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## **Moulinet: An Action Quarterly, Volume 5, Issue 4**

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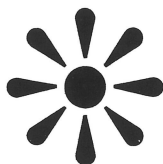
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# **MOULINET:** An Action Quarterly



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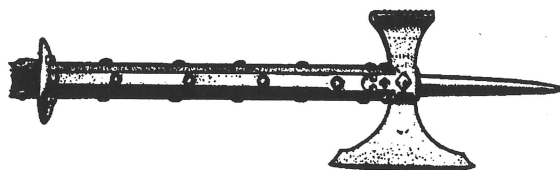
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## MOULINET: An Action Quarterly

Number Four – 2004

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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)

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## 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)

## HAVE BROADSWORD, WILL TRAVEL or, ARE YOU LOOKING FOR A FIGHT, MISTER?

by Bebe Swerdlow

With the number of plays produced in this continent and the quantities of actor-combatants certified by the SAFD every year, you would think that connecting with each other would be easy. But even in a theatre-saturated town like Chicago, one still finds directors entrusting intricate and potentially-hazardous stage violence to untrained actors, dancers, technicians, stage managers—anyone who ever participated in any kind of slugfest and is willing to assume responsibility for assembling one. This, while the very technicians they so badly need grumble at the lack of job opportunities and the limitations presented by “Word-of-Mouth” recruiting.

Mark Guinn, fight instructor for Louisiana Tech University: “Word-of-mouth is a staple of my business.” Fight master David Woolley, stage combat and movement instructor at Chicago’s Columbia College: “Most of my work has come by word-of-mouth.” Dawn “Sam” Alden, founder of the all-female fight troupe, Babes With Blades: “The jobs we get are usually by word-of-mouth.”

“I’ve always obtained fight gigs through word-of-mouth,” reports actor-choreographer Erin Carlson, “I can only remember one time I solicited a job myself—but that was sort of word-of-mouth, too. Woolley gave the director my name, and I went in for an interview.”

David Skvarla agrees, “Word-of-mouth is all I use. When I get a call to fight or direct something and can’t do it myself, I refer the caller to Erin or Geoff [Coates] or Kat [Rosen]. And if *they* aren’t available, they pass it on to someone else.”

But how does that homely method apply to theatre companies too newly arrived in town to have an ear attuned to the word-of-mouth network? Or a rural high school drama club doing *The Miracle Worker*? Or a medieval-history society desiring to re-enact the battle of Agincourt? How do directors working far from concentrations of arts and education signal their need for a stage combat specialist, and how do fighters indicate their availability as, literally, Free Lances? A cursory poll of stage combat artists yielded the following suggestions:

### Be from the right school

Says Nick Sandys, instructor at DePaul University’s drama school, “I am constantly getting [offers for] small jobs—more than I have time for—

mostly from directors calling because we have worked together before and I’ve shown myself to be a good resource who ‘plays well with others’. If I can’t take the assignment, I try to match the job up with other choreographers whom I know and have worked with, taking into consideration the project’s style, time frame and fee.”

Woolley concurs, “Most of my work has come by calls inquiring as to whether I am available. Or my calling an artistic director to interview about upcoming projects, where I often propose ideas that they then use *without* hiring me.”

“The only money I put toward advertising is with the Louisiana Film Commission,” shrugs Guinn, “I have received only one phone call in almost ten years. It led to a contract for an adventure film that was never shot. And here I was, looking forward to guns, multiple beatings, a couple of hangings, some gay porn...”

### Be affiliated with the right people

Babes With Blades often receives requests for stunt fighters, says Alden. “Several times a year we get e-mails on our website from someone looking for a fight director—usually a high school gig. Sometimes party planners want a fight as entertainment, but after an incident a few years ago when the guests intervened, trying to break up the scuffle, we’re careful about those.”

### Be in the right place

Mary Shen Barnidge recalls chatting with Maggie Speer in the lobby at a play opening in Skokie and learning that Waukegan’s Bowen Park needed a fight choreographer for an upcoming production. “So later that night, I e-mailed a list of fight people I knew and asked if anybody was interested. Someone responded with a resumé the very next day.”

Carlson claims to have found work at taverns where theatre people congregate. “We’re at the bar, right? And [Rich] Cotovsky [artistic director for Mary-Arrchie Theatre] says, ‘Oh, shit! Erin, I’ve got some fights in my show. Can you come by tomorrow?’”

### Sign up for a class

Directors looking for expertise in any specialized field tend to first phone their local educational institution. Stage combat being a skill requiring frequent practice in the company of other like-minded and similarly-schooled partners, classes and workshops may be found at any time of year offering opportunities for maintenance workouts as well as social contacts.

## Take out an ad

Trade publications tend to cover entire regions. A fight choreographer in Eastern Ohio may find his or her advertisement answered by a theatre company in Northern Missouri, so include your scope of operations.

## Pick up the phone

Brian LeTraunik, in an interview for *Footlights* magazine, confesses "I've gotten work before by calling the theatre when I see they're doing a play with fights in it, and asking, 'Do you need a fight choreographer?'. Most of the time, they say 'We didn't even think about that'."

## Lick some stamps

Says Geoff Coates, "My latest attempt involves a mass mailing, with resumé and cover letter enclosed, to as many companies as I can find."

## Hang around the Fight Shop

Richard Gilbert and David Gregory, the duo comprising R & D Violence Designers, frequently advertise in trade papers like Chicago's *PerformInk* and in theatre playbills. As managers for the Fight Shop, a facility offering classes and practice space, they also receive requests for fight instructors and combat-trained actors.

## Join the Society of American Fight Directors

This organization maintains a national directory of members in good standing. Regional Representatives receiving requests for fight-trained personnel have been known to forward e-mail bulletins to their compatriots.

Barnidge would like to see a print and/or web directory of fight resources unrestricted to a single organization or region. "While you can't go wrong with the SAFD for safety and dependability, all those things *can* sometimes be found elsewhere—corresponding organizations in other countries, for example."

"When I first started doing this," says LeTraunik, "I was shocked at the number of directors who don't realize how much practice goes into this. They assume that I'll come in once, show the actors how to move, and that's all there is to it. But we are not magicians, we are not tricksters, and this is not something you can learn overnight."

In the meantime, the only answer seems to be for journalists and publications such as *this* one to promote heightened awareness in all branches and all levels of show business regarding the necessity of using trained fighters, as well as the accessibility of such in their immediate community.

"It's like fishing," says Coates, "If one bait don't work, you try another."

## ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS

### THE KING'S CHAMPIONS at ILLINOIS RENAISSANCE FAIRE

The Florida-based Royal Chessman were missing some teammates, stranded by East coast hurricanes. The Scurvy Dogs, whose comedy act usually includes a few slapstick scuffles, had left their weapons at their last gig. And the main performance space was set up on a green with never a hint of shade all that blistering hot weekend in downstate Champaign-Urbana.

Of course, the Illinois Renaissance Faire, only in its second year, might be forgiven an occasional oversight. Throughout history, traveling entertainers have relied as much on nature's caprice as the organizational expertise of their sponsors. The King's Champion jousters, however, would have been well within their rights to call a strike after discovering their tilting field demarcated only by a single row of hay-bales instead of the fence specified in their contract.

Virtually all modern exhibitions of knightly skills have as their goal a replication of the tournaments contemporary with their chosen period. But if choreographed spectacle, with its simulated violence and character-driven repartee, is analogous to acting, full-contact armored combat is comparable to professional athletics. The participants in this international sport charge one another at full gallop, lances erect and aimed at their opponent's most vulnerable center of balance—in Realgestech fighting, a small shield bolted to the knight's breastplate, gridded in order to grip the point of the striking lance, and in Northern Italian-styled combat, the knight's helm, though contact on any area above the waist is considered a fair target. Points are awarded only when one knight has propelled the other off his horse.

But as with football or boxing, the rules regarding playing conditions render it safer than might appear—both for the combatants and the audience. An activity requiring both participants to charge and collide head-on with one another mandates heavy protection for both men and horses, with corresponding sacrifice in maneuverability—especially regarding braking-distances for mounted riders weighing in at a hundred pounds (minus weapons) over their natural weight.

The fence around the perimeter of the field, then,

serves as a backstop—or frontstop, in this case. But while horses can recognize a fence as a barrier, a bale of hay does not register in their field of vision. Furthermore, audience members frequently treat the hay as benches, placing themselves *within* the tiltyard boundary. With Master of Arms Shawn Adams—serving also as referee and ringside announcer for the match—absorbed in his own duties, and the site-hired squires seemingly reluctant to take the initiative for rousting paying customers, it all made for a patently hazardous situation.

Rather than disappoint the weekend crowds, however, the knights Sir Timothy and Sir Shanton (the former played by Tim Tobey and the latter, by Canadian champion Shane Adams) forged ahead resolutely. As might have been foreseen, Timothy's mount overran the end of the field during the first joust, scattering spectators and throwing his rider. Soon thereafter, Timothy was again unhorsed when his saddle slipped. By the commencement of the second bout, fairgrounds medics were uncertain whether his arm was broken. Following a few passes, with the heat-dazed Timothy swaying precariously on the turnaround, the match was declared finished.

Rome and Renaissance Faires are not built in a day. But more careful planning is in order if attendees at this event's 2005 incarnation are to enjoy themselves with no risk of illness or injury.

**Champaign County Fairgrounds in Champaign, Illinois. For further information, phone Illinois Renaissance Faire at (217) 351-3464**

## **HANLON-LEES ACTION THEATER at CRETE WILD WEST DAYS**

This one-weekend downstate festival might seem insignificant when compared with the big commercial rodeos, faires and jamborees, but the Hanlon-Lees Action Theater expends as much care and preparation in presenting a fresh new show every year as if they were playing Caesar's Palace.

Featuring the Kent Shelton in the role of Buffalo Bill Cody, the 2004 spectacle at Crete Park was framed in a homage to the short-lived but much-celebrated Pony Express: in the course of the afternoon's program, we saw demonstrations of such skills as relay switches—mounted couriers swiftly exchanging horses and mailbags with never a moment's pause—as well as slapstick robberies and other road hazards, with a fireworks display celebrating the final delivery of the service who brought the mail from St. Joseph to Sacramento in only ten days.

In between, we were entertained by Charley Keen, whose gun-twirling and rope-spinning tricks grow more innovative with each appearance, and by "Little Miss Sure-Shot", Annie Oakley, played this year by Trish Mack. New to the ensemble is Laura Amandis, aka Zitcala-sa, and her Andalusian steed, Acierto, who together deliver passages, piafs, Spanish Marches and *dema vaqueras* of balletic grace. Gary Boeck, on loan from Wisconsin's Bristol Renaissance Faire, stood in for Matt Stratton this year as highwayman Cole Younger, while Chris Mitri returned to play Chief Rain-In-The-Face (flanked by Reuben, Ash and Calin Fasthorse in a one-family pageant of Native American lore.)

All but stealing the show, however, was the pint-sized Emilia Dvorak, making her debut as the long-lost offspring of our wayfaring host, Ned Buntline (again portrayed by whipmaster Jimmy Ellis). Not only is she a virtuoso at bratty-little-kid shtik, but at Colonel Cody's request, she sang our National Anthem, *a cappella*, without missing a note. Somebody sign this child to the permanent company, quick! **Crete Park District (formerly Willard Wood Park), 515 First Street in Crete, Illinois. For further information, phone (708) 672-6969.**

## **A NIGHT WITH THE FIGHTS**

### **A CLOCKWORK ORANGE fight choreography by David Blixt**

By way of farewell to Chicago before their migration westwards, Defiant Theatre chose a show allowing them to do all the stunts that have so endeared them to us over the last decade. As young antihero Alex revels in his sadistic video-games, the Virtual violence spills over the stage in a *melée* of ninja-warriors, slaving vampires, trenchcoated gangsters, hockey-masked killers and helpless victims attacked by an alligator. The stage teems with gang weapons—razors, knives both large and small, ingenious retractable batons for the police, bicycle-chain flails ("We had to rehearse the fight in real time," reported one of the participants, "You can't swing a chain in slow-motion"). But perhaps the most original aspect of Blixt's choreography is his insistence that, unlike in the film, the women put up a viable defense before Burgess' plot requires them to surrender—and not just fight-trained gamines like Amy Stackpoole and Erica Peregrine, but plucky dowagers like Margaret Kusterman, who, at one point, holds four thugs at bay with only a cane, delivering a smart crotch-kick to one before being knocked unconscious by his henchmen.

## **SHAKESPEARE KUNG FU**

### **fight choreography by Chuck Coyl**

Scripts built around fights are a staple of certification exams for membership in the Society Of American Fight Directors, but Will Kern, author of the long-running hit show *Hellcab*, goes beyond simple scenarios to forge an entire play with dialogue cobbled together from the plays and poems of William Shakespeare, accompanied by an array of quasi-Asian fights choreographed by fight master Chuck Coyl. So you'd think a collaboration between two such expert craftsmen would be more exciting than it emerges, due to the propensity of action-oriented actors to render their assignments' verbal aspects mere background noise. There are exceptions—Damien Geoffrion recites a sonnet with enough romantic croon to pass muster at one of our city's more intimate spoken-word clubs. But as with certain cinema and television fight sequences all too obviously filmed separately from the story, this production's physical action seems always to have been dropped into, rather than integrated with, its dramatic counterpart.

## **TOMMY GUN'S GARAGE**

### **fight choreography by Jim Boinski and Bob Lakasik**

You might see a *real* fight if you take the El to Tommy Gun's new garage—a former livery stable, actually—at Wabash and Cermak. Fortunately, the violence indoors is safe and PG-rated. Indeed, the only punches thrown in the course of the show—three jabs and a karate-kick—are purely for demonstration, with no target but the downstage air. (Don't be fooled, however—the chorus of cuties for the floor show includes at least two David Woolley-trained and SAFD certified actress-combatants.) More impressive are the authentic period weapons borrowed from the Police museum up the street whose blankfire charges make for show-stopping noise in the cavelike quarters. Safety measures are observed: they are fired *far* from the stage and aimed so that nothing more fragile than a brick wall catches the powder burn. And don't ask to handle the emcee's .38 snubnose—customers are not allowed to play with the props, and you will likely be refused with a mischievous “What's that, Lady? You say you wanna hold my gun?”.

## **IPHIGENIA IN KINGMAN**

### **fight choreography by Robert Gretta**

In this adaptation of the Greek tragedy, the scene where a café proprietor eighty-sixes a troublesome customer could have been staged generically—indeed, in its first rehearsals, the actors were reported to have run the gamut of their carefully-practiced falls and flourishes. But Thaos, the King of the Kitchen, doesn't want to *assault* Orestes, only throw him out. And since we have been told that Thaos is a war veteran (World War II, most likely), it is not implausible to have him fight commando-style, efficiently twisting Orestes' arm behind him and proceeding directly to a choke hold. But just as the calmer of two opponents always has the advantage, so does confidence often prove detrimental: Orestes' sidekick Pylades, seeing his friend being roughed up, spins Thaos around and decks him with a playground scrapper's left cross. The fight emerges more dramatic in its very simplicity and logic than would a twelve-minute look-ma-I'm-fighting fistfest.

## **I HATE HAMLET**

### **fight choreography by John McFarland**

It's only a single fight, but when one of the swordsmen is the ghost of John Barrymore, the action must embody all the legerdemain of theatrical swashbuckling, even if the actor's skill with cutlery is limited to carving at Thanksgiving dinner. Complicating matters is the Attic Playhouse's wide but shallow stage, its depth further diminished by an upstage alcove and two door units. McFarland wisely keeps the action linear, Barrymore goading his opponent with balestras and thrusts, all blade engagement executed safely in the air over the fighters' heads and augmented with plenty of bobbing-and-weaving combinations. And since the *coup de grâce* is subsequently revealed to be a ruse fooling even the spectral provocateur, it's only fitting that it be a patently phony upstage-downstage stab further camouflaged by the alcove furnishings.

## **THE DOCTOR IN SPITE OF HIMSELF & THE PRETENTIOUS YOUNG LADIES**

### **fight choreography by Erin Kathleen Carlson**

Though better known for his courtly satires, Molière could write *commedia*, too. And as long as the cast includes Uma Thurman-lookalike Erin Carlson, why not incorporate some Three Stooges-styled slapstick (often itself nowadays called

“Molière-and-Curly” fights) into the action? The comic tone is especially important in *The Doctor In Spite Of Himself*, whose title character is understood to beat his wife—with her hearty encouragement! But Carlson reduces their physical engagement to some rough-and-tumble wrestling, culminating in the most playful of spankings, ascertaining that what could otherwise have been disturbingly offensive is not allowed to disrupt the farcical tone of the play.

## —SKIRMISHES—

### 500 CLOWN FRANKENSTEIN

#### fight choreography by the 500 Clown ensemble

If the aesthetic of most stage violence can be compared to dance, 500 Clown’s aesthetic is that of the stunt-car crash. In defiance of the dictum that the audience must *never* fear for the safety of the actors, Adrian Danzig, Molly Brennan and Paul Kalina strive to make it all look as painful, reckless and dangerous as their audiences can stomach. Their props are large and heavy—folding tables constructed of two-by-fours, for example—so the act is not without its real dangers, but as with full-contact jousting, the players have their ways of rendering the violence safer than it may appear. A greater hazard are the spectators who, invited at one point to attack the hapless Kalina, proceed to carry out their instructions with such gusto that his comrades are forced to intervene.

### SEVEN OUT

#### fight choreography by Jessica Hester

It’s not difficult to repel an attacker himself drunk and unsteady on his feet, unless the bargirl he pursues is also tipsy. Wisely rejecting anything smacking of sophisticated martial-arts technique, Hester has the aggressor’s sheer bulk bowl his victim over, whereupon the small female proceeds to bring her adversary down with a punch to the crotch. With both fighters on the floor, the playing field is evened up, allowing the young woman to roll on top of her assailant, effectively pinning him to the mat, while further intimidating him (and bolstering her own adrenaline) with a war-cry of “Don’t you DARE!”.

### SWEENEY TODD

#### fight choreography by Brian LeTraunik

Staging fights in musicals present additional challenges, even when the punches and kicks *don’t* have to land squarely on the beat. For a story involving multiple homicides and dismemberments, however, *Sweeney Todd* contains remarkably little person-to-person violence. LeTraunik’s instruction makes a snake oil-peddler’s chastisement of his

reluctant apprentice suitably quick and brutal. But employing a fight specialist, rather than relying on the imagination of a dance choreographer, also produces such crowd-pleasing moments as the cheerful waltz where the murderous barber and the cannibalistic cook—armed, respectively, with butcher knife and rolling-pin—celebrate their collusion by swapping some triumphant bladework-in-five.

## CALL TO ARMS

**March 12-13. March Madness** at Northern Kentucky University in Highland Heights, Kentucky. Instructors include Richard Ryan, Chuck Coyl, John Bellomo, Don Preston and Gina Cerimele-Mechley. Class titles include “Naughty Fighting”, “Sneaky Sh\*t” and “Mass Battle Basketball Style”. For information, phone Ruth Baca at (513) 295-4755 or log into [www.clearstagecincinnati.com](http://www.clearstagecincinnati.com).

**March 18-20. Virginia Beach Bash** at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Instructors include Dale Girard, Michael Chin, Scot J. Mann, Michael Kirkland, K. Jenny Jones, John Wynn, the ubiquitous Richard Ryan and word is that Michael York—of *Three Musketeers* fame—may make an appearance. For information, phone Michael Kirkland at (757) 226-4730 or e-mail at [michkir@regent.edu](mailto:michkir@regent.edu).

## FIELD DISPATCHES

### NO BETTING ON THE HORSES

The Renaissance Faire season currently runs from February to November, but bloodthirsty fight fans who just *gotta* see a joust in the middle of winter now have an alternative to Medieval Times. Christian Stavrakis, webjockey for the Hanlon-Lees Action Theater, reports that the Turning Stone Casino in Verona, New York, sponsored a “Night of Knights” on New Year’s Eve 2004, featuring armored combat by Hanlon-Lees regulars Kent Shelton, Taso Stavrakis, Steve Cowan, Joe D’Arrigo, Jimmy Ellis and special guest star Richard Weber in the role of King Arthur. Other entertainment included equestrienne exhibitions by Trish Mack and Laura Amandis, magic by Rusty Ammerman and falconry by Mark Westermann. Stablechat has it that 2006 will ride in at the Turning Stone with a Wild West night, and that an as-yet-unnamed casino in California is also planning a New Year’s festival of RenFaire fare. For further information, look to the Hanlon-Lees website at [www.hanlon-lees.com](http://www.hanlon-lees.com).

**“It’s better to fall short  
than to fall down.”**

**– Chuck Coyl**

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