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Moulinet Staff

MOULINET: An Action Quarterly

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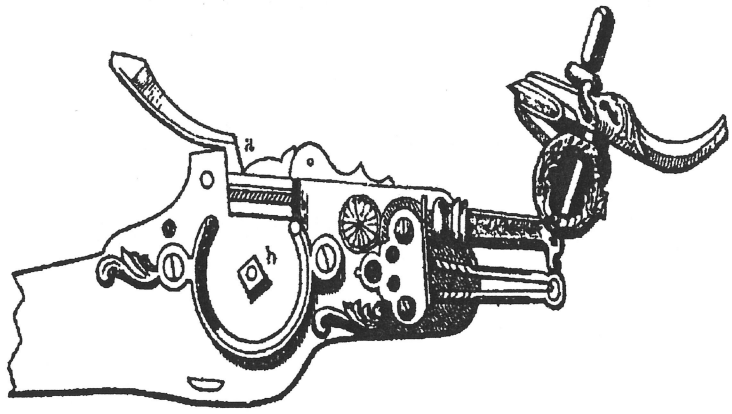

MOULINET: An Action Quarterly

Number Four – 2007

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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.

Nick Sandys is an instructor at DePaul University and a member of the Remy Bumppo Theatre Company, for whom he recently directed while simultaneously choreographing duels with Spanish rapier for *The Defiant Muse* at Victory Gardens.

Richard Gilbert and David Gregory together comprise the team of R & D Violence Designers. Recent projects include *The Magician* at National Pastime.

Kevin Murphy and Tony Sancho have assembled fights together for four years now, with credits that include *Blind Mouth Singing* for Teatro Vista, *Danger Face* for Hermit Arts, and *Peter Pan* for the Schaumburg Dance Ensemble.

Jeremy Wechsler is no stranger to action drama, having directed such bloodfests as *The White Devil, The Roaring Girl,* and *Titus Andronicus* for Shakespeare's Motley Crew and most recently, *Horror Academy* for the Babes With Blades.

Amy E. Harmon is the managing director of the all-female Babes With Blades fight troupe, an SAFD-certified actor-combatant, and a former varsity fencer at Northwestern University.

BARTER, HIRE & BROADSIDES

Renaissance Men: The True Story of the Hanlon-Lees Action Theater, DVD documentary by Kevin Leeser, starring the stunt-troupe whose debut in 1977 became the prototype for American Renaissance Faire jousts to this day. For ordering information, log onto www.3alarmcarnival.com

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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.the housetheatre.com

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

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

BEYOND "BLAH-BLAH-BLAH-THEY-FIGHT": FIGHTS AS DESIGN ELEMENTS

THE DEFIANT MUSE – fight choreography
by Nick Sandys

Nicholas Patricca wrote his play without ever picking up a sword, instead visualizing the circular movement of 17th-century Spanish rapier dueling as a parallel to the orbits of the planets that his heroine views through her telescope. She is no ordinary star-gazer, however, but Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the Mexican commoner who pursued her scholarly career under the protection of the Spanish Court after entering a convent to ensure immunity against the customary subjugation of her society's women. As if this were not enough to render her unique for her time, Patricca supplies her with an imaginary confidante–none other than Don Juan Tenorio, the famous libertine whose excesses reflected his passion for pushing the limits of human experience. Though Sor Juana wisely limits her own ambitions to intellectual pursuits, they share the spotlight illuminating the play's thesis.

In terms of fight sequences, this means that in addition to standard-issue skirmishes such as Don Juan brawling with the indignant kinsmen of betrayed ladies, and a struggle when Sor Juana, armed only with the dagger permitted to women for their own defense, repels a pair of assailants (their combat executed in slow-motion to amplify the sexual subtext of the ruffians' intent), choreographer Nick Sandys must grapple with long scenes in which Sor Juana and Don Juan banter while sparring with rapiers, their stratagems echoing their arguments.

MARY SHEN BARNIDGE: In most stage combat, characters fight and *then* talk, but Sor Juana and Don Juan have to fight *as* they talk, and when they're done, talk some *more*. How did you manage this?

NICK SANDYS: Fighting and talking at the same time is difficult, not only because you need sufficient breath to do both, but because you're using completely different parts of your brain. Safety is always a factor in this situation because actors can't fully focus on one while simultaneously executing the other. Breaking down the text into phrases by rhythmic beats enables you to score the fight with the dialogue.

BARNIDGE: But these are long scenes, with a *lot* of words. The first thing we see in the play–which sets up the whole relationship between Sor Juana and Don Juan–is the two of them having a friendly chat as they practice killing each other.

SANDYS: The fighting in this important scene had to follow the dialogue, but not overlap it, and so was divided into bursts of action *between* bursts of intellect. I wasn't trying for a swashbuckling effect, where speed wins. This is why I asked for larger weapons, with full-cup hilts and diamond Schlager blades. They are not only more historically accurate, but they also appear more exotic to the audience.

BARNIDGE: You also slowed down the fights considerably–not just the slo-mo one where Sor Juana fends off her would-be rapists, but all of them.

SANDYS: In their scenes together, Don Juan is giving Sor Juana fencing lessons, so I wanted the tempo to gradually increase, as Sor Juana learns from her errors and discovers the practical applications of her reading. In fact, the choreographic scheme for Sor Juana and Don Juan over the entire production is one continuous lesson plan, the pupil finally surpassing the master. But this choice meant we had to deal with the *actors'* individual strengths. I never felt that they could go any faster and still retain specificity in technique, whether acting *or* fighting.

BARNIDGE: In one scene, Patricca has them *walking* with their blades right at each other's throats. Everybody said it couldn't be done–even without edged swords, that's enough to make actors *real* nervous. How did *you* do it?

SANDYS: The script asked for a number of cinematic maneuvers. For example, Patricca wanted the "arrow" for his final duel. You can see one of these in the opening sequence of Jet Li's *Fearless*, but it's *very* unsafe to reproduce onstage. Fortunately, the language of the sword-at-throats scene provides wonderful descriptions of the images that Patricca wanted, so I recreated the *essence* of that imagery, using different techniques.

BARNIDGE: In this case, resulting in–

SANDYS: Sor Juana and Don Juan come to *en garde* position and then both advance two steps toward each other. If you try this, you'll see that the points of the swords are now almost a foot past each opponent's head. A wrist-moulinet places the blades *across* the actors' throats, with the points resting on the shoulders of their sword arms. This makes for an interlocked stance, very challenging to escape from.

BARNIDGE: What sparked the idea of basing the

final fight in patterns suggested by the planetary orbits that Sor Juana's been studying?
SANDYS: Again, it all came from the text. Sor Juana has discovered that the orbits are elliptical–"dynamic circles", in Patricca's language. This led me to blend the Italian-Spanish circular form with some Asian and smallsword technique to create a style for Sor Juana of her *own* invention, where she uses continuous glissades to make *herself* the center of the orbit. This helps us to see, ourselves, the amazing connections she's forging between natural phenomena and her own environment.
BARNIDGE: Whew! Exercise for the *brain* as well as the body! But how about the ordinary fights? The scene in the play-within-a-play where Don Juan is in Rome brawling with the family and servants of the woman he has just ravished–did you have them fighting in the Italian style?
SANDYS: The Roman fighters are using a mix of Marozzo/Capo Ferro style and good, old-fashioned swash-and-buckle. The play-within-a-play's combination of reality and fantasy allows for switching between historical and stage techniques, but though Don Juan retains his circular footwork, I *did* want a rougher, less intellectual and more muscular, style for that scene.
BARNIDGE: Dan Kenney, who plays Don Juan, and Dawn Alden, who doesn't fight at *all* in the role of the Vicerine, both have fight training, but how about the other actors? Lisa Tejero has done all kindsa acrobatics with Lookingglass Theatre, but has she ever swung steel before? And your actors ranged in age from barely-out-of-the-classroom to downright *old*. Were there any problems?
SANDYS: I trained Desmin [Borges] myself at DePaul, and Raoul Johnson has taught rudimentary stage combat at Loyola U. The three youngest ensemble players mostly had no training, but were athletic, wild and willing. I kept the tempo fairly slow for Tejero, since she has a damaged elbow from years of misuse with Lookingglass, reducing her arm-strength. But our main problems were with pacing and with the set, which was *very* limiting in regard to stairs and sightlines.
BARNIDGE: How about the costumes? The Spanish Baroque features some of the most grotesque–and cumbersome–gowns in the history of fashion!
SANDYS: Yes, the lovely costumes were very tricky when the women were fighting. Clothes, like blades, have an energy and flow all their own, and you just have to find *their* innate rhythms. The raised elbow of the Spanish fencing style allows the sleeves to fall free, but they still had to be adjusted again and again. We also had to make sure the hilts stayed wide of the skirts during the circular foot movement. We pinned up Sor Juana's skirts for her earlier fights, but we couldn't do that with her nun's habit.
BARNIDGE: So in the end, *wardrobe* was your chief adversary!
SANDYS: Yes. That said, however, it's been *years* since I was called upon to choreograph *two* bodice-dagger fights for a single show!

THE ISLAND OF DR. MOREAU – fight choreography by Richard Gilbert and David Gregory

The 1933 film version echoes to this day, sparking long-dormant nightmares of grossly malformed mammalian monsters shouting "Are we not men?" in preparation for turning on their cruel master. H.G. Wells' scathing criticism of Victorian imperialism and scientific technology gone wild recounts the neogothic tale of a madman obsessed with the notion of evolution, leading him to conduct experiments directed toward accelerating its process through draconian surgeries blurring the boundaries between animals and human beings.

In Richard Gilbert and David Gregory's violence design for Lifeline Theatre's production, the Law of the Jungle dominates the dramatic universe from the opening scene, in which sailors rescue a castaway, a gentle lepidopterist named Prendrick. They deliver him, along with a cargo of wild animals, to the remote island settlement where dwell the mysterious Dr. Moreau and his heavy-drinking assistant, Montgomery. Surrounded by terrifying noises and feral carnivores, Prendrick soon discovers the origins of the hybrid creatures populating the island under the tenuous rule of the ambition-twisted Moreau.

MARY SHEN BARNIDGE: Did you deliberately shape the human fights–those involving the sailors, for example–to contrast with the way animals scrap among themselves?
DAVID GREGORY: There are two hallmarks unique to humans in conflict: the use of fists and the use of weapons. Animals don't punch each other in the face, whereas that's usually a human fighter's *first* attack. As for weapons, we have the sailors

fighting with belaying pins and pipe wrenches. More important, they *enjoy* their violence, at one point administering a beating intended solely to *humiliate*, not to kill or repel. You don't often see animals doing that.

RICHARD GILBERT: The sailors are animals, too–literally. The same actors who play the sailors play the beast-folk, and they chose to make a conscious connection. So each individual sailor moves like his later animal character.

BARNIDGE: The men threaten each other with guns, but their whips are what keep the beast-folk at bay.

GREGORY: A whip's two primary purposes are to intimidate, by cracking it, and to inflict pain, by lashing with it. But though you *can* beat someone to death with a bullwhip, it's more commonly used as a punitive device. Animals have no qualms about warning or killing, but they don't have the tools–or the mindset–to *punish* each other.

BARNIDGE: Did any of the actors have any previous training in whipwork?

GREGORY: None of them had so much as touched a bullwhip before being cast. Fortunately, [director] Paul Holmquist and [adapter] Rob Kauzlaric had warned us months earlier that the show would demand 11-foot bullwhips on a stage measuring–*without* scenery and other actors–only 18 X 24 feet.

GILBERT: We held whip classes in July, two whole months before rehearsals. And even after, the actors would often practice in the lobby when they weren't needed onstage. We wore out two complete sets of lashes [the whips' snapping appendages] and the show hadn't even opened yet!

BARNIDGE: Is it uncommon to rehearse fights for this long?

GREGORY: Don't get us started! An action film starts training its lead actors in violence skills *four to six* months before the cameras start rolling–and this is just the fundamentals, without any specific choreography. Stage actors, on the other hand, typically get their fight sequences thrown at them during regular rehearsals. So they're supposed to perform like Lara Croft after a total of only 10-15 *hours* of practice.

BARNIDGE: What can be done about this?

GREGORY: We understand that theatres don't have the money to pay actors to train for half a year in advance, so it behooves actors to build up their skills on their own time. And stage directors planning action-oriented shows should cast as early as they can, to allow the fighting characters to work with the violence designers before the first full rehearsal.

BARNIDGE: Let's talk about the beast-folk for awhile. We know how a bear or a boar attacks, but how about the less aggressive animals?

GREGORY: Moreau remarks that prey animals do not "convert" well–that each of the beast-folk still has some of the predator inside them–so we looked to what natural weapons were available to this or that beast-person. And for the characters without an obvious predatory bent–the Dog Woman, for example, or the Ape Man–we focused more on guarding behaviors and the like.

BARNIDGE: How about the costumes? How did you deal with the restricted field of vision afforded by the masks? Or the encumbrances of the furry suits?

GREGORY: We were lucky–there weren't any tails, and the vision was actually pretty good. The two biggest hazards were, of course, the heat–nothing can be done about *that*–and the footing for the beast-folk with *hooves*. They were wearing high-heeled clogs that forced them up on the balls of their feet, affecting the way they would execute throws or carries. We asked the costumer to give them the shoes as soon as possible so that they could practice in them.

BARNIDGE: You also have some rather–ahem!–*mature* men with minimal fight experience thrashing about onstage. Did that present any obstacles?

GREGORY: That was never a problem. Frankly, Richard and *I* are turning into those old guys thrashing around onstage. Phil Timberlake, who plays Prendrick, is more agile than both of us put together.

BARNIDGE: How about Nigel Patterson, who plays Dr. Moreau? Classical training–Shakespeare and stuff–helps, but he's not a 20-year-old fresh from the classroom, and that's a fact

GREGORY: Neither is Moreau. He's–well, a gentleman and a scholar, so his movements are fairly restrained, anyway. Falling was actually the hardest thing Nigel had to do, but we used some tricks to reduce the physical demands–having him stagger into another actor, or dropping in *stages*, first to his knees and then to the ground. Age and mobility don't have to present problems.

GILBERT: It's like we've always said: if you can walk, you can fight.

MEN OF STEEL – fight choreography by Kevin Murphy and Tony Sancho

Comic-book sci-fi superheroes on stage are nothing new, but what distinguishes Qui Nguyen's look at the subculture of the Extraordinary Talented from the usual slapstick spoofs is his singularly dark vision of a modern world increasingly hostile to the clearly-defined morality characteristic of this literary genre. So while *Men of Steel*'s milieu incorporates exotic personalities and intricate martial action, fight choreographers Kevin Murphy and Tony Sancho, as well as director Jeremy Wechsler needed to exercise special care to ascertain that at no time would the spectacle be permitted to overwhelm the intellectual dimensions of the story.

MARY SHEN BARNIDGE: *Men of Steel* has some fight moves we don't usually see onstage: Maelstrom using his lit cigarette to foil a jailhouse mugger, for example, or The Mole using his *tail* as a flailing weapon. How'd you come up with *those*?
KEVIN MURPHY: The ideas came from the story elements combined with our love of using "found objects" in our choreography.
TONY SANCHO: That particular business suggested itself in rehearsal. E.B. Smith, who plays Maelstrom, was using the cigarette to distract himself so that Andy, the "Hooded Menace", could sneak up on him. When the script says Maelstrom's supposed to reverse the hold on his adversary, Kevin thought it would be interesting to do it using the cigarette as a weapon.
BARNIDGE: And the fight with The Mole swinging his tail like a bullwhip or along the ground, like the ladder-stunt in *Man of La Mancha*?
MURPHY: (laughs) *That* was fun, wasn't it?
SANCHO: The costume designer was kind of responsible for that one. While she was doing her research, she came up with the interesting fact that moles have *extremely strong tails*. Kevin and I looked at each other at that moment and knew we *had* to use it!
BARNIDGE: The Mole's the only freakish villain, but you have an astonishing variety of heroes. How did you arrive at their individual fighting styles?
MURPHY: Those were determined by two main things: the forward action of the play and the abilities of the actor. Take Captain Justice [a combination of Superman and Captain America]. Even though Rob [McLean] has plenty of stage combat training, we kept his fights simple. Hey, Justice has superhuman strength! He doesn't *need* fancy footwork. Lady Liberty's powers, on the other hand, are only *equal* to his, so when she squares off with him, she has to rely more on her acrobatic skills to get the better of him.
SANCHO: Maelstrom, on the other hand, is a human being, not a "super". He uses martial arts, along with an arsenal of gadgets–like the high-frequency sound device that stops his opponents by attacking their auditory nerves. E.B. has a background in Aikido and Tae Kwon Do, so he already knew how to take advantage of efficiency in his movements.
MURPHY: The comic sidekicks calling themselves "Los Hermanos Manos" were another example of our using the abilities that the actors brought with them. From the beginning, we wanted these characters to be influenced by the pro-wrestlers on TV. It turned out that Edgar Sanchez, who plays Lukas, had trained as a semi-professional wrestler, so we took advantage of that.
BARNIDGE: The biggest problem in a show like this one is to keep the action from eclipsing the rest of the play. How'd you-all manage it?
JEREMY WECHSLER: Fighting is a key element in *Men of Steel*, but it's no more the "point" of the show than the number of doors in a Feydeau farce.
MURPHY: We don't choreograph just for all the cool things we want to do–
SANCHO: Not that we won't throw them in when we can get away with it–
MURPHY: But the story comes first. And the motivations of the characters: what are their targets? What do they want? What does their gut tell them?
BARNIDGE: How does this collaboration evolve?
WECHSLER: First the fight team and I discuss the script's violent moments to determine their specific *flavor*, so to speak. Which ones are more important? How real is this one, or that one, supposed to be? How are each of them supposed to affect us? Then I disappear for about two weeks as they sketch out the shape of each fight.

BARNIDGE: And then?

WECHSLER: Then I come in and I look at them, not for their execution, but for their storytelling role. For example, one of the characters–the buffoonish Damon–can negate the others' superpowers by getting close to them. Now, I knew that we'd never be able to track *all* of Damon's movements in terms of his proximity to the superheroes, so I decided that his anti-power capabilities only worked when he made *physical contact* with them. This slowed down the fights a little, but it made the *strategies* as important as the techniques.

BARNIDGE: Especially in that final free-for-all when everyone has to remember exactly what each character *can* or *cannot* do, at that *precise* moment.

WECHSLER: Fortunately, we had the kabuki-style koken to help with the flying shield. Nobody could have thrown something like that safely and accurately on a small stage like we had.

BARNIDGE: I'm told that the playwright liked the Chicago show *better* than when his own company did it in New York.

WECHSLER: He was surprised by how much *humor* we found in the script. Apparently, in the New York production, the second act was quite dark, without the contrast between the comedy and melodrama that he saw in *our* show.

A NIGHT WITH THE FIGHTS

HORROR ACADEMY

fight choreography by the Babes With Blades

One of the three chillers comprising Darren Callahan's anthology proposes a doctor seeking a cure for a mysterious plague that mimics the symptoms of homicidal zombies, attacking the recently deceased and resurrecting them into killing machines. The latest corpse delivered to the hospital laboratory is that of an accident victim whose spinal injury has left her paralyzed from the waist down.

"The original script calls for the woman, still lying there and strapped down, to *flip* the table, dragging the doctor down with her," says Amy Harmon, the actress cast as the crippled patient, "We couldn't figure how to make *that* work, but at one of the first rehearsals, I was sitting on the gurney, just goofing around, when somebody standing at the *foot* of the cot said something snarky. I reached for her, and the whole thing overbalanced like a teeter-totter! After we ascertained that both I *and* the furniture were okay, we set about seeing if I could tip over on cue."

The role requires more than a single fall, however. The character then has to defend herself against not only the medical personnel determined to restrain her, but the homicidal monsters they become post-mortem. All this must be accomplished using only her upper body, while sprawled on the floor.

"Since I'm the twitchiest person in the Known Universe, holding *any* part of me still was hard!" recalls Harmon, "I had to find ways to execute grabs and throws without using my legs for balance. Eventually, I found muscles in my torso–hooray for Pilates!–that gave me the necessary leverage.

"The bigger problem was a partnering issue: normally, when you're onstage with someone whose back is to you, and they're about to step on your foot, you can move it out of the way. But I couldn't do that without ruining the "dead-leg" illusion! So I learned to keep one eye on the people standing near me–especially after I get my right foot kicked, so that my leg is all bent back up on itself–as well as one hand free to grab it and haul it out of the way when I needed. I was *so* glad when I turned into a zombie and could stand up!"

HEY! WHO WAS THAT UNMASKED FIGHT CHOREOGRAPHER?

Since *Moulinet*'s premiere issue in 2000, the critics and awards committees have gradually become aware that when you see lots of people waving swords around onstage, a specialist was probably required to show them how. This didn't get Kevin Asselin a Jeff in 2007 for his *Three Musketeers* fights, and nobody even thought to nominate Rick Sordelet for his epic-sized violence in *King Lear*, but street talk has it that the JeffCom is discussing a proposal to make Stage Combat a competitive category all its own, rather than a "special awards" contendor alongside puppets, video artists and food-sculptors. This means that even if someone doesn't take the prize, their resumé will note that they were *nominated*–and that certainly can't *hurt* anybody's rep, can it?

"I fought on land, I fought at sea,
At home, I fought my Auntie-O"

—Scottish ballad

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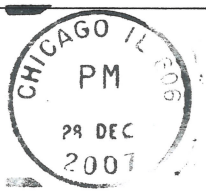

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