>



Part of the [Acting Commons](#), [Other Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#), [Performance Studies Commons](#), and the [Theatre History Commons](#)

---

# MOULINET: An Action Quarterly



## IN THIS ISSUE

### Feature Stories

**Cat Fighting at the Cad Palace:  
Stage Combat in *The Lion King*  
and an interview with  
Lion-Tamer Rick Sordelet**

**Hitting The Sharp Notes**

### Reviews

**Golden Boy**

**Sailing From The Moon**

**Shoppers Carried By Escalators**

**The Zoo Story**

**Lysistrata**

**Titlow**

### Field Dispatches

**Flirting And Fighting**

**Duct Tape In Uniform**

.....

**News of upcoming workshops  
and fight opportunities**



## MOULINET: An Action Quarterly

Number Two – 2003

**Publisher** - Charles J. Likar

**Editor** - Bebe Swerdlow

### Staff Writer

Mary Shen Barnidge

### Contributing Reporters

David Krajec

Donnie D'Assaut

### Consultants

H. Gregory Mermel

William Fiedler

Duane Sharp

### Technical Support

Gregory Zelchenko

William B. Stallings

Rollins Warden

Zoe Quan

Copyright © 2003 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 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 392, La Grange, Illinois 60525 or e-mail to [fightingwords@hotmail.com](mailto:fightingwords@hotmail.com) (include ground-mail address and/or telephone number, please)

Payment in copies. All rights return to the authors.

## DEADLINE FOR NEXT ISSUE IS

**31 JULY 2003**

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.

**RICK SORDELET** has choreographed fights for the Broadway productions of *The Lion King*, *Beauty And The Beast*, *Aida*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, *Dance Of The Vampires*, *Smell Of The Kill* and *Urinetown*. Off-Broadway, his credits include, among others, the Public Theatre production of *Othello* and the Lambs' Theatre production of *The Prince And The Pauper*. He now lives in New Jersey and travels the world as fight consultant for the Disney shows.

**DAVID KRAJEC**, along with Steve Covey, was one of the founding members of the now-disbanded Ring Of Steel troupe. He now heads Milwaukee's Rascals And Scoundrels Fencing Club and teaches at Cardinal Stritch College.

**DONNIE D'ASSAULT** is the editor and publisher of *Action Weekly*.

.....

## COMING UP IN OUR NEXT ISSUE!

Milwaukee's elusive Rascals And Scoundrels Classical Fencing Club, Looking for fights in Las Vegas, Jousts and swordplay at the Bristol Renaissance Faire, outdoor Shakespeare and MORE!

## BARTER, HIRE & BROADSIDES

**THE GALLERY BOOKSTORE** at 923 West Belmont Ave. has back issues of *Moulinet: An Action Quarterly*. They are now also available on-line through Advanced Book Exchange, Gallery Bookstore Ltd. inventory number 060 ([Abe@Abebooks.com](mailto:Abe@Abebooks.com)). Price, \$4.00 per issue. For further information, phone William Fiedler at Gallery Bookstore (773) 975-8200 or e-mail; [ChgosOldst@voyager.net](mailto:ChgosOldst@voyager.net)



Check out the  
**Society of American  
Fight Directors**  
website  
at  
[www.safd.org](http://www.safd.org)

## CAT FIGHTING AT THE CAD PALACE: STAGE COMBAT IN *THE LION KING*

fight choreography by Rick Sordelet

The star of the show is Julie Taymor's inventive gadgetry, of course: elephants the size of parade floats lumbering up the aisle, kite-birds soaring over the audience's heads, stilt-walker giraffes bowing over the orchestra pit, Javanese shadow-puppets, Bunraku rod-puppets, foot-high masks—extravagant images designed to convey the unlimited fancy of the animated film within the physical dimensions of contemporary stagecraft. But *The Lion King* also includes some old-fashioned stage combat.

For example, there are the rough-and-tumble bouts between Simba, the young prince, and Nala, his girl-pal—playful scuffles of small concern, but which will later play an important part in the story, when the grown Nala's practice of pinning her opponent to signal victory will identify her to her long-estranged comrade. There is also the murder of King Mufasa, thrown into a wildebeest stampede by his jealous brother, Scar. And let's not forget the climactic melee, with warring animals who must never tangle in or snag on their intricate costumes, culminating in the final Showdown between Simba and Scar atop a cliff from whence the latter meets his poetic justice.

Compounding the challenges is the difficulty of retaining the psychological dynamics and dramatic nuances within the practical environment of this production, the 2400-seat Cadillac Palace. Fortunately, Rick Sordelet is no stranger to boathouse-sized auditoriums, having choreographed fights for the New York productions of *Beauty And The Beast*, the Elton John *Aida*, and *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. The hectic schedule of getting the Chicago *Lion King* ready did not permit a live interview, but Sordelet, e-mailing from London, answers some questions for *Moulinet*.  
MARY SHEN BARNIDGE: We have to be aware of Nala pinning her opponent at the end of each bout because it plays such an important part later in the story. Is that why you chose to have her fight martial-arts style or was that dictated by the movie?

RICK SORDELET: The concept is from the animated film. Julie [Taymor] thought it was important, and so did I. We embraced the aikido aspect of Nala's fighting style to punch up the exotic atmosphere.

BARNIDGE: Pumbaa, the warthog, is characterized

early in the show as having a problem with flatulence, and in the melee with the hyenas, he uses this as a weapon—a *literal* gas attack. In what other ways do the fights reflect individual temperaments?

SORDELET: The trick to translating a popular animated feature to the stage is to keep key elements close to the spirit in which it was conceived. The characters have to be like the ones in the film or the kids will be too much occupied with trying to figure what's different from the film. So again, the film provided the template to how the characters fight. If there wasn't a farting warthog in every *Lion King*—done with taste and humor, based on the costume Julie designed—Disney would hear about it.

BARNIDGE: The struggle between Mufasa and Scar, and the final showdown between Scar and Simba, both terminate in the defeated one fly-falling in a long arcing drop. How was this rendered compatible with the elaborate costumes and props?

SORDELET: Flying With Foy is one of the pioneers in this field, and a leading company in the business. They totally understand the requirements for the actors doing other physical work in the show, and they designed a harness that was actor-friendly enough to fight in, dance in, and still fly in. And I developed a fight vocabulary based on what we could or couldn't do in flying harness, puppet head and prosthetic tail. Any successful big-budget musical is a masterpiece of collaboration.

The bigger costume challenge than the fights, actually, was "Be Prepared", the hyenas' dance number. [The hyena-puppets' heads are mounted on swivels in the middle of the actors' chests to give the animals a slouched-over hangdog stance]. We solved it by having only the three main hyenas—Shenzi, Banzai and Ed—in puppet apparatus. Once the kids accepted *those* hyenas, then the dance hyenas—dressed with a body profile closer to a human one—presented no distraction. This way, the dancers could dance the hell out of the number without being encumbered with puppet gadgetry.  
BARNIDGE: Speaking of gadgetry, the actors are wearing a *lotta* heavy equipment—motors and batteries, I'm told, and masks standing almost a foot high and weighing almost a pound apiece. This has to take a toll on the wearers. How do you work around that factor?

SORDELET: When we determined what the costumes would be and what would be asked of the actors, our mantra was "eight times a week"—i.e. the

fight must be performed, and performed *safely*, eight times a week for four weeks. This means every fight isn't always as flashy as I would like, but it also means nobody is having to get corrective surgery in a year because *I* thought it would be so cool to hang them by one hand from a rock for three minutes. I take into consideration every part of what the actor is wearing and how he is to move in it, and then I plug that information into what I believe the actor can do for—again—eight times a week. After that, it's a matter of making everybody's wish come true.

BARNIDGE: I interviewed Larry Yando [who plays Scar in this production] earlier and noted that villains, especially when older than the heroes, are usually not expected to jump around like juveniles. And Yando, while well short of AARP status, is not precisely a *young* man. How do you factor that into making the fight still exciting?

SORDELET: Funny as it sounds, we always respect the source text, even if the source is a cartoon. I approach the *Lion King* book the same as I would *Hamlet*—that is, I read the book for clues and reinforce what is said. Scar's greatest weapon is his *brain*—he says so himself more than once. And Yando is as talented a Scar as I ever worked with. He has that good old midwestern attitude that gets the job done joyfully and without complaint. I had to hold him back sometimes to confine him to the existing choreography. He was capable of so much more.

BARNIDGE: Did you have to adjust the fights to accommodate any special problems at the Cad Palace that you didn't at the Amsterdam? Or do we have pretty much the same set and the same fights?

SORDELET: Same set, same fights, different casts—different thought-process, depending on the country where it's being produced. Many times we have to take social and cultural differences into consideration in our approach to the work.

BARNIDGE: How so?

SORDELET: Some cultures don't get the jokes, or don't understand why the characters behave in the way they do. We have to educate the actors as to why it's important to keep true to the source. This is an American product, and more important, a *Disney* product. Love 'em or leave 'em—there's no other company on the planet that understands this process and delivers the goods like Disney. They know their business, their standards are high. And you don't mess with that.

## HITTING THE SHARP NOTES

recounted by David Krajec

Two years ago, the Florentine Opera was rehearsing *I Pagliacci* at [Milwaukee's] Performing Arts Center—an updated version, set in Italy of the 1950s. I was reading the paper one morning and I see the headline, "Actor knifed at Center For The Performing Arts". My first thought was, "Oooh! A knifing! Some poor actor got mugged outside the theatre!"

Not half an hour later, my phone rings and it's the production's stage manager. "Uh, Dave," he says, "Can you come in today?". "Sure—but why? What's up?". "Well, we had an accident". "Yeah, I know. I read about it. What happened?"

The official statement called it an "automatic knife"—you push a button and something happens, then you push another button and something else *un*-happens. But it was a *sharp* one. It had already been confiscated by the police, so I never saw it, myself. It had been brought in and shown with an assortment of other weapons, and when they asked the director which one he wanted, he said "Oh, I like that *shiny* one!".

And it would have *been* the appropriate choice—except for the fight. The way the scene is staged, Nedda runs between Canio, her husband, and Silvio, her lover. Canio kills her by accident and she falls to the ground. Canio then turns in rage on Silvio and kills *him*, after which Canio staggers back in horror and drops the knife. They'd been walking through it in slow-motion at rehearsals—opera singers *do* know how to count, at least—but anytime you have a *mechanical* device, it can go wrong.

And *this* mechanical device jammed—fortunately, *not* when he stabs Nedda in the back or she'd have wound up missing a kidney. But the blade didn't retract the second time and was sticking halfway out when he went for Silvio—who's supposed to lean heroically *into* the impact. So when you combine both of those factors, the actor took about three inches of steel in the stomach. Hence the how-do-we-make-this-safe call to me.

Well, we didn't have to worry about the weapon—the police had *it*. What we did was to go to Bart's Party Supply and buy one of those big, phony-looking plastic things. It allowed us to see Canio raise it into the air, but when he stabs, he turns his hand so that all Silvio has coming at him is knuckles. Not that he's got *those* coming at him at

full energy, so that he gets punched in the stomach and maybe loses his lunch. No, the knife comes in with *intent*, but it comes in *soft*.

And that's all you *need* in a theatre the size of the Performing Arts Center. On opening night, I was sitting in the tenth row and I could barely *see* the fake knife. In the balcony, they wouldn't be able to see *what's* in his hand. We could have used a banana, a telephone, a *tree trunk* and they'd never know. But the audience will accept whatever it is as a knife because they know *Pagliacci* and they know what's *supposed* to happen.

I think we're getting into an era where theatre directors are indulging in cinematic vision. They are looking at their production like it was a movie and not a stage show. A director will say, "This moment doesn't work for me, I can't see their faces." and that's because the faces are *fifty feet away* and you don't have zoom lenses! Every aspect of theatre is being affected by this striving for realism. Alfred Hitchcock didn't have to show the blade entering the body—just the blade, the woman, and the chocolate syrup going down the drain, and *we* put it all together.

Accidents like this are such a silly thing. It would have taken so little time to fix it.

## A NIGHT WITH THE FIGHTS

### GOLDEN BOY

fight choreography by David Woolley

You'd think that in a play about boxing, the most elaborate fights would be those in the ring (cf. *Never Come Morning*), but in this production, we never see Joe Bonaparte in action except for a pair of locker-room brawls, where the professionals are restrained by auxiliary personnel simply wrapping arms around them and pulling to opposite sides of the room. The two moments of violence that disturb us, however, are both premised on men bullying women (the latter of whom never so much as raise their voices, let alone a hand, in retaliation). In the first, Joe's brother slaps around his wife (who's "crazy about him" nonetheless—this is 1938, when girls knew that "How'd you like a punch in the nose?" meant "I love you, honey"). Anne Foldeak's choreography for a 2001 production of the play skirted the potential repugnance of this dynamic by staging it as intramarital loveplay. But David Woolley adheres to period subtext in this scene, as

well as later, when a gangster menaces Joe's girl friend. Ironically, the closest he comes to inflicting actual injury is to start a slap, only to be interrupted before it can be executed. But so acclimated have we become to the ethos of female helplessness that we are as terrified and repelled as if firearms or steel had been employed. In the picture of America painted by playwright Clifford Odets, a weak man is an abusive spouse, a powerful one is a sadistic thug, and women should not expect decent treatment from either of them.

### SAILING FROM THE MOON

fight choreography by Kevin Murphy

The big duel between our hero's "angel" and "devil" spirits is easy, once the standard weapons have been modified to dagger and shortsword so as to accommodate the limited distance between audience and combatants, since both Alison Moody and Kerri Van Auken obviously have fight training. And the scene where Van Auken's earthly persona seduces the callow swain with a punch to the breadbasket and a smack to the eye likewise requires only that the object of this cavewoman courtship learn the proper responsive moves. No, the hardest fight in this romantic comedy is the one requiring two actors with minimal fight training to, as one character will describe it, "kick each other's asses". Kevin Murphy solves the problem by putting the fight behind a sofa: we hear the sounds of scuffle and see fists and feet in the air, heads popping up to be pulled down again, arms thrown over seat-backs as their owners grapple for a handhold, bodies sprawling prone and being dragged back into the unseen fray. Yes, it's strictly looney-tunes, but meets the demands of the text without the participants having to undergo training for which their abbreviated rehearsal schedule did not allow sufficient time.

### SHOPPERS CARRIED BY ESCALATORS INTO THE FLAMES

fight choreography by Geoff Coates

Why do playwrights continue to write, and directors continue to block, scenes requiring weapons to sit out in plain sight so that instead of attending to the dramatic action, we anticipate the violence that will justify the conspicuous display of arms? (*The Lisbon Traviata*, for example—if *your* emotionally unstable lover were having a jealous fit, wouldn't *you* put the scissors away out of immediate reach?)

But in Dennis Johnson's play, after the hell-raising brother has drawn a gun to shoot out the television set with a big BIG boom, where do the author and the director have him set it down again? Far upstage by the kitchen window? Atop the refrigerator? On the foyer table by the front door? Underneath one of the sofa cushions? No, he puts it on the breakfast bar dividing the two rooms, right where it can be reached from anywhere on the stage. And do any other family members quietly move it out of harm's way when its owner isn't looking? Of course not. It sits, drawing attention to itself, until it is suddenly re-activated by the same brother pistol-whipping an ex-wife in Buddha drag, the whipsman shouting "bang!" as he does so—whether done for symbolic emphasis or expediency, an anticlimax, after our expectations have been teased over the course of nearly two hours. In situations like this, it's up to the fight choreographer to rescue a play's plausibility factor, insofar as it *can* be salvaged when encumbered with an author and/or director too naive to play with guns.

## TITLOW

**fight choreography by Carrie Houchins-Witt**

The play itself was doomed when its author first sat down to write it, and its demand for two fights on a caliper-extension of the Cornservatory stage allowing the combatants barely five feet from side-to-side only exacerbates its problems. Seattle-emigré Carrie Houchins-Witt responds to this difficulty by keeping both fights relentlessly linear—easy enough with a standard-repertoire wife-bashing, relying as it does on shoves, rib-kicks and punches that turn the recipient toward the wall. Trickier is the scene in which an elderly invalid attempts to sexually assault one of his caretakers and is subsequently murdered. Houchins starts the sequence with the patient asking for a kiss, and when his nurse clasps his hands and leans toward him from the foot of his bed, suddenly grabbing her arms and pulling her down on top of him. Their struggle brings her to a sitting position as they move up the mattress to facilitate the second medic tipping the attacker's head back and pouring vodka into his open mouth (after first brandishing the bottle in a Sweeney Todd gesture of defiance). So vivid is this image that we hardly notice that the medic's thumb stoppers the bottle in the air before bringing it close and emptying it into the drinker's mouth, or that the drinker's

face is turned to the side to allow the fluid to splash harmlessly over him with no danger of his actually swallowing and possibly choking.

## THE ZOO STORY

**fight choreography by J Scott & John Wilson**

There's no denying that it's dangerous. But as evidenced by a mishap in a 2001 production where one of them cold-cocked the other with a blow to the head from a (fake) firearm, an injury or two between these friends in the line of duty is acceptable damage. Besides, the knife-fight is taking place, not on the storefront stage, but in the aisle with audience less than two feet from the action. (I could have reached out and grabbed the weapon-arm without even rising from my chair—now *that's* close!) Oh, and did I mention that it's a *real* knife, with a point and an edge? With these hazards, you'd *better* be careful, and the fighters, J Scott and John Wilson, have taken what precautions they can within the limits of their context. For one, Scott is costumed in several layers of sweatshirt and other heavy fabrics. For another, the steel is a hawk-bill knife, with a curved blade that can easily be turned harmlessly to the side. But most important, the two combatants assure me that they have practiced their scene extensively (and, if Scott's scars are any testimony, they are telling the truth), assessing precisely the distance available for manipulation of the cutlery with as little risk to themselves and spectators as possible.

## LYSISTRATA

**fight choreography by Ned Mochel**

One of the hazards of having a plentiful supply of fight talent is the temptation to reduce the script to a stunt-show (cf. 1995's *Coming Attractions*). But in this adaptation of Aristophanes' timeless classic—women declare a moratorium on sex in order to end the war—it inadvertently muddies the iconography to impose a counterproductive subtext on the dramatic question. The highlight of the action is a full-cast melee in which the soldiers guarding war headquarters are attacked by female guerrillas armed with the symbols of their cause: teasing combs, underarm razors, hair dryers, etc.—all potentially, if not outright lethal, objects introduced in earlier scenes of women eagerly undergoing self-improvement rituals that would approximate medieval torture (the face-lifts, in particular) if not staged in such slapstick

manner. But when "sex" is equated with the artificial standards promulgated by the cosmetic *industry*, are not these women fighting for a lifestyle advocating such draconian vanity measures as botox injections, liposuction surgery and other likewise extreme makeovers? Even without having seen the episode of television's *CSI* in which a mutilated corpse is found to have been a victim of her own beauty treatments, we might give second thought to supporting such an agenda, however cleverly-staged and expertly-executed its presentation.

## CALL TO ARMS

**The Lady Cavaliers**, a New York City-based company "dedicated to strengthening the female image through stage combat", offer a series of workshops in stage fighting fundamentals, including techniques, terminology, etiquette and "acting the fight". Men, women, actors and non-actors of all skill levels are welcome. For further information, phone (212) 726-8301 or e-mail [theladycavaliers@mac.com](mailto:theladycavaliers@mac.com)

**The Society Of American Fight Directors National Stage Combat workshop** will be conducted on Las Vegas University's air-conditioned college campus, July 7-July 25. This is the big one you've all heard about, gang. For further information, visit [www.safd.org](http://www.safd.org) or e-mail Mike Chin at [NSCWCoordinator@safd.org](mailto:NSCWCoordinator@safd.org).

**Summer Sling VII**, the SAFD New York Regional Stage Combat Workshop, is scheduled for August 21-24 and will be held at New York University's Tisch Building, 721 Broadway at Waverly Street in The Village. Class offerings include "Biker Karate" and "Police Baton and Handcuffing Techniques". For further information, e-mail Mike Chin at [nscwboss@aol.com](mailto:nscwboss@aol.com)

**A New Fight Publication:** Paul Magee is accepting original articles for a new (as yet untitled) magazine focusing on "the art, discipline and romance" of swords and swordplay, both historical and modern, "catering to anyone who is passionate about swords, from fencing professors to Kendo masters to antique dealers to teenagers whose only exposure to swords is Dungeons And Dragons," he says. "My biggest

obstacle is gathering enough material for the first issue, since I have no budget yet." He would especially like descriptions of the Chicago Art Institute's arms and armor collection, or that of Mader's German restaurant in Milwaukee. For further information, query: Paul Magee, 695 Manomin Drive, St. Paul, Minnesota 55107, or e-mail at [paulrmagee@yahoo.com](mailto:paulrmagee@yahoo.com)

## FIELD DISPATCHES

### FLIRTING AND FIGHTING

Fight choreographers should be included in the creative process from Day One. It's like I say when conducting workshops at the Wisconsin High School Theatre Festivals. I ask the students, "Have you ever been in a show where people had to kiss?" and after the giggles stop, I ask, "How many times has the kiss looked awkward? weird? uncomfortable?"

Most of the hands go into the air, and I ask, "Do you know why that is?" and they usually shake their heads I-don't-know. Then I ask, "How many times do you remember the actors kissing onstage *for the first time* on the day before the opening?" Then the light goes on!

"That's the problem!" I tell them, "You didn't *rehearse* it! It looked uncomfortable because it *was*! Even if you think you already know how to kiss, you have to learn it all over again, because you're kissing someone you've never kissed before. It's the same with a fight—except that it's longer sometimes. Or less dangerous. Sometimes.

—David Krajec

### DUCT TAPE IN UNIFORM

According to officer Bruce Hovanec of Chicago's 23rd District, a gag fashioned of duct-tape would likely entail a wad of tape stuffed into the victim's mouth, with more tape wrapped around his head and under his jaw. Looks as if the five-inch single-strip duct tape gag *is* strictly a theatrical invention. Band-aids, anyone?

—Donnie D'Assaut



# “Violence Without Bloodshed”

—motto of the Ring Of Steel combat troupe

**MOULINET: An Action Quarterly**  
**P.O. Box 392**  
**LaGrange, IL 60525**

