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MOULINET: An Action Quarterly



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MOULINET: An Action Quarterly

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mary Shen Barnidge is an award-winning freelance writer and theatre critic, contributing regularly to *Windy City Times* and the website www.theatreinchicago.com. She is a member of the American Theatre Critics Association, Poets & Writers, Inc. and a Friend in the Society of American Fight Directors.

John Tovar is currently preparing thirty years of London street-fights for About Face's production of *The Pride*, opening June 13.

David Woolley contributed shell-shock falls and geezer fights to *The Happiest Song Plays Last* at the Goodman and is readying himself for another season playing Guido Crescendo at the Bristol Renaissance Faire.

Matt Hawkins directed gunplay for Lookingglass Theater's recent *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* and will swash buckles this summer for Rob Kauzlaric's new adaptation of *The Three Musketeers* at Lifeline.

Ryan Bourque was recently nominated for a Jeff award in recognition of his fights for The Hypocrites' *Coriolanus* and will assemble boat-in-the bottle fights in the Redtwist storefront for *Reverb*.

Alex Farrington crafted the badass brawls for Wayward Productions' motorcycle-gang *Richard III* in the Underground Wonder Bar basement (reopened at The Den through June 29).

John Moran just completed knife-fights, beat-downs and other urban violence for Factory Theater's Jeff-nominated *Incident on Run 1217*.

Beau Forbes is spending his summer acting in films and brewing beer.

William Endsley is a former director/stage manager turned freelance international real estate consultant.

BARTER, HIRE & BROADSIDES

A Terrific Combat!!!, edited by Tony Wolf, with a forward by William Hobbs. Published by Lulu Press. A refreshingly entertaining compilation of documented and anecdotal commentary on theatrical combat from 1900 to 1920, by the cultural fight consultant for the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy. For further information and to order, log onto www.lulu.com.

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TWO-MAN PUNCH-UP: Sparring in *The Opponent*

There are certain plays that offer opportunities to showcase hand-to-hand sporting skills, one being Prop Thtr's multiple award-winning 1995 adaptation of Nelson Algren's *Never Come Morning*, which featured several boxing sequences and earned a Joseph Jefferson award for fight designer Scott Cummins. Nick Sandys also took home a Jeff in 2008 for his three-minute match providing the prologue to Shattered Globe's production of Rod Serling's American classic *Requiem for a Heavyweight*, while in 2010, Kristoffer Diaz' *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity* located the entire dramatic action within the world of pro wrestling, its characters often swapping commentary in mid-grapple.

The Opponent's celebration of hard knocks-schooling differs from them all in that its physical milieu never moves outside the fighters' purview to acquaint us with promoters, arena staff or audiences. Instead, the narrative is focused on the long hours spent in preparing the fighter for the event, and when the only people in a gymnasium are a boxer and his trainer—the former paying the latter thirty dollars an hour for his services—they usually don't waste time in idle chatter.

Fortunately, the Red Orchid production boasts ex-firefighter Guy Van Swearingen playing the avuncular Tremont "Tre" Billiford (this is Louisiana, obviously) and Kamal Angelo Bolden, originator of the title character in *Chad Deity*, taking the role of the ambitious Donell Fuseles. The stamina exhibited by both actors before ever stepping into the ring anticipates the punches and repartee they will be required to swap with a precision never giving way to sloppy brutality. Hey, these are professional fighters we're talking here!

It takes three additional fighters—director Karen Kessler, violence designer John Tovar and technical consultant Alfonso Ortiz—all likewise professional at their respective skills, to drill the actors for the two 45-minute rounds—uh, acts—mandated by Brett Neveu's minimalist drama.

MARY SHEN BARNIDGE: How long before the show's opening did you start rehearsing?

JOHN TOVAR: Guy and Kamal did some boxing over the summer with Al [Ortiz] before we started working in Red Orchid's rehearsal space mid-September.

BARNIDGE: The Chicago Fire Department has a boxing club. Did either of the actors have any previous experience in the ring?

TOVAR: Neither of them did, but both were in physical condition and had a good understanding of what their work involves, so it was easy for them to learn the "vocabulary." I watched one of their sessions in order to familiarize myself with what Al was teaching them, and we used that material for the onstage training scenes.

BARNIDGE: How much did Kessler's vision contribute to the show's final shape?

TOVAR: Karen had done extensive research on boxing prior to the beginning of rehearsals, and so had Neveu. Since they and the actors needed to first have the text in their heads before they could integrate the movement, we didn't work on the choreographed sequences until nearly two weeks into rehearsals.

BARNIDGE: Did you have to make many changes before the show opened?

TOVAR: The sequences had to be altered from time to time to ascertain that the story flowed properly, or that the action remained true to the characters—for those aspects, the actors' input was very helpful in achieving the right balance.

BARNIDGE: How did the dimensions of the auditorium figure in determining the finished product? A boxing ring is awfully big, but the Red Orchid space puts the audience, literally, within spitting distance of the action.

TOVAR: We needed to give them as much "ring" as possible, but in *real* boxing, audiences are close to the action, too.

BARNIDGE: How did Bolden and Swearingen hold up, doing four shows in a row every week?

TOVAR: Very well, I'm told. I always monitor the performance reports closely, but I never saw the actors having issues with fatigue or injuries. That made me *very* happy.

BARNIDGE: The critical and popular acclaim should make *all* of you very happy!

TOVAR: Oh, yes! For this show to work, it *had* to be a totally collaborative effort. There were no egos allowed—if something didn't work, we looked at all the options and discussed them until we came to an agreement. I am very proud of this show and grateful for the chance to have worked with everyone involved.

A NIGHT WITH THE FIGHTS

TRAINSPOTTING USA

fight design by Beau Forbes

The personnel are the same druggies whose adventures spawned a novel, two sequels and a film enjoying a cult following to this day. The first difference in Tom Mullen's adaptation is that the slackers who shoot up, screw up, crash and burn are Americans, from Kansas City, Missouri in the U.S. of A. The second difference is that the production's team has assembled a scenic universe designed to convey the highs and lows of the escapes associated with addictive lifestyles: gray walls, dazzling strobes, VL-5 spotlights squirming like snakes over the ceiling, shrieking punkrock guitars, delicate string quartets, voiceover soliloquies so quiet they seem to emerge subliminally from your own subconsciousness, wagons like rolling industrial towers and a spinning turntable floor on which hapless antiheroes can run as fast as they are able without going anywhere.

This is enough ambient sensory overload to make *Blue Man Group* feel like *Waiting For Godot*. Rather than attempt to prevent its stealing focus, Beau Forbes uses it to enhance the violence endemic to such a milieu. A bar fight progresses from shoves and punches—never mind whether the knaps land—to clashing pool cues manipulated like quarterstaffs (but not like flails, in such restricted space). The scuffle ends with a man lying prone on the floor as his attacker piston-strikes him with the butt of the stick for maximum wood-on-wood tattoo-clatter.

Ironically, the grisliest business of the evening—the one that sent audience members fleeing the room in mid-scene—involves a weapon no more deadly than the syringe with which the full-frontal nude recipient of its precious contents, after searching in vain for an uncollapsed vein, injects himself in the penis. Granted, the actor is back-lit, so that the deed is executed in shadow, blurring the icky details to spectators, but the audible whimpers heard in the house on opening night attest to this being declared as the gross-out stunt of the season.

25 SAINTS

fight design by Ryan Bourque

Tracy Letts didn't invent the rural-*noir* genre, but there's no denying *Killer Joe*'s part in spawning a plethora of white-trash-capitalist dramas in the decades following its premiere in 1990. Joshua Rollins takes the formula to new levels of efficiency for this paint-by-the-numbers thriller, dispatching all seven of his characters in a carefully-assembled seventy minutes by means of claw hammer, necktie, three handguns, a can of gasoline, and a box of kitchen matches. Naturally, methamphetamine is involved, too.

The action begins with a bang (literally), the cozy silence of a cabin in the Appalachian mountains interrupted by violence bursting through the door as clean-cut Charlie, disabled-vet Tuck and sexy Sammy proceed to savagely beat an already-wounded police officer, battering their victim with fists and feet, even pushing on the bullet hole to accelerate the bleeding, before finally bludgeoning him unconscious with the aforementioned carpenter's implement. All this transpires a bare eight feet from the audience.

Ryan Bourque's solution to the close scrutiny afforded by this proximity is to use the actors' explosive entrance to propel them downstage for the initial scrimmage, then quickly move it upstage behind the sofa—conveniently placed almost parallel to the curtain line—to cover the impact of the smacks, stomps and head-smashes.

The final shoot-out that eliminates all but one of the characters utilizes a similar misdirection. The crooked sheriff, after dispatching three of the incriminating witnesses with his big .45 automatic, finds himself facing Sammy and her puny colt revolver. They fire simultaneously, Sammy missing and falling dead. Charlie, though unarmed, attacks her killer and they engage in hand-to-hand until Charlie turns the uniformed officer's necktie into a garrote, forcing the lawman down—you guessed it—behind the sofa, where his kicking legs telegraph the finish to his futile struggle.

After all this, would you believe that it's not over yet? Left alone with only a corpse-count approaching that of Jacobean tragedy for company, Charlie picks up Sammy's gun and puts the barrel into his own mouth. Ah, but just when we think that Bourque's arsenal includes the side-venting pistol from the

R & D Choreography collection, our would-be suicide pulls the trigger to find the cylinder empty. Unswayed from his purpose, he then pours the contents of the meth lab over himself and strikes a match. Blackout.

On the way home, you may ponder the question of how much acreage will be destroyed by the subsequent fire before the crime scene is discovered—as it soon will, since we are told that the first patrolman has not only survived, but *escaped*, and is now giving testimony in a hospital. Plausibility plays no part in this kind of yarn.

GEOGRAPHY OF A HORSE-DREAMER

fight design by Ryan Bourque

Sam Shepard's eerie tale of a clairvoyant who predicts the outcome of horse races is usually played for Pinteresque menace—much downstage spotlighting of needles and scalpels—but wherever Ryan Bourque's name appears in the playbill, you can expect copious physical violence. The odds of finding it in a Mary-Arrchie Theatre production escalate when the cast includes Mark Vallerta, whose portrayals of red-in-the-face-hand-on-the-trigger badasses has been a mainstay on Chicago's storefront circuit for longer than anybody's counting.

So barely has the first act begun than we get a confrontation. The twitchy Santee—played by Vallerta and packing a colt pistol in a shoulder-holster far too small for it—gets some backchat from sidekick Beaujo. His response is to sucker-choke his partner with the latter's own necktie. Later, they awaken the snoozing soothsayer, not just by shaking and slapping him, but straddling his unconscious body, bouncing over him on the mattress in imitation of riding a horse. Santee is not above attacking inanimate objects, either, slamming doors and kicking furniture—at one point, even attempting to rip the hotel-room sink from the wall with his bare hands.

This kind of man bears watching, so when he proceeds to inflict a beat-down on his prisoner, we carefully note that he first sets his gun down on the dresser. Whatever subsequent dust-ups may occur in the confined quarters—even the “doctor” (portrayed by a moose-sized actor channeling Bond-villain sadism) swatting aside the operation's boss like an annoying fly—we remain focused on the firearm and its gradual improximity to the action demanding the conspirators' attention. Our vigilance is not in vain—a knock at the door admits a posse of cowboys come to rescue

their captive kin, with blazing shotguns triggering a flying bloodbath that really flies. (Audiences were assured by the management pre-curtain that the blood was completely washable, but that it might attract unwelcome comment on public transit if worn home from the theater.)

JULIUS CAESAR

fight design by Matt Hawkins

Setting Shakespeare's venerable tragedy amid Smartphones, CCTV cameras and RayBan-wearing Secret Service agents makes for some provocative liberties with period detail: a flash-mob rally on the Capitol steps (under a campaign banner reading “Elect Caesar” and exhorting voters to log onto “www.CaesarForAll.com”) is dispersed by a security guard discharging his side-arm into the air. Later, in the second act, civil unrest is suggested by uniformed policemen armed with truncheons and riot-shields, before the partisan conflict escalates to include Uzi automatic-fire flashing in darkened interiors as the roar of offstage bombs and fighter planes underscore the pandemonium.

Oooh, but nothing beats a nice old-fashioned assassination! What does it matter that the actor playing Caesar is not only—ahem!—considerably older than his character, but also untrained in stunt-falls? Matt Hawkins' solution is to place the doomed emperor behind a lectern halfway up the staircase, where a likewise elderly Casca initiates the conspiratorial murder by operatically raising his dagger high into the air and stabbing Caesar in the back—an old-school move executed with an old-school weapon that propels the wounded victim forward into the arms of another senator for a bear-hug that hides the thrust while releasing more blood, after which he again staggers and is caught in another deadly clasp by another conspirator. His slow downward path brings him to a halt barely inches from the audience for his final, “Et tu, Brute?” before he crumples to the ground in a gore-stained heap.

Spectacle like this, occurring midway through the play, could easily deflate the hour remaining. Director Jonathan Munby having vetoed Brutus meeting his soldier's death by means of a cyanide capsule, or locked in a fraternal embrace with Cassius for simultaneous impalement (as in Strawdog's 2002 production), it's up to Great Caesar's Ghost, himself, to enliven the battlefield scenes with his spectral presence.

This reliable Shakespearean device doesn't signal the end of betrayal, however. Munby's cynical textual twist shatters the promise of a kinder, gentler Rome by having Octavius, after assuming the office of emperor *pro tem*, launch his administration by promptly executing his surviving comrades, both of whom may then be designated "war casualties" and given heroes' funerals. Dead men tell no tales, you know.

LES LIAISONS DANGEREUSES

fight design by Françoise Rostain

reviewed by William Endsley

Though the play is allegedly set in eighteenth-century Paris, the Vicomte de Valmont wears blue jeans beneath his frock coat and writes his love letters on tablet computers, reminding us that the games of sex, deceit and revenge have only been accelerated by advances in technology. The most conspicuous motif in this production, however—directed by Steppenwolf alumnus John Malkovich, who claims to have been inspired by seeing actors watching each other during auditions—is the constant presence of all personnel onstage throughout the entire performance. Unlike Brechtian "alienation" techniques, where players revert to their own identities when not actively participating in a scene, Malkovich's concept proposes the play's characters observing each other's intrigues in parlors and bedrooms.

This means that Madame de Tourval, even though fully aware of Valmont's intentions after witnessing his bargain with the manipulative Marquise de Merteuil, is fated to follow the path to her destruction. Valmont is distinguished from his peers in being so immersed in his schemes that he never pauses to ponder his fate. His moment of truth finds him alone with only his own self-reflection.

As choreographed by Françoise Rostain, his rapier duel with the Chevalier Danceny is staged as a montage of flashlight-illuminated episodes alternating with blackouts (during which Valmont's valet applies blood to the combatants) that condenses the performance time as it traces the arc of emotional intensity. As this progresses, Valmont's world literally collapses around him, his psyche also crumbling until he is batting away with his bare hands at his opponent's sword, before finally seizing the blade in despair and thrusting it into his own belly.

SUPERIOR DONUTS

fight design by David Woolley

His status as a Pulitzer-prize winner mandated his play premiering in palatial auditoriums, but Tracy Letts has always written stories reflecting small spaces: trailers, motel rooms, studios—even in *Osage County*'s labyrinthine 19th-century farmhouse, the action transpires within tiny closets and cells. Mary-Arrchie's loft boasts the requisite claustrophobic ambience for a play set in a shabby ungentrified coffee shop, but not until its transfer to the Royal George's cabaret room did this populist play find an environment boasting a mid-sized stage whose unobstructed sight-lines sacrifice none of the intimacy necessary to maintain the appropriate level of dramatic atmosphere.

What this means for the climactic geezer-fight is that factors later deciding the victor have more time to establish themselves in the earlier scenes. For example, if we already know that Max's nephew has the temperament of a mouse (but not that he has the physique of a Goliath), his entrance becomes a swift reversal in favor of the good guys. Another cleverly-placed foreshadow is hard-guy Luther's complaints about his ulcer—a condition leading us to anticipate Arthur's choice to open his attack with a belly-punch.

The increased traveling distance on the wider stage makes for a slower fight, but the script specifies that the battle be a long and brutal one for the aging brawlers, calling for David Woolley to empty his entire bag of dirty street-fighting tricks—fish-hooks, groin-twists, bites to both ears *and* legs, slams and shoves incorporating furniture, head-smashes with kitchen trays, napkin dispensers and other "found" objects. The mayhem never ceases to propel us toward the crucial moment when Luther's stomach finally betrays him as he is rolled over the counter to land on the floor, coughing up blood, his defeat affirmed even before Arthur's allies ascertain that no further revenge will be contemplated.

PONTYPOOL

fight design by John Moran

Tony Burgess' apocalyptic fable scrambles together retro caveats like H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* with Hollywood myths of zombies and *Alien* parasites, but it doesn't matter because what *really* spells the end of life-as-we-know-it is the social breakdown engendered by paranoia. The agent causing people to devour one another, you see, is a virus-contaminated *word* that, once you hear it, starts to affect your brain in increasingly irksome ways. Oh, and since nobody knows exactly what the

fatal word *is*, its symptoms present a particular hazard to the three broadcasters bunkered down in a basement radio station where they receive ever more disturbing reports from their unseen listeners.

The playing space carved out of Strawdog Theatre's bar and lounge conveys the necessary claustrophobia, but also puts audience within splashing distance of spurting blood—did I mention that the virus, when foiled, bursts forth from its infected host's chest in a projectile gush of gore? John Moran's solution is to have the unlucky victim collapse behind a desk to launch a spray of sanguine fluid in a massive sheet-spatter across the windows of the transmission booth where our last lucid mortals have sequestered themselves.

This occurs sufficiently early in the play to lend the workplace an appropriately slaughterhouse-ish decor. This omnipresent visual reminder of imminent destruction renders more commonplace acts of brutality—a station manager inflicting a beat-down with a telephone on a suddenly-suspect ally, or an announcer fatally choking a co-worker who risks uttering the deadly word—suitably horrific without the aid of additional special effects.

BLOODY BLOODY ANDREW JACKSON fight design by Beau Forbes

Yes, our seventh president was a violent leader—although scholars still debate whether he was a war hero defending us from British invasion or a genocidal tyrant seeking to eradicate the Native-American population. Authors Michael Friedman and Alex Timbers take an R. Crumb-style cartoon view of history, and furthermore, it's a musical, so Beau Forbes keeps the fights swift, slapstick and well within the capabilities of actors better trained in *grand battements* than roundhouse kicks: arrows and tomahawks are represented as prostheses attached to their victims' bodies, while floggings are administered with baby-size whips from the American Science and Surplus Warehouse, and soundenistas foley in any needed snaps, bangs and whooshes.

Hand-to-hand combat isn't as easy to fake, however. Fortunately, the obligatory tavern brawls rely less on individual virtuosity than on the cumulative volume generated by simultaneous skirmishes. Forbes disguises the ensemble's uneven skill levels by placing the actors who know how to swing-and-flinch downstage, while keeping those that don't in the back, where they can grapple like dancing bears.

The audience in National Pastime's cavernous new quarters awarded the crowd-pleaser prize, ironically, to a very small fight, executed front-and-center, in which a rotund bureaucrat tries to coax a fist-bump

from a scrappy little boy, only to find himself sucker-punched in the belly by his pint-sized (and scene stealing) critic.

FIELD DISPATCHES

SMASH, CRASH AND FLYING SMITHEREENS

Movies have acclimated audiences to eardrum-shattering crashes, followed by tsunami-sized showers of flying glass, but when such spectacle must be executed night after night in enclosed spaces, the hazards—not to mention the cost—usually inspire fight designers to look for other ways of producing the primal thrill associated with smashing things to smithereens. What do you do, though, when the play is *Long Way Go Down*, and the Jackalope Theatre production requires a cornered combatant to defend himself by smashing a bottle against his attacker's *head*?

The cheap way to stage this scene, of course, is to station a member of the prop crew backstage with instructions to drop a box of broken crockery at the instant of impact, then have the actor raise his hand up into view and brandish his jagged-edged weapon. The expensive Hollywood-studios way is to import glassware made from a special kind of boiled-syrup candy. Fight designer Alex Farrington rejects both solutions.

"Sugar-glass hasn't been used since the 1980s! When the pieces separate and fall on the floor, they sound like plastic. In humid theaters, instead of breaking, sugar-glass *bends*, and it also has a tendency to melt in actors' hands. Breakaway bottles nowadays are more likely to be made of resin, which is far more brittle, allowing them to disintegrate with less force. Oh, and after the show every night, the broken bits can be collected for the manufacturer to recycle."

That still makes for resin shards spraying in all directions. How did he contain the fallout? "The blow was angled upstage toward a small pocket on the set where the fragments could collect. We were also lucky that the scene was followed by some action on the other side of the stage, so our actors had time to clear away any debris that might trip them up."

That's a lot of trouble for a one-second effect, but Farrington declares it to be well worth the preparation, "The director and playwright wanted [that moment] to be very abrupt, very unexpected and very alarming. Breakaway effects may be hard, but in the end, the payoff is phenomenal!"

**“Audiences enjoy
seeing tall men fall—it’s
such a *long* way down!”**

—David Woolley

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