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MOULINET: An Action Quarterly



Feature Story

A DOUBLE DOSE OF DERRING-DO:
Geoff Coates talks about
The Mark Of Zorro and *Bloody Bess*

Reviews

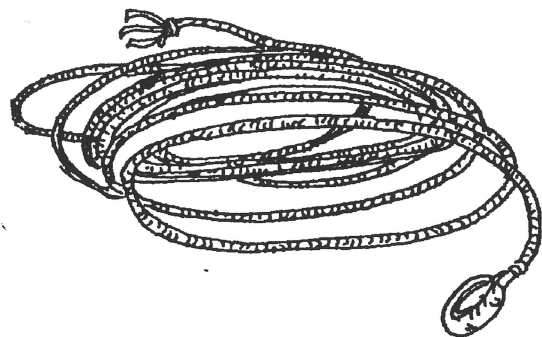
Hanlon-Lees Action Theatre
at the Bristol Renaissance Faire

Swords of Valour and the Knotty Bits
at the World of Faerie Festival

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Check Your Weapons at the Door



MOULINET: An Action Quarterly

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Society of American
Fight Directors
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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mary Shen Barnidge is a freelance writer and theatre critic for Chicago's *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.

Geoff Coates is the recipient of two Joseph Jefferson awards for Outstanding Fight Design, for *Action Movie: The Director's Cut* in 2005 and *The Talisman Ring* in 2006, in addition to an After Dark award for his violence design in the 2005 production of *The Kentucky Cycle*.

David Skvarla has enjoyed a long career on the storefront circuit in the capacity of actor, writer and fight designer, moving from juvenile to character roles with nary a pause or stumble.

Chuck Coyl is the former president of the Society of American Fight Directors, a member of the North Carolina Stuntman's Association and currently teaches at Chicago's Roosevelt University and at the Actors' Gymnasium in Evanston.

Greg Poljacik recently choreographed fights for Bailiwick Repertory's production of *Pins* and will appear this fall in Will Act For Food theatre company's adaptation of Clive Barker's *Frankenstein In Love*.

Robin McFarquhar is currently in Washington, D.C. choreographing fights for *Romeo and Juliet* at the Shakespeare Theatre Company, after which he will return to Chicago for *Macbeth* at the Pier.

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

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

Welcome To Reality, DVD by Loekan Productions. What happens when a group of fantasy-gamers enlist the aid of a Medieval History scholar to embark on an adventure in 10th-century Italy—as it really was? For information, log onto www.CreateSpace.com or e-mail loekan@gmail.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

A DOUBLE DOSE OF DERRING-DO:

Geoff Coates talks about *The Mark of Zorro* and *Bloody Bess*

From the beginning of May to the end of July, Chicago stage combat fans were in heaven. In Rogers Park, on the far north side, at Lifeline Theatre was the dramatic adaptation of *The Mark of Zorro*, Johnston McCulley's seminal sword-and-cloak novel (whose masked hero is said to have been the prototype for that modern *guerilla incognito*, Batman), housed in a former Commonwealth Edison substation boasting a stage only 28 x 30 feet—albeit with a ceiling just under 16 feet high—and eight rows of sharply-raked seats only inches from the action. In residence downtown at The Storefront, a black box facility newly-constructed in 2001 as part of the Randolph Street Theatre District project, was BackStage Theatre Company's production of *Bloody Bess*, a seafaring classic from the repertoire of the legendary Organic Theatre Company. And standing at the center of the fray for both was triple award-winning fight choreographer Geoff Coates.

MARY SHEN BARNIDGE: Who thought up that *amazing* *melée* on horseback in *Mark of Zorro*?

GEOFF COATES: It was actually a collaboration between [adaptor] Katie McLean, [director] Dorothy Milne, [set designer] Alan Donahue and myself. The script just read "horse chase", so we put our heads together. First we ascertained that James [Elly, playing Zorro] was comfy—well, comfy *enough*—sitting on the chandelier crossbar. Then we calculated the circumference of the swing (about 15-29 feet), and how an actor could stand behind him to maintain his speed and keep him moving through the air for the whole scene. And *then* we put in the soldiers miming riders with their sabers raised for James to slash at whenever the opportunity arose. Add in lights, sound and character and you've got yourself a horse chase.

BARNIDGE: How are you going to replicate it when the show transfers to a bigger room at Theatre Building Chicago this fall?

COATES: Well, we don't know yet. You'll have to wait and see.

BARNIDGE: A stunt that had the audience flinching was the scene where Friar Felipe is flogged at the stake with a cat-o-nine-tails. Dorothy told me that she wanted us to see his face as he was whipped, but a colleague of mine was concerned that one of the flails might catch him in the eye. Was there any cause for alarm?

COATES: Not *much* alarm. Hanlon [Smith-Dorsey, playing Fr. Felipe] was padded under his robes, the cat was made of ripped-up t-shirts—

BARNIDGE: Nice and soft—

COATES: Exactly! And the whipsman was trained to strike for the *center* mass, away from the sides.

BARNIDGE: What elevated the *Zorro* fights above the usual swash-and-bash were the funny touches—like when Zorro escapes out a narrow door, pursued by a beefy guardsman who gets stuck trying to follow.

COATES: Dorothy gets credit for the beefy-soldier gag. Combining humor with danger is what allows us to balance the light and dark moments that are integral to *any* adventure story.

BARNIDGE: How about that moose-and-squirrel skirmish after the soldiers discover Lolita hiding beneath a pile of cowhides? The one where Fr. Felipe tries to protect her from the soldiers, only to have her join him in repelling their attackers.

COATES: That fight was inspired by Jackie Chan's found-object acrobatics. The purpose behind the scene you mention was to show a small protagonist, armed with only her brains and a roomful of accessories, evading a whole squad of bigger, stronger bullies.

BARNIDGE: What was that funny-looking dagger she was brandishing?

COATES: It was a skinning knife—she found it in the pile of cowhides.

BARNIDGE: And then the friar rescues *her* by coldcocking an assailant with a holy icon he snatches off the wall. As I recall, priests of that period weren't permitted to carry weapons, but were allowed batons and walking-sticks for self-defense.

COATES: So Fr. Felipe's choice of weapon was the logical one for a clergyman constrained by his vows, forced to take action.

BARNIDGE: Speaking of weapon choice, I noticed that in the first duel between Zorro and the evil aristocrat Captain Ramón—an archetype dating to 1651 and Calderón's *Mayor of Zalamea*, by the way—Ramón takes a high Spanish-style stance, while Zorro uses the straight-line approach. But after that, everybody fights in the Italian manner.

COATES: The opening stances were just for attitude and variety. Originally, I'd wanted the all the fights to be in the Spanish style, but that doesn't lend itself to swashbuckling.

BARNIDGE: Especially with audiences viewing from farther away after the play re-opens in September. That brings up *Bloody Bess*, a play that premiered in the huge arena at the Uptown Hull House, but was just recently done on the *really* small stage at Red Hen. How did you and [co-fight director] David Skvarla take to *your* space in an airplane hanger-sized auditorium?

COATES: Sight-lines are always tricky when the seats are not only deeper, but *wider*. Skvarla and I repeated some of the same tricks that we used in *Pirates* at the Chopin—*another* big room.

BARNIDGE: What's your process for determining who does what, and where, and when?

COATES: First we decide the visual and dramatic moments we want to highlight, then in rehearsal, we figure how to get from Point A to Point F. For the big fights, we worked up the individual fights for the different locations onstage and then put them all together. After that, we swap out or kill off various partners before starting the next phrase. When we get the whole thing onto the set, we modify the placement of the groups for maximum coverage, effect and—always—safety.

BARNIDGE: So it's like the figures in a cotillion.

COATES: Right! If all the actors keep their timing and range of action, the battle will—with any luck—be a tightly-controlled dance, but one that *looks* like a giant blender of razor-sharp doom.

ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS

THE HANLON-LEES ACTION THEATER

at

BRISTOL RENAISSANCE FAIRE

I-94 at 120th Street in Kenosha, Wisconsin

Despite its dedication to 16th-century fancy, the opening weekend of the Bristol Renaissance Faire was a credit to modern medical practice. Not only was Her Royal Highness, Elizabeth Regina (aka actress Mary B. Kababik) on sick leave, recovering from surgery, but the two three-part jousts unexpectedly mandated the personnel of the Hanlon-Lees Action Theater to trade personae in mid-performance before the final chapter on Sunday evening.

The first day's morning *plaisance* presented us with the patrician Sir Edgerton—played by Jack

Cowan, son of Hanlon-Lees veteran Steve Cowan—and the likewise upright Sir William deBracey, played by local favorite William Burch. Their adversaries are the *braggadocio* Sir Mauldron—portrayed by Cowan Sr. with trademark polygot accent—and the likewise contemptuous Sir Amadeo of Mantua, played with sneering relish by Joe D'Arrigo with an authentic Italian accent and a brawny percheron horse—"like sitting on a sofa" confides the rider. (When asked the name of his steed, the insolent knight translated it from the Italian as "stupid", but ghetto-raised *paesani* might have detected an epithet constituting fighting words in the old neighborhood).

Edgerton, as befitting a youth whose countenance calls to mind puppies thrown to fighting dogs for bait, was quickly brushed aside, while DeBracey, astride his own home-schooled horse, ran faster and showier than his competitors, brandishing his lance like a spear before lowering it for the strike. (Though his lofty demeanor still allowed for comic business, as when he surreptitiously inspects his mount's caparisoned flanks after Mauldron disparages the latter's oversized hindquarters.)

But none of this prepared audiences for the sudden disappearance of Sir Mauldron after the second joust, forcing Sir Amadeo to be, literally, *twice* as evil as he squared off to the death against Edgerton *and* DeBracey. Within hearing range of spectators, Mauldron's absence was excused with a casual "He had to kill a Frenchman, and he wanted to take all day about it", but speaking in confidence, Cowan's comrades revealed that he had taken a bad fall, and was being sidelined for the day.

The next day, however, dawned to a *three*-man joust, Burch's DeBracey now characterized as a Gallic villain, while D'Arrigo was transformed into the proud English Sir Joseph of Lincoln (his horse now innocuously dubbed "Calypso"). Cowan Jr. repeated his role as the wholesome Sir Edgerton, whose presence escalated as his portrayer demonstrated vocal prowess to rival his progenitor's. Nevertheless, as the day wore on, the scenario demanded the young warrior be sucker-slashed in the second joust, then summarily executed in the third, leaving the final showdown to the righteous Sir Joseph and the wicked Sir William.

The Hanlon-Lees Action Theatre this year celebrates its thirtieth anniversary, with many of its founding members still taking an active part in the

athletic spectacle. More commendable, however, is its continuing attention to the contemporary context framing its period spectacles, and the innovations rooted in awareness of such. This is especially apparent in its introduction of women into the act, specifically the whip-snapping Lady Gwendolyn of Aquitaine as the tournament's Master—or is that Mistress?—of Arms. As played by Trisha Mack, whose whiskey-and-honey contralto conveys authority with increasing dignity each season, she projects a commanding vigor to spark fantasies in adolescent RenFaire fans of both genders.

For further information, phone (847) 395-7773 or log onto www.RenFair.com

THE WORLD OF FAERIE FESTIVAL

Vasa Park, 35 W217 Hwy 31 in South Elgin, Illinois

A logistical error moved the Swords Of Valour's last show up an hour, causing this reporter to miss all but the last few minutes, which featured some coed ass-kicking in what looked to be a thrilling climax to their hour-long spectacle. This squad of semi-comic knightly combatants perform the year round, often playing in such indoor venues as Science-Fiction and Fantasy conventions, with a calendar of their upcoming appearances available on-line.

Also in evidence at the World Of Faerie festival, however, was the two-person sideshow calling itself the Knotty Bits. A walkabout performance featured Sylver Fyre nibbling at ignited torches (in a high riverfront breeze, yet!) and snapping flowers from a blindfolded assistant's teeth with a grisly-looking whip. But the stunt that halted strolling fairegoers in their tracks involved Fyre's partner, Gwydion The Unusual, and a pool of broken bottles gleaming in the sun with seductive menace.

"Risk level one!" Gwydion announced before proceeding to slide with bare feet over the surface of razor-sharp glass shards, after calling upon a bystander to testify to the lacerative potential of the latter and vulnerability of the former. "Risk level two!" mandated his jumping up and down upon the serrated surface, while for "Risk level three", the intrepid daredevil dropped to the ground with one cheek gently cushioned on the glittering pillow. This was Fyre's cue to place one dainty foot on his head and the other in the small of his back, then—with an audible crunch of silica—assume a heroic stance atop his prone body.

The Knotty Bits' act also encompasses aerial stunts, but the absence of the necessary rigging equipment at this event, confided Fyre, was due to their car having been *struck by lightning* at the Port Washington Pirate Festival earlier in the season. Now *that's* a risk level *Four* spectacle!

For further information, phone (815) 788-1630 or log onto www.theworldoffaeries.com

A NIGHT WITH THE FIGHTS

THE MARK OF ZORRO

fight choreography by Geoff Coates

Audiences arriving with their tongues already lodged firmly in their cheeks, anticipating a string of Road-Runner chase-and-clash blackouts in keeping with the plethora of parodies and spoofs spawned by the enduring success of Johnston McCulley's immensely popular adventure serial, won't get them at Lifeline Theatre. Instead, this adaptation delivers all the solemn issues raised by the romantic saga of Old California even as its action sequences dally with the conventions of its genre.

Homages to the golden age of Hollywood swash-buckling encompass such familiar scenes as a terrified house-servant clumsily defending himself with a broomstick against a bullying cavalryman's military saber, and a villainous henchman opening a window-shutter to find himself face-to-face with a pistol thrust through it. Fans of the *beau sabreur* tradition will also recognize the drollery of a burly soldier getting stuck in a narrow doorway through which the lissome hero has just fled, as well as the irony of a sympathetic priest bludgeoning a rowdy hooligan with an icon, snatched from the mission wall.

This last maneuver caps a found-object skirmish in which the good friar attempts to protect a cornered *señorita* Lolita from a squad of attacking soldiers by shielding her with his body, only to see her crawl between his legs past her assaulters, where she commences to harass them with whatever ammunition comes to hand. The churchly man's fighting prowess has already been established in an earlier episode in which he resists the troops holding him in custody, prior to execution of a fraudulent sentence mandating that he be publicly flogged with a cat-o-nine-tails whip.

But as the outdoor stunt-players often grumble, it's always about the *horses*—even when the arena measures a mere 28 x 30 feet. We are acclimated to the ubiquitous presence of equine transport by the sound of offstage hoofbeats as riders or carriages approach, so that when a spotlight picks out Zorro and Lolita astride the pueblo's protruding roof-beam (the latter seated pillion behind him), we accept the illusion immediately. But what sets the audiences to cheering with gusto is a subsequent sequence wherein our hero straddles the hitherto-unnoticed chandelier and proceeds to swing in a large circle, crossing swords with the surrounding soldiers, who drum their heels in flamenco-styled imitation of thundering iron-shod footfalls.

Even in a season where no less than four plays have boasted simulated elephants, look for the beasts of burden conjured by this *literal* suspension of disbelief to attract *magna cum laudes* when awards time comes around.

SUPERIOR DONUTS

fight choreography by Chuck Coyl

The mixed blessing is that Chris Jones, theatre critic for the Chicago *Tribune*, is now fight-savvy enough to declare the opening-night fight choreography in Pulitzer prize-winning author Tracy Letts' latest play "ineffective". He was not alone in his appraisal. But the fault did *not* lie with the script, nor with Chuck Coyl's combat design, and—in all fairness—neither with the actors performing it.

The fisticuffs in question are not the product of an anger-fueled outburst, but of a formal duel, initiated in cold blood. The setting is a shabby diner, and the opponents, a middle-aged gangster with a virulent ulcer (who gulps down the contents of a tabletop creamer during the course of the scuffle), confronted by a 60-year-old pacifist whose last taste of physical conflict was probably a kindergarten playground squabble. The former is played by Robert Maffia, a seasoned storefront-circuit slugger since the early 1990s, but the latter is portrayed by Hollywood import Michael McKean, creator of such legendary clowns as Lenny Kosnowski in the television series *LaVerne* and Shirley and David St. Hubbins in the film parody *This Is Spinal Tap*.

So the problem would seem to be an over-forty actor, whose training pre-dates fight instruction for any but classical curriculums, pushed to learn stage combat from the ground up in the few weeks allotted rehearsals for a play's premiere production. In this

case, the character's pugilistic inexperience somewhat justifies the match's leisurely round-to-round progress, but what most saps the excitement from its execution, bringing the dramatic tension to a standstill, is the necessity of every punch being thrown so slowly as to make the timing of knaps impossible. And a punch with no impact quickly devolves from a replication of grim, but unavoidable, violence into a meaningless terpsichorean exercise.

Whether this problem was resolved later in the play's run with more practice, or will have to wait for its next production, is not known. What's certain, however, is that directors must be aware, when casting shows incorporating violence into their action, of an actor's ability to accomplish the tasks demanded of the role, and of the necessity of allotting sufficient time for his preparation under the supervision of an instructor specializing in those skills.

BLOODY BESS

**fight choreography by Geoff Coates
and David Skvarla**

When the first scene presents us with heartless pirates stringing up a prisoner by his heels, and then cutting his throat so that he bleeds like a slaughtered pig, where can the rest of the play go from there? Especially when this seagoing yarn by Stuart Gordon, John Ostrander and William J. Norris predates by several decades the popularity of Jolly Roger roistering following in the wake of the phenomenally successful *Pirates Of The Caribbean* film trilogy.

Geoff Coates and David Skvarla have an advantage in the casting of such contrasting physical types as the pint-sized Stephanie Repin and the brawny Skvarla, the latter resplendent in scalp-tattoos and ankle-length leather duster. The script itself likewise mandates some exotic spectacle in its inclusion among the band of outlaws an African-born slave who, at one point, makes use of a blow-pipe and poisoned dart (weapons more properly associated with Brazilian natives—but this is fantasy, remember.)

A balcony shelf extending the full perimeter of the auditorium provides support for rigging to facilitate climbs up and slides down (but not "swings from", to the disappointment of geezerly fans who recall little else from the 1974 premiere production). The 2004 Defiant Theatre production of *Pyrates* taught Coates and Skvarla the value of restraint when confronted by a seemingly limitless wealth of fight opportunities, however, and at no time does the spectacle elbow aside story, acting or audience.

ORRA

fight choreography by Greg Poljacik

Poisoned daggers. Maidens driven to madness. Innocent youths slaughtered by hardened assassins. Oh, don't you just *love* Jacobean tragedies? This is not Webster and Middleton, however, but a neo-gothic romance written in 1812 by Scottish author Joanna Baillie, making for a slightly stilted progression of the plot (which ends with lovers alive and united, but far from happily). Neither are the mostly-young members of the Halcyon Theatre company classically-schooled thespians, any more than the cramped corner in the Peter Jones warehouse gallery is a roomy, fully-equipped stage.

All that notwithstanding, we have a villain armed with, not one, but *two* daggers—one to end his own life should the prospect of dishonor render that choice the more desirable, and the other “envenomed” to ascertain that he not go alone into that good night. The target of his wicked career is a high-born lady betrothed to her adolescent cousin, but secretly enamored of a neighboring nobleman. Enlisted by her father to kidnap and imprison this willful child, Ruddigere falls in love with his prey in the course of his nefarious task. But despite her straitened circumstances, she proves intractable to the attentions of her captor, who increases her distress with mental torture designed to gain her dependence. When her two suitors arrive to rescue her, they find that she has succumbed to insanity as a result of her cruel confinement.

Greg Poljacik wisely moves the climactic scene well upstage, instructing Ruddigere to stab himself under the ribcage, doubling over as he does to hide the point of impact. As he writhes on the ground, however, he continues to utter imprecations against the woman who scorned him. These vilifications so incense her *fiancé* that he pounces upon the supine malefactor. Thus is the callow defender, himself, scratched with the deadly blade, mere seconds before taking it up to stab the dying man repeatedly. His rage spent, he weakens and is helped offstage by a kinsman. Another servant presently returns to report the death of his master.

THE COMEDY OF ERRORS

fight choreography by Robin McFarquhar

The framing concept is so novel we hardly notice the Shakespeare at all: an English film studio in 1940 is doing their part for the war effort by making

a panto-styled movie of Old Bill's most lightweight homage to Plautus, their progress impeded by air-raids, the inevitable backstage squabbles and a cast comprised of thespians rejected for military duty.

One of these is a matinee idol known for his swashbuckling action-epics—a fortuitous coincidence giving Robin McFarquhar an opportunity to inject a short skirmish pitting the *faux*-cavalier's rapier against an injured, wheelchair-bound old man waving that quintessential English weapon, a furled umbrella. Their skirmish is brief, with no blade-to-bumbershoot contact, but makes for relief from the generic slapstick shtik—slaps, ear-twists, hair-pulls, *et cetera*—characteristic of classical comedy cast with non-fight trained actors.

Far from being bored with such tame antics, McFarquhar was elated, enthusing at the opening-night gala, “I don't often get a chance to do something like this!”

FIELD DISPATCHES

CHECK 'EM AT THE DOOR, MISTER

With the popularity of stab-and-slash spectacle, it's sometimes easy to forget how startling period weapons can be when seen outside of context by unprepared civilians.

Recently, a 29-year-old Manhattan kickball player named Lawrence Jackson was strolling through Macy's department store with his girl friend when police arrested him for “brandishing” a large, rusted, deadly-looking cutlass. His explanation—that his team often wore pirate-themed costumes and that he was on his way to a game—did not prevent his being charged with criminal possession of a weapon.

Less excusable was the incident caused by Vladislav Lisetskiy, the Brooklyn citizen who arrived at the courthouse for jury duty armed with a cane concealing a 30-inch sword and a 6-inch dagger. Despite Lisetskiy's protests that he “didn't know it was illegal”, he was charged with misdemeanor possession of a concealed weapon.

“The cane attracted attention because of the way it looked,” said courthouse policeman Kuz Bryan, “It had two metal bands. That's usually an indication that something's concealed. My officers noticed it right away.”

**“Fights are always
more fun when
you can make a mess.”**

—David Woolley

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