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MOULINET: An Action Quarterly



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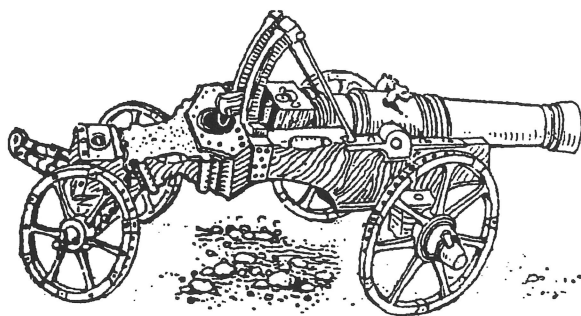
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MOULINET: An Action Quarterly

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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*.

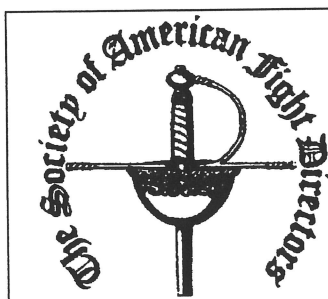
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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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.

Greg Poljacik is a swordsmith with Rogue Steel during the day and, by night, is a current ensemble player in *Barenaked Lads In The Great Outdoors* at Bailiwick Repertory Theatre.

Robin McFarquhar recently directed fights for Chicago Shakespeare's production of *Henry IV*, for which he receiving critical praise both in the United States and in the UK.

R & D Violence Designers, also known as Richard Gilbert and David Gregory, recently choreographed domestic squabbles, playground brawls and fantasy swordplay, all for BlindFaith Theatre's production of *Stand-Up Tragedy*.

Bruce Hovanec and **Frank Soto** are patrolmen for Chicago's Area 23. They are often seen in the Emerald City Coffee Shop at the end of their shift.

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

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/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

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

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). Price, \$4 per issue. For further information, phone William Fiedler at Gallery Bookstore (773) 975-8200 or e-mail; ChgosOldst@voyager.net

GOING TO THE MATS AT BAILIWICK REP: Greg Poljacik and Jim Provenzano's *Pins*

Jim Provenzano's 1999 novel recounts the story of a teenage boy's struggle to find his identity amid the high-pressure milieu of high school wrestling, where likewise ambivalent adolescents vent their own emotional conflicts through hostile bullying of weaker comrades. Further muddying the already volatile atmosphere associated with this uncertain age are the intrusion of unhealthy practices infecting the professional leagues—draconian dietary methods, steroid drugs, etc. Caught between loyalty to his close friends and his wish to be accepted by his teammates at a new school, Joey is finally forced to risk everything in a crucial decision that will change the course of his life forever.

The major challenge for fight choreographer Greg Poljacik in this page-to-stage adaptation for Bailiwick Repertory Theatre is to convey the distinction between formalized athletic combat and the savage street violence fueled by fury, fear and frustration.

MARY SHEN BARNIDGE: I'm told that you, yourself, wrestled in school, and so did [director] Chris [Arnold]. How many of your actors already had fight training?

GREG POLJACIK: All of the actors had some kind of stage combat experience. And Tim Ballard, who plays Bennie, the bully, had wrestled at the college level. He was very helpful as an "extra eye" for determining what moves would work the best.

BARNIDGE: Did you have to slow down the wrestling sequences to make them safe, or were they paced in "real time"?

POLJACIK: Wrestling is *naturally* safe, so once the actors had the basic moves in their bodies, we could speed things up in rehearsal to performance level. The only sequence that we slowed down was the long one in the first scene. We did this to show the beauty and elegance—and the *efficiency*, too—of sports wrestling. This also helps the audience to understand why Joey wants to stay with it in spite of all the trouble that it brings.

BARNIDGE: How hard was it to stage the combinations so that Joey—or whoever had the next speech—would always finish facing the audience?

POLJACIK: It was a little difficult at first. What

was tricky in that sequence I just mentioned was that the final move has Joey delivering the last lines of his monologue from upside-down, at the bottom of a pile-on. He kept ending at the wrong angle or facing upstage, but Tim and I finally worked out the choreography to get it right. What we did was to let the slower motion allow the actors to make the adjustments they needed to get into the right position. If they were out of place, they could "struggle" a bit, and, in doing so, pull each other to wherever they were supposed to be.

BARNIDGE: What did you do to distinguish between the formalized combat and the *brutal* way that Bennie attacks the meek Anthony?

POLJACIK: My main goal was to contrast the aggression naturally involved in wrestling with the *hostile* aggression inspired by homophobia, steroids and all the other issues. Sports like boxing and wrestling are sometimes tagged as activity leading to violent behavior—which is *not* true—and so I thought it was important to exclude *all* the wrestling moves from the fight where the battle escalates until someone dies.

BARNIDGE: Later in the play, Joey's classmates taunt him for turning in the killers to the police, and he strikes out at his accusers. Where along this spectrum do these later fights belong?

POLJACIK: *Those* fights combine wrestling and street-scrapping, but the attacks are motivated more by self-defense than by any intrinsic *hate* on Joey's part.

BARNIDGE: Going back to the gay-bashing sequence—why did you choose the particular moves that you did?

POLJACIK: Since all of the characters are in high school, I knew that their combat training would be very limited. Being on the wrestling team takes up whatever free time they might otherwise have to learn any stylized fighting—boxing or martial arts, for example—so all the fight moves were *very* basic. I also wanted to infuse the dynamic with some of the sexual tension that causes there to *be* a fight in the first place. So there's a combination where Bennie kicks Anthony under the chin, bringing him to his knees, with his face at his attacker's crotch-level. But then Bennie grabs Anthony's head and tips his face up to look him in the eyes.

BARNIDGE: And later on in that same fight, Bennie hits Anthony repeatedly while straddling his victim's chest—which is also very sexual, besides being dirty tactics. But I noticed on opening night that there weren't any knaps [manually-produced sound effects] for the punches. How'd that happen?

POLJACIK: Anthony's vocal responses drowned the knaps, and then, after *he* passed out, Bennie's vocalizations overpowered the sounds. So they were all *there*—but Chris and I thought the story was more important.

BARNIDGE: How much directorial input did Arnold contribute overall? Did he pretty much leave to you to figure the fights out on your own?

POLJACIK: It was a very collaborative effort from the beginning, and we were lucky to be on the same page throughout. At our first meeting, we talked about the way the fights would go as regards violence levels and story arcs. After that, we didn't need to have any more sit-down conferences. I'd put together the fight and show it to him with a few possible variations, and he'd choose whatever best fit the dramatic action. He would decide how the fights would be integrated into the blocking of the scene—where and how they would begin and end—but he left it mainly to me and Tim to work out the individual mechanics.

BARNIDGE: How about the actors who had to do it? Did they also have a say in how the fights were constructed?

POLJACIK: Oh, yes. I always ask the combatants to speak up if they're uncomfortable with anything, or if there's something their character might do that I may have missed. I also ask any people in the house during rehearsals to watch the fights and let me know if *they* see any problems with sight-lines or the believability of the action.

BARNIDGE: How pleased were you with the results?

POLJACIK: It was a great challenge combining wrestling with combat onstage. But Chris gave me a generous framework to operate in and plenty of freedom to create. Also, we had talented and professional actors who caught on to the choreography very quickly, giving us plenty of time to clean the moves and to make sure the *story* of each fight sequence was clear. I feel really good about what we accomplished.

ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS

CAMBRIDGE RENAISSANCE FAIRE

Lake Ripley Park off Highway 12 in Cambridge, Wisconsin.

It's not the first year for this little faire, but it's their first at the park abutting Lake Ripley in Wisconsin's Jefferson county. Geographically, the faireground is a kettle-moraine whose floor opens onto the water that generates cool breezes even on the conspicuously-bare central green. (Look for planners next year to place self-shading pavilions here to relieve the cluster of booths and stages huddled on the site's perimeter.) But while the surrounding ridges present obstacles—the sole latrines are a steep climb for pedestrians very young, very old and marginally infirm (another problem which should be resolved by 2007)—they also provide acoustics of a quality to be envied in all branches of the outdoor-entertainment circuit.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in the two-man joust staged by the Hanlon-Lees Action Theater, featuring Kent Shelton in his familiar role of Sir Thomas, Duke of Kent, along with Tim O'Brian as Don Hidalgo of Cordoza and Jimmy Ellis, better known as Ned Buntline to fans of the troupe's Buffalo Bill Show, standing in as Master of Arms. On this occasion, the dramatic arc forged by the devolution of a festival joust to a bloody fight to the death was assisted by Their Royal Highnesses King Edrick and Queen Eathelyn, contributing fighting words. By Lady Julianne (portrayed by Hanlon-Lees auxiliary player, Julie Evans) providing drum-rolls to enhance the martial excitement. And by Squire Tybalt, played with sprightly grace by local thespian Lyssa Junek, who throws a fine punch or two in the course of the action.

The placement of the tiltyard on the rocky basin's rim, with bleachers on its eastern fence, not only makes for swift and dramatic entrances as the horses spill over the crest of the upper grasslands, but allows the actors full-front address of their audiences, the terrain's naturally reflective surface amplifying their voices with an accuracy that renders the patter always audible and intelligible. And in the moments when Master Ellis, his business arm back in fine shape after his injury in 2004, snaps his bullwhip, the sharp report resounds throughout the pastoral calm like the clap of a lightning bolt.

The rest of the day's entertainment was somewhat light on martial spectacle: a group calling

themselves the Drunken Uglies turned out to be gentle-voiced musicians, and the chess match was a board-game with children. But fight fans were given an education by the Tribe of the Blue Rose, demonstrating fighting techniques of fifth-century England. Their focus on a period too often neglected even by the historical societies—the age of King Arthur, when the British Islands were developing their own mythology after the waning of the Roman occupation—is most commendable in a milieu where fantasy re-enactments of more cinematic eras are the norm. **For further information, phone (608) 423-3780**

PORT WASHINGTON PIRATE FESTIVAL

Rotary Park at East end of Grand Avenue in Port Washington, Wisconsin.

The wind being right that day, one could lounge on the patio of the Dockside Deli and hear the Scurvy Dawgs, performing at the far north end of the marina. But the acreage for this second-year festival sprawls over nearly a quarter-mile of nautical architecture. Strolling the lakefront on a mildly warm June day is a pleasurable pastime in itself, to be sure, but less peripatetic drylanders looking to plan their day's excursion searched in vain for a map or timetable (something to be addressed by planners for next year).

The centerpiece to Saturday's festivities was a thrilling ship-to-shore battle, staged by Richard Gilbert and David Gregory of Chicago's R & D Violence Designers, its story framed in the premise of two privateers taken captive by the United States Coast Guard and sentenced to be hanged. The set-up begins on land, with Captain Lester Orchitis and Lieutenant Kelloid—played by Rick Cleveringa and Gilbert, himself—proclaiming the need for an orderly society. Opposing them are Captain Joseph Cotton and Rum Davey Reed—played by Tom Charney and David Gregory, with no more Johnny Depp mannerisms than necessary—who scoff at their shackles (forged by Marc Lepage) and death sentences to champion the rights of downtrodden commoners.

The first stage of the fight commences with a female pirate infiltrating the crowd of bystanders to shatter Reed's chains with a single (and astonishingly well-aimed) shot from a flintlock pistol, after which she throws him a pair of swords. Reed and Kelloid, both now armed with saber and cutlass, then engage in an ambidextrous duel ending in hand-to-hand combat. This distracts us, as it is meant to do, from

the ship we have earlier spotted some half a mile out on the water closing in on us and pulling alongside the dock—the vintage schooner *Windy II*, hijacked by outlaw mariners come to rescue their comrades.

At least it does until the gigantic boom as the battery warden (portrayed by St. Michael's Guild re-enactor Christopher Last) fires the cannon guarding the harbor. (Chatting before the show, Gilbert smirked, "It takes a six-pound ball! We *could* sink the ship, if we wanted to!") The *Windy* returns fire until all its unruly crew have charged ashore ready to rumble. But the stand-off is resolved by the entrance of the Port Washington governor and his obligatory beautiful daughter, the former of whom declares that a festival day is too happy an occasion for a hanging—a speech familiar to Renaissance Faire aficionados—before pardoning the rebels and sending us on our way.

A few further spectacle-to-site adaptations are in order: its present location offers audiences no vantage point from which to view all episodes of the action. But there's no denying the majesty and scope lent the scenario by an authentic ship on an authentic (inland) sea. Look for this festival to grow in popularity for as long as the Pirate Craze continues to flourish.

For further information, log onto www.portpiratefestival.com

BRISTOL RENAISSANCE FAIRE

I-94 at 120th Street in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

It's a rare Renaissance Faire nowadays that doesn't have a bevy of invading pirates stretching the perimeter of its universe. And since the Bristol landscapers recently built themselves a lake complete with fish and traversing bridge *just* wobbly enough for period authenticity, it was only a matter of time before its placid waters harbored an equally landlubber-friendly vessel—the 95-foot triple-masted galleon *Dreadnought*, making its debut this season (along with Grace O'Malley and her crew of privateers, henchmen to the Lord High Sheriff in this year's Robyn Hoode show).

So far, this independent attraction is mostly historical exhibit, its cabin housing displays of period artifacts—ammunition, surgical instruments, domestic tools, cargo and swag. On opening weekend, the tour guides were still a little shaky on their patter, making one long for a hoard of buccaneers to swarm over the sides and provide some excitement. But second-season developments will be up to its captain, Michael Breza.

The most striking innovation on the tiltyard, however, was the introduction by the Hanlon-Lees Action Theater—an all-male squad for the nearly three decades of its existence—of a female Master of Arms, Lady Gwendolyn of Fairhaven, played by Tricia Mack with a whiskey-sweetened drawl in contralto range recalling Lauren Bacall. This arresting vocal presence conjures a laconic assurance equaled only by veteran Bristoleer Mary B. Kababik's feisty Elizabeth Tudor, who, herself, even risks a tumble into the sand as she bravely holds rings for the lancers.

The progress of the joust continues to highlight the folly of patriotic hubris, with the Spanish Don Hidalgo of Cordoza and the French Sir Philippe, duc de Lorraine (Chris Mitri, wearing a José Jimenez accent, and Stephen Cowan showboating like a soccer-fan Inspector Clouseau) scorning the rules of chivalry. Portraying their rivals in this tournament are Tim O'Brian (in real life, a Chicago policeman) as Sir Wilfred of the "Northern Isles" and twenty-plus-year jousting knight Kent Shelton as the queen's English champion, Sir Thomas, Duke of Kent (whose receding hairline drew a lone shout of "Hey, grandpa!" from a heckler).

After the morning's equestrian sports, the scenario has the swaggering Philippe (whose snarls are audible even behind his steel visor) becoming increasingly bloodthirsty in his xenophobia, defying the authority of the armsmaster and, at one point, going so far as to threaten Her Royal Highness. Though Her Majesty declares that she would as soon have his head on a pike, the prospect of its starting a war that would "waste good English blood" persuades her to grant his demand for an antiquated trial-by-combat.

Before the final showdown, the Lord Mayor of London (Richard Weber's latest incarnation) prays for victory "not to the strong, but to the righteous". And so it does, albeit at terrible cost. One hopes that this parable of quarrels between nations continues to exert its influence on the civilian nonparticipants after the actors take their bows and the squires clear the field of its artificial carnage. **Through Labor Day. For further information, phone (847) 395-7773 or log onto www.RenFaire.com**

A NIGHT WITH THE FIGHTS

THE DUCHESS OF MALFI fight choreography by Robin McFarquhar

The set might look like a scaled-down version of *Romeo And Juliet* at Shakes-on-the-Pier last year, but the Writers' Theatre stage is too small for 3-foot-rapier duels. Besides, Jacobean tragedy is all about *stealth* murder—what could be more sneaky, after all, than a priest soaking a Bible in *poison* and then persuading someone to *kiss* it? But while blood overflowing the lips of innocent damsels is permissible in urban storefront productions, playgoers in the gentle far northern suburbs—many of whom later gasped audibly at a simple neck-snap accompanied by the old crumpled-styrofoam knap—prefer their spectacle less sanguine.

Thus, Robin McFarquhar's violence schematic has a pair of flintlock pistols drawn in the course of the action, but never fired. And the only characters bearing arms are those required by the plot to use them (though the gentlemen's coats, conspicuously cut away on the right side to expose sheathed daggers, make for a hint of gratuitous swagger).

Likewise bloodless is the gracefully—almost prettily—staged death of the Duchess. After Bosola confronts her with a scarlet rope and apprises her of its purpose, black-robed koken wind a length of red silk about her arms and torso. At a signal, they then pull them taut to symbolize the tightening of the cord about her neck. (A quasi-Peking Opera device playgoers may recall also utilized in the 2004 PowerTap production of *Lysistrata*.)

There are, in addition, several back-and-belly knifings, their points of impact concealed from audience view upstage or by *corps-à-corps* stances, and one actual *fight*, in which McFarquhar takes advantage of Matt Kozlowski and Nick Sandys' considerable skills to extend the evil Cardinal's comeuppance over not one, but *three*, mortal strikes with a dagger, accompanied by much rolling on the recoils. And even after all *this*, Sandys' wicked churchman recovers, *Carrie*-style, to deliver Bosola the *coup de grâce*. To be sure, this is not how John Webster wrote it, but there is no denying McFarquhar's liberties with his text making for a fast and flashy finish to this singularly dainty interpretation of English Literature's grisliest play.

RICHARD II

fight choreography by R & D Violence Designers

If Richard III is Shakespeare's school-shooter, Richard II is his slacker, and a low-budget production in Angel Island's restricted space, with decor comprised of an assortment of chairs and several clear plastic shower-curtains, introduces even less opportunity for martial spectacle. Indeed, the trial-by-combat between Bolingbroke and Mowbry that precipitates the story initially looks as if it will be fought with shillelaghs (making it fortuitous that Richard stops the match before it commences).

More intricate is the choreography for Richard's assassination in prison. Tiring of the wait for his execution and confronting the prospect of his food being poisoned, the impatient monarch launches a deliberate attack on his guards, landing a punch and knee-kick to one before the other catches up an armload of curtain, which he then employs as a garrote to strangle his prey, the bulkiness of the stiff fabric suggesting the pressure of cord-on-windpipe while camouflaging the actual contact.

PORNO

fight choreography uncredited

Sean Graney's grosser-than-thou aesthetic falls short of its predecessors—notably, Billy Birmingham's *Cannibal Cheerleaders On Crack*, Joe Foust's *Action Movie* trilogy, and Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping And Fucking*—but renders mere fisticuffs pretty mild as spectacle. Further diluting any visceral threat engendered by punches and kicks thrown in a space barely larger than a YMCA cubicle is the alley staging: audience seated on both sides of the action leaves no blind-side on which the impact can be covered, allowing us a clear view of the safety gaps between fists, feet and bodies. Since a gratuitously scatological gag earlier in the show relies on video monitors placed in the offstage bathroom, one wonders why the mayhem wasn't simply blocked for camera-range with our always-willing-to-help imaginations doing the rest.

CALL TO ARMS

August 19. Swords For Rusty Broads (and Gents) workshop at Chase Park in Chicago. Refresher course covers stage combat basics as well as techniques for building fights. Sponsored by the Babes With Blades. Weapons are provided, but feel free to

bring your own. For further information, e-mail workshop@babeswithblades.org

The Fight Shop has lost its shop. Instructors Richard Gilbert and David Gregory are conducting classes at the Duncan Chernin YMCA for the time being. For further information, phone (847) 333-1494 or log onto www.thefightshop.org.

FIELD DISPATCHES

COPPING A STANCE

David Caruso's mannerisms on the TV series *CSI: Miami* have already made it a joke, so why do actors portraying police officers continue to strike a pose with arms akimbo and hands hitched at their belts? Done once, this stance might intimidate a culprit by making the uniformed guard look bigger and more formidable. Done repeatedly, it bespeaks only insecurity diminishing the authority of its perpetrator.

The key to arranging oneself when no immediate danger is present, say Area 23 police officers Bruce Hovanec and Frank Soto, is to keep one's hands close to one's weapons, without provoking confrontation by appearing *too* ready for action. A patrolman might rest his lower arm on the handle-grip of his holstered sidearm, they advise, or rest his hand on the butt of his nightstick. Interrogating a suspect at the scene of a disturbance, he might fold his arms over his chest or tuck his hands into the armholes of his kevlar vest (and he/she *will* be wearing this bullet-proof armor). And in an office, listening to his superior, he might stand at military parade rest, his hands clasped behind his back.

Variety is the key to believability onstage. Actors and directors should remember this before settling for short-cuts.

DRAGON-SLAYER IN LOVE

The "I Saw You" column of the *Reader* personals recently included a message from an unnamed courtier who offered his service to the likewise untitled damsel catching his eye at a performance of *When Fairy Tales Attack* on the First Folio Theatre grounds in Oak Brook, to wit: "Dost thou, fair lady, have any dragons in need of slaying?" Since the object of his attentions is rumored to be none other than Dawn "Sam" Alden, fight choreographer and founder of the Babes With Blades fight troupe, it remains to be seen in what capacity she is likely to employ this Free Lance come a-wooing.

**“He that strikes with the
sword shall be beaten
with its scabbard.”**

– John Heywood

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