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7-1-2002

Moulinet: An Action Quarterly, Volume 3, Issue 3

Moulinet Staff

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Recommended Citation

Moulinet Staff, "Moulinet: An Action Quarterly, Volume 3, Issue 3" (2002). *Moulinet: An Action Quarterly*. 19.

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MOULINET: An Action Quarterly



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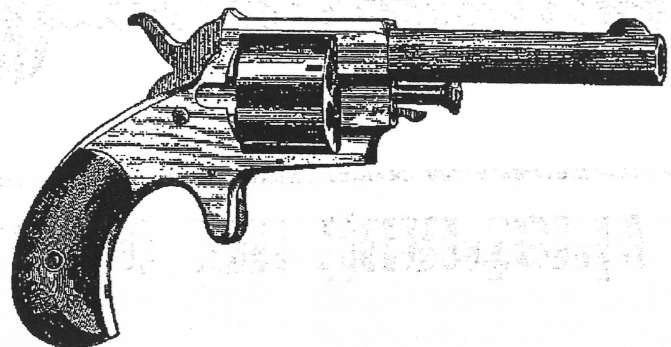
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MOULINET: An Action Quarterly

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1 November 2002**

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STEVE SCOTT is one of Chicago's busiest directors, with credits stretching back nearly two decades, most recently the Noble Fool's inaugural production of *Mirandolina*. Since 1987, he has been an Associate Producer at the Goodman Theatre and serves on the faculty of Columbia College and Act One Studios.

DEXTER BULLARD is remembered by fighters chiefly as director of the 1992 production of *A Night At The Fights* during his tenure as associate artistic director of the Next Lab (an adjunct of Evanston's Next Theatre) where he also directed the legendary *Bouncers* and the premiere production of the international hit, *Killer Joe*. He is currently artistic director of the performance group, Plasticene.

BILLY BERMINGHAM, founder of Chicago's Torso Theatre, is rumored to be residing in Italy, where he continues to produce his long-running hit, *Cannibal Cheerleaders on Crack*.

BRIAN LeTRAUNIK studied stage combat at Columbia College, serving as assistant to David Woolley, and certifying as an actor/combatant in 1996. He is the founder of the Chicago Stage Combat Academy and resident fight choreographer for Red Hen Theatre Company.

RICHARD GILBERT is one-half of R & D Choreography and, along with his partner David Gregory, also comprises fifty percent of the faculty at the Fight Shop school for stage combat.

RORY ROUNDUP is the pseudonym of Will County columnist Harry Buncombe.

BARTER, HIRE & BROADSIDES

THE GALLERY BOOKSTORE at 923 West Belmont Avenue 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). Price, \$4.00 per issue. For further information, phone William Fiedler at Gallery Bookstore (773) 975-8200 or e-mail; ChgosOldst@voyager.net



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BATTLE-HUNGRY AND BLOOD-THIRSTY: FIGHTING WITH FOOD

by Mary Shen Barnidge

There's the classic pie-throwing melee, of course. And sooner or later in every fight choreographer's career comes the dinner-table scene in *The Miracle Worker*. But artists and audience members alike are usually hard put to recall occasions requiring food employed as tools for violence.

Of course, sometimes the food is disguised as non-food, as in the reliable Karo Syrup-based blood (or a recent play, where a peanut butter Power Bar posed as a human *tongue*, forcibly severed with a fish-skinning tool). Or the packaging, rather than the food itself, warrants the most concern, as with "poison" surreptitiously transferred from a ring, or filled bottles that must then be broken (in *Among The Thugs*, the understudies were stationed in the front row during rehearsals to assess the danger from flying sugar-glass – "and they didn't even warn us to shut our eyes!" groused one of the human backstops).

Foam-rubber sausages and fiberglass melons, along with the venerable rubber chickens, are standard equipment for theatre companies specializing in period farces involving pantry-fodder hurled at foes. Richard Gilbert recalls a fight that pitted Salami ("giant, stuffed-cloth") against French Bread ("giant, real"), the latter of which, by the end of the run, "was a dangerous weapon for *real*, having hardened to rock-like consistency". Indeed, a major difficulty with plastic fruits and vegetables are not only their tendency to *bounce* on impact, but their injury capabilities when propelled at sufficient speeds.

A ready example of food presented as non-food is the popular mix-it-yourself stage blood, whose formula is based in corn syrup and food coloring – ingredients inexpensive, easy to locate in remote sites, and harmless when swallowed, inhaled or accidentally dripped into an eye. Its resemblance to actual blood is also an advantage – the heavy syrup both shines and coagulates like blood and retains its sluggish flow even when applied to sweating, overheated bodies. By experimenting with different proportions of the food coloring (each fight captain and director has his or her own formula, some blending red and blue, some red and green, and some incorporating chocolate syrup), gallons of gore in a variety of sanguinary shades may be matched to a particular scene's lights and decor.

One disadvantage common to all stage blood, however, is the difficulty of washing red dye out of costumes, though Brian LeTraunik maintains that the oil in peanut butter ("smooth or chunky – though chunky gives the illusion of tissue mingled with the blood") prevents the stain from setting, rendering it easy to launder. And old veterans of summer-Shakespeare battles warn their comrades of another hazard, encountered in outdoor theatres whenever sweet substances are stored in flimsy shelters, where a blood jar not kept securely covered and free of surrounding stickiness may well attract ANTS.

Blood is the body fluid most often simulated onstage, of course, but Torso Theatre's long-running production of *Cannibal Cheerleaders On Crack* featured an array of secretions, discharges and fluxes. Its director, Billy Bermingham, having been trained as a chef, recreated most of these with ingredients from the local grocery: vomit composed of partially diluted mushroom soup. Sperm consisting of Ivory dishwashing liquid ("Catches the light so nicely"). And phlegm replicated by a touch of green food coloring in a spoonful of Plochmann's mustard – which Bermingham claims "flies beautifully".

"Since these are projectile fluids, the most important element is viscosity and color, with the goal being high visibility," says Bermingham, "I mix everything onstage every night in front of the lights because its intensity has to match the strong primary colors we have on the set. The actors apply the fluids with hand-held irrigators – like you use for ear medications – that can be kept hidden from the audience. And we regularly have 'squirt rehearsals', so everyone knows their range of fire and we don't hit anyone in the audience."

In most productions, however, food is used as food – though not always the food it may appear to be onstage. Veteran comedy director Steve Scott cautions, "Food is messy, and it's hard to incorporate that kind of clean-up process into a show – unless, of course, the food fight is the final scene." It goes without saying that a fight conducted with relatively *dry* food is easier to sweep up – as with *The Lonesome West*, where the brothers squabble over cocktail-sized sausage rolls and 3-ounce bags of potato chips. When that is not possible, more disposable foods are substituted for their textual counterparts. Dawn "Sam" Alden recalls mashed potatoes being the weapon of choice in one production of *The Miracle Worker*, while Scott remembers scrambled eggs

dominating the arsenal in another, adding that mashed potatoes also make a realistic and relatively non-perishable ice cream.

Wise words and practical advice notwithstanding, one of the most legendary incorporations of edibles into a play's action involved fried chicken – ordinarily the *last* thing anyone would want on a stage. The play was *Killer Joe*, Tracy Letts' gruesome tale of Texas justice – part of which includes fisticuffs and gunfire over a tableful of carry-out, but not until after an avenging assassin has held a chicken-leg at crotch-level and forced a woman to perform fellatio thereupon.

"After an eight-month run," recalls director Dexter Bullard, speaking of the premiere production in the classroom-sized Next Theatre Lab, "the room never smelled the same again. We had the whole family-pack meal on that table – gravy, potato salad, cole slaw, the works. It became a new form of olfactory dramatic foreshadowing. As the audience entered, they got this subconscious sense that, sooner or later, the spicy-wings would hit the fan."

Not just any poultry would do, however. Letts' specification of Kentucky Fried Chicken by brand-name in the play's text might have been only for regional verisimilitude, but when the show found itself playing in London, it became a technical necessity – the English recipes for takeaway fowl proving too greasy to permit actress Holly Wantuch to perform her oral gymnastics properly. The branch of KFC near the theatre, hearing that their product's logo was displayed so prominently onstage, was happy to provide the company with free food – for awhile, anyway.

Under the headline, "Weird Sponsorship stories no. 98", a columnist in the Evening Standard reported: "Colonel Sanders may sue Killer Joe, the eponymous hero of Tracy Letts' darkly comic thriller at the Bush Theatre, after the folks at Kentucky Fried Chicken heard that one of their drumsticks was used as a *membrum virile* in a grotesque oral rape scene. 'They may be doing us for defamation of drumstick,' admits artistic director Dominic Dromgoogle, 'But everyone in the play says they enjoy KFC, and our audiences eat there afterward, so I've suggested they should market their product as *the sex-aid for the nineties*.'" Adds the columnist, "With a revised advertising slogan, presumably."

From prehistoric times, virtually anything that can be thrown, kicked or spat has been employed as

a means of repelling unwelcome intrusions, whether threatening or merely annoying. While we rarely hear nowadays of wives flinging long-grown-cold suppers at errant husbands or playgoers pelting actors with overripe tomatoes, the extent to which an armory may be culled from the larder is not to be overlooked in the creation of fresh and original scenes of martial combat.

ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS

FIGHT ACTS at the BRISTOL RENAISSANCE FAIRE

12250 120th Street/Russell Road west of I-94:
Kenosha, Wisconsin

Hanlon-Lees Action Theatre

This company just gets better and better, adding innovations to change with the times. Innovations this year include the return of a local cult hero, a daring monarch, a low-risk audience-participation gimmick, two very talented horses, and a rainbow coalition cast whose bloody partisanship reflects the dangers of patriotism taken to extremes – all in one day's joust!

Even the morning's exhibition drills were given fresh interest on the weekend of 6-7 July by Steve Jones, playing Master of Arms Sir Steven (*not* to be confused with Sir Stephen of Alsatia, played by senior Hanlon-Lees combatant Stephen Ommerlé). Spinning his baton authoritatively, the Eric Burdon-lookalike acquainted the separate audience sectors with their duties in a fraction of the time usually required by individual squires, thanks to a body-mike that allowed for more vocal flexibility and a horse (Benjamin by name, for those taking notes) trained in backing up, wheeling about, and side-stepping in a shuffle-off-to-Buffalo as gracefully as Fred Astaire.

The action leading up to the Jousting Challenge was enhanced by Elizabeth R herself declaring a wish to hold rings for the lancers' drills – a feat raising the stakes substantially, should a knight miss his target (as even the most careful of stunt fighters can do on a windy day) – and a charming turn with selected spectators likewise holding rings, this time at the end of a lance, thus guaranteeing a safe distance between rider and amateur squire.

But all this is merely a prelude to the final showdown among the four competing knights, with the Spanish Sir Mitri and the Saracen Lord Othello, played, respectively, by Native-American actor Chris Mitri and African-American actor Lionel Lee, serving as seconds to Stephen Cowan's Sir Andrew the Dane (an Arnold Schwarzenegger-styled giant speaking in ersatz-Scandinavian gibberish) and William Burch's Sir William DeBracey – both actor and character former stars of the Bristol Faire, returning after a three-year hiatus.

The duel that will end in bloodshed is precipitated by the latter's perceived mishandling of Denmark's flag, leading the arrogant Andrew to demand Satisfaction from DeBracey, himself now a punch-drunk veteran of too many wars, living in a haze of madness (as is his likewise kill-crazy steed, who paws the ground, prepared to leap eagerly to the charge). With both sides vowing to defend their country's honor – are you getting the metaphor here? – the exercise in voluntary suicide commences.

All Geneva Convention agreements are off in a fight ugly as a prison brawl. At one point, Andrew uses a wounded Othello as a living shield – a strategy that does nothing to stop DeBracey, who hacks his way through the human barrier with not a second's hesitation. After Andrew emerges triumphant – that is to say, not dead – having slain his competitors by means so underhanded as to be obvious to the most naive spectator, the irony of warfare is rendered complete by Revels Master Edmund Tilney's laudatory whitewash proclaiming the recipient of the victory prize "a brave and virtuous hero". Think about *that* the next time politicians haul out their hankies over our Brave Boys In Uniform.

The Swordsmen

Has this duo really been doing this six months out of the year for over a decade? When David Woolley and Doug Mumaw agreed in 1988 to stage a rhymes-and-rapiers fight for Marc Smith's Uptown Poetry Slam, did they guess that they would acquire fans driving hundreds of miles to cheer on and sing along with the charming cavaliers? Did they anticipate eventually having to train a second-string squad to play the Western states?

Whatever the speculations, the certainty is that age has robbed neither the patter nor its performers

of the precision timing and playful banter that makes for the illusion that all this is happening *for the first time* – not just for the audience members pulled onstage to smile, strut or otherwise display themselves more expansively than is customary, but for the tricksters who must inveigle them into doing so while assuring their physical safety and psychological security at all times. (Insult comedy is left to the ducking-stool booth.)

What we anticipate, however, are the bouts of swordplay, some executed a trifle more slowly these days, but still guaranteeing lots of flashing steel, manly vocalization and the level of technical skill one would expect of two stage-combat instructors with over three decades of choreographic experience between them. Every faire in the United States might feature a copycat Swordsmen act, but nothing surpasses the original.

Death and Taxes

The hired fight acts were augmented by a slapstick play incorporating the faire's strolling players. The plot for this year's live-action cartoon involves an elusive strongbox, crooked magistrates, dimwitted pirates, and lusty wives. But resident fight choreographer Gary Boeck stages a complex, if leisurely-paced, full-cast melee utilizing every level of the Cheshire Chase Stage and culminating in a splendid pants-on-fire pyro-stunt, courtesy of Matt and Linda Stratton.

FIGHT ACTS at the SILVER LEAF RENAISSANCE FAIRE

River Oaks Park: Comstock, Michigan

Noble Cause

The Silver Leaf Faire is located in a public park just east of Kalamazoo, making for a relatively small and simple event, its tiltyard a clearing among the trees, barely big enough to allow horses to canter. All of which may explain, but in no way excuses, the chintziness of Noble Cause's joust – on this day, a two-man affair featuring Scott Rushing as the lofty Sir Edward, Dan Foss as the sour Sir Malcolm and Rick Jensen as Squire Richard, who also served as Master-Of-Arms

The fault was not in the execution of the armored combat, but that there was so disappointingly little of it. In an eight-hour day divided into half-hour incre-

ments, each of the three parts comprising the day's tournament featured a mere fifteen minutes of actual fighting (following five minutes of the squires teaching audience members how to cheer). Even this brief running time showed evidence of stretching, notably in the slowness with which the jousting knights returned to their original corners to prepare for the next charge.

Dialogue was marginally audible – a common hazard with 360-degree staging – though the treble voices and field-officer enunciation of the female volunteer-squires rendered their speeches intelligible in every corner of the arena, if not the county. And since most of the children's events had been set up on the other side of the faireground, the patter included a few jokes considerably more risqué than heard at more commercial faires. But another viewing in another context will determine whether Noble Cause's performance on this occasion was a by-product of environmental factors or a reflection of their craftsmanship.

Rogues And Rapiers

Granting certain characteristics common to all two-armed-clowns acts, the name still leads one to expect another knock-off of the Swordsmen. But the happy circumstance of Dominic Daniel's being African-American allows him to employ humor based in topics forbidden to his paler compatriots, and gives blond-hippie straight-man David Dragon the opportunity to hurl such original invectives as "You over-tanned Caucasian!".

The gags include, as promised by Dragon, some that are "silly" and some that are "just plain gross", but the rogues' swift and sharply-timed delivery elevates even the South Park groaners, as well as references to nearby communities, and – just for good measure – the "Do you bite your thumb at me" scene from *Romeo and Juliet*.

The Rogues' routine also incorporates a competently-executed, if classroom-level, rapier fight. But the climactic action sequence utilizes weapons no more dangerous than a water-pistol and risk no greater than Dragon being soaked with a bucket of same in the course of rescuing a magically-restored virgin. In a genre where physical prowess usually dominates cerebral acuity, however, the Rogues are indisputable masters of *verbal* fencing.

Otto The Swordswallower

Not all dances-with-cutlery demand an opponent. When Otto the Swordswallower, né Alex Kensington, refuses to continue with the show until every audience member has sworn that they will *not* attempt to replicate what they are about to see, he is serious. That's because there's no *trick* – only skill, practice and plenty of nerve – to a brand of stunt read about, but rarely seen in our sensitive times.

There's no way to fake steel down one's gullet, in other words. To make sure this is understood, Otto invites spectators to inspect the weapons used as esophageal probes. These include an 18-inch bayonet, a 26-inch shortsword and, instead of the traditional long-sword, three interlocking swords which, simultaneously inserted, he rotates 180 degrees, to the amazement and horror of the audience.

As commendable as his technique is Otto's expertise at selling an act that could easily cease to be entertaining and become nauseating – and when he relaxes his epiglottis to allow blades to drop another few inches bellywards, the line becomes thin. But Kensington's blond, curly-haired cuddliness renders inoffensive even his stern pronouncements to potential backyard metallophages. "Children, if you try this, you will get hurt. And if you get hurt, *you will deserve it.*"

HANLON-LEES ACTION THEATER at CRETE WILD WEST DAYS

Willard Wood Park: Crete, Illinois

No one would begrudge Kent Shelton sitting out this gig so soon after the loss of two close family members in the last month, but Hanlon-Lees Action Theater's Buffalo Bill Wild West Show would have been unthinkable without Buffalo Bill in command, and so it was a pleasure to have him back in the saddle of his favorite horse (Jerry, for the record) at Crete's Wild West Days festival. Additions to the 2002 Hanlon-Lees schedule made for an ensemble considerably smaller than usual – two horses and only four performers besides emcee Ned Buntline (played once again by Jimmy Ellis) and Colonel Cody himself. The tree in the midst of the audience, atop which Chief Rain-in-The-Face was accustomed to act as target for Annie Oakley, had been cut down since last year, and the stagecoach remained stationary throughout the day, guarding against a mishap such as occurred at this event in 2001 (see *Field Dispatches*).

None of these changes rendered the show any less welcome to the crowds that flocked to Willard Wood Park. The return of Milwaukee's trick-roper Charlie Keyes – this year setting a new record by spinning a 75-foot loop, up from the 50-footer he kept in the air in 2001 – was enthusiastically applauded, as was newcomer Trisha Mack, playing Miss Sure-Shot herself, Annie Oakley, and doubling as a stunt-rider to open for Chris Mitri's equestrian acrobatics.

A re-enactment of the historic Bowie-knife fight between Cody and Chief Yellow Hand now features ringside commentary by Buntline, making the play-by-play dynamic easier to follow. This and the robbing of a train – not the Union Pacific Freighter passing on the perimeter of the site, but the horseless stagecoach, called into play as a substitute – are presented with enough accuracy to satisfy the scholars, but also with sufficient playfulness to soften the violence of such necessary dialogue as, "First scalp for Custer!". And commendations are due Ellis for his delivery, as Buntline, of a speech warning children not to play with guns or with whips—his caveat concluding with a severe, "And now I don't want to hear any complaints from your parents!", after which he proceeds to charm the very people he has just chastised.

A NIGHT WITH THE FIGHTS

PULP FICTION

fight choreography by Mark Dodge

The space is a former Masonic hall the size and sumptuousness of the throne room in the czar's summer palace, making for film-noir lighting and long sight-lines (even from the front rows) that conceal a multitude of bluffs. But audiences who have seen the ground-breaking Quentin Tarantino film expect BIG violence, and Mark Dodge, with some hardware borrowed from the R & D arsenal, delivers it in abundance. We have hand-to-hand slugfests, a cardiac needle jabbed through a supine female sternum, and even a bit of saber-fencing when a pair of gas-station thugs turn out to have a souvenir of the Rough Riders stowed behind the counter. But the tip-off that Dodge knows his firearms is the scene where a gunman empties his six-shooter into his victim – all *five* shots. How often do you find *that* kind of attention to detail?

FIELD DISPATCHES

CUT TO THE CHASE

Crete's Wild West Days festival is held in a public park and our playing area didn't have enough turning room to do the stagecoach robbery. But as long as we'd brought the stage, Bart gave people rides in it around the festival grounds. So early Saturday afternoon, he was getting ready to take a couple of teenagers out, when something spooked the horses – I think it was a motorcycle starting up close to the trailer – and they began to run away, down the driveway and out onto First Street. Bart was halfway into the coach, and when it jerked out from under him, he fell out.

Now, as long as we were all saddled up and ready, what better way to chase runaway horses than with another horse? Kent and Chris took off after them, but what finally stopped it was the team breaking free of the coach and doubling back to the far end of the site, where one horse tried to pass a tree on the left and the other tried to pass it on the right, and their harness caught in the middle. They didn't knock heads, but they were both stunned by the sudden stop. And since Lone Bear was right in that area – Rick Cleveringa, the Indian storyteller, who jumped up to shield the kids as soon as he saw trouble coming – he stepped in and grabbed the bridles until the riders could get there and calm everything down.

What's funny is that nobody was badly hurt. Bart was run over by a stagecoach wheel, but except for some really bad bruising where it first hit his chest, nothing was broken. He apologized to the passengers, offering to refund their money, but they said it was the most exciting ride they'd ever had! The coach horses had jumped the hood of a Ford Taurus, knocked over two Harley-Davidsons and side-swiped a bunch of people who, I guess, had seen too many movies and didn't know that *they* had to get out of the way. But even the little girl who went to the hospital with a sprained wrist was back again that same day. The only person who made a fuss was one of the Harley owners – he called the police and made a big scene until the officers themselves told him to back off. Kent says that in Colorado, something called Equine Law states that "horses are not responsible for their actions" – fortunately for us, they've got that here in Illinois, too.

—Rory Roundup

“Boot Hill is full of fellers who pulled the trigger without aiming.”

– Edgar R. Potter

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