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## **Moulinet: An Action Quarterly, Volume 13, Issue 4**

Moulinet Staff

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# MOULINET: An Action Quarterly



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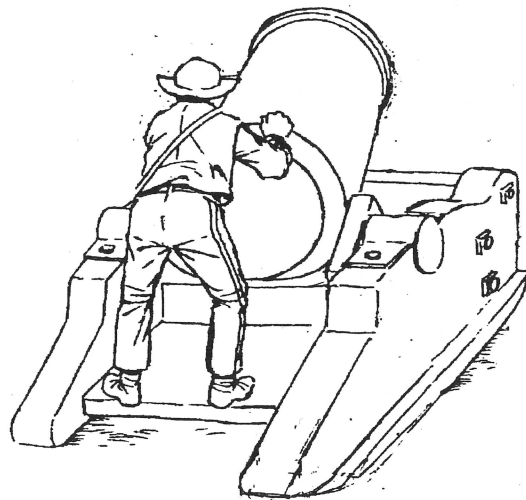
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## MOULINET: An Action Quarterly

Number One

**Publisher** – Charles J. Likar

**Webmaster** – William Endsley

**Staff Writer** – Mary Shen Barnidge

### Contributing Reporters

Richard Gilbert

David Gregory

David Woolley

Ned Mochel

Rick Sordelet

David Krajec

Greg Poljacik

Libby Beyreis

Tony Wolf

Ryan Bourque

Jay Burckhardt

Kim Fukawa

Robert Hoffman

### Consultants

H. Gregory Mermel

William Fiedler

Nicholas C. King

### Technical Support

Gregory Zelchenko

Zoe Quan

### Courier Services

Martha Conger

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Fight Directors**  
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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](http://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.

**Richard Gilbert** and **David Gregory**, aka R & D Violence Designers, will provide the extensive violence for *A Bend In The Road*, written by legendary Fight Master Michael Sokoloff, opening in May.

**Ned Mochel** recently served as fight director for the Geffen Playhouse's world premiere production of Beth Henley's *The Jacksonian*.

**David Woolley**, along with Doug Mumaw, is preparing for The Swordsmen's 23rd season on the Renaissance Faire circuit.

**Nick Sandys** is currently acting in First Folio's *Turn of the Screw*, after contributing fights to the Lyric Opera's productions of *Showboat* and *Rinaldo*.

**Tony Wolf** is a New Zealand expat now living in Chicago, and is the author of *Ancient Swordplay* and *A Terrific Combat!!!*

**Greg Poljacik** is a member of The Scrappers and an armorer with Rogue Steel, in addition to co-ordinating the Fight Jam series.

**Libby Beyreis** is presently designing fights for Strangeloop Theater's revisionist production of *As You Like It*.

**Ryan Bourque** is a member of The Inconvenience, and whose fights may be seen in *The Butcher of Baraboo*.

**Robert Hoffman** is hard at work designing the fights for Gorilla Tango's upcoming *Go-Go Power Rangers: A Mighty Morphin Burlesque*.

**Jay Burckhardt** and **Kim Fukawa**, aka JKchoreography are both teachers at the Fight Factory and certified members of the SAFFD.

## 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](http://www.lulu.com).

*Renaissance Men: The True Story of the Hanlon-Lees Action Theater*, DVD documentary by Kevin Leaser, starring the stunt-trope whose debut in 1977 became the prototype for American Renaissance Faire jousts to this day. For ordering information, log onto [www.3alarmacarnival.com](http://www.3alarmacarnival.com)

*Sword of Hearts*, DVD film by Sword And Cloak Productions. A swashbuckling tale of adventure and intrigue in the style of *The Three Musketeers*, filmed on the grounds of the Bristol Renaissance Faire and Stronghold Medieval Retreat, starring Kathrynne Ann Rosen, Zach Thomas, Amy Harmon and Travis Estes. For order information, log onto [www.swordandcloak.com](http://www.swordandcloak.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](http://www.CreateSpace.com) or e-mail [lokean@gmail.com](mailto:lokean@gmail.com).

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## NOT YOUR GRANDFATHER'S STAGE COMBAT: Toward A More Realistic Approach to Theatrical Violence

Real violence is nearly always a) ugly, b) stupid, c) minimal, and d) soon finished. This is because a) when the punches land, what you get is a bloody mess, b) when they don't, you get opponents flailing the air harmlessly, c) the fighters are focused solely on one another, and d) brawlers are rarely in top physical condition and tire quickly. What real violence is *not*, is entertaining. So when playwrights, directors, actors—even fight choreographers—declare “I don't want stage combat, I want *real* combat”, their words aren't to be taken literally.

So what *is* the source of the current disparagement of “stage combat”? In a soon-to-be-published essay, Richard Gilbert and David Gregory of R & D Choreography propose that too many of the staples associated with the classical-curriculum stage combat taught over the last forty years have become as hackneyed as the “two up, two down” swordplay of 19th-century melodrama.

“Just as the acting styles of seventy years ago don't ‘look real’ to modern audiences,” Gregory asserts, “so do the combat styles of that time. Children graduating high school nowadays have seen violence depicted in film and on television. They see *real* fights on YouTube—or even in their own lives. They can spot our tricks.”

Ned Mochel gives examples, “The closed-fist hair-pull and the open-hand belly punch, when practiced for years by a trained professional, can be made to appear convincing—but they almost always come off looking unnatural when taught to an actor within the restrictions of a single production.”

Fight designers are typically warned against making fights too realistic, lest playgoers fear for the safety of the players, distracting them from the dramatic illusion. Rick Sordelet supports this caveat, saying, “The contract between actor and audience implies that everyone knows the violence is as fake as the kisses and the tears and the deaths. I have no interest in violating that trust.” David Woolley agrees, citing the SAFD precept of “creating the *illusion* of violence. Sometimes incongruous occurrences are needed to propel the action.”

Gregory is quick to explain that their manifesto is not applicable to *all* theatrical violence—certainly not to comedic fights, stylized combat, and swash-

bucklers. “Our criticism is leveled at fights meant to portray characters who are engaged in physical combat that is intended to inflict potentially-lethal damage upon one another. The common belief is that if an audience member believes the actor is in actual danger, it takes them out of the play—but if an audience member recognizes that the combat-in-progress is fake, the awareness that they are watching actors playing *roles*, has *already* distanced them from the play's universe.”

“If audiences are concerned for the people appearing to be hurt, they are reassured when smiling actors file out for the curtain call,” adds Gilbert, “We were gratified when the reviews for Profiles Theatre's *Killer Joe* commented on the ‘brutality’ of our fights and how critics couldn't tell if the actors were always in control.” He shrugs, “Of course, the show was performed without injury for eight months!”

They also deny that they are calling for fight choreographers to adopt an *auteur* stance regarding their contribution to a production. “The question is, always, does the action support the director's vision of the play?” Woolley reminds us, though David Krajec notes that “playwrights often write the weirdest stuff into a play”, leading directors toward patently illogical concepts.

Greg Poljacik declares, “I'll give directors a lot of leeway, but I draw the line at putting actors in *real* danger,” while Nick Sandys concedes, “Sometimes you just have to bite the bullet and go with the Combat 101 grab-bag. Frequently, at the larger theaters, a fight choreographer is considered a ‘safety inspector’, called in to fix what the director has muddled up over weeks of rehearsal.” Even Mochel admits, “The director is the boss. If he wants to see the same tired old-school moves, then you can quit, or you can ask for lots of rehearsal, pray the actor is reasonably fit, and hold your breath on opening night.”

On the other hand, Sandys recalls the boxing scene in Shattered Globe's production of *Requiem for a Heavyweight*, “[Director] Lou Contey asked for thirty seconds, but ended up approving three minutes of brutal, in-your-lap, pugilistics to foreshadow the hero's struggle,” and Mochel smiles at the memory of a domestic-violence match involving multiple head-slams for Beth Henley's *The Jacksonian*. “It would have been easy to tell the victim to knap the slam by slapping or kicking the wall, but after presenting [director] Robert Falls with a plan involving hidden stagehands to Foley in the impact noise, as

well as apply blood to both the spouses, and drilling Ed Harris and Amy Madigan in properly brutal body-language—we got a fight that looks so real that the audience gasps every night.”

Still, when even New York fight directors like J. Steven White are reduced to incorporating into big-budget equity productions like Danai Gurira’s *The Convert* such threadbare turns as the “beat-down-behind-the-sofa”, what’s to be done? “Let’s not settle. Let’s keep pushing,” exhorts Sandys, while Krajec advises, “Work with directors that trust you.”

“Violence Designers need to examine our old techniques with a critical eye and find different safeties, different patterns and different illusions,” insist Gilbert and Gregory, “Performers need to be better trained in how to act violence, and directors must be encouraged to ask for choreography that makes sense in the context of the fight.”

## **FIRING BLIND WITH HEDDA GABLER** reviewed by William Endsley

The year is 1938 and our heroine’s most prized possessions are a pair of lugers inherited from her father, the distinguished General Gabler, but after a dreary honeymoon with her dishrag of a husband, she is ready for some target practice. When Judge Brack comes strolling up the garden path, she fires. And misses. This seemingly-unimportant detail is what sets up the enigmatic twist in Brian Friel’s translation of Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*.

As directed by Robert McNamara (with firearms consultation by Robb Hunter), the swiftly-propelled action engages us in Hedda’s quest for power over the destinies of the men in her life. She discovers, however, that she cannot guide any of them: Her new spouse prefers the company of her childhood chum, and her old flame botches his suicide with the fire-arm Hedda has given him with instructions to kill himself “beautifully”.

Left in control of no destiny but her own, Hedda retreats offstage with the remaining pistol. Soon we hear a single shot, whereupon hubby George (significantly) peers into the room where she has sequestered herself and reports to the others that she is playing with her guns again. A few moments pass, then—and *only* then—do we hear the fatal shot.

Why *two* shots? The flurry of questions provoked by this mystery as audiences departed after the show at Washington, DC’s SCENA Theatre would have pleased this production’s Hedda by its granting her the attention she sought so desperately.

## **A NIGHT WITH THE FIGHTS**

### **SUPERIOR DONUTS**

fight choreography by David Woolley

Unlike in the Steppenwolf production, Mary-Arrchie director Matt Miller brought in his fight choreographer well in advance of opening night. Unlike the Broadway production, the actors in the geezer-showdown scene have the requisite maturity, but also boast fight training. Alas, unlike the Los Angeles production, the stage at Angel Island isn’t big enough to conceal a squad of backstage personnel to pump up the special effects. What this first off-loop home-town production of Tracy Letts’ post-Pulitzer play has going for it, however, is a 50-seat loft, two forty-something troupers who’ve been rough-housing together for nearly a quarter of a century, and David Woolley, Mister *Elaborate-Entrance-of-Chad-Deity* himself, overseeing what is rapidly becoming the most popular showcase fight since the poetry duel in *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

The set-up for the duel in the shabby coffee-and-doughnut eatery of the title matches Luther, the neighborhood tough guy (whose ulcer has led him to delegate the strongarm tactics to subordinates), with Arthur, a peacenik who has never waged combat in his life. Bystanders have been warned not to interfere.

Arthur leads with a belly-punch, catching the over-confident Luther by surprise. The latter rallies, however, steering his challenger into a pair of head-slams against the upstage cigarette-machine. They skirmish back downstage, Luther clutching his hyperacid stomach, to bear-waltz their way to the kitchen door, where, crowded chest-to-chest in the narrow passage, Luther pulls at Arthur’s beard, and Arthur “fish-hooks” Luther’s nose, following up with a graphic bite to the ear.

Oh, but it’s not over yet! Not when the script clearly specifies a conflict as long, as ugly, as bloody as the actors can sustain. The combatants stagger into the kitchen out of our sight, where we hear the crash of scullery being hurled back and forth, before abruptly ceasing. After an ominous silence, Luther drags himself back into the front room, pursued by Arthur—fatigued, but still game—wielding a large cooking-tray which he uses to bring Luther down behind the store counter. Arthur’s scream of pain signals a riposte from the nearly-spent Luther—a

groin-twist, perhaps—but through his agony, Arthur pulls his tormentor’s hand up into view and slams its fingers in the register cash-drawer.

This signals the fight’s finale: Arthur wrestles the limp Luther over the counter head-first and rolls him onto the line of stools. He then slides to the floor and lies supine and panting, almost at our feet. The play still has a scene and a half to go before the plot is resolved, but that didn’t stop adrenaline-drunk playgoers bursting into spontaneous applause by way of a victory endorsement.

## **THE SEA**

**fight choreography by Nick Sandys**

The only fight more fun than a fur-and-feathers fight is a *funeral* fur-and-feathers fight. Especially a maritime funeral during the Edwardian era, where the ashes of the deceased are to be scattered at sea on an unfavorably windy day. Oh, and where one of the mourners is convinced that the departed met his untimely end as a consequence of hostile extra-terrestrial invasion.

The ceremonies begin formally enough: the choir sings “Eternal Father, Strong To Save”, also known as the “Seafarer’s Hymn”. At its conclusion, village matriarch Mrs. Rafi, bearing the coffer containing the remains, ascends the sea wall. Before she can finish her obsequies, however, Mr. Hatch, the deranged town draper, armed with blades-open shears, interrupts the service, bringing her up short in mid-strew. Mrs. Rafi transfers her fistful of ashes to a horrified bystander, then advances on Hatch to upbraid him for his insolence. The dispute grows more heated until the indignant dowager flings the contents of the casket into Hatch’s face, the aforementioned bystander following suit.

Hatch then dives at his second attacker, catching the considerably-taller lady around the waist. A shorter male bystander leaps to the rescue, hurling himself upon Hatch, whereupon they spin round and round in a three-way version of the “waltzing-bear grapple”. Near the piano on the other side of the stage, where rolls of sheet music have been deployed as truncheons, the pastor signals the pianist to play a soothing processional. At the center of the *melée*, Mrs. Rafi lays about the surrounding brawlers with her parasol, while a member of the choir snatches up a chair and brandishes it in the air, only to set it down again, unsure what to do with it.

There is more, of course—the mark of a successful

group-fight is action so thoroughly filling the stage picture that we can’t see *everything*—but the deterioration of order into full-blown anarchy executed over less than two minutes, is illustrated as exhaustively and comically as in a Marx Brothers film.

## **TRASH**

**fight choreography by JKChoreography**

When the Babes With Blades launched their Joining Sword And Pen play competition in 2005, who thought that six years later, the prize would go to a drama where the major part of the conflict is expressed verbally, with only a few moments of physical combat? This doesn’t mean there’s not plenty of action: the setting is a municipal dump, where a pair of estranged sisters scramble over slippery mountains of slime-coated refuse in their search for a revealing letter sent by their recently-deceased mother, only to be discarded unopened by its recipient.

Oh, Toto, we’re not in sword-and-cloak territory any more. Given the reduced emotional distance engendered in small auditoriums, and with only two actors to sustain the necessary level of tension over eighty minutes, the suspension of belief surrounding the smallest act of violence is far more fragile than in your standard-issue swashbuckler. Jay Burckhardt and Kim Fukawa, working under the name JKChoreography, meet the challenge, keeping a tight rein on their plausibility factor by restricting the combat action to grapples, shoves, hair-pulls and a few punches—aggression rooted in childhood squabbles resurrected after long dormancy by untrained fighters caught up in a fit of pique.

The availability of found-object weapons, some geared toward humiliation (rotten food, for example) and some threatening serious harm, make for a gradually escalating dynamic reaching its climax in a surprisingly brief confrontation transforming techniques associated with medieval armed combat to a clash-of-arms that pits a truncheon improvised from a length of pipe against a two-gallon jerry-can, releasing the pent-up hostilities in an alarming ring of metal-on-metal.

## **HIT THE WALL**

**fight choreography by Ryan Bourque**

It’s an assignment every choreographer dreams of being asked to fulfill, this replica of the 1969 Stone-

wall riots—that sweltering summer night in New York City’s Greenwich Village when police made a routine raid on a bar frequented by homosexuals, and the patrons, instead of quietly submitting to arrest, turned on their harassers in a show of resistance that sparked an international rebellion leading to changes in the social landscape still in evidence today.

The Inconvenience, otherwise known as the company who gave us last season’s *The Earl*, is well-versed at muggings and beat-downs. The arena-like floor at the Steppenwolf Garage also accommodates a live stageside band that enables Ryan Bourque to segue from sweating bodies writhing in orgiastic revelry to sweaty bodies leaping and springing off the walls in an orgy of anarchic violence. Some of this is brutal, directed at specific targets (cops bashing hapless citizens) and some rowdy—jumping on park benches, kicking over trash cans, etc.

“I like making things look badass,” says Bourque, “I focused on pace and rhythm, because I wanted the band’s energy to drive the emotion of the fight. Without the story and the characters there in the moment, it’s a dance, not a fight. I wanted a sensory overload, with each audience member—even if they zeroed in on only *one* part of the action—seeing movement and mayhem in the corners of their vision wherever they looked.”

### **EL MARI CHI CHI: A ROBERT RODRIGUEZ BURLESQUE** fight choreography by Robert Hoffman

The word “burlesque” derives from the Italian “burla”, meaning “joke,” and so this latest Gorilla Tango spoof arrives with a script custom-crafted by the iSalsation! comedy troupe, guaranteeing abundant gags aimed at Antonio Banderas—but since the *modern* definition of “burlesque” mandates nubile girls in scanty costume, it also arrives with plenty of opportunities for the smiling ladies to divest themselves of extraneous attire (though Diva laVida, who plays the vengeance-seeking El Mari Chi Chi, mostly keeps her clothes on). Oh, and since what’s being *burlata* this time are the cactus-and-bullets movies of Robert Rodriguez, our show also arrives with GUNS, KNIVES and BLOODY VIOLENCE!

Hold on just a minute, *amigo!* When your stage measures eight feet by twelve feet, your fighters are wearing minimal—um, protective gear, and your audience is seated barely arm’s length away, what you do *not* want are live blankfire and simulated body

fluids flying at distances to present a risk of powder burns or slippery floors. Luckily, Robert Hoffman has forged a vocabulary of brutal-looking, but safely low-impact, spectacle rooted in Apache, Tango and Moorish dance, as well as Capoeira, floor-gymnastics and the Macarena.

Gunfire noise is foleyed in, wounds are inflicted in fountains of red confetti and *mano-a-manos* are executed at fight-call speed, augmented by Hollywood-Latino music and lots of groans and grimaces. Crossing the fourth wall to strafe the house with silly-string and scarlet glitter might be considered excessive in most plays, but has not stopped the show from extending twice, now closing May 29.

### **ZASTROZZI, THE MASTER OF DISCIPLINE**

fight choreography by Libby Beyreis

George F. Walker’s adaptation of Percy Shelley’s 1810 neo-gothic novel of romance, remorse and existential revenge ranks right alongside *The Princess Bride* as a source for fight-classroom projects, but The Division theater company rejects Walker’s attempts at camp parody to resurrect both the contemplative tone of the author’s philosophical arguments and the intense passions sparking a thirst for vengeance that only bloodshed can slake.

In the title role, Jason Kingsley is sufficiently agile to snake-crawl using only his shoulders, whip forth from his greatcoat pocket a stealthy sickle-bladed Afghani spring-knife called an Iohar, as well as project the requisite patrician presence. His saber-work also exhibits the necessary swagger, assisted by opponents inept as characters and in some instances, as actors. (Ironically, the best-trained fighter in the company is cast as an effete aesthete.)

The athletic ensemble nevertheless acquits itself capably, hurdling the scenic design’s precarious grid of bridges and ramps in graceful acrobatic leaps lacking only Crouching Tiger-Hidden Dragon flying stunts to physicalize the metaphysical dimensions at the roots of their source’s literary period.

### **MOMMA’S BOYZ**

fight choreography by David Woolley

We start with three young ghetto homeys—one dead, one in jail for shooting him, and the third remorseful over his inability to prevent this sorry conclusion to their deeply-felt friendship. Suddenly,

time reverses itself, spooling backward to expose each fatal step bringing them closer to their fates. David Woolley carefully orchestrates his actors' body language to clearly define—even when viewed in serial flashbacks—the milestones in the lives of these scrapping-and-snapping boyhood buddies, the tightly-wound anger of adults brandishing guns recklessly out of fear giving way to the rough-and-tumble play of action-fantasy games, to keep us always anchored in the progress of innocents painfully unaware of the future that awaits them.

## FIELD DISPATCHES

### FORTEZA GYMNASIUM BLASTS INTO THE PAST

Its name may include the word “fitness”, but you won't find nautilus machines or stairmasters at the just-opened Forteza Fitness, Physical Culture and Martial Arts center. Yes, you could do aerobics, jazzercise or yoga in it (the purr of the El passing by across the street is very restful), but why not take a turn on the 120-year-old rowing machine or wall-mounted suspension weights, or work out with dumbbells and indian clubs dating from 1898? These antique tools for building healthy bodies aren't just for display, you know. You can play on them, taking your instruction from the vintage prints displayed on the exposed-brick walls or from Tony Wolf, America's foremost—and possibly only—expert on “Bartitsu”, the esoteric fighting-techniques that saved Sherlock Holmes from diving over Reichenbach Falls.

The Forteza gymnasium-plus-museum isn't merely a Steampunk/SCA theme park, in other words. This latest commercial enterprise to open up in the hitherto-industrial Ravenswood corridor offers hands-on instruction in combat skills ranging from Medieval longsword to stunt-flying, with the occasional lightsaber or *bat'leth* making an appearance. This historical approach is founded in Forteza's being home to the Chicago Swordplay Guild, Asylum Stunts and the first Bartitsu Club since 1899, with rental space available for skills not covered in the resident curriculum (the Scrapers have recently declared Forteza home to their Fight Jam series). You can even learn *real* fighting, too. Keith Jennings,

Chicago's only licensed instructor in MBC Self-Defense, conducts evening classes there.

At one of Forteza's open-house Sundays, while Brian Connelly coached students in the art of spring-board leaps and Greg Mele's staff sparred with rapiers, Tony Wolf twirled a silver-headed walking stick while chatting with a reporter. “I've taught seminars in Victorian martial arts before,” he exults, “but this is the first time I've been able to teach an ongoing course in Bartitsu.” Sounds like exactly what the Chicago fight scene needs.

### FREELANCE EMPORIUM AT FIRST FIGHT GALA

Busy theatre artists rarely have time to see each others' work. Since plays—even in Chicago, where a staggering eight hundred plays are produced every season—perform only at certain times on certain days, there are few opportunities for fight directors/actors/supporters to meet and exchange news or views. This isolation is what inspired The Scrapers (aka Gravity and Momentum, sponsors of the Fight Jam workshop series) to assemble an event answering the need for a stage combat *agora*—classical Greek for “market-place”—combining aspects of trade shows, job fairs and networking conferences, with the range of activities distinguished from its nonspecialized counterparts by the physical presence of fly-wire equipment and a swords-and-armor sales concession.

The site of the 2011 gathering was the Stage 773 theatre multiplex, in an auditorium featuring a stage wide enough to hold tables bearing brochures, posters, cards and weaponry, while still leaving room in the center for live performances by representatives of Asylum Stunts, Hall Associates Flying Effects, R & D Choreography, the Babes With Blades and emcee Greg Poljacik, demonstrating his own all-natural formula for non-drip blood that you can eat, wear, freeze for storage and wash off with hot water. (A member of the Asylum squad tested it on her ice-blond hair, pronouncing it cosmetically acceptable, while assistant bloodchef Zev Steinberg bravely dabbed some of the high-saline fluid into his eyes and declared the sensation “no worse than opening your eyes in the ocean”.)

At the end of the evening, names were exchanged, notes were taken, meetings were proposed and everybody knew more than when they arrived. Is that success or what?



**“The thing to remember  
about a fight scene is  
that it’s not a *fight* scene.”**

**—Rick Sordelet**

**MOULINET: An Action Quarterly**

**P.O. Box 392**

**LaGrange, IL 60525**

**[www.actionquarterly.com](http://www.actionquarterly.com)**

