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MOULINET: An Action Quarterly



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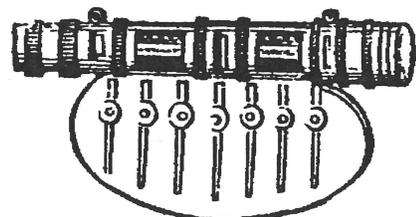
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Fight Directors**
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at
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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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.

Greg Poljacik is choreographing a dance-fight piece for the Matter Dance Company and looking ahead to some "really intense stuff" for the Halcyon Theatre "Alcyone" festival, this year's theme being "Martyrdom of the Innocents".

Nick Sandys is glad to be home after air-shuttling between two opera companies in two cities, following his fights for Steppenwolf's production of *The Seafarer*. He is currently grappling with execution-style shootings and dead cats for Northlight Theatre's *Lieutenant of Inishmore*.

Jeff Christian is an alumnus of the seminal 1995 hit show *The Fair Maid Of The West* and has served as fight captain for Robin McFarquhar and David Woolley in several productions. He recently choreographed the fights for Seanachai Theatre's *Our Father*.

Chris Walsh choreographed fights for Steep Theatre's *In Arabia, We'd All Be Kings* and is currently doing same for Black Sheep Theatre's *Camp Freedom*. Look for him to appear onstage in *Busman's Honeymoon* at Lifeline Theatre later this spring.

Robin McFarquhar was recently nominated for a Helen Hayes award in the category of "outstanding choreography"—hitherto restricted to dance and movement design—in recognition of his fights for *Romeo And Juliet* at Washington DC's Shakespeare Theatre Company.

Ned Mochel is a founding member of Powertap Productions and a Jeff award-winning fight choreographer, with a string of international credits. He presently lives and works in Los Angeles, where his independent film, *Jack Slash*, is currently in development. Look for him in the soon-to-be-released action movie *Hit Parade*.

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 Lokean 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 lokean@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

CREATING A FRANKENSTEIN: a chat with Greg Poljacik

Its plot may be rooted in the literary conventions of neo-gothic romanticism, but the first thing any Clive Barker story requires is oceans of blood, and never more so than for *Frankenstein In Love*, a contemporary sequel to Mary Shelley's classic tale of horror-fantasy fiction.

The dramatic setting is an unnamed South American country undergoing—what else?—an overthrow of its despotic government. One of the rebel leaders is the hideously scarred El Coco. His quarry, the European scientist in whose laboratories terrible experiments are conducted. Other personae figuring in our story are the beautiful (and likewise surgically-altered) Veronique, the dashing guerrilla-warrior Cockatoo, a sardonic gypsy clairvoyant calling herself Maria, and a bevy of the usual corrupt public servants.

The *physical* setting, however, is a room of cramped dimensions even by storefront standards, rendered even *more* claustrophobic by a huddle of spectators placed in its center, around whose perimeter actors parade so closely that their costumes graze audience members as the wearers pass. This mosaic arrangement thus transforms *every* bit of unoccupied space—aisles, hallways, cracks between screens, gaps between chair-backs and feet tucked carefully under seats—into a playing area to be utilized *without* paying customers being splashed with body fluids and biologicals, actual or simulated. It also renders Greg Poljacik's duties less those of a *fight* choreographer than of the "violence director" his playbill credit proclaims him to be.

MARY SHEN BARNIDGE: Clive Barker is primarily a prose writer, and *Frankenstein In Love*, one of his first attempts at writing a play. But in a novel, you can load on the horrors, since we can take as long as we need to absorb the shocks, our imaginations working as an additional buffer. On the stage, however, you've got limited playing time and attention span—so how did you decide what to *show* us, and what to only *tell* us?

GREG POLJACIK: The first thing the production staff talked about was to decide which moments had real *meaning*, adding depth to the characters and facilitating the story's progress, as opposed to just being there for the gore. After that, we discussed what we could actually *do* on the stage with them.

BARNIDGE: Were there *many* good scenes, full of

real "meaning", that had to be cut after proving technically impractical?

POLJACIK: A few didn't make it. One of them was El Coco having his flesh ripped off while Dr. Frankenstein watched. Dramatically, the scene revealed the relationship between the two of them, besides letting the audience know why all these creatures feared the doctor so much.

BARNIDGE: Which raises a problem: in a play where you have one murder/mutilation coming after another, how do you guard against their all starting to look the same?

POLJACIK: The murders and mutilations are alike in that they're all extreme, but each violent act, no matter how brief, was built around the story it was telling. When El Coco strangles Maria, for example, it's an act of *love*. She is the only non-monster who sees him for what he is. She understands that he *only* knows how to express love through inflicting injury—and that this is something he learned from his father, Dr. Frankenstein.

BARNIDGE: And since Maria's already an "undead" ghost, being strangled doesn't really do *her* any permanent harm.

POLJACIK: Right! Now when Veronique stabs Perez, the deposed dictator, the subtext is very different. It's an act of sexual revenge, with sensual enjoyment reflected in the blade's slow penetration.

BARNIDGE: Speaking of sexual revenge, whose idea was it to have Dr. Frankenstein menace young Veronique like a creepy pedophile stalking a teenage girl? We almost *cheered* when she carved open his chest and, literally, tore his heart out!

POLJACIK: Credit for that goes to [director] Greg Gerhard and [actor] Larry Garner. The prosthetic heart, along with some extra blood, is wrapped in a sealable sandwich bag—with another bag surrounding *that*, in case of leakage—and held in place by athletic tape wound around Larry's chest. It's tight enough to hold the apparatus in place, but loose enough for him to move naturally, with his jacket, shirt and tie hiding the bulge.

BARNIDGE: Electric lights are what destroyed Grand Guignol, but your show was in a *really* small room, with audience less than elbow's distance away from the gruesome deeds. How did you ascertain that we wouldn't see anything from too close up to ignore the artifice?

POLJACIK: Both Barker and Gerhard wanted the audience to feel trapped—

BARNIDGE: *That* should have been easy! The regular audience area in that theatre is gridlocked, anyway, but the cluster in the middle of the room crowded us even *closer* together—

POLJACIK: Exactly! And wherever I could, I pinned the characters up against the walls, so that the spectators could empathize with their fear at being, literally, cornered.

BARNIDGE: And so even when the impact was a belly-stab, with the victim curling his body over the blade, we all still got a clear view of the thrust, no matter where we were sitting.

POLJACIK: Keeping the areas of the violent scenes dark and shadowy made it possible to stage the acts themselves out in the open, so that the audience could *see* the stabbing, choking, or whatever, but not the mechanisms we used to make them happen.

BARNIDGE: I'm told you used a premix fake blood instead of the homemade corn syrup/dish soap substitute, even though the professional product is more expensive. Why is that?

POLJACIK: We went with the premix for convenience, but it worked out well because we were able to get a thinner, runnier blood for the stomach stab, as well as a thicker, goopier one for the heart-ripping.

BARNIDGE: How many gallons did you end up using?

POLJACIK: Surprisingly, not that much. Maybe between 16-20 ounces per show. But it got *everywhere*. The most frequently-heard question in the dressing room was "How did I get blood on *that*?"

COME OUT SWINGING AND COME OUT SINGING: GRAPPLING WITH DIVAS AND DIVOS

You'd think that opera fights would be easy to stage—everything has to occur in tempo with the *music*, right? And singers are trained to *count*, aren't they? Oh, every combat choreographer usually has a war story or two about the stabbings in *I Pagliacci* or *Cavalleria Rusticana*, and a few barroom chortles are occasionally swapped at the expense of the firing squad in *Tosca* or the armies-on-the-march in *Götterdämmerung*. But after a frantic month of commuting between Chicago's Lyric and New York City's Metropolitan opera companies, Nick Sandys returned home with plenty of jet-lagged fodder for collecting drinks and sympathy.

To begin with, the economy had struck at the Lyric. Though its director had the wisdom to hire a

fight choreographer for the violent scenes in *Tristan And Isolde* (aka *Tris & Is*), Sandys was dismayed to discover that the fight-trained actors he'd been promised had been cut from the budget. Instead he was informed that he would have to recruit his warriors from the corps of supernumeraries ("average age, seventy!") and teach them to fight from scratch. The results were action sequences later casually dismissed by the *Sun-Times*' Neil Steinberg as "tepid".

"If he thought the Lyric fights were tepid, he should have seen the ones at the Met!" sputtered Sandys, "Their *Il Trovatore* was a remount from two years ago, but after three days of drilling the chorus, I was presented with an Azucena who had a broken arm—no, a broken *shoulder*—oh, wait, no, a *dislocated* shoulder. In the end, she proved to be so badly injured that she couldn't be *touched* on her left upper torso—certainly not captured, bound, dragged around onstage by the wrists and thrown into a cell, as the script requires."

Fortunately, the character in question is an elderly crone, the mother of the hero, who can't be expected to be in top physical condition. Sandys' solution was to have her bound around the waist, with another rope trailing at her back for her captors to lead her onstage. As the surrounding crowds taunt her, she darts and whirls and thrashes about at the end of her leash (which the singer holds safely anchored against her own body as the loose end is passed from one tormentor to the other) until, in a frenzied burst of terror, she spins down the line of soldiers, winding her tether around herself so that she is soon swaddled in her own restraints. Then, when she is escorted offstage, she moves as an upright unit, with no jerking or pulling.

Ironically, the much-maligned "Anvil Chorus"—mocked by everyone from Gilbert and Sullivan to the Marx Brothers for its orchestral replication of gypsy blacksmiths' hammers striking hot iron—turned out to be a, well, smashing success. "I got to *cast* the anvil guys this time! Some of the selected supers were big and some small, but they were *all* very hunky. So for that scene, we had steam rising around the central four muscle-men, sledge hammers in full swing, and even a little bit of sword-fighting in the background! It was *huge*! The *New York Times* even ran a photograph of it with the review!

"My biggest disappointment, however, was Dmitri Hvorostovsky—a terrific baritone I'd first worked with in 1996 for the Lyric's *Faust*. At that

time, he was fresh out of Russia—handsome, athletic, well co-ordinated and *trained in sword fighting!* He works out seriously, so he was still in good shape twelve years later, but in the meantime, all the sloppy fighting—doing it ‘like they used to’—had eroded his skills. Movements were generalized, not specific. He’d get too close, parry without looking at his target, go for the blades clickety-clacking together instead of paying attention to the larger sweep of the fight.

“Don’t get me wrong—I still enjoyed working with Hvorostovsky, who’s a great talent, but I was surprised to find my job so much harder than before. And as exciting as it was to be doing fights at the Met in the strange and wonderful world of grand opera, I’d be wrong if I said it was any faster, or simpler, or better organized, than any other production. As lovely as opera singers are as individual human beings—and the staff and crew, too—they can make your life hell, professionally.”

A NIGHT WITH THE FIGHTS

MODIGLIANI

fight choreography by Jeff Christian

Oh, the *vie de bohème* is ugly and squalid, and the artists are drunken pigs who spend all their time whining about how nobody recognizes their genius (not unlike playwright Dennis McIntyre). But amid episodes of disappointed painters smashing actual—not breakaway—bottles in the gutter, or lovers expressing their passion by smacking each other’s faces and dragging each other around by the hair (and that’s the *woman* who does this, by the way), we get a trio of delightful Molière-and-Curly fights to alleviate the gloom.

The first bout is initiated by two men seated in a café, jockeying for the last swig of wine. They begin by alternately nudging the bottle closer to their respective sides of the table, until both grab the flask in a tug-of-war culminating in some of the precious contents being spilled, whereupon one combatant spits in the other’s eyes, forcing him to release his grip on the hooch in order to wipe his face.

This move is repeated in a second skirmish, beginning with the spitter attempting his strategy a second time, only to have his adversary cover his face with the apron he holds in his hands (yes, *just* like the Three Stooges). After exchanging a few

flimsy slaps with the wadded-up fabric, the squabblers go for each other’s throats and throttle one another with a see-saw crawl in a circle around the table. The comedy is heightened by the other characters in the room carrying on their conversation placidly, oblivious to the disturbance on the floor.

The evening’s *pièce de résistance*, however, is the three-on-one brawl initiated by a proposal that the pair of artists, along with a third companion, rob the café waiter. The least drunk of the would-be marauders catches the waiter from behind in a bear hug, only to have his prisoner go limp and slide out of his grip into a sitting position on the floor, legs outstretched to trip one of the henchmen. When the third assailant then pulls the waiter to his feet, the resourceful servant promptly jumps into his attacker’s arms, wrapping his legs around the latter. In the struggle to subdue their prey, the other two brawlers end up with the waiter suspended horizontally between them. After three accordion-stretches, the captive frees himself and scrambles for the door. The first ruffian launches himself into a “hail-mary” leap, somersaulting across the room, but landing just short of his target. Before he can recover, his comrades stumble to his aid, in the process falling over him and each other. The sequence then finishes with the waiter standing triumphantly over the pile of would-be thieves.

MACBETH

fight choreography by Robin McFarquhar

A world-class theatre with a world-class budget can afford to stage Shakespeare brimming with scenery sexier than Mr. and Mrs. Macbeth necking on the floor, videos more arresting than the trio of witches tarted up in *à-go-go* drag for a lairds’ conference at a “gentlemen’s club”, but violence—well, downright skimpy, with none of the drama invoked by men looking each other in the eye as they move in for the kill.

The initial scene, set on the field of battle, is suggested by the noises of gunfire and air attacks, the alarums and excursions receiving focus only when Macbeth takes center stage to sadistically disembowel a wounded adversary out of sheer bloodlust, thus enabling his captain to report that he “unseamed him from the navel to the chops”—the display of valor earning our hero the promotion that launches the plot.

In a later scene, masked and uniformed terrorists smash through the wall of the Macduff's nursery—an entrance more startling than any mayhem they subsequently inflict on the family—to first slit the throat, and then, redundantly, snap the neck of one son, while Lady Macduff and her other two children watch in horror, but are never physically manhandled.

And what about the final showdown between Macbeth and Macduff, in which the dramatic conflict reaches its climax, the former's fate finally ensured by the revelation of the latter's origins? In this show, the weapons are not even commando knives reflecting the production design's modern warfare, but Shakespeare-R-Us daggers facilitating a likewise generic duel.

That leaves only Banquo's murder to provide us a good spine-chilling thrill. McFarquhar's decision to enact the deed in total darkness, illuminated only by flashlights, is a novelty offering opportunities for some interesting blocking, but the victim's subsequent return from the dead to haunt his killer's dinner party begins with photographic images of the ghost projected onto flat upstage screens. Just when we think this will be another triumph for technology, however, the final shot of a bloody, near-naked Banquo reveals itself to be the actor himself, who abruptly breaks out of the frame to romp among the startled guests. After the plethora of electronic gimmickry, who would have guessed that a sight as primitive as a human being parading the stage would supply the biggest shock of the evening?

SHAKESPLOITATION!

fight choreography by Chris Walsh

A punch whose knap follows several seconds *after* the swing, but several seconds *before* the receiver registers the impact, establishes at the outset the tone of author Andy Grigg's three Shakespeare spoofs, modeled on popular action-film genres—the ghetto-and-car-chase *Grand Theft Othello*, the makeup-and-body-parts *Apocalypse: Romeo and Juliet*, and the chop-socko *Ninja Hamlet: Burning Fist of Denmark*. But fight choreographer Chris Walsh's biggest problem isn't living up to the show publicity's assertion that "The Bard is a Baaadaass", but doing it on the Gorilla Tango storefront cabaret's stage—an arena barely larger than a hostess-waitstation with front-row tables and customers' knees marking the boundaries of its apron.

Zombies of the Hollywood variety being uniformly big and hulking, the menacing creatures of *Apocalypse* are kept offstage (specifically, in the general region of the playhouse lobby—a tactic not uncommon to low-budget *Blair Witch Project* knockoffs), while *Grand Theft* relies on hand-to-hand spectacle choreographed in the patently artificial manner of the evening's aforementioned opening sequence. Ironically, *Ninja Hamlet* presents the most ready solution to the safe-distance problem, thanks to the conventions introduced in the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* dictating that magic, not muscle, decides the battle. Thus, blows and kicks launched on opposite sides of the stage (with appropriate vocal accompaniment) are understood to be fully as efficacious as those connecting at close range. This full-cast (and most extensively-conceived) of the three sketches finishes with a burst of adrenaline to send us home—or off to another Bucktown bar, anyway—happy and exhilarated.

MEN OF TORTUGA

fight choreography by Rick Snyder

The star of the workshop production at Steppenwolf's 2005 First Look Festival was a weapon. Not just *any* weapon, however, but a metal detector-defying, x-ray machine-proof fiberglass blade concealed in a briefcase handle—a hit man's dream promptly declared useless by a roomful of bureaucratic would-be assassins. This James Bond thingmawhatsis makes its appearance in Profiles Theatre's staging of the play, too, but this time is upstaged by a quick "weighty-tome" fight. The armament, in this case, is a 400-page hardcover-bound government report whose author foils the professional goon standing guard by first slamming the volume down on the latter's hands, then delivering him a swat upside the head that sends the menacing thug sprawling, victim of a *coup* adding humiliation to defeat.

PICASSO AT THE LAPIN AGILE

fight choreography by Steven Walanka, Luke Daigle and Renae Stone

The momentum in Steve Martin's play is chiefly based on its repartee, onstage physical action being comprised largely of the Lapin Agile tavern's denizens pouring and consuming drinks, in addition to excusing themselves to—no surprise—visit the bathroom, or exit on what they cheerfully concede

are contrived errands. The St. Sebastian Players, however, augment their church-basement playing space's restricted visual interest during a *tête-à-tête* between a horn-dogging artist and a wise barmaid by choreographing it to a characteristically French *apache* dance. What renders this sexually-charged adagio all the more droll is the partnering of the brawny Renae Stone with the bantamweight Luke Daigle, making for a moose-and-squirrel duet as much wrestling match as pinch-and-tickle *pas de deux*.

CALL TO ARMS

March 14-15. March Madness VI at Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights, Ohio. SAFD Fight Masters Chuck Coyl and Mike Chin, also Michael Johnson, John Tovar, Lewis Shaw and Gina Cerimele-Mechley, will teach classes in Lightsaber, Isengard Mass Battle and "Sneaky Sh*t". For information, phone (513) 295-4788, e-mail cincymarchmadness@yahoo.com or log onto www.geocities.com/cincymarchmadness.

March 28-29. Virginia Beach Bash at Regent University, Virginia Beach, VA. The workshop's focus is "Fighting on television and in films". Faculty includes SAFD Fight Masters Richard Ryan and Dale Girard, along with Michael Kirkland, John Paul Scheidler, Gregg Lloyd and Jill Matarelli Carlson. For information, phone (757) 352-4237, e-mail michkir@regent.edu or log into www.regent.edu/beachbash

FIELD DISPATCHES

911 KNIGHTS TO THE RESCUE— AGAIN

An insert into the playbill for the Goodman Theatre opening of *Desire Under The Elms* listed not one, but *three* names crediting those responsible for its incidental rough stuff: "Fight Choreographer" Rick Sordelet, "Fight Consultant" Nick Sandys and "Fight Captain" Michael Huftile. What expedited this curious—not to mention expensive—duplication of personnel in a play hardly renowned for its violence?

What, indeed? When will directors recognize the need to include a fight choreographer on the creative team *before* some hyperadrenal actor tries to kill his—

or nowadays like as not, *her*—partner? Granted, the problem may not have been immediately apparent—Eugene O'Neill never said his characters had to get so physical. But modern audiences expect lovers to *display* their passion, and in terms sufficiently extravagant as to present a hazard when baby hams lose themselves in *The Moment*. Only after a bruised and aching leading lady refused to proceed unless a specialist was called in did the search commence for a referee to oversee the amorous hugs and tugs.

By then, however, the production was barely two weeks from opening, and Sandys, the Goodman's reliable 911 Knight, was embroiled in transcontinental shuttling between cities for two opera companies. *Elms'* director, recalling his work with Sordelet in New York City, persuaded the likewise overworked combat choreographer to make a one-day road call—for a fee, of course—to administer martial first aid sufficient to leave subsequent convalescence in the hands of understudy cast member Huftile.

Chalk up another disaster averted. But how much time and money could have been saved by hiring a fight technician at the *beginning* of rehearsals to administer preventative care, instead of having to rely on last-minute emergency surgery?

SHADOW BOXING

Being the sole contender for a theatre award left Ned Mochel open to snarky comments—Lisa Fung, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, dead-panned, "We don't have any insider info, [but] we're willing to bet that [Mochel] is named the winner in his highly competitive category", while *PerformInk's* Kerry Reid chuckled, "Hope he's got his speech ready!" But the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle nomination of Mochel for his fight choreography in *VS*. Theatre Company's premiere production of *On An Average Day* presents two additional perks not apparent to outsiders: first, his solitary status clearly announces that no other worthy candidates were found for the region. Second, the Critics Circle's decision to retain the category title—as opposed to going the "special award" route—means that only those future scholars prepared to do the extra research will have any inkling that Mochel did not, in fact, compete with *dozens* of rivals before emerging victorious with his prize.

“War is as wont to raise
soldiers of fortune
as to ruin them.”

—Robert Boyle

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