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The Society of American Fight Directors

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## **Moulinet: An Action Quarterly, Volume 7, Issue 2**

Moulinet Staff

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# **MOULINET: An Action Quarterly**



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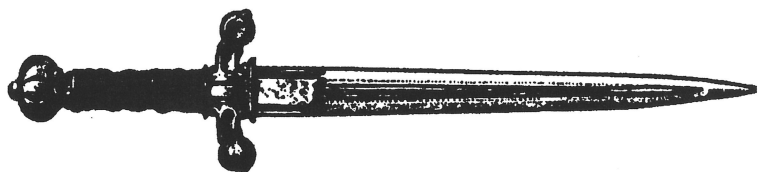
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## MOULINET: An Action Quarterly

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**Publisher** - Charles J. Likar

**Editor** - Bebe Swerdlow

**Staff Writer**

Mary Shen Barnidge

**Contributing Reporters**

Nicholas Patricca

Michael Goldberg

Dawn "Sam" Alden

David Woolley

Nick Sandys

Ned Mochel

Amy Harmon

James Stark

**Consultants**

H. Gregory Mermel

William Fiedler

**Technical Support**

Cole England

Gregory Zelchenko

Zoe Quan

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Mary Shen Barnidge** is a freelance writer and theatre critic for the *Chicago Reader* and *Windy City Times*. She is a member of the American Theatre Critics Association, Poets & Writers, Inc. and a Friend in the Society Of American Fight Directors.

**Nicholas Patricca** is the author of several plays, including *An Uncertain Hour*, *The Radiance of a Thousand Suns*, and the comedy *Oh, Holy Allen Ginsberg*, *Oh Holy Shit Sweet Jesus*, *Tantric Buddha*, *Dharma Road*, recently performed at the Dublin International Theatre Festival. He hopes no one will ever challenge him to a duel with rapiers.

**David Woolley** is a Fight Master in the SAFFD and half of the popular comedy-fencing team, The Swordsmen, in addition to teaching at Columbia College.

**Nick Sandys** is a member of the Remy Bumppo Theatre Company and is scheduled to play the Cardinal in the upcoming Writers' Theatre production of *The Duchess Of Malfi*.

**Michael Goldberg** is a veteran of Shakespeare presented indoors at Navy Pier and outdoors at First Folio, where he is looking forward to directing *The Madness of Edgar Allen Poe* in the fall.

**Ned Mochel** recently choreographed fights for the award-winning west coast production of *Killer Joe*. He has served as stunt co-ordinator for several films and currently has as project of his own in development (working title, *Jack Slash*).

**Alison Dornheggan** and **Amy Harmon** are members of the Babes With Blades, and will appear this summer in *When Fairy Tales ATTACK* at First Folio.

**Hans Fleischmann** recently made his directorial debut with the Jeff-nominated production of *Buried Child* for Mary-Arrchie Theatre, where he also serves as Producing Director, in addition to a variety of other duties.

**José Antonio García** is a member of the Ouroboros Theatre Company and a graduate of Indiana University. He appeared in *A Few Good Men* at Raven Theatre and *Revenge of the Space Pandas* at the Goodman.

**R & D Violence Designers** are scheduled to direct fights for BlindFaith Theatre's upcoming production of *Stand-Up Tragedy*, after having staged fights for its hit production of *Short Eyes*.

## BARTER, HIRE & BROADSIDES

*Hanlon-Lees Theatrical Joust Extravaganza*, DVD starring the Hanlon-Lees Action Theater. "A spectacular behind-the-scenes look at the history of the company, including rare film footage of the original Hanlons, from which the troupe takes its name". For ordering information, e-mail [webmaster@hanlon-lees.com](mailto:webmaster@hanlon-lees.com)

*Sword Of Hearts*, DVD starring Kathryn Ann Rosen, Amy E. Harmon and Libby Beyreis of the Babes With Blades. "A rollicking comic adventure in the style of *The Princess Bride* and *The Three Musketeers*". Order from [www.customflix.com/](http://www.customflix.com/) 206814

*San Valentino And The Melancholy Kid*, DVD of the smash hit action-musical by House Productions. "There's more passion, exuberance, wit, imagination and sheer spirit in the first twenty minutes than most theatres serve up in an entire season" declared Chris Jones, reviewing for the *Chicago Tribune*. Order from [www.thehousetheatre.com](http://www.thehousetheatre.com)

*Curse Of The Crying Heart*, DVD of part two in Nathan Allen's action-packed trilogy for House Productions, featuring aerial fights à la *Crouching Tiger*, *Hidden Dragon*, choreographed by Matthew Hawkins. Order from [www.thehousetheatre.com](http://www.thehousetheatre.com)

**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 per issue. For further information, phone William Fiedler at Gallery Bookstore (773) 975-8200 or e-mail; [ChgosOldst@voyager.net](mailto:ChgosOldst@voyager.net)

## DUELING SPANISH: DON JUAN TENORIO AND SISTER JUANA INÉS DE LA CRUZ

an interview with Nicholas Patricca

Her decision to enter a convent was motivated less by the call of her faith than as a stratagem to avoid the housewife-and-mother career path dictated by her society—a subterfuge common among freethinking ladies of rank in the Spanish Commonwealth of the 17th century. And thus, Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz, born the illegitimate child of a Basque nobleman, freed herself to pursue her scholarly interests, gaining the recognition of Europe’s great men of science, while writing poetry and plays for her adoring protectors at court.

This amazing life would have made provocative biodrama in itself, but playwright Nicholas Patricca takes his heroine’s astonishing adventures a step farther, portraying the rebel *clerica* in a meeting of the minds with a comrade as earthy as she is intellectual: *Don Juan Tenorio*, with whom she swaps swordplay and wordplay in the course of Patricca’s dramatic account of the woman called by her contemporaries, *La Décima Musa*—the “tenth muse”.

**MARY SHEN BARNIDGE:** Where did you get the idea of Sister Juana’s having an imaginary companion?

**NICHOLAS PATRICCA:** *Sor Juana* was born into a society where her desire for knowledge and experience was systematically thwarted—by her gender, first, and her illegitimate birth, second. But on her grandfather’s *hacienda* was the largest private library in the New World, and he allowed her free run of it. By the time she was six, she had taught herself several languages. As a child, she dressed in boys’ clothes so that she could befriend the servants and join her brothers at school (where she probably received her training in the gentlemen’s martial skills). I think that she *must* have forged relationships with intriguing, if not necessarily benign, personalities from worlds more congenial to her talents and temperament.

**BARNIDGE:** What made you decide to *show* us one of these relationships in action?

**PATRICCA:** It’s difficult to portray the intimate inner life of a character without resorting to devices such as monologues or flashbacks. The imaginary

confidante allows me to break with the convention of “present time” and to have my hero/heroine travel through time and space, as we all *do* when we think or we feel. It also permits me to establish a *real* dialogue between *Sor Juana* and the culture that would stifle her natural progress. To me, what really counts in drama are the unseen decisions that affirm the self in spite of all contradictions.

**BARNIDGE:** But why *Don Juan*, of all people?

**PATRICCA:** The legend of *Don Juan* is the story of the individual’s quest for knowledge and power—

**BARNIDGE:** You mean like Marlowe’s *Faustus*, in English literature?

**PATRICCA:** Exactly. And theirs is a quest that demands the violation—or transcendence, if you prefer—of cultural restrictions. *Sor Juana* would have immediately recognized her counterpart in *Don Juan* after reading Tirso de Molina’s *El Burlador de Sevilla*. (Historians have catalogued this play in her grandfather’s library, by the way.) *Don Juan* wanted to discover, for *himself*, the innate limits of his own powers. To this end, he rejected the jurisdiction of external authority—Church and State, God and Satan—not denying their existence, but their relevance to *himself*. My *Sor Juana* takes a similar path, but contrives a means to achieve self-realization *within* the universe to which she is bound.

**BARNIDGE:** So the scenes where they spar with one another is a metaphor for the whole play, and not just visual business for their chats.

**PATRICCA:** But what they’re doing is not merely sparring. They are *dueling*—not swiftly, but *to the death* nevertheless. The young *Sor Juana*, in her boy’s disguise, would have come to understand that surpassing men at scholarship, literary artistry and wit meant nothing if she could not *also* best them at what they *most* valued: the physical, mental and spiritual ordeal of personal combat. She knew that *Don Juan* would enjoy their elegant debates and filigreed verses, but that his ultimate challenge, as a duelist who *always* emerged victorious, would be the possibility of his own extinction at the hands of someone capable of delivering it.

**BARNIDGE:** So she *has* to cross swords with him! Because *Don Juan*’s fabled bad behavior springs, fundamentally, from *boredom*. He *might* tire of their conversation—though I don’t think *that’s* likely—but



a contest with an opponent who could plausibly kill him *never* ceases to be entertaining. No *wonder* they're both so careful not to let the match end.

**PATRICCA:** Yes, I see them in a constant duel, executed in an unending series of episodes. For the aristocracy of the Spanish Empire, the duel embodied the finest and highest values of their civilization.

**BARNIDGE:** And a duel in the Spanish fencing style was a *particularly* dignified way to die. Is this why you specify it for your heroes, or is it just for period accuracy?

**PATRICCA:** In the classic rapier duel, the combatants would stand open, each leaving his body unprotected, with his feet placed on a circle, the diameter of which is one dancing-step farther than the longest possible extension of each opponent's arm and blade. When the duelists are evenly matched and perfectly attuned to one another, *neither* can win. Instead, the action creates a symphonic geometry of circles continuously mapped by the precision of their footwork.

**BARNIDGE:** Like in Federico García-Lorca's description of a bullfight, where the bull and the toreador each have their own "orbit", between which "lies the point of danger."

**PATRICCA:** Something like that. The fencing we most often see nowadays is that of the épée rather than the rapier. But the Spanish were considered to be the finest swordsmen of the early Renaissance. Their rapier developed from a short sword called the *espada*, a cut-and-thrust weapon that had evolved from the Roman *gladius*, itself grown obsolete with the advent of gunpowder and body armor. The Spanish swordsmiths at Toledo extended the length of the *espada*, narrowed the blade's width and thickness, improved the tensile strength with alloys and honed the point to lethal sharpness.

**BARNIDGE:** In order to murder more efficiently.

**PATRICCA:** Oh, yes. While the original *espada* had two cutting edges, the rapier had four, making it possible to kill or be killed *instantly* by a *single* thrust or cut. If the attacker's move failed, then he would be immediately slain by his opponent's response. To deal with this stunning—and *beautiful*, in its own way—fact of the rapier's lethal power, a *science* was created for this new method of combat, based in geometry recovered from the ancient Greeks and passed down by the Arabs. In Spain,

Hieronimo de Carranca and others formulated the theory of the Circle. This argued that each duelist's range of action creates a circle around himself, and that the duel's dynamic emerges from the relationship of these circles—which could be *mathematically* charted to render the duelist undefeatable.

**BARNIDGE:** Hence the legendary "undefensible attack" of swashbucklers everywhere. But Juana *tricks* him—

**PATRICCA:** By bisecting the circle. And after *Don* Juan repels her surprise assault—just barely—he sniffs, "Anyone but *me* would be dead". But I don't want to give away any more than that right now.

**BARNIDGE:** In your play, all of the men fight, and Juan also dances, at one point. But Juana not only *fights*—she dances, sings, plays the guitar, recites poems in native Mexican language—

**PATRICCA:** Nahuatl, yes.

**BARNIDGE:** Do you think you'll be able to find an actress who can do all of these things?

**PATRICCA:** The art of staging a play is not unlike the perfect circle of the rapier duel—a goal to be pursued, but almost impossible to achieve. What I'm looking for is that performer who can make *Sor* Juana come alive for the audience. But *I* can't, nor do I *want* to, control *all* of the production elements—no, I'm fully committed to the collaborative nature of theatre. All the artists working *together* are what will make my play real—or maybe even evolve into something entirely new.

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## THEM'S—WHATCHA SAY?— FIGHTING WORDS, MISTER by BeBe Swerdlow

It shouldn't happen, but too frequently it does: a field commander strides onstage with dignity and bearing, his mighty sword in hand, and proceeds to address his armies—in a voice pitched like the squeaking of a rusty screen-door hinge! Or soldiers pause in the midst of battle to rally one another in a language as unintelligible as the late Danny Kaye's polyglot gibberish. Or it's the next scene, several days after the big showdown in dramatic time, but the survivors can't seem to remember their lines, stumbling and mispronouncing words.

Time restrictions at the recent Winter Wonderland "Vocal Extremes" workshop confined the discussion to the execution of battle cries and

agonized screams without sustaining bodily damage. Left unresolved, however, was the process by which a fighter, after engaging in strenuous athletic activity, diminishes the adrenaline flow, shifts from physical to intellectual mode, and gathers sufficient verbal dexterity to recite whole and coherent speeches—no small concern to an actor-combatant looking to move up from “Second Thug” or “Soldier #6” into roles requiring eloquence beyond “Aaargh!” “Huh!” and “Prepare to die, foul villain!”

SAFD Fight Master David Woolley dismisses the entire question. “The term ‘Actor-Combatant’ means you should be taking *acting* lessons. A sword, or a knife, or a club, is only another prop, and stage combat classes teach an actor how to use these props correctly. This is why a director will *always* hire an actor over a combatant, and the fight will then be tailored to the abilities of that actor.”

But unawareness of the connection between talking and fighting is not what makes for problems so much as the modern theatre practice of rehearsing the components of a play separately and integrating them only days before opening night. Directors hurry their actors during line drills (“Then you both fight, blah-blah-blah. For now, let’s pick up the scene after so-and-so falls to the ground.”). Fight choreographers allow their charges to mumble in order to focus on movement—hey, what *we’re* doing is dangerous, and that makes it more important than just *words*, right?

Fight director and film-stunt co-ordinator Ned Mochel complained of this in 2002. “Fighting and acting skills seem to be forced apart in the current training, when they should be one and the same”. At that time, also, stage combat journalist Mary Shen Barnidge warned, “If text and action are not taught together, in the same class, then acting becomes what you do when you’re *not* fighting, and vice versa.”

Neither voice nor combat coaches offer any answers, but what about the people who *do* it?

“The actor must breathe for the *thought*,” says Nick Sandys, speaking of the scene in a recent production of *Tartuffe* where he and Linda Gillum declaimed in iambic quatrameter while wrestling in a slap-and-tickle scuffle atop a table, “If the *intention* of the action, physical or mental, is not

matched to the energy *implementing* that action—that is, if the actor is just ‘reciting’ the line or the move—there will *never* be enough breath to complete it. No matter if it’s an elaborate George Bernard Shaw sentence, a rhyming couplet in a Molière comedy or a rapier attack—the thought will *always* contain enough energy for its completion.”

“Shifting gears from fighting to speaking is more physical than mental,” observes Amy Harmon of the Babes With Blades, “It has more to do with fitness level than anything else. If you work out—especially cardio—you get your body used to revving up and ramping down, and you’ll have the breath control and adrenal control you need.”

Michael Goldberg, a veteran of Shakespeare staged both indoors at Navy Pier and outdoors at First Folio, adds, “It’s usually easy to recognize right away whether an actor has what it takes to fight hard and deliver long speeches simultaneously. If he—or she—doesn’t, we heighten the scene’s tension by *not* fighting—the fighters circle each other, reverse directions, feign thrusts, and so on. But if the actor is committed to the character and the moment, then long speeches, short speeches, walking and chewing gum at the same time—*whatever* you need—only becomes an issue in the rehearsals when we’re first combining the different elements.”

“Stage combat is not a sport,” Woolley reminds starry-eyed fans and students, “What makes for ‘fight geek syndrome’ is mediocre actors who think that learning how to fight, by itself, will get them jobs. But while it might give them a hobby, it is *not* the means to an end.”

“Stage combat *always* has to involve brainwork as well as bodywork,” concurs Harmon, “There’s *nothing* scarier than partnering with someone who’s too deep into their body.”

*Mens Sana in Corpore Sano*, goes the proverb, “A sound mind in a sound body”. For those who look to stage combat as a tool for weight-loss, an outlet for psychological stress (advises Mochel, “Take up football”) or fantasy-fulfillment, the sweat alone is enough. But for those intent on pursuing a career in the theatre, scene study classes, especially in the classics, would appear mandatory to achieving that goal. *Thinking* requires muscle, too.

## A NIGHT WITH THE FIGHTS

### AN AFFAIR OF HONOR

fight choreography by David Woolley, Alison Dornheggen and the Babes With Blades

The rules for the *Joining Sword And Pen* International Playwrighting Competition stipulated that all entries must include in their stage business the scene depicted in an early 19th-century painting by Emile Bayard. In proposing to perform the winning play, the all-female Babes With Blades troupe committed themselves to duels executed, not only encumbered by Victorian gowns frothing with petticoats and *frou-frou*, but stripped to the waist—no chemises, no camisoles, certainly no sports-bras. Extensive program notes acquaint us with the reasons behind this custom: the restrictive clothing of the period, risk of infection setting into wounds, the possibility of an opponent wearing concealed leather or chain-mail protective armor. Even so, there is no denying the obstacles inherent in this project, both to fighters adapting to altered physical silhouettes and to spectators whose social training inclines them to self-conscious giggles at unfettered body parts.

But David Woolley and Alison Dornheggen both quickly recognize the analogy between the fighters' attire—or lack thereof—and Shakespearean garb incorporating medallions and lavaliers. In Tony Wolf's *Satisfaction* and Byron Hatfield's *Mrs. Dire's House Of Crumpets And Solutions*, the duelists, armed with short-swords ("a lady's weapon" declares one character), adopt the straight-line approach as they prepare to fight, then engage blades in short two-to-five-beat sequences. For the combatants, this limits substantially the hazards associated with torso-twisting movement, in addition to reducing the "jiggle factor" and its reflexive audience response.

*An Affair of Honor* also skirts accusations of being a mere gimmick-driven exhibition by its inclusion of several conventional bouts leading up to the climactic showdowns, among them a match pitting a nervous beginner gingerly essaying her first bladework against a dotty spinster armed with knitting needles (wielded in quasi-akido style). Most noteworthy, however, is the extent to which the cast's martial and thespian skills are integrated to produce spectacle entertaining for fighters *and* non-fighters alike. In an artistic climate where shows produced by fight-clubs are likely to resemble nothing more than certification-exam romps, *An Affair Of Honor's* development and execution represents a significant step toward putting the "stage" back into "stage combat".

### KILLERS

fight choreography by Hans Fleischmann

If the play's not *Take Me Out* or *Bang The Drum Slowly* or *The Sweetest Swing In Baseball*, and you introduce a baseball bat in the first act, you'd better be sure it goes off in the second—especially when your story features a psychopathic thug whose response to a kitchen knife brandished by a hysterical woman is to disarm her by gripping its blade. But when you're working in a space like Angel Island, where the action occurs six feet from the front row, there's only so much that can be accomplished with a flail weapon without endangering actors, audience *and* scenery.

So the bat is introduced, and its menace established, by having a manic-depressive adolescent beat on the furniture with it in a burst of frenzied elation. It does not re-emerge until the climactic scene when the aforementioned crazed thug threatens to shoot the hero, the former pulling his prey into an embrace designed to force physical contact with the concealed firearm, whereupon their confrontation is interrupted by the boy charging to the rescue, armed with the Louisville Slugger.

To be sure, the text requires his first swing—its range considerably limited by a playing area only inches larger than a latrine stall—to strike the hero, who reels upstage, allowing the combatants to close in a body-to-body grapple that pins the weapon between them. In the ensuing struggle, the gun fires, killing its owner, who falls into the hero's arms, the impact turning the both of them to the wall. We then see the latter's back, his wounded attacker's hands gripping his shoulders in a death-clasp, while the boy looks on in stunned horror. After a moment, they separate, the would-be murderer crumpling to the ground.

### THE STOIC

fight choreography by R & D Violence Designers

In Nate White's homage to the "modern western", the mysterious stranger (think Clint Eastwood) who rides into town is the long-missing Tom, a prodigal son who abandoned his family. The uneasy autocrat (think Gene Hackman) is his sister Kate, who suspects him to be the notorious serial killer whose identity remains elusive, as well as a nemesis come to expose the secret of her ascension to power. But despite the air of brooding ambiguity and the number of situations providing fertile ground for violence, not until the final moments do guns, fists and fury break forth.

They can't break very far in a space as cramped

as the Stage Left storefront, however, and so Richard Gilbert and David Gregory, who together constitute R & D Violence Designers, first equip the whisky-besotted Kate with a cannon-sized firearm, then ascertain that it never goes off. Instead, she menaces Tom with it at such close range that he grabs it by the barrel, wrests it from her grasp and bludgeons her to the floor with it, after which he delivers her a kick—not to the ribs, as we anticipate—but to the *jaw*, allowing for a visible recoil before she rises with appropriately bloodied face.

While sanguine playgoers may find this stratagem disappointing, it nevertheless represents an original twist on our expectations of the genre. It also affirms our trust in Gilbert and Gregory's safety measures, so that when the curtain falls on the picture of Kate holding the aforementioned pistol to her own head, we are secure in our assurance that neither she, nor we, will go home with powder burns on *that* night.

## ELECTRA

fight choreography by José Antonio García

The story calls for two assassinations, but there would seem to be no place for the victims to fall but into our laps when the stage measures a rough 18 X 20 feet *without* the set's multiple-level pedestal at its center, and actors' costumes brush the knees of front-row spectators.

To resolve the problem, José Antonio García first has Orestes embrace his mother, cradling her face in his hands. They then turn, he facing downstage and she upstage, her back to us. We see his hands slide down her neck, and her subsequent struggle, before she crumples to the floor in a stationary heap, where she is then laid out by the chorus.

But *that* leaves barely a foot of maneuvering room around the corpse, now stretched out on the stage apron, for the second fight—this one between two strapping males—ending in murder. García, himself playing Aegisthus, locates his confrontation with Orestes at the far side of the stage, their dispute leading Aegisthus to scorn his stepson, in turn prompting them both to move center stage where they grapple *over* the supine body of the dead matriarch. Though no weapon appears and Orestes launches no overt attack, we see the upstage-facing Aegisthus recoil and double over as a peking opera-style red scarf is drawn forth from his chest, after which he falls upon his consort's lifeless remains.

## CALL TO ARMS

**May 20-21.** Rumble In The Rockies workshop in Denver, Colorado. Geoffrey Kent and Angela Bonacasa head the faculty of this workshop whose curriculum promises a mass pirate battle (mountain buccaneers, presumably). Sponsored by the Denver Center Theatre Academy. For information, phone (303) 446-4892 or log onto [www.rumbleintherockies.com](http://www.rumbleintherockies.com)

**May 27-28.** Whip It workshop at Jamestown, Ohio. Gery S. Deer offers instruction in whip snapping and safety. Studio weapons are available, but participants are advised to bring their own equipment. Sponsored by the Society of American Whip Artistry. For information, e-mail [gdeer@gldenterprises.net](mailto:gdeer@gldenterprises.net) or [scout@gldenterprises.net](mailto:scout@gldenterprises.net) or log onto [www.gldenterprises.net](http://www.gldenterprises.net).

**May 27-28.** Salem Sockeye (fka Seattle Sockeye) workshop at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon. Instructors include Dale Girard, Geoffrey Kent, Bob Borwick and Geof Alm. Sponsored by the SAFD and Revenge Arts Stage Combat. For information, phone (503) 999-4709, e-mail [info@revengearts.com](mailto:info@revengearts.com) or log onto [www.revengearts.com](http://www.revengearts.com)

## FIELD DISPATCHES

### OUTLAWS WITH SWORDS

According to Napster, on August 5, 2005, police in Royal Oak, Michigan pursued a man said to have fled the scene of an automobile accident. Upon arriving at his house, however, they found themselves under attack as the culprit swung at a policeman with a "four-foot sword".

Realizing that he was unable to strike his target, the berserker then retreated to his basement where he dressed himself in chain-mail vest and "leather gauntlets (sic) to protect his arms" and armed himself with a "giant wooden mallet", shouting, "I'm gonna crush your fucking skulls! I have a thousand years of power!" The police eventually brought him down with tasers.

And in Jacksonville, Florida, a few weeks later, a robber armed with a samurai sword proceeded to trash a local diner and escape with \$32. The sword and getaway car—both stolen the night previous—were later found abandoned. No word was forthcoming on whether the sword was restored to its owner.

**“The duel is the perfect dance,  
intimate and elegant.”**

**– Nicholas Patricca**

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**P.O. Box 392**  
**LaGrange, IL 60525**

