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The Society of American Fight Directors

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

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

## About the Authors

**RAY SCHMITZ III** has put away his guns and now makes his living as the head “soundenista” at Chicago’s Shubert Theatre. His poetry and fiction have been published extensively and two of his artistic creations are included in the permanent collection of the Vietnam Veterans Museum.

\* \* \*

**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 and Writers, Inc. and a Friend in the Society Of American Fight Directors.

\* \* \*

**LAURA JONES MACKNIN** is a founding member of Shakespeare’s Motley Crew, recently seen in the title role of its Jeff-nominated production of *The Roaring Girl* and earlier as the bloodthirsty Margaret of Anjou in Bailiwick Repertory’s *Henry VI: Blood Of A Nation*.

\* \* \*

**WILLIAM SIDNEY PARKER** has appeared in many costume-drama productions, playing both fighting and non-fighting roles (notably, *The Roaring Girl*, *A Month In The Country* and *Titus Andronicus*). He is an ensemble member in Shakespeare’s Motley Crew.

\* \* \*

**ZOE QUAN** is no stranger to Worst-Case Scenarios, having extensive experience with life-threatening situations while traveling the world in her capacity as a telecommunications consultant.

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\* \* \*

*Moulinet: An Action Quarterly* would like to review some seaside stunt-shows in 2001. If you know of any pirate-ship fight acts, please let us know when and where to find them. Send information care of *Moulinet*, P.O. Box 1265, LaGrange Park, IL 60526 or e-mail [fightingwords@hotmail.com](mailto:fightingwords@hotmail.com).

## READY, AIM-DON'T FIRE!

by Ray Schmitz III

Several years ago, I was employed as Head Armorer at a major metropolitan opera company which shall remain nameless. My major duty was maintaining the armory, a large room on the fifth floor that stored armaments from every period imaginable—épées and claymores, scimitars and cavalry sabers, lances and halberds, along with one-of-a-kind specialties like the Mephistopheles sword with the wraparound bat-wing hilt and 70 eight-foot, hemp-wrapped spears I'd built out of 3/4-inch plywood for Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*. (A reviewer said these reminded him of arrows without bows. I told him we'd discarded the bows as too effeminate.) Among the firearms in our collection was a rack of bolt-action rifles in near-pristine condition that were chosen to be the firing squad's weapons in our production of *Tosca*.

As soon as the cast was given their guns, a problem arose. Several of the actors, whether from moral scruples or just reticence about firearms in general, were uncomfortable with the idea of shooting a gun. It ended with a dozen of them excused from actually firing the weapons, instead simply miming the action. The director instructed me to mark the blank-loaded guns for the other half dozen men, who were almost *too* eager to shoot. All of them were instructed in safety procedures and told not to point the guns—even the empty ones—at anyone. I also warned the stagehands placed near the backstage gun-rack that touching anything would lose them the use of their hands. Or worse.

The dress rehearsal was the first time we actually ran the scene in full context. I handed out the rifles, making sure each person got the correct weapon. They were to chamber the round on the order of an officer standing five feet upstage of the squad, who would then raise his sword and signal them to fire by allowing it to drop. As the scene approached, the tension within me mounted. I had not yet seen what six rifle shots would look and sound like going off all together, having only myself fired once or twice out my office window over the river while experimenting with varying black-powder charges for proper smoke-to-sound ratio. (I abandoned my trials after the police asked me to confine my activities to the building's interior).

The sword dropped, the shots rang out, the noise and smoke were fine—but Cavaradossi, our hero, wasn't stretched out on the ground. He was standing with his hand over his left eye and glaring at me with the other. A piece of wadding had hit him, fortunately missing

the eyeball. I chewed out the shooters, reminding them that they were *never* to point the guns at anyone. Having once again put the fear—of me, if not God—into everybody within ground zero, I assured Cavaradossi that the evening show would go smoothly.

At the opening performance, I admonished the firing squad once again to aim *upstage*, then watched from the wings as they marched onstage, chambered the fatal round, and raised the stocks to their shoulders. There was a volley of gunfire and Cavaradossi slumped to the ground just the way everything was supposed to go. Except that the officer's sword was lying on the floor, and the officer himself was clutching his hand and grimacing in pain.

The shooters had followed my instructions so diligently, they'd aimed a whole twenty feet wide of their mark. The officer had to be taken to the hospital where his hand was treated for severe burns and pellets of undetonated gunpowder extracted from under the skin.

I had another heart-to-heart with my intrepid *demi-douzaine*, after which they all performed competently for the rest of the show's run (although two declared themselves Conscientious Objectors afterward). And years later, when I ran into the officer again, we had a chuckle over the incident. We were lucky that time.

## NO DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE

by William Sidney Parker

We had reached the trial scene in John Webster's *The White Devil*. Braccianno and Flamineo, the characters played by Christian Gray and myself, are banned from participating, but observe the proceedings from the "gallery"—which we had located about six rows back into the audience area. Christian and I were to engage in some *sotto voce* improvisations until Braccianno can no longer contain himself and breaks in on the action.

After only a little over a minute, however, I saw one of a party of people in the second row leave the theatre. Then another one followed him and someone sitting behind the group leaned over and began talking to a blonde woman in the party. I noticed that her head was beginning to roll on her neck and quickly reviewed the hypotheses: she could be diabetic. She could be epileptic. She could be emotionally agitated. Then I noticed [assistant director] Katie, who had been seated in the house the whole time, looking back at the booth like she was trying to catch [stage manager] Maggie's eye. For me, that was the clincher.

As one of the patrons who had left the theatre returned and prepared to carry the distressed woman out,



I whispered to Christian, "We should stop it." When he looked puzzled and continued with the scene, I whispered again. "That woman's in trouble. I think we should stop the show." She was unconscious by now. I directed my voice at the stage and addressed the actors by their own names, not their characters'.

"Alan-Don-please stop." As they heard me and looked up, I turned to Maggie in the booth at the back of the house, "Maggie, I'm sorry. We need to stop." I suggested to the people ministering to the unconscious woman that they not move her, but one of them had already ordered the others to carry her out to the lobby, where one of our actors was calling 911.

The woman regained consciousness as the paramedics arrived. While they were questioning her, we made an announcement to the audience (waiting quietly in their seats), assuring them that the woman was all right and that we would be resuming the show in a few minutes. Maggie got the actors together to decide on a point several beats back in the text from which to start again. After the paramedics left and everyone was re-seated, she thanked the audience for their patience, gave us "places" and with surprising fluidity and lack of fanfare, we and the audience were back in the show. Our real-life drama was over in all of ten minutes.

Some things we learned from this incident are that good care for sick spectators could be quickly summoned. That audience members are reluctant to interrupt the show, but will wait for the cast or crew to make the call. And that an interruption need not have an effect on the play.

The possibility of the unexpected, the unplanned and the unrehearsed is a part of the vitality of live performance in the theatre. It is important for the performers' and technicians' default setting to be "keep going", and for us to be prepared to improvise, solve the problem and keep the story moving. But while "The show must go on" might be our discipline, it's not necessarily our audiences', and not being afraid to stop a show is also important.

The full-time stage and house management staff in the larger houses have the planning and equipment to handle these contingencies—heck, you could perform surgery at the back of the [old] Goodman without the audience noticing. But in small spaces with no direct communication between the various parts of the room, the time it takes to convey information may be the time it takes to save a life. As a long-time company member but also as an individual player, I think it is a good idea to have clear guidelines as to when to say, "Stop".

## GETTING INTO THE ACT

by Mary Shen Barnidge

Even for a drama critic, a seat in the audience is usually thought to be a safe vantage point from which to observe stage violence. Except when something goes wrong, of course.

The production was Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, set in the playhouse's big mainstage, and the weapons reflected a period covering some six centuries. At one point, an actor was to draw a blunderbuss pistol, do a full turn downstage and then fire upstage. But the hair-trigger on the pistol accidentally discharged on the turn, spraying me and a half-dozen playgoers with compressed air and sparks.

After the show, I asked the director if this business was a part of show's choreography. He seemed startled, and assured me that "no one was instructed to shoot the critic!". In the meantime, the story must have gotten bigger traveling from the front lobby to the dressing room. The next day, I received a phone call from the show's fight choreographer, saying sheepishly, "I hear we shot you last night, Mary."

I assured him I was neither injured nor frightened, but that a more naive spectator might have stopped the show before reaching that conclusion. The gunman, I said, should not count on being always so lucky as to shoot someone as fight-friendly as I.

And that would have been the end of it, if it hadn't been for a production of Dekker and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl* in the studio space of that same playhouse a year later.

There were several full-cast melees incorporated into the action, with the first row of the audience seated a bare eight feet from the mayhem. I *thought* I had stowed my handbag securely under my chair. But at the start of the first fight, I suddenly heard a dragging sound near my feet and, looking at the stage, saw my bag five feet out on the set and an actor shaking his foot loose from its strap.

I knew better than to compound the hazard by trying to retrieve it while the fight was still in progress, but thought I might be able to fall-and-crawl onto the apron afterward and snag it back. Fortunately for me *and* for the show, another actor saw it during the course of the fight, snatched it up by a corner and slung it into the front row, where I recovered it easily.

It was my turn this time to phone not one, but *two*, fight choreographers the next day. The *Roaring Girl* fight director, to apologize for accidentally interfering with his fight the night before. And the *Henry VI* fight director, to ascertain that the actor booby-trapped by my carelessness was, indeed, the same one who had inadvertently opened fire on me the year before. We agreed that fate had conspired to even up the karma and settle all scores.

## A NIGHT WITH THE FIGHTS

### **JULIUS CAESAR**

**fight choreography by R & D Choreography**

When a predominately male company like National Pastime stages a predominantly male play like *Julius Caesar*, the collective adrenaline/testosterone level is liable to push the vocal intensity to a volume more appropriate for a parade ground than the Old Speakeasy's intimate space. Director Larry Bryan and his cast of ensemble regulars never lose control of their material, however, nor of Richard Gilbert and David Gregory's characteristically gut-wrenching depictions of high-level warfare. Far from romanticizing the violence associated with the Roman Coup of 44 BC, assassinations are portrayed as a dirty conspiracy by weaseling bureaucrats, civil partisanship as mob rule, and suicide as an act, not of defiance, but of desperation and defeat. Whether executed with daggers, swords or firearms—and this contemporary-dress Shakespeare has them all—their subtext allows no glory in bloody deeds where both the killers and the killed cry out in agony at the atrocity of their actions.

### **HAMBONE**

**fight choreography by Richard Barrows**

Tragedy demands scope for grandeur, but Victory Gardens' premiere production of Javon Johnson's *Hambone* aspires to tragic proportions in an intimate 200-seat room. With violent confrontations—fathers against sons, sons against sons, even sons against grandfathers—playing out within a few feet of the audience, suspension of disbelief must be absolute if the scene's gravity is to remain uncompromised. The cast varies widely in age and fight training, but newcomer Richard Barrows has drilled his charges in the precision dance of fisticuffs and in the safe handling of chillingly real-looking switchblade knives to craft tension-escalating moves of unexpected swiftness (at least one of which drew audible gasps from spectators) so seamlessly integrated into the play's action and characters therein that only long after leaving the theatre does one think to search the playbill for a fight director's name.

## **THE WHITE DEVIL & THE DUCHESS OF MALFI**

**fight choreography by Jonathan Nichols**

You won't find much display of combat skills in Jacobean tragedy, which is less about chivalrous sword-play than about murder—the more lurid and covert, the better. So the decision of Shakespeare's Motley Crew to run two of John Webster's Greatest Hits in repertory not only requires blood mixed by the jeroboam, but homicides in sufficient variety to keep us from growing bored and noticing the trickery. While the plays' texts supply a few exotic inspirations—prominent among them an envenomed Bible which victims are enjoined to kiss—chief responsibility for the array of stranglings, poisonings, stabbings, slashings and the magnificent group-shootout with 45 automatics at the end of *Devil* goes to Jonathan Nichols, making his debut as fight choreographer. Assisted by a cast practiced at theatrical violence, as well as some rarely-hazarded special effects (including a scene lit exclusively by an automotive flare—see FIELD DISPATCHES), the excitement and suspense never stall into the “ho-hum, who's gonna die next?” torpor risked by plays of this genre.

### **THE SILVER CHAIR**

**fight choreography by Richard Gilbert & David Gregory**

It's not just an optical illusion engendered by the small stage—that's a twenty-foot-long snake attacking Prince Rillian of Narnia, his two juvenile liberators and Puddleglum, their marshwiggle sidekick. In Lifeline Theatre's adaptation of C.S. Lewis' *The Silver Chair*, the gonzo ingenuity of Richard Gilbert and David Gregory not only succeeds in fitting Rebekah Johnson's puppet-monster—formidable even by Chinese New Year-parade standards and requiring three operators to render it mobile—into the 28 X 30-foot space, but also contrives a thrilling showdown in which all four of the combatants must work together to subdue the fierce and deadly beast until one of them can cut off its head (velcroed in place for a bloodless decapitation). In a story heavy with Victorian allegory, this is a showdown to send young playgoers home in readiness for whatever demons, spiritual or physical, may lurk in the shadows of Glenwood Avenue.

## EXACT CHANGE

fight choreography by David Hart Waggoner

The snow stranded the director in the western suburbs on the night of the fight scene rehearsal, leaving three actors of widely varying stage combat experience to plot out punches and grapples to be executed by their characters—aging, rusted-out Vietnam war veterans—in such close proximity to the audience that one wrong move could garner some hapless front-row spectator a hook to the beeper. Fortunately, the Cenacle Theatre Company's distinguishing feature is its ensemble work, and while David Hart Waggoner is credited by his fellow players as the one responsible for the sudden outbreaks of violence that heighten the story's pathos, credit for their success would appear to be shared by all the participants. A bona fide choreographer on site is best, of course, but sometimes all you need is a little know-how and a lot of dedicated teamwork.

## TRAINING MANUALS

### THE WORST-CASE SCENARIO SURVIVAL HANDBOOK

reviewed by Zoe Quan

What do you do if a bull charges at you? How about a bear? Joshua Piven and David Borgenicht sought advice from people with a variety of expertise—stunt performers, medics, pilots, sailing and scuba instructors, wilderness-survival trainers—who confront such critical situations on a regular basis. The result: a small, hazard warning-yellow book entitled, *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook*, outlining helpful defensive measures in 40 circumstances that could endanger life and limb.

Most of the emergencies are unlikely to be encountered by the average reader—how to detect a bomb, for example. Others are useful, but of dubious legality, such as breaking down doors or hot-wiring cars. Stage combat aficionados will find strategies for winning sword fights or taking punches. The intention is not so much technique as response—a reminder that it always pays to be prepared, both mentally and physically.

While it could not be considered a humor book per se, *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook* is

certainly entertaining as well as informative. The scenarios are arranged roughly by activity and written in bite-sized increments that make it easy to dip into when one has a few moments to look for something to worry about.

And that charging bull? Don't run away—movement is what attracts the bull's attention. Ditto for bears. Had Shakespeare read this book, literature might have been deprived of that famous stage direction "Exit, pursued by a bear."

## FIGHTING WORDS

reviewed by Mary Shen Barnidge

Most fighters, both real and theatrical, learn their craft by being *shown* how to do it. Words are rarely of great concern, whether when interpreting a playwright's text or improvising "alarums" for a melee. But sometimes understanding what those words mean is important to making sense of the fight indicated in the script. For example, if a character is reported to have "egged on" his followers, it helps to know that the action had nothing to do with hen fruit. Or that rendering someone *hors de combat* does not require a fighting quadruped.

Christine Ammer's glossary to the terminology of conflict, *Fighting Words* (subtitled "From War, Rebellion and Other Combative Capers") is a fairly comprehensive and refreshingly easy-to-read compilation of vocabulary born of violence but now a part of the American idiom. How many citizens, strolling down a picturesque tree-lined "boulevard", are aware that its name derives from "bulwark" (from the Middle Low German "bolwerk")—the top of the wide rampart that comprised the defensive wall surrounding a medieval town? How many restaurant customers would ever suspect that the "banquettes" on which they sit are named for 17th-century gunners' platforms erected behind a parapet? And lawyers looking for a "loop-hole" might be surprised to learn the origins of *that* expression.

Though no longer in print, *Fighting Words* is well worth the search through second-hand book stores and library sales. For the armchair warrior, it is an entertaining guide to our language's sanguine roots. And for martial scholars, it is a valuable tool to ensuring accuracy in the replication of period combat.

## FIELD DISPATCHES

### NO XENAS NEED APPLY

A fight choreographer nowadays knows that a small woman delivering a crotch-kick to a big man will always get laughs and applause from an audience. But one fight you never see is a big woman taken down by a small man. You won't see the big woman beat the small man, either. And only when the script specifies a brawny female, like in *Ballad Of The Sad Cafe*, are you likely to see a big woman fight a big man.

Most fight directors, when faced with a female fighter over five-feet-nine tall or over 130 pounds, either cast her as a man in the ensemble, or have the tall, skinny villainess bring her on to wrestle with the short, skinny heroine. Heavyweight men are cast in lead roles all the time, but there doesn't seem to be much opportunity for plus-sized amazons.

—Angela Altay

### PLAYING WITH FIRE

[Editor's note: At a recent production of *The Duchess Of Malfi*, a flare employed to illuminate a crucial scene refused to stay in place, despite efforts to confine it to its fireproof container. An actress appearing onstage during the series of futile rescue operations initiated while the show continued shares her thoughts.]

### WHEN WORKING ON STAGE WITH AN EMERGENCY ROAD FLARE (ERF):

1. Remember that an emergency road flare is *not* a toy. Your director may claim the lighting effect is "really cool", but an ERF is more like a small, heavily-armed guerrilla squadron—dangerous and unpredictable, with no discernible ideology whatsoever.

2. An ERF does not throw a lot of light. It does, however, throw clouds of acrid smoke and burning debris. Choose discretion over vanity and keep as far from this as possible, no matter how fabulous your costume. Or put another actor between yourself and the flying goo. Also, this scene should be of some duration, in

order to ensure the audience's sharing in the smoke-filled environment.

3. Make sure the ERF accompanies a scene of extreme devastation, grief or horror. The greater the emotional resonance, the greater likelihood of the audience assuming that your frantic, flapping-armed gestures are part of the blocking. Mad scenes are ideal, especially if they include references to Portia (not the one in *The Merchant Of Venice*, but the one wedded to Brutus) swallowing hot coals in her grief.

4. If you should have an accident with an ERF, make sure a journalist is on hand to document it. You will become famous and your friends in other not-for-profit, no-money theatre companies will offer donations to pay your medical expenses.

5. See that the director is in the house at all times. If someone has to make the Ultimate Sacrifice, he's easy to replace at this point in the run and it was his idea, anyway.

6. Recite, hourly, these lines from *Shakespeare In Love*: "The theatre's natural condition is one of unsurmountable obstacles on the road to imminent disaster. Strangely enough, it all works out in the end."

7. Say a daily prayer of thanks that cruise missiles are hard to come by.

—Laura Jones Macknin

### BE KIND TO ANIMALS

It had rained all the night before, but by afternoon the sun had come out and it was hot and muggy for the 3 o'clock joust, when the knights and their mounts come out in full armor — steel for the men and canvas caparisons for the horses. So just as they ride onto the field, I hear an audience member behind me say, "That horse must be dying!". Not one *word* about the poor guy out there wearing the sixty pounds of steel armor. Horses! It's *always* the horses!

—Brandon Dennison



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**“If you can’t find a way to stage a horse accident convincingly, you might as well have the fellow just walk in the front door”**

**– Richard Zoglin**

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