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The Society of American Fight Directors

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The Society of American Fight Directors

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The FightMaster

Fall 2016 The Journal of the Society of American Fight Directors

So You Want to Buy a Sword

A beginner's guide

Blank-firing Prop Review

Select Retay models

Fighters on Wires

Considerations when fighting & flying on stage

A Fight at the Opera

Duel Fantasy

Game of Thrones & the problem of violence

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Editorially Speaking



When I started going to workshops, the method by which the teachers and armorers examined props and deemed them good or bad reminded me of the way the local water witch “found” the underground springs at my house— that is, with a little mysticism and a great deal of practice. With a series of taps and shakes, a sword was accepted or set aside. At vendor nights, I walked the tables covered in shining metal, and tried to figure out which pieces suited me. Often I walked away hiding frustration, unsure what questions to ask, afraid to look like I wasn’t as savvy as everyone else. Our community places a great deal of stock in personal weaponry, and the decision to buy felt like I was defining my very theatrical persona in a single purchase. Broadsword? Quarterstaff? Rapier? Smallsword? I admit I fell into a long period of indecision, stymied by possibility.

Then I remembered that I was buying a prop. Stage weapons are theatrical props, objects that define a character or move a plot to a specific point. I had gotten so caught up in all the cultural iconography that I forgot what I had observed in the classroom; safety and function come first. Our tools, be they blades, staves, or firearms, promise and deliver injury if misused or poorly made. It is critical that our equipment passes higher standards not applied to the more generic props on stage. That is why, for this issue of *The Fight Master*, I wanted to offer pieces that focused on equipment. It is important to learn what is available in the market, and how to identify what you need to succeed at your profession. It shouldn’t feel like water-witching. It should be fun, because it is.

As this magazine goes to print, the National Workshops will have concluded. I would like to congratulate the newest batch of Certified Teachers who completed their training. As the latest academic semesters and quarters get under way, I wish you the best of luck in your new roles. I’m sure you will help mold the next generation of actor combatants and fight directors in a safe and entertaining fashion. Just remember to maintain your props!

Be well, fight well!

Jean A. Monfort, Editor
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(For those of you still curious – I got a smallsword with a burgundy rayskin grip. Now I get to think about the rest of my armory...)

The FightMaster

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Editorial and graphic content featured in *The Fight Master* is the product of contributions from SAFD members of all levels as well as from the global stage combat community. Participation is greatly encouraged and submissions are accepted on a rolling basis, with deadlines for the Fall and Spring editions occurring on June 1 and December 1 respectively. For submissions by traditional mail, please send a shipping address request by email.

Articles

Submitted material will be edited for clarity and length with the assistance and approval of the author. Articles should include a short biography 150 words or less, as well as contact information. By submitting material to *The Fight Master*, it is assumed the author agrees the following:

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- Before publication, author must approve all changes beyond grammar and conventions
- Submissions must be written in a clear and professional manner
- No submissions defaming individuals by name will be published
- Authors are assumed to be working toward the betterment of the SAFD and, thus, will not be paid for submissions

Please forward submissions and questions to:

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Both digital and traditional photographs are accepted; however, resolution will play a factor in where, or if an image is used. All photos should be accompanied by the names of the performers w/ roles (if fewer than five are pictured), photographer, play, playwright, fight director, theatre company, and year of performance. Without this information, we can not give proper credit to the contributors and the picture will not be used.

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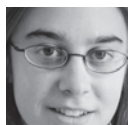
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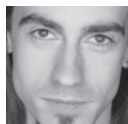
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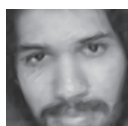
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On The Cover



Taken at the Winter Wonderland Workshop.
Photo courtesy of Fight Guy Photography.

Letter to the Editor

Understanding Our History

Editor's intro: This is a modified version of a letter the founder of the SAFD, David Boushey, sent to The Fight Master earlier in 2016. The following is a composite, built from that first letter to the magazine and a conversation we had the following summer regarding the history of the SAFD, the lexicon used by our community, and how he hopes to see our organization grow in the years to come.

I was reading an article in the 2015 Fall issue of *The Fight Master* of late and was quite surprised to find an issue whose origin was apparently unknowable? The article was authored by our colleague Robert Najarian (“The Language of Actions and Reactions”). It is not my intention to lecture



Mr. Najarian, nor any member, on their research. I do want to help provide some clarity on how the SAFD vocabulary came to be.

The first fight directors created many of our terms in the first ten years of the Society's creation. They got their language from the historical fencing masters, who got their terms from the first fencing manuals. If you go way, way back to George Silver in the 16th century—he taught the real thing, how to kill people in real duels. It wasn't a matter of theatrics; it was a matter of teaching how to eliminate a person permanently, or to “first blood.” The thing is, terms didn't come into the foreground until the late 1800s, when fencing instructors would be brought in to do the fights for a show, such as *Hamlet*. However, theatricality was not an important issue, and consequently, the fights looked like fencing matches.

In 1969, the Society of British Fight Directors initiated the art of stage fighting with a new emphasis on theatricality as an integral part of the production. When I went over to the U.K. to study acting in 1972, the concept of stage fighting was unheard of in the U.S. So it was still relatively new for them, and totally new for us. Their terms came from their founding members—like Patrick “Paddy” Crean, William Hobbs, Henry Marshall, Bob Anderson, and Ian McKay. Crean was a sport fencer and actor, and so he used fencing terms to choreograph theatrical fights. My fight master, Ian McKay, gave me these same terms, as well as his own unique fencing vernacular which he had developed from sport fencing—epee work, saber work—that's where a lot of the terms originated.

When I came back to the States, I started incorporating what I'd learned with my students, but I also changed things because actors are not always fencers. My students did not necessarily get those Italian terms at first, so I'd change them. When I was teaching at the University of Washington, I'd say, “parry prime” but then I'd also say, “the watch parry” because it looks like you're looking at a wristwatch (which was easier for actors to visualize). I tried to use terminology that might work better for an actor than a sport fencer—I didn't require that they learn the Italian unless

they were serious about growing as fight practitioners.

This brings me to an important issue I want the Society membership to consider. Why not go back to the beginning when researching? I can list a number of FM's that have SAFD historical knowledge if you wished to approach them. We can start with myself, then Maestro Erik Fredricksen, Emertus Joe Martinez, Maestro Allen Suddeth, and a number of other FM's who were there in the early days. We all invented phrases to suit our purposes. I would venture that at least 60% of all the phrases now in use in the fight arena were fostered in the first decade of the Society by way of modern fencing vernacular or the imaginations of fellow fight practitioners. As we explored the teaching arena we gave birth to much of the language of armed and unarmed combat. I have several of my “invented phrases” still utilized in the fight arena and many of my colleagues in the early years can attest to having done the same. Therefore, I say to you...seek out the knowledge of those who have gone before and don't simply dismiss something as “unknowable.”

That's where the phrase “action-reaction-action” came from. I incorporated it into a lesson on cues, about three years before founding the SAFD (making it around 1974), and one of my earliest students, now Maestro Dale Girard, went on to feature it in his book *Actors on Guard* some years later. It was not a principle, or a theory. It was a description of behavior. I worry that in our effort to grow as an organization, we'll over-complicate our ideas. Action/Reaction/Action, Parry/Riposte, Fencing Measure, these are not theories or principles. I don't think we need to get too dogmatic or too overly intellectual about the fight game. Fight choreography is for the most part the ability to string together a number of fight moves (armed or unarmed) that are interesting to look at, that tell a story that the author and director want to explore and at the same time entertains and excites the audience. The SAFD lexicon doesn't change that much—that is by design. The fencing lexicon hasn't changed that much either.

There is a second piece I read in the 2015 issue that I want to address in terms of accuracy. This is a minor but important point I dispute in the article by Joseph Travers (“A Noble Profession”). I bring this up because I think that any new members to the Society should know how teaching methodology began. The codification of the principles that make up the way we explore combat was initiated by and through the Society of American Fight Directors, and in Mr. Travers' article he referenced that Paddy Crean initiated it in the later part of the 20th century. It is true Paddy taught classes, but he spent most of his illustrious career in the Golden years of Hollywood choreographing and doubling for the likes of Errol Flynn.

It was only in his later years he took on the position of fight master for the Stratford Theatre in Ontario, Canada where he resided for several years. He would occasionally go out and teach workshops at various theatres and universities. This is how Erik Fredricksen and Allen Suddeth started

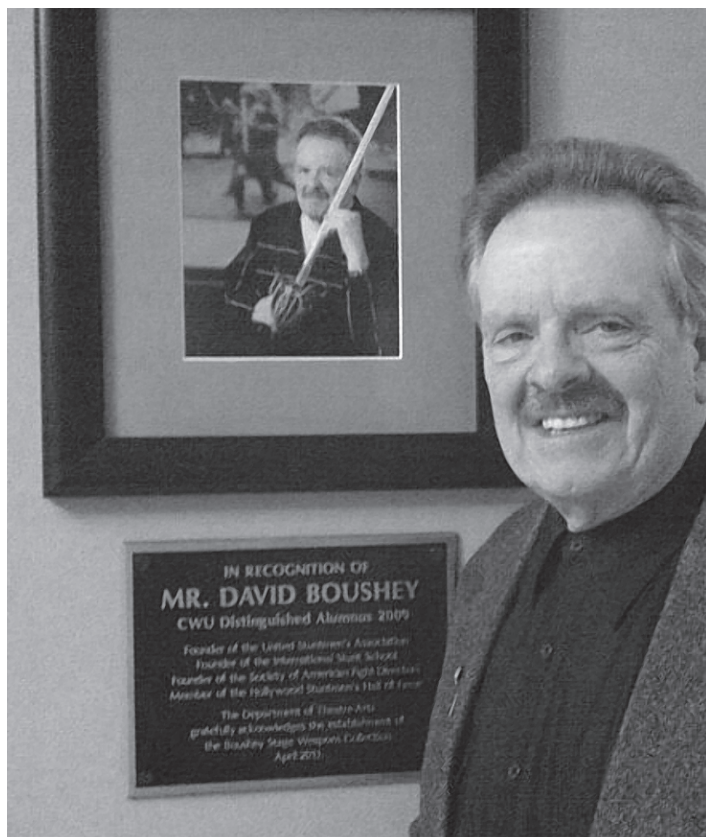
their careers. However, Paddy's primary focus was not teaching. He enjoyed the process, but for him (and for me) teaching was supplementary to the work on stage. It was a good way to earn extra income, but it was not his reason for taking up the sword. We were fight directors, first and foremost. That was (and is) our first love.

I say this because the SAFD was indeed the first organization to actually codify a fight training system whereby students could garner fight skills to further their theatrical careers. Teaching was not the primary emphasis in the beginning years, and none of us fell out of the sky as a ready-made combat instructor. It wasn't until 1979 when Allen Suddeth formulated a certification test in New York, with Erik Fredricksen adjudicating, that teaching started to develop. The testing had to follow certain protocol and thus the start of "codification." In 1980 Joe Martinez initiated the first National Training at Western Illinois University. By this time we were on our way. We had codified a teaching procedure and it has continued to develop to this day. In order to maintain consistent standards, we used that universal vocabulary across the teacher training courses.

I've given a lot of thought to how the Society has seemingly split along two lines—teaching and fight direction. When I wrote the first by-laws of the Society in 1977, I focused exclusively on the primary focus of the Society; that being the development of an organization that endeavors to enhance the reputation of those who pursue fight directing for stage and screen. It had never been officially addressed before in the United States, and the UK was only a few years ahead of us. Forty years later, I believe that it would be beneficial for a stronger return to a choreography focus, especially for the Certified Teachers and Fight Directors.

The SAFD has done a tremendous job building up the membership, but now is the time to look forward and define what that means. The quality of weapons work has grown by leaps and bounds, and with the inclusion of firearms the variety of skills we offer is more sophisticated than it was back in the early years. With all the advances we have promoted in prior years, the area where we are the weakest is our execution of unarmed combat! I have felt this way for thirty years, and I still feel the same today. I see too many "hokey" stage punches with giant cues, and too many impractical or unrealistic deliveries. We can do better.

I think the SAFD should push for greater film representation, where I feel we have been snubbed by the film community, especially the stunt industry. I think we should explore more fully the live stunt show arenas that incorporate action and acting in a live-action setting. I also think that the SAFD, whose members have worked all over the country, need to collaborate with the stunt community in demanding a little more recognition. I know we get regional nominations, such as the JEFF awards, but we deserve more. Just as the stunt community is pushing with the Oscars, we should be pushing with the Tony's! That should be a goal for all members, especially those with pull. After everything we have contributed over the years, the least we



FME Dave Boushey in front of his commemorative award.

deserve is an honorary Tony for our contributions to safe and effective fight choreography!

Finally, more of our workshops need to incorporate playing for the camera, not a live audience. The SAFD doesn't have to cover all stunt work, but the students nowadays are not working solely in theater. They're going into film and live-action stunt shows, and that's where the skills need to grow. Theater is not an easy road, and making a living in theater is getting harder and harder. In order to survive—and I know that sounds alarmist—the SAFD has to continue evolving with the change in mediums. As someone who appreciates a decent salary, I have to say it is nice to be an "artist," but it is also nice to earn a fair wage.

Through our efforts we have helped start a number of international societies including the Nordic, Canadian, Australian and even the re-organized British Society that eventually took the place of the of British Fight Directors. It has been a long glorious adventure and who would have imagined that it would have continued to thrive this many years? When I started it all it was my hope that it would last long enough to benefit those of us who aspired to make a career in this art form. I'm glad we've come as far as we have. When I wrote my initial letter, I was primarily concerned with the SAFD losing its sense of history, and of trying too hard to mash academia into the craftwork. Having been given an opportunity to expand on those thoughts, I hope that I've made clear that my criticisms come from a place of caring. I love the Society, and for those of you who share that love, I hope you will continue to carry the torch forward.

—David Boushey, *Fight Master Emeritus*

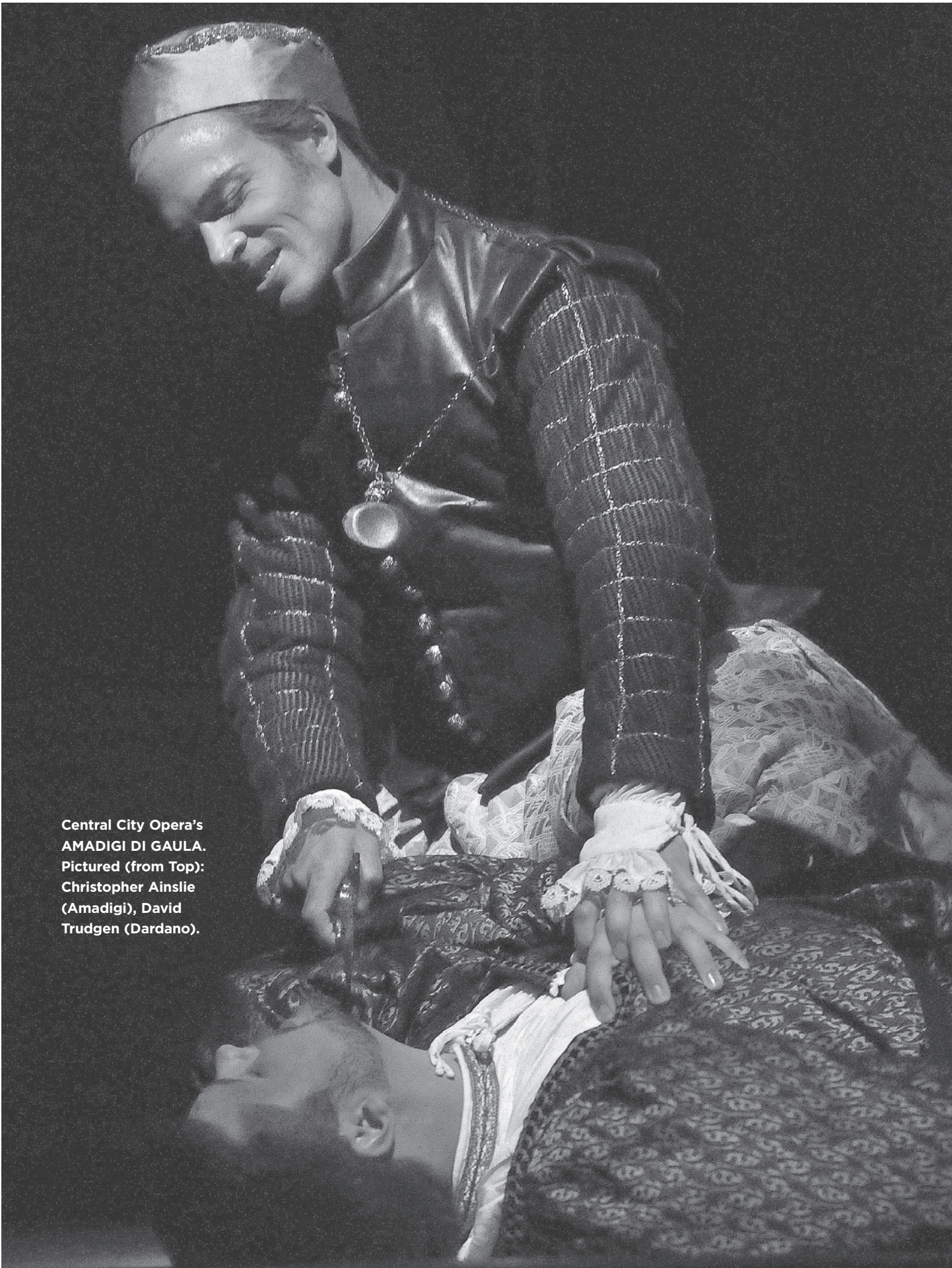
A Fight at the Opera

By Brian LeTraunik (CT)

Most people reading this have a good deal of experience with violence in the theatre. I'm sure you could probably name dozens of plays and musicals with violence in them without even trying. But how many operas can you name? You may be familiar with operas based on Shakespeare, such as Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* or Verdi's *Otello* and *Macbeth*. But those are just the tip of the iceberg. *Tosca* has a knife fight and an execution by firing squad. *Carmen* features a sword fight, a knife duel, whip work, a riot and an execution by firing squad. Sword fights feature prominently in *Il Trovatore*, *Don Giovanni*, *Faust*, and numerous others, and that's also not including the countless slaps, punches, pushes, falls, stab-bings and other random violence so prevalent on the operatic stage.

In summer of 2015 I was fortunate enough to be hired as the resident fight choreographer for Central City Opera in Central City, CO, about 40 miles west of Denver. Located 8500 feet above sea level in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, Central City is a former gold mining town, and is now home to many casinos and a 160 year old jewel box of an opera house built by the Irish and Welsh miners as a cultural landmark. Central City Opera is an AGMA company, which employs world-renowned performers, directors, and designers for a summer festival of both full-scale, and studio sized opera productions.

My experience with fight directing operas had been quite minimal up to this point, my only previous outing being a university production of a new work. I arrived with some idea of what to expect having had many discussions and heard many stories from



Central City Opera's
AMADIGI DI GAULA.
Pictured (from Top):
Christopher Ainslie
(Amadigi), David
Trudgen (Dardano).



my various SAFD friends and colleagues, but there were still several things that I learned. In many ways, fight directing for opera is quite similar to staging a fight for theatre or musical theatre, but opera is very much a unique animal with unique demands. I know many of you reading this are or aspire to be a fight director, and your careers may eventually lead you to stage violence for an opera one day. Let this article serve as a bit of a primer for those new to this world.

I would like to acknowledge and thank Fight Master k. Jenny Jones and director Elise Sandell for their thoughts and contributions to this article.

Things to Know About Fight Directing for Opera

It's All About the Music. While theatre is usually about the clear and truthful depiction of characters in a particular situation, opera is primarily about the music. The music comes first and all else is secondary. Because of this, the director of an opera usually (not always but often) takes a lesser role to that of the music director, or “maestro”. While the director will take control of the blocking and even explore character and intent, the maestro has most of the authority. For example, singers must be staged so that the maestro is always in view. Indeed most of the singers I have worked with are careful so that they are always in a position to see the maestro in the pit. What does this mean for a fight director? It means that even during scenes of action or physical violence, an awareness of the maestro

Central City Opera's GIANNI SCHICCHI (2011). Pictured (L to R): Norman Reinhardt (Rinuccio), Peabody Southwell (Zita), Kaileen Erin Miller (Nella), Daniel Belcher (Gianni Schicchi), Joanna Mongiardo (Lauretta).

is essential. That singer involved in the big sword fight may have to sing an aria after the fight, and being able to get a cue and tempo from the maestro is a must.

To that end, knowing how to read music is a great asset in this situation. Having a basic knowledge of rhythms and tempos can be vital in making sure the fight is not too long or too short. You have a fixed amount of music in which to stage everything. Getting hold of a recording and the vocal score can be great tools for this as well. According to opera director Elise Sandell:

“...the process of staging (anything, let alone a fight) is quite complicated. It leaves less space for organic choices, and a stage director and a fight director need to walk in prepared with what they're looking for from the first days, but also be ready to 'fly by the seat of our pants' and create things in the moment. Of course, there's also the pressure that whatever we stage has to live up to and 'go with' the music. Because of all these people and all this collaboration, opera is also the most expensive art form, and we're often under pressure to get our jobs done with little rehearsal time. However, when all these elements come together, the result has the potential to be pure magic!”

You May Not Even Meet the Director. Opera productions, especially ones staged by grand opera companies, tend to tour. What that means is the production of *Otello* you have been hired to work on in San Francisco, directed by the Internationally Renowned Director that you can't wait to collaborate with, was first staged in Chicago three years ago. Unless the production is new, the physical production (sets, costumes, light plot, blocking) has been touring to opera houses across the country. The “directing” is actually being done by the Assistant Director. This person is re-staging that

Chicago production from three years ago, while the original director is sitting at home receiving a check. It may also mean you are restaging someone else's fight choreography. Even if you are not, as SAFFD Fight Master k. Jenny Jones recalled, "The singer who performed that role really liked the choreography they did in Baltimore. So that's the choreography they are going to do." In a situation such as that, you may have to be more of the safety police.

I was put into a situation where the director actually staged the violence. Although this person had a good grasp of staging and safety, and is a talented and well-respected director, the stage managers and performers were coming to me outside of rehearsal to look at the moments to make sure they were safe. In this situation, my job was not so much to choreograph the violence, as it was to be sure that it could be done safely.

Additionally, you may have a chorus with upwards of 70 people you will have to coordinate. Often, these individuals will wear numbers or nametags, so the Director (or Assistant Director as the case may be), can quickly identify and move performers in the space.

Fight Call is Often Catch as Catch Can. Fight call is something we take for granted in the theatre. It is expected, if not required, that any actor involved in any violence whatsoever will gather on stage at a given time before house opens to run through the fights at least once, if not several times. This is not always the case in opera. If the fight takes place in Act III, but the stage is already set for Act I, the stagehands are not going to spend the time and energy to move the \$100,000 set for 10 minutes so you can have fight call. This means that fight call will often not happen before the performance. It's not unusual to hold the fight call during an intermission; although during intermissions the sets are often being changed, so the fight call may have to be held in a variety of locations, such as the Green Room. In my experience, we used the scene shop. Typically a stage manager and/or fight captain will oversee the fight call.

While AGMA does stipulate a fight call, that doesn't mean the performers will always attend. The lead singers typically have a very expensive, intricately designed costume, not to mention elaborate make-up, and often a wig. These can be time consuming to put on or change, so much so that if a singer does not want to attend fight call, they won't. Additionally, you may have a wig, wardrobe or makeup crew head that is not about to repair or redo their work that may be marred during a fight call. Fight directors are still relatively new on the opera landscape and there are still those who may not see the value or purpose of what it is we do.

In my experience, I have found that constant check-ins with the singers, stage managers and/or assistant director are vital. They are watching the show more often than you are will note any inconsistencies that may need to be addressed with a specially called rehearsal. Using a phone or tablet camera to video fight call is a great tool, providing the stage manager or fight captain a visual reference to help check for those "improvements" in the choreography. Add to this the point that in most opera companies, the performances are being done in repertory with several other productions, which means it may be days between performances, which means an especially diligent fight call is needed when coming back to a production after a few days off.

Opera Singers are not Trained the Way Actors Are. This is a generalization, I know. Many of the performers I was fortunate enough to work with were not only skilled musicians, but also dedicated actors. To that end, the vast majority of them took to the choreography very well. Many of them had studied stage combat in school and had extensive production experience. It also didn't hurt that I was teaching many of them in stage combat classes during the day.

Opera singers are trained primarily as musicians. The emphasis is typically placed first on music skills and vocal technique, as it must. The athleticism it takes to sing a three-hour opera is mind-boggling. It requires a great degree of strength, flexibility and control. However, many opera programs do not focus heavily on acting or movement, although that is changing with many graduate opera programs.

Often choreography must be kept very simple, so that the singers may learn it quickly and be able to perform it with confidence. To quote opera director Elise Sandell:

"A singer's training is completely different from an actor's. While undergraduate actors are learning text analysis, singers are learning that and diction in English, French, Italian, German, Russian, and Czech. While actors are learning the art of physical expression or cultivating their method or Suzuki or Viewpoints techniques, singers are in vocal pedagogy, music theory, and a practice room learning how to sing a beautiful legato line. They have to learn the art of physical expression too, but have to divide their time with all these other aspects of their art too."


There Is A Formality In The Opera World That Doesn't Exist In Theatre. The theatre world is pretty informal. Rehearsals are casual, with actors, directors, stage managers, etc. dressed in t-shirts and jeans. People tell jokes, run lines, and unless the show is in dire straits, the atmosphere is generally very relaxed. While many of this is also true for opera rehearsals, there is also an odd formality to the proceedings.

While I did not experience this, I have heard stories of singers dressing for rehearsal, with men wearing jackets and ties and ladies in full makeup. What did strike me was the formal use of titles. The music director, as has been mentioned, is always "maestro." To refer to him or her as anything else while in rehearsal could be considered a breach of etiquette. This formality also extended itself to rehearsal reports or stage management memos. It was not unusual to see "Mr. Smith needs a smaller pair of shoes," or "Ms. Smith needs a rehearsal parasol!" These were written in purely internal messages that no public would see, yet, rarely if ever, was a performer, director or designer, referred to as anything other than Mr. or Ms.

The same also held true for calls stage management gave over the PA. When I would run fight calls, the stage manager would call "Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones, please come down for fight call." In the theatre, we usually do not adhere to such formality. The opera world tends to be a little more stratified and regulated, and as such it engenders a much more formal environment.

The egos in opera tend to be larger and oftentimes more frail than those in the theatre, therefore I found it wise to choose my battles. You do not want to be the reason the soprano or the tenor will not perform that night! As long as safety and storytelling are being observed, small differences often will be taken into consideration.

I would also recommend getting the stage manager and assistant director on your side from the beginning. While at Central City Opera, I worked with many superbly organized and communicative personnel who ensured that all the safety parameters were being followed and that the fights remained consistent throughout the run.

My time working at Central City Opera was enlightening and creatively stimulating. I worked with some superb artists, contributed to some stunning productions and expanded my own artistic horizons. I certainly do not intend for this list to be exhaustive, as one cannot plan for every eventuality, but I hope it introduces some of the larger differences between staging fights for opera and staging fights for a play. 

FIGHTERS ON WIRES

Considerations When Fighting and Flying on Stage

BY JASON SCHUMACHER

A man and a boy meet on the deck of a pirate frigate, the waves of the harbor rolling the ship gently as the two exchange words and draw swords. They are surrounded by confederates on either side, an unlikely intermingling of pirates, children, and native islanders. All action on the ship ceases as the two enemies come on guard. The tip of the man's rapier rasps against the mid-blade of the boy's short sword while his opposite arm makes an exaggerated dragging motion across his neck, a hook where his hand should be. Suddenly the boy yells, "Have at thee!" and unleashes a flurry of attacks on the man, who parries and dodges, barely keeping the point of the boy's sword from piercing him. Retreating quickly, the man is able to parry hard against the boy's sword and drop into a passato sotto, hooked left hand extending far from his body to counterbalance the rapier thrusting at the boy's midsection. His target, however, has disappeared, along with the boy, who has leapt high into the air and touched down improbably on the tip of the rapier. The boy balances lightly for a moment on his opponent's foible, then runs up the blade, across the man's shoulders and onto his extended, hooked arm before taking flight and landing twenty feet up on the crow's nest of the ship. He turns to taunt the bedeviled pirate captain below as the tick-tock of a mechanical clock grows near.

The scene above, of course, describes the climactic duel between Peter Pan and Captain Hook in any number of adaptations of JM Barrie's stage play, *Peter Pan*; or *The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*. In the libretto for the Broadway musical version of the show, the action is described with the following stage direction:

(As they begin to duel PETER flies about HOOK's head and swoops down on him. HOOK is unable to fight him properly.)

This single stage direction requires the effective joint execution of two highly challenging, somewhat disparate and potentially dangerous physical disciplines, each requiring a great deal of planning and expertise when done individually. When fighting and flying are performed in concert, the amount of time and talent necessary to bring about the safe and narratively clear realization of a scene increases exponentially. The intent of this article is to give some perspective on choreographing aerial violence and to offer a primer to fight choreographers on the challenges of fighting in the air. Although this

article will occasionally reference the application of aerial violence on screen, the scope of this article is generally limited to the stage.

To start, it is useful to define some terms that may not be familiar to those who have never been part of a production that utilized flying effects. Flying effects are movements created by lifting a performer off the ground using a harness, a lifting medium, pulleys and other mechanics, and a source of power. Collectively, the harness, lifting medium, mechanics, and power source are called a *flying system*. The lifting medium is usually wire rope, colloquially called a cable, although it can also be a synthetic rope. The power source for a flying system is either manual or motorized. A manual system is powered by individuals pulling on ropes; these individuals are called *operators*. A motorized system is powered by an electric motor. This motor typically turns a drum that spools the lifting medium. A motorized system can be controlled either with a joystick or through fully automated and programmable software. Multiple flying systems can be integrated to create multi-axis effects. Finally, the person who rigs the flying system, choreographs the flying effects, trains the operators and performers, and is ultimately responsible for the safe and effective execution of the effects is called a *flying director*.

When production meetings begin and the creative and technical team is discussing how to approach a scene that integrates fighting and flying, it is of the utmost importance to first recognize the necessity of hiring professionals for both the fight choreography and for the flying effects. While readers of this journal probably don't need convincing of the importance of hiring an experienced and professional choreographer to stage scripted violence, it is beneficial to take some space to discuss the need for giving the same considerations to flying effects. As with stage combat, it takes years of training and practice to safely rig and choreograph flying effects. Additionally, flying systems are purpose-built machines that must be designed, engineered, tested, and field-tested thoroughly. This type of training and infrastructure is only possible within the context of a company dedicated to the art, craft, and science of performer flying. Although I certainly have a bias toward the company that I manage, ZFX, there are a small handful of other capable companies in the United States that are dedicated to performer flying effects, as well



as another small handful overseas. Any of these companies are capable of installing flying systems and choreographing flying effects safely. One of them *must* be used when attempting flying effects of any sort on stage. A few additional options exist when considering effects for film or television, but it is absolutely necessary to hire a professional company that has created effects for thousands of performances when flying a production. The need for safety and compelling storytelling alone should motivate any producer to hire a pro, but if that's not enough, the thoroughly vetted liability policies that the professional flying effects companies carry should tip the scales in favor of hiring someone who knows what they're doing.

Once a fight choreographer and a flying effects company have been hired, the creative team should take the advice of both parties

Captain Hook (Julio Concepcion) and Peter Pan (Walker Martin) square off in Oklahoma City Ballet's *Peter Pan*. In the background, SR to SL: Michael Darling (Leon Khrapunsky), Cook (Yui Sato), and John Darling (Richard Walters). Choreography by Paul Vastering, Flying Director Rebecca Knipfer

into account when casting the show. Just as previous stage combat experience is a plus for an auditor, previous flying experience should weigh in favor of the person auditioning. In the absence of direct performer flying experience, any movement experience or general physical facility is advantageous. That being said, it should be noted that performer flying is a very unique physical discipline that has few analogous movement styles. Because nearly all movement training requires the executioner to push off from the ground in order to move, and because flying effects eliminate the resistance of the ground as an impetus for movement, excellent skill and training in dance, stage combat or sports does not necessarily equate to a great advantage in the air. People with experience in situations that simulate low gravity, such as swimmers, divers and, of course, aerialists generally have an advantage over those without that experience. Finally, the weight of the performer should be taken into consideration, especially with a manual flying system. While it's possible to fly any size performer, a lighter performer is easier on manual system operators and usually allows for a faster flight.

At this point discussions should happen between the creative team and the flying effects company on the type of flying that is

desired. The first consideration is the number of axes of movement that is needed. A simple pendulum, where the cable moves through a single point overhead, can create surprisingly complex movement. The benefits here are simpler rigging and potentially lower costs. A track system that gives movement on both the vertical and horizontal axes will allow for more choreographic options, while a fully automated, three dimensional flying system can position a performer anywhere in a predetermined rectangular cubic space.

The second consideration should be the type of harness that will best serve the needs of the show. A *single point harness* has a dorsal pick point between the shoulder blades, causing the body to list slightly forward and the feet to shift slightly off the vertical axis. This creates the classic flying position that many of us are familiar with from *Peter Pan*. It also minimizes the amount of cable necessary for flying and allows the performer complete and endless rotation on the vertical axis. A *seat harness* has two pick points roughly at the belt line. This is the most user-friendly harness because all a performer needs to do in order to look like they are flying is to engage their musculature so that they are not slumped in the harness. A *somersault harness* allows the actor to flip in both directions and, when combined with a spreader bar, rotate on the vertical axis. This type of harness gives the fight choreographer and flying director the most options, but relies the most heavily on the ability of the performer. Other harnesses, like jerk vests and orbital harnesses, can be considered for even more specialized application.

The final and arguably most important consideration is how the flying fits into the narrative of the character. This type of storytelling decision will influence what system and harness are chosen, along with how they are used. I typically divide flying into three broad categories, particularly when it comes to stage combat. The first is the most obvious: a character has the power to fly, whether motivated by an object, as in the witch's broom in *The Wizard of Oz* or simply by supernatural ability, as in *Peter Pan*. The second is that the character has an "enhanced" ability. They can't fly, but perhaps they can jump very high or glide along the floor. This is effectively used in many kung fu and superhero movies. The third category is how a character affects other characters and how the flying system can be used to demonstrate that. Perhaps a character is very strong and can throw other characters across the stage, or lift them effortlessly overhead with a single arm. The fight between the Beast and the wolves in *Beauty and the Beast* is a good example of this particular type of flying.

It is best if these considerations are discussed with the flying

effects company and the flying director prior to any significant choreographing. These particulars can greatly influence both the practical and aesthetic aspects of the choreography.

Once the flying performers are cast, it is best if they start training immediately for flying. The two greatest things a performer can do prior to leaving the ground for the first time are to increase overall flexibility and strengthen core stability. Flying, particularly while wielding a sword or carrying out complicated martial arts sequences, requires a large range of motion and therefore a flexible body. Core strength is absolutely necessary because, while the lift (up/down) and traverse (left/right) movement of a flying effect are created by the flying system and the power source, any rotational, directional or localized movement is created by the performer. Because the performer does not have the ground to push against and the air surrounding the performer offers no significant resistance, the actor must twist,





performers who are highly experienced in either stage combat or flying, and there are very few actors out there who have extensive experience in both disciplines. This means that a lot of time has to be dedicated to teaching the fundamentals of fighting and flying prior to any actual choreography getting done. Ideally, the fight choreographer teaches stage combat fundamentals and outlines the choreography of the aerial fight prior to the arrival of the flying system and the flying director. Because of the relative expense of hiring a flying effects company, flying rehearsals are usually started after the regular rehearsal process is well underway, so it helps immensely to have a solid foundation in the techniques and some of the specifics of the fight prior to the arrival of the flying director.

Once the flying director is in the space and has rigged the system, all fights should be rehearsed with the flying. This requires all of the operators present and usually requires that the rehearsal has moved from the hall to the stage to accommodate the flying system. The fight choreographer and the flying director conduct an aerial violence rehearsal jointly and collaboratively, each contributing their specialized knowledge to tell the story of the fight. Generally, the fight choreographer will contribute aspects of the technical fight choreography—parries, thrusts, blocks, kicks and punches—while the flying director will integrate the flying aspect of the fight with the martial aspect and contribute to creating the narrative arc of the fight.

There are a number of things that a fight choreographer will want to keep in mind when thinking about choreographing aerial violence. First, the performer will have wire rope attached to them, usually at the hips or between the shoulder blades, and extending up to the flying system. The position of these cables needs to be considered when choreographing head cuts, overhead moulinets, and any other moves that traverse the horizontal plane above the flying performer.

Second, when connected to a flying system, a performer may have a limited range of motion when on the ground. Depending on the type of venue, a flying system may be 15 to 60 feet above the stage, and the cables connecting the flying system to the performer can foul in electrics and rigging if the performer travels too far away from directly beneath the flying system. Large diagonal moves or fighting on-the-circle can become difficult, particularly if there is more than one performer connected to the flying system. With two actors connected to the flying system executing a series of punto mandritti and punto reverso, the cables can become twisted around each other, preventing the actors from flying. Third, when connected to the flying system it can be difficult for a performer to fall or grapple. The cables, particularly if more than one cable is connected to a performer, can entangle with the actor or actors. While none of these types of movement is impossible in an aerial sequence, they should be discussed with the flying director ahead of time and properly planned.

Also important when plotting out choreography for an aerial fight sequence is to remember that a flying performer is not able to exert the same resistance that is possible for a performer on the ground. Newton's third law of motion, that every action has an equal and opposite reaction, plays out in a fight very differently when one or more combatants are suspended from a cable versus everyone situated

shift and position their body using only the movement they can create while suspended in the air. This requires excellent isolation of various muscle groups, which is achieved primarily through a strong core. This is particularly true when flying in a somersault harness, where the pick points are on swivels at the hips. A performer flips and somersaults in the air not by pushing off the ground and tucking, but by shifting body weight around a pivot point. Much like children on a seesaw, an actor controls the position of their body by shifting weight closer to or further away from the fulcrum at the swivels.

OPPOSITE: Christi Waldon (Ground), and Jason Schumacher (Air) work a scene from ZFX's Dojo Fight. Director Joshua Moise pictured with camera. Flying Director: Jason Schumacher. ABOVE: Jason Schumacher works through the flying choreography in Joshua Moise's Dojo Fight. Schumacher was also the show's Fight and Flying Director.

As the actors prepare for the first day of flying rehearsal, the production team and the fight choreographer should consider the rehearsal schedule. Both fight choreography and flying choreography take a large amount of time to teach and rehearse, and when these two disciplines are done at the same time, the amount of time necessary more than doubles. It is somewhat rare that we have the good fortune to work with



firmly on the ground. Attacks or defenses that apply a significant amount of force to the performer on the ground necessitate the resistance of the earth to push back against the move. This is not possible when flying. Expulsions, beat parries, shoves, glissades, prises de fer and any other technique that requires appreciable amounts of force or resistance from either the attacker or victim can cause the flying performer to spin, swing, or otherwise move in an unanticipated and uncontrolled manner.

These techniques are not impossible in the air. In fact, the lack of resistance can create interesting choreography that is not possible on the ground. An envelopment with an expulsion can send an actor in the air into a quick spin that leads into a counterattack from the opposite direction faster than is possible with footwork. A strong shove can cause a dramatic, arcing pendulum swing that fills the entire stage, horizontally and vertically, and return the victim rapidly to the attacker. To execute these moves, though, it is imperative that the fight choreographer work closely with the flying director prior to and during rehearsals.

During a fighting and flying rehearsal, it is important to continually discuss the speed at which a sequence or phrase is performed. Because so much of performer flying relies on gravity and pendulum swings, it is difficult and many times impossible to perform a flight at anything other than full speed, which can make it very challenging

to integrate a number of stage combat moves with a flying move. Ideally, the fight choreographer will run the performers through the phrase on the ground without flying, building up to something approaching show speed. After this is done, the flying director will rehearse the aerial aspects of the phrase without the flying and usually without any weapons. Any non-flying performers should follow along on the ground, marking any exchanges to get used to the timing of the sequence. Once the fight choreographer, flying director, performers, and operators are comfortable with both the fighting and the flying elements of the sequence, the fight can be run at speed.

Because of all the elements necessary for a fight involving flight, I have found that it is often necessary to break an aerial violence sequence down into very short component parts. I usually rehearse only a move or two at a time, moving forward only once I feel that all involved can incorporate the moves into the scene. This strategy, although time consuming, keeps the performers safe and gives them a comfort level that allows them to act the fight, not just execute a set of choreographed moves.

It is rare that a flying director is able to stay with a show through opening night, much less through the run of a show. This makes assigning a *flying supervisor* necessary. Much like a fight captain, a flying supervisor is tasked with maintaining the safety and the narrative integrity of the movement sequence after the flying director



has left. A flying supervisor is also responsible for a daily inspection of the flying system and should be the first point of contact for stage management when dealing with any flying related issues. The flying supervisor and fight captain work closely together to maintain the vision of the fight choreographer, the flying director and, of course, the director. Typically, the flying supervisor is also an operator.

A fighting and flying sequence is extremely demanding both creatively and technically. To tell the story of the fight properly, it is not just the performers who have to do their job, but the operators as well. On a manual system, the backstage movements of the operators can be just as tightly choreographed as the performers on two track systems, it's not just the two actors who have to get it right. It's the two actors and four operators. This type of

OPPOSITE: Two students at Washington and Lee University's Dance school elevate the choreography for Jenefer Davies' Aerial Dance: Take Flight. Flying Directors: Stu Cox, Sandy Hamed, and Jason Schumacher.

ABOVE: In *Angels: The Musical*, the Angel (Andrea Graves) and the Demon (Jonathan Jolly) illustrate fighting at different elevations. Fight and Flying Director: Jason Whicker.

ABOVE: ROBERT DEAN; OPPOSITE: KEVIN REMINGTON

fight requires awareness, timing, and flawless execution from all six participants. It's hard. For a complex aerial fight it can be extremely hard. But when it's done right, there are very few things on stage that are more exciting.

The sword fight between Peter Pan and Captain Hook described at the beginning of this article is one of my favorite things to choreograph. As both a fight choreographer and a flying director, this fight gives me the opportunity to stretch my imagination and test my skills every time, even after choreographing it for more than 50 productions. That being said, there's great potential for adding flying effects to fights in numerous other stories. In addition to the previously mentioned fight from *Beauty and the Beast*, I've added flying to moments of violence in *The Wizard of Oz*, 9 to 5, numerous original stage plays and independent movies, more than one Shakespeare piece (including a Kabuki production of *Richard III*), and many others. Most recently I helped Brian Owens, a colleague and senior flying director at ZFX, and Fight Master Drew Fracher add a flying sword fight to the world premiere of Sarah Ruhl's *For Peter Pan on Her 70th Birthday*. With all of these shows, the combination of careful planning, seasoned professionals in the fighting and flying disciplines, and lots of hard work, helped to create spectacular and exhilarating moments. Performer flying is another powerful tool for all of us as storytellers. ✦

So You Want to Buy a Sword

A Beginner's Guide

BY DAVE GONZALEZ

It's something that we all face in the stage combat community. We take a class or two, attend a regional workshop, and get introduced to our first Vendor Night. Tables of swords, daggers, shields, all laid out for perusal and purchase. But with so many options, it can be difficult to choose. What kind of sword to buy? Who to buy from? How do you pick the right one? A little over three years ago I started working for Neil Massey at Rogue Steel as a shop assistant. I've been lucky enough to get about as in-depth a view into swords as anyone can over the past few years, and I wanted to share some of the basics of swords for newcomers to the SAFD. This article isn't meant to be definitive, a commercial, or a strict how-to. It's a guide, but it's up to you to choose the path.

Before rushing to buy, you should know what goes into a sword in the first place. When it comes to how the sword goes together, the basics are as such: the blade has a bottom section (the tang) that fits into the hilt (handle section) and is held in place by the pommel (bottom piece). There are two main ways to actually hold the sword together. The more historical way is called "peening." This is when the tang sticks out through the pommel and is then heated and pounded into place to maintain the compression, holding the sword together. The second main option is a threaded tang. Basically, the pommel (or a small piece called the "pommel nut") is threaded onto the tang like a nut onto a bolt. Peening is the more historically accurate way and generally results in a heavier sword (not necessarily a bad thing). Threading allows the sword to be taken apart for maintenance & cleaning, and if things start to rattle over time, simply tighten on the pommel more. If a blade breaks (as can happen), take the sword apart and replace the blade. With a peened sword, once things start to rattle or

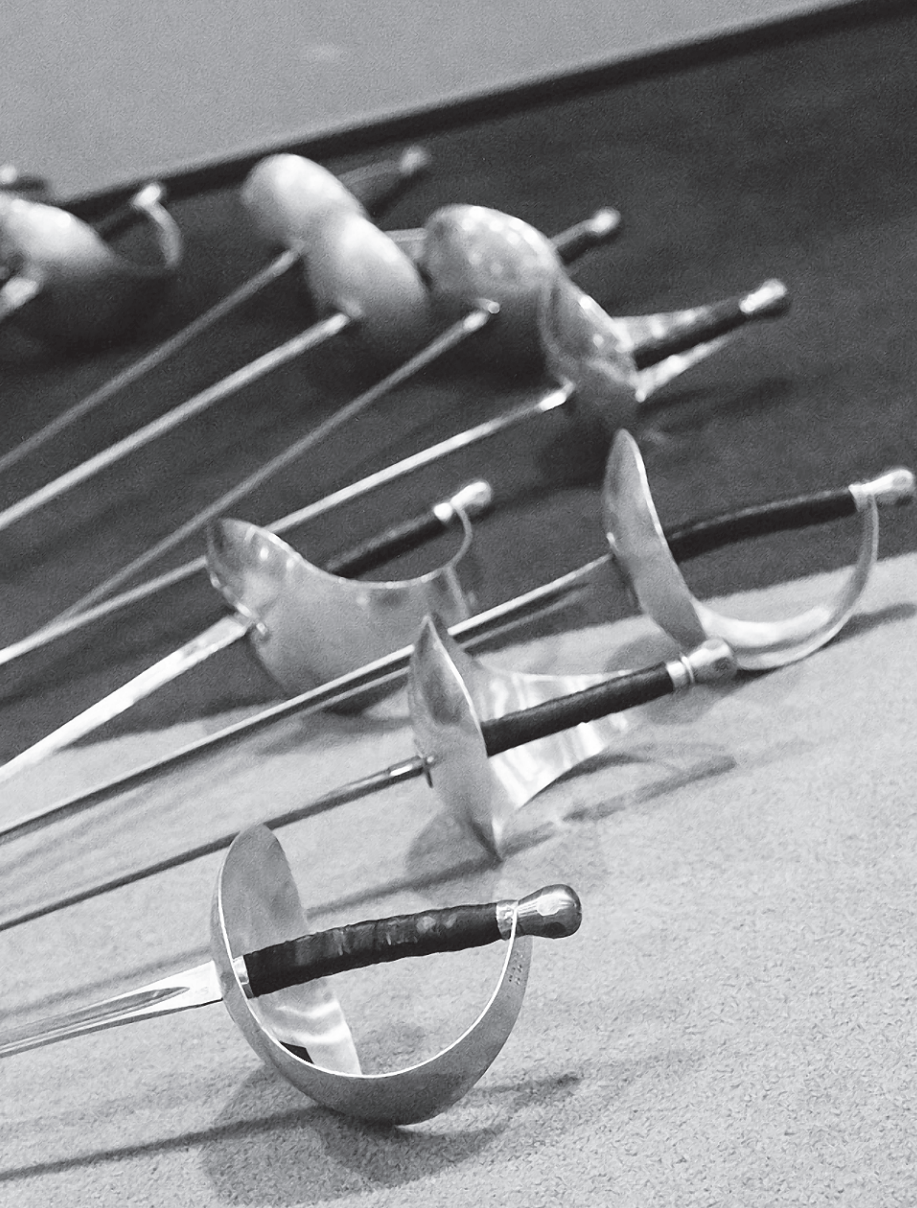
a blade breaks, there's not really anything to be done about it. Consider your physical needs when looking into how your future sword gets made.

The first thing to look at when buying your own first weapon is simple: what do you like? Are you looking for a smallsword, rapier, broadsword, or perhaps something else entirely like a knife or cutlass? There's no real guide to choosing this, only your tastes and what you think you'll get the most use out of. That leads me to the next thing to narrow down your selection. Ask yourself "How will I use this?" If you're a first-time sword-buyer, chances are you're planning on using it in your own productions and performances, and you'll want to look for something "character neutral." Ask yourself when you look at the sword; what kind of character would use it?

It's a bit more nuanced than you might expect, unless you found a sword with a black grip, blackened hilt, and a skull-shaped pommel (This would 9 times out of 10 be a villain's sword). Oftentimes doing anything heavily customized turns into a character-specific weapon (even if the character is just you!) If you want a heavily customized sword, it can very strongly convey a specific character, but might look odd in the hands of a different character that still in your type. Imagine if Macduff was using a sword like the one above? Might seem a little weird to the audience. Character neutrality maximizes your options, but might not always possess the most "pizzazz." Look for a sword that the maximum number of characters would use.

Now you've decided what kind of sword you're after. How do you tell the good from the bad? Here are the basic red flags:

It's sharp. Obviously not what we want for *pretend* violence. Approach second-hand blades with caution (they might be too beat up), and if it was originally a decorative piece that someone



and aluminum against aluminum. The steel is much harder than the aluminum and will chew it up.

It rattles. Hold the sword in one hand and smack the side of the pommel with your other hand. If you hear a rattling sound, try tightening it down. If it still rattles, don't buy it.

Often a sword has a tang that is welded on to the rest of the blade. This isn't always a bad thing. Often a welded piece allows a consistency that can't be produced by most blade manufacturers. What you want to avoid spot welding, where the blade looks to be directly welded to the hilt with a bit of metal. This is just a simple spot of weld and NOT what you want to put your trust in for you or your partner's safety.

Now, all of this being said, a *lot* of what you want in a sword just comes down to aesthetic. But any dressing up of a sword is just that. Dress up. Bells and whistles. A turquoise stingray skin grip might make you feel like the coolest kid in class, but it won't provide a better grip on the sword. Neither will a metal wire grip. That high-shine polish won't protect your hand any better than a more neutral polish. This is arguably the most difficult part of buying a personal weapon, because it's not related to safety or necessarily craftsmanship. It's entirely up to your sensibilities and budget. A plain leather grip doesn't make a sword "less cool" or less useful; it's straightforward and simple. Even just a simple color difference (burgundy leather instead of black, for example) can add the personal touch just as much as an exotic material. And besides, oftentimes if things get too fancy, I've seen people afraid to use their own

dulled down, there's about a 99% chance you don't want to risk your safety or the safety of your partner to it.. Before you use it, make sure you let your instructor or choreographer check on it.

It's made of stainless steel. These are almost always decorative swords and fall under the above warning. It's simply not made to handle the stress of stage combat. The only metals a sword should be made of are high carbon steel or aluminum. And you don't want to mix the two. Keep steel against steel

swords because of all the money they spent on it.

In terms of how you spend your money, and I've owned weapons from a *lot* of different makers, it's better to spend money on a good *value* of a sword. A sword you will use and get accustomed to over time; built to last and work as hard you do. It's the use and the experience over the long term that really makes it *your* sword. So take your time, don't rush to buy anything, and have fun! ♣

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Discipulus Semper

BY JOSEPH TRAVERS, SAFD CT/FD



Recently, I came across some notes from early in my stage combat training—notes I had received in performing some early fights. Interest-

ingly, they sounded very familiar:

drop your center
need more rhythm and flow
stronger intention
more sense of danger

They sounded so familiar because all these years later, I now give these same notes almost every day to the students I teach—dozens of students every school term. This isn't so surprising, of course. Most students have similar hurdles at the beginning of their training. I've noticed this year after year as a teacher. Yet it's a refreshing reminder that as a student, all those years ago, I too was struggling with the same challenges.

Over many years of teaching, it can become easy to shift so fully into the role of teacher that we forget the role of student. The job of teaching requires that we stand in a place of knowledge and responsibility, that we play the role of gatekeeper, focusing the students we teach on the work at hand, preparing the work they must do next, noting and cajoling (and grading) from a place of authority. We earnestly lean toward targeting problems and fixing what's wrong about a student's work, while trying to remember to praise what is right. We do it for many students at a time, all year long. It is fair to admit that as we do so, we can forget what is much more important than a high center or a low target—the individual student's struggle to learn.

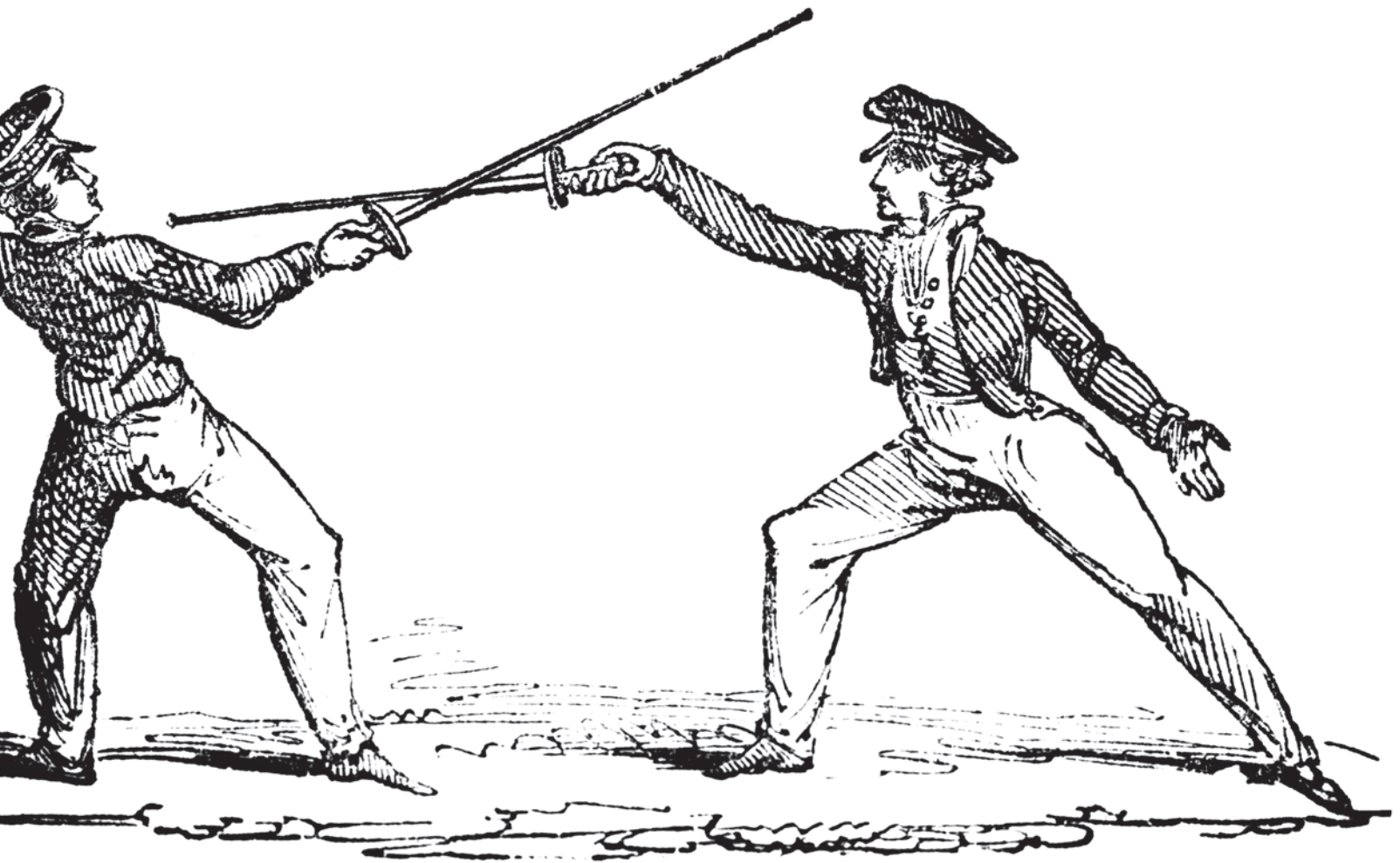
Becoming a teacher requires a high level of technical expertise. Teachers work very hard to go beyond the level of achievement of even the most successful students, studying and practicing and grappling with the best ways to pass material on to their pupils. After years of work, after reaching the point of becoming a teacher, it might be tempting to feel that one has “arrived”—that a destination has been reached, a pinnacle has been summited, and now one will never have to climb again. The struggle is over.

Fortunately, nothing could be further from the truth.

If I choose the profession of teacher, I must be ready for continued struggle—the learning doesn't end. I hope that by now I have corrected most if not all of those early notes I received. That doesn't mean I haven't earned different notes, or that those same early technical challenges might not creep in again from time to time. If I'm tempted to think my own technique is so advanced that it doesn't require work and attention, I'm wrong.

Looking beyond technique, what of the larger, deeper challenges that as a teacher I now find before me? Do I really know my students? Can I see all of their strengths and weaknesses? Do I regularly address and highlight both? Do I connect with them only as a group, or do I work to reach out to each one of them? My own teachers made very strong impressions on me, inspiring me to keep learning and growing. They did this because they themselves were struggling to be better, all the while striving to push and connect with me individually and my own struggle with the material at hand. Do I make such efforts with my students?

If I ignore this dimension of the work, this continuous striving and struggle, then I am less of a teacher, and certainly not the teacher I could be. If I think I have “arrived,” I am fooling myself. I am just beginning. It is in striving to learn that I grow as a teacher, and it is through my own struggle that I connect with that of my



students. When I forget that like my students, I too have things to work on, I put the wrong kind of separation between us. When I forget that I also am learning, I am no longer really able to help. In short, when I forget I am a student, I cease to really be a teacher.

Learning is a great ladder climbed by teacher and student alike. Every hard won step that each student takes must be matched by two of mine, or I am liable to block the way. What's more, if I stay connected to each of them, to their efforts to ascend, then they can push me farther too. Reading this, some voices might say, "Look, I know it's important to connect, but I have a stage combat class to teach! Techniques to demonstrate! Fights to choreograph! Performances to watch! Grades to give! That's my work as a teacher. Students have to do their own work! I'm not here to spoon-feed them!" I have heard all these voices, too, in me. Yes, it is true there is a great deal of work to do, and no, we

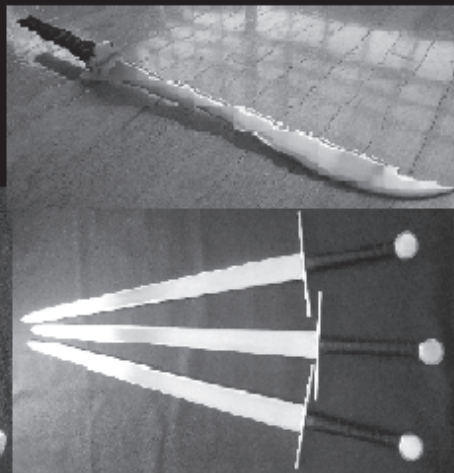
should not spoon-feed students, but rather hold up a standard of excellence that each student must strive to meet. But none of that need prevent me from connecting.

When they witness the example of my own efforts to learn more and more about this amazing craft, my students get to know me more deeply as their teacher. When I am willing to get down in the trenches with each of them as they wrestle with their own difficulties, I get to know them more deeply. And their success and my success become bound together.

When I forget this—and I do—it must be in part because I am forgetting my own "studenthood"—past and present and future. When I remember that I was, am now, and always will be a student, then the doors can open, and real connection, real learning can begin. Teachers, let our watchword be, *Discipulus Semper*—"always a student"! ✦



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Blank-firing Prop Review

SELECT RETIAY MODELS

BY KEVIN INOUE

With the Fall issue ostensibly focused on the tools of our trade, I thought it perhaps useful to write a quick review of some of the new releases within the area of blank firing theatrical firearms—both because this new brand/line might be of interest to the members of our society, and as a way to model a process for investigating new offerings.

While I've been in the field long enough to see major players in the sword production market come and go, the changes in the field of firearm props have always been much more rapid and random. Unlike sword production, theatrical firearms production is rarely the work of a single artisan or small business like Lewis Shaw, Neil Massey, or Baltimore Knife & Sword. They're also unlikely to be made within the U.S., and are more highly regulated by a patchwork of federal and local agencies, including Customs, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, and the U.S. Dept. of Commerce. Asia was the sole source of cap-firing shell ejecting "model guns," which were popular in film and television in the late 20th century and still see occasional use. Asia is also the source of most of the Airsoft guns (made to fire 6mm plastic BBs) that are near-ubiquitous in the modern entertainment industry. Europe has had more blank firing options than the US for a long time, and I have envied some European countries for the models they have available. While we were typically limited to top-venting models for much of the past decade (up until a couple years ago), many companies sold them in their originally-intended front-vent versions overseas, and there is still a much wider variety available there. On the other hand, some areas, like the UK, have tighter restrictions than us (since the passage of the 2006 Violent Crimes Reduction Act effectively banned them for ownership by the average citizen).

Because theatrical firearms are replicating items in current military, law enforcement, and civilian use, the trends, design options,

etc. are also constantly shifting in a way that our swords (which have changed more slowly, based mostly on our better understanding of how historically accurate swords should handle, and the HEMA-fueled demand for better replicas) do not. The airsoft market is especially subject to this, being something that relies heavily on the latest tacti-cool trends in firearms, as well as trends in airsoft gaming and 'limited release' marketing tactics. The airsoft market has generally been much more diverse and on top of the latest new releases for firearms models than blank firing options have been.

One final market force at play that is worth mentioning with theatrical firearms is the legal teams of the actual firearms companies, and licensing trends. Of the major players, so far only Umarex has pursued licensing for their blank firing replicas, and while they have a variety of licensed semiautomatic and revolver replicas that they make, only a handful of these were made widely available in the US, and those primarily in top-vent (which in semiautomatics also meant they cut a notch in the top of the slide to accommodate the vent). These include a few revolvers (S&W Chief's special, Ruger Redhawk) and semi-automatics (1911s by both Colt and Smith & Wesson, and P99s and P22s by Walther). I'm reluctant to speak to availability, since that is constantly changing subject to the whims of importers, customs, etc. but at the time of me writing this, Umarex USA recently said to me that they have gotten out of the blank gun importation business (focusing on their airsoft and pellet guns instead—I bought most of their remaining stock of revolvers, and have been selling them to SAFD members), and only a limited number of these models are still on the market. Other companies have made models obviously meant to replicate real firearms, but which bear the markings of the replica company rather than the actual firearm, and so may not be suited to on-screen close-ups. The most readily found style, made by almost every blank gun company, is variations on the Beretta 92, but there are others that, to varying degrees, imitate a range of old west, WWII, and at least somewhat modern firearms. Some models don't seem to directly copy anything at all. They all have their giveaways though, and I very frequently see stock photos being used with news stories about real



**Retay PT24 with
mock suppressor
and laser attached**

firearms incidents in which I can tell the exact type of replica being used in the photos.

So far, despite the copying of general morphology, I've only heard of one firearms company that has actively, aggressively shut down import of replicas, and that's Glock. They attempted this with airsoft models with limited success (licensed replicas are hard to find still), but had more luck with blank fire. The "GAP" G17-style replicas once offered through Western Stage Props disappeared years ago, and the introduction of the Zoraki 917, a more modern Glock 17-style front-vent blank gun, was shut down hard a few years back, with the importer Maxsell facing a brutal lawsuit despite starting to clearly label the slide on all of them "NOT A GLOCK" after import. Perhaps this is because, unlike the Berettas, the Walther PPK, and the 1911, the design for the Glock is not shared by multiple companies and remains under the original designer's strict control.

This is part of why I'm so interested in the new line recently brought into the US, made by Retay. The thing that first caught my attention was that Retay, more than Zoraki, Ekol, or some of the other makers, seem to be very clearly trying to make identifiable replicas of popular modern semiautomatics, including the Desert Eagle, SIG P228, Springfield XD, Taurus 24/7, and yes, the Glock 17 service pistol.

I first saw these in early June of 2016, and they're now starting to spread some through the usual resellers. They're made in Turkey, as are Zoraki and Voltran/Ekol, two of the other big players in blank guns here. As sole proprietor of a small prop weapons rental company (Fight Designer, LLC), this is something I needed to look into, so I picked up a few of them quickly for initial review. I've come to learn that you never know how long something will be available, or what it will cost—some items have disappeared from the market, leaving me wishing I'd bought them. Others have gotten cheaper over time, and several have stayed consistent. It's a gamble.

First, some generalizations: All of the models Retay is offering at present are front-venting 9mm semiautomatics. This is ideal for film/video production, where if people opt for blank fire chances are good they want the muzzle flash and ejected casings that these

deliver. It is perhaps less ideal for live theatre, where we might want more options for safe staging (like top vent plugged barrels), and where a full-load 9mm blank is often a bit too loud for smaller theaters. 8mm is marginally better, but typically found just in top-vent props; some models by other companies (Kimar and GAP for example) are actually available in both 8mm top vent and 9mm front-vent versions. None are available in smaller calibers, at least in this country. I sincerely wish someone made a viable .22 semiautomatic blank gun that could use the readily available nail gun blanks from hardware stores—the realm of small-run 3D printed firearms, which has been quickly moving towards some legitimacy with real firearms, could be perfect for something like this. In theory, the front-vent models would probably work with a suppressor, but the expense and hassle of that (including a \$200 tax stamp) has prevented me from trying.

The Retay models have the same accommodation all current front-vent blank imports have to assuage the commerce department requirement for replicas; they have a steel barrel extension permanently attached, with bright orange paint on it. For theatrical or film purposes, given the proper federal waiver from the commerce department, you can legally either sand the orange paint off, paint over it, or sometimes cut off the extension. More information on the official and practical implications of these options can be found in my book, *The Theatrical Firearms Handbook*, which should be getting a second print run soon.

Since these replicas are brand new, I have yet to make those arrangements; the muzzles are still orange. On Zoraki and Ekol models, the barrel extensions typically feature a smooth open bore, but on the Retays they include a visible restrictor inside, so there's a chance that cutting them off to the rear of that might prevent them from cycling properly. Unlike others I've seen, these extensions are also threaded on the inside (as the barrels generally are before these extensions are added) to accommodate the insertion of a flare adapter. These can, when attached, allow you to use the blank gun to launch special small flares, pepper gas paintballs, etc., and they are sometimes marketed in that way as self-defense items in countries



where real firearms are more heavily restricted than replicas. The threaded barrels can allow for other attachments though, and for a while there were mock suppressors (sadly nonfunctional, but still useful for films sometimes) available for models from Zoraki and Ekol.

Strangely, my Retay models were not all packaged the same. Most came in a nicer, fitted-foam case, more like a real firearm than the cheap cases we're used to getting all our other blank guns in (the other exception being the Zoraki 925 machine pistol). They include the prop, magazine, flare adapter, cleaning brush, and a small container of oil. The "Baron" was the exception, coming in a standard molded case. None came with any papers, in contrast with the Zoraki 915 I recently acquired, which had a nice multilingual manual with field-stripping and maintenance instructions, or the Ekols models, which just have glossy brochures advertising their other models.

All felt very solid, with the typical modern mix of polymer and metal parts. Attention to detail is pretty par for the course; not as nice as your typical real firearm, but not bad, in terms of the clean lines, smooth finish, depth of stippling or cutouts, and assembly. There is one flaw in the top of the barrel on the Retay Baron I got, looking as though someone slipped a bit with an angle grinder, but I don't think it's deep enough to be a safety issue, and it's only visible when the slide is fully to the rear. As with all the blank guns I've seen, the construction is different from the real deal, with the barrel being a part of the lower frame rather than a separate element. One of the typical requirements for props to qualify as replicas and not real firearms is that they cannot be readily converted to live fire, and the integral and restricted barrel and shorter magazine are typical ways of facilitating this.

On cycling the action, all of these felt a bit dry and stiff, like they could benefit from both the included oil and perhaps a breaking-in period. Many replicas (and some real firearms) are sold/stored fairly heavily greased or oiled to prevent rust, so the dryness of these surprised me a bit, but whether due to their newness or something else, I saw no signs of rust. The "breaking-in" issue is something debated with real firearms, typical of some high-end 1911s for example, where after 500 rounds or so the feed ramp and other elements start working a bit better than right out of the box. For a blank firing replica, where I've come to assume it will have a very limited working lifespan anyway, that's not something I'd expect to see. The slide release and magazine springs were all tighter than I'm used to, but there's a chance this means they may not wear out as fast. We can hope.

Sights are built in, which is the best choice for these; while on real firearms adjustable and customizable sights are ideal, aim really doesn't matter for us, and I've had some models where the rear sight fell off and was lost by clients.

The hammerless Retay models all have a small hole in the back of the slide that I'm not sure has any function. On some striker-fire firearms there's a loaded chamber indicator there, but this doesn't seem to be one. It may just be an artifact of the way they cast things, and while it looks a bit odd to me, I doubt anyone would notice it in use.

One thing I look for in replicas is compatibility with accessories. The rails on these models are standard, but only with the Umarex Ruger revolvers have I ever had issues with atypical rails. Holster fit is a challenge though: While a universal holster will work, those tend to be lower quality, and being able to use a nicer, model-specific



Firing the Retay Baron, XR, PT24, and G17. Shape of muzzle flash has as much to do with the timing of the picture as it does with the individual model

have any Kydex holsters on hand to test the fit for the XD/XR or the SIG/Baron, but the Glock, despite being a bit shorter than the Zoraki, was a little too thick to fit in my Kydex holsters (that hold both the Zoraki and GAP blank firing Glock). Chances are that with a little breaking in, a leather holster would work for any of these, but it might stretch out the holster, ruining it for other prop types, and it might be a bit of a tight fit for the draw if it has the same thickness problem as the G17. Their Desert Eagle replica is one I did not purchase, but it looks a bit downsized and off in shape to me, so I wouldn't count on that model fitting any fitted holsters. It's been a while since we had a Desert Eagle available in blank fire in the U.S. (I only know of two other companies selling them here in the past, and only have one of those in stock), so there may well be demand.

The orange paint on these makes it hard to attach the included adapter, but I was still able to screw it in. Since the threading matches that of the Ekol models, I can also attach the same mock suppressor I bought for use with the earlier (pre-barrel extension) Jackal models. It does not match the threading on Zoraki models.

Magazines for the Retay models tested are similar, and potentially tradable if you need, but the baseplates vary, so the fit won't look or feel great if you use the wrong one.

As an instructor, I appreciate the range of functions available in

Kydex or molded leather holster is ideal. That might work with some of these replicas, especially if the holster has an adjustment screw to set the tightness of the fit. I didn't

this line: we have exposed and internal hammers, trigger and thumb safeties, a built-in lock on the PT24 and a de-cocker on the Baron, and while the models I tested are all single-action and/or simulated striker fire, I assume the Beretta 92s they carry would work as either double action or single action. For much of the past year, it has been difficult to find internal hammer models to use for mechanical demonstration. The XR/XD sadly lacks the grip safety in the back that a real XD would have—that would have been unique amongst blank replicas if they'd included it. Other common real firearms with grip safeties include some 1911s and the Uzi, but neither the Bruni, Kimar, Brigadier/Napoleon, or Umarex 1911s or the Ekol Asi (loosely modeled after an Uzi, but really just their select fire Beretta 92-style Jackal in a plastic shell) have included one. The XR also lacks the trigger safety that both the real XD and the real and replica G17s have.

A few minor ergonomic gripes: The G17 has well-defined finger notches, similar to the later-generation Glock it imitates, but not as well placed. The space between the trigger guard and the top notch is insufficient for my middle finger, making the grip a bit less comfortable for all but tiny hands. The slide release on the Baron also sticks out a bit more than I expected it to (based primarily on experience with airsoft versions; it's been a while since I fired a real SIG), and I can see that potentially catching on things during the draw or reholstering, especially from concealment.

In terms of function, initial test fires all went fine. For budgetary reasons, I only tested about a half dozen rounds each on average. Both the Baron and the XR had one failure to feed during initial dry-handling/chambering, but that may be operator error; I'm guessing

I didn't fully let the slide slam forward, and then the ejector didn't quite make it over the lip of the chambered round. When actually firing, all rounds cycled just fine, and I was later able to cycle spent blanks by hand with no problems. The G17 had no problems, even feeding from a full (14 round) magazine, which sometimes causes problems even in real firearms. I will say it was a bit tight loading the magazine all the way, furthering my initial impression of tight action and magazines, but even without any oil or breaking in they all cycled just fine.

Some were noticeably more "sparky" than others on firing, even with the same blanks, but this may be due to variation/quality control with the blanks, or perhaps a few metal filings left behind from the threading of the barrel extension. Shell ejection was fairly consistent (ejected casings were in a fairly confined landing zone), with the Baron being a bit more downrange than the others. By way of comparison, I also helped our shop foreman test some new Ekol and Kimar props we'd purchased last Spring for the University of Wyoming, and all semi-autos had at least some minor jams (mostly failure to feed, though there may have been some operator error involved there as well). I also tested a new Zoraki 917, and it too functioned perfectly. Volume levels were as expected (about 100db) for all of these—it can vary



ABOVE LEFT:
Rear view of the Retay G17

ABOVE RIGHT:
The Retay XR with its case and accessories

occasionally depending on the model, vent, etc. but these are all in the standard ballpark.

I did not conduct paper tests yet to see how far out they're dangerous, but the above screen-captures from video footage make it clear that anything within a few feet downrange of the muzzle is going to be in danger from both the explosive force and heat of the muzzle flare. Smoke was visible emerging from the muzzle, ejection port, and some out the rear of the slide, as well as the top of the magazine if it was ejected shortly after firing. I did not notice any shockwave or spent powder coming my way though, as I have experienced in the past sometimes with other models (this is part of why I highly suggest use of both ear and eye protection when testing unknown props). I'll do more thorough vetting of these models as a part of our upcoming Theatrical Firearms Safety workshop at the University of Wyoming in October.

Obviously I cannot speak to durability yet, as these have been available for less than a month at the time of my writing this review, but I expect they'll be comparable to other models; with regular use, expect to get a couple years out of them at best before they start having problems, and eventually need to be decommissioned and relegated to non-firing prop status (or pitched). That's something I've learned to expect with blank firing guns. Unlike quality steel swords, where you might get a lifetime's service out of most, blank guns do wear out, and spare parts are never available for the Retay or other models, unless you have an equivalent in your stock that can serve as an "organ donor." Your local gunsmith will probably know nothing about blank guns, and may be hesitant to mess with them, so don't count on them for repairs.

Overall I'm very pleased with these new offerings. Video of the props and firing tests will be made available on my YouTube channel and industry blog (both available by searching for Fight Designer), and the Facebook page for *The Theatrical Firearms Handbook*. It will be interesting to see if these stay available, especially the Glock (given their history of shutting down replicas), but for now they make a great addition to my props inventory, and fill a few underserved niches for modern replica semiautomatics. ❦



Dueling for Diversity

BY MATT HERNDON

Approaching its 40th birthday next May, the Society of American Fight Directors has made great strides in incorporating the art of stage combat into the realms of theatre, film, television, opera, and even video games. Stressing the importance of the fight director/choreographer, actor/performer safety, and safe and believable depictions of violence, the SAFD has seen a tremendous increase in membership within the past 15 years alone. However, just as the SAFD continues to extend its influence outwards, the organization recognizes that it must tend to inward matters as well. Despite theatre already being a very inclusive community, there is always room for improvement, and I find it heartening to see the SAFD tackle these kinds of issues head-on.

This past fall, the SAFD's Governing Body (GB) determined that underserved populations exist within its ranks; therefore, the organization is investigating strategies to better serve its membership. A call for interested members was put out at the end of September 2015, and by mid-October a Diversity Committee was formed in order to explore the topic of diversity in the Society. This 13-member committee, led by committee chair Gregg Lloyd (CT), spans many groups of people within the SAFD. Members hold ranks from Fight Master to Actor Combatant, are located from New York to Los Angeles (and

China!), and represent groups such as women, the LGBTQ community, and people of color. Armed with an open-ended mandate and prepared to investigate all aspects of diversity, the task before us is neither easy nor quick. Which path or direction to pursue first? Which subject matter or issue to immediately tackle? How do we discuss some of these topics without lambasting each other? Fortunately, we hit the ground running and began discussing various important issues we felt needed to be addressed. Prior to the GB's December 2015 meeting, a summation of initial concerns was presented on our behalf by T. Fulton Burns (CT), focusing on five separate topics we wanted addressed.

Current Enrollment and Representation

While it is easy to generalize the demographics of the SAFD as a whole by looking up our members on our website, we truly want to know how our members identify themselves. In order to better serve our entire body, we feel it is in our best interest to collect data from the current enrollment of our members (something the SAFD does not currently request of its members when they join), and of course we will be seeing how this is reflected in our leadership. We are in the process of putting together an anonymous, non-mandatory online survey to send out to all members. Any information we collect will only be

accessible to the Diversity Committee (and by extension the Governing Body) and will be kept in strict confidentiality, with the possibility of sharing the aggregate results with our members.

Literature

This is a major point as it relates to both Skills Proficiency Tests and scenes of onstage violence in general. Granted, in the theatre we can gender-bend and put ourselves in the shoes of many characters that weren't specifically written for us, but there is empowerment in engaging in a scene that relates to the individual performer. For instance, one point we rallied around was the lack of good fight scenes for women fighting other women. We are curious to know if the GB has ever tried to incentivize writers to produce first-rate material involving stage violence for women, individuals who identify as LG-BTQ, people of color, etc. One solution could involve approaching any playwrights among our own membership to assist with this task.

Staff Demographics at the NSCW/Winter Wonderland/Other Workshops

At the time this committee was forming, the Winter Wonderland Workshop (sponsored by MACE, held annually in Chicago) was right around the corner. Several of us immediately wondered why the staff seemed to predominantly lean in a certain direction, and although we speculated that certain qualified individuals were either busy with fight work elsewhere or were unavailable to teach at that time, we truly wish to know what the applicant pool for teachers/teaching assistants/interns looks like for workshops such as Winter Wonderland and the National Stage Combat Workshops.

Scholarships

When it comes to SAFD workshop scholarships, primarily won through various workshop raffles, has diversity ever factored into the awarding process? Though refusing to demand imposed quotas (a point of contention in several of our discussions so far), we are curious to see if there is any interest in creating scholarships specifically for women, people of color, members of the LGBTQ community, and other minority groups, offered separately from the general raffle prizes and scholarships.

Community Outreach

At the NSCW, there is the Introduction to Stage Combat: High School track, and some SAFD members often work with high schools and middle schools on various productions. However, several of us on the committee are interested in reaching out even further to pre-college performers and less affluent communities.

We plan to explore ways to connect with youth and underserved communities. Such strategies should help us garner a wider range of performers interested in the craft of stage combat and, in turn, broaden our own numbers.

A Strong Start for the Future

For the immediate future, the Diversity Committee plans to finalize its anonymous online survey for SAFD members, and get it moving amongst our membership to start collecting data. Please note that completing this survey is not mandatory, but would be extremely helpful to us in trying to determine what makes up our entire body and how those findings could affect our efforts in our other areas of exploration. In addition, if you have any comments or questions you'd like to pose to the Diversity Committee, you can contact the committee at diversity@safd.org, or me at herndonm12@gmail.com. The committee members are also listed at the end of this article, should you wish to reach out to a particular member.

For many of us currently in the SAFD, a combination of theatre, stage combat, stunts, and martial arts helped bring us into the fold and gave us common ground with which we connect. However, as an Advanced Actor Combatant of mixed race who works as an actor and a fight choreographer, I would love to see a greater diversity of stage combat students and SAFD members at workshops and conferences. The Diversity Committee is not about pointing fingers at practices and procedures; instead, it is interested in creating more opportunities for incorporating a wider community into stage combat. As Gregg Lloyd puts it, "I believe the most important thing about diversity is that it makes the best use of all of our resources. If we alienate a group or individual, we deny ourselves the talents and ideas of those people and weaken any group of which we are a part." Change takes time, and we as a committee are open to any and all suggestions from the rest of our members. The SAFD draws strength from each of its members, so help us better serve our vast array of members. You can help keep the SAFD and stage combat relevant and fresh! ✦

Below is the list of Diversity Committee Members:

Leraldo Anzaldúa (CT)	Ed Baker (AAC)
Michael Chin (FM)	Zachary Dorsey (Friend)
Paola Gonzalez (Friend)	Matt Herndon (AAC)
Gregg Lloyd (CT)	Mike Mahaffey (FD)
Nigel Poulton (CT)	Cristina Ramos (AC)
Barbara Seifert (CT)	Alaric Toy (AAC)
Elizabeth van den Berg (AC)	



Donald McBane



BY MELISSA FREILICH

McBane spent his entire life on one battlefield or another. His first battle (now famous as the battle of Killiecrankie) made him the stuff of legend when he jumped 18 feet across a river gorge to escape (not the most auspicious start, but impressive). McBane first learned to duel in 1692, when the older soldier assigned to manage his pay refused to dole any of it out to the young Scot. McBane paid for fencing lessons, borrowed a smallsword from a friend, and was thoroughly trounced by the older soldier. Undeterred, McBane went back for more lessons, stole a different friend's sword, and tried again. This time he was successful and took control of his own pay.

McBane was subsequently sent to Holland as part of the Duke of Marlborough's campaign, where he established his life as a professional soldier, swordsman, teacher, and thug. In Brabant, McBane tells us "I set up a school for teaching the Art of the Sword and had very good business. But there being a great many schools in the town...which obliged me to be constantly on my guard and to fight twenty-four times before they would be persuaded that I was a Master of my business."¹ In fact, McBane frequently used his sword to defend his livelihood, although this had less to do with his fencing schools and more to do with the whorehouses he established alongside them.

Born: 1663-1664
Died: sometime after 1728
Country of Birth: Scotland
Parents: Unknown
Titles: None
Weapon of Choice: Smallsword, Backsword, and numerous others
Advice: "...keep your left hand always above your left eye brow, ready to Parie...never parie wide if possible you can avoid it, for you then are open and may be deceived by a Feint."

The life of a soldier in a time when the army was still not fully professional was a rocky one. While on campaign, he still needed to earn his living from whorehouses, gambling and teaching people to fight, with business often interrupted by injuries. At the Battle of Blenheim in 1704 he was shot four times, stabbed five, stripped of his possessions, and left for dead. McBane recounts, "I lay among the dead, expecting death every minute, not only by reason of wounds, but by reason of the cold and great thirst that I had. I drank several handfuls of the dead men's blood I lay beside."² He was found, and recovered.

In 1712 there was an armistice, after which McBane moved to London to fight in sword gladiatorial contests at the Bear Garden. He retired in 1726 because, as he put it, "now being sixty-three years of age, [I] resolve never to fight any more, but to repent for my former wickedness." He had two musket balls in his thigh and a silver plate in his skull. He had been wounded 27 times, not including the time his own grenade blew up in his hand. He had been in 16 battles, 52 sieges, innumerable skirmishes and finished his career with 37 prize fights in London.

Writings

McBane's *The Expert Sword-Man's Companion*, written in 1728 after his retirement, contains not only useful advice and systems for many weapons, but also his own highly colorful biography. McBane's writings on the smallsword are well worth reading for the modern stage combat enthusiast. He offers a counterpoint to the punctilio of the French masters and the treatises on honorable quarrels.

McBane did fight formalized duels, but he also served in the ranks and frequently fought for his life with (fellow?) ruffians. He warns against tricks during a sword fight: "If you are engaged with a Ruffin [ruffian], or a stranger, be watchfull that he does not throw his hat, dust, or something else at your face...."³ For a combination of practical advice, step-by-step exercises and amusing anecdotes, look no further than McBane's *The Expert Sword-Man's Companion*. ♦

Endnotes

- 1 McBane 30
- 2 McBane 38
- 3 McBane 59

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Duel Fantasy

Game of Thrones and
the Problem of Violence

BY ROBERT W. DILLON, JR. with additional contributions by JEAN MONFORT

Editor's note: The following piece discusses HBO's Game of Thrones in detail, and contains specific plot reveals and character deaths. Please do not write to The Fight Master and say you were not warned.

I'm a fan of *Game of Thrones*. I came to the show late, but I've made something of a habit of binge watching the seasons as they appear on DVD. I admire the show's overt maturity (one might say sensationalism). I have one gripe, though: the sword fighting. More specifically, the violent action shown on screen doesn't follow the same clarity as the "general" mass violence. Whereas the show almost fetishizes frank depictions of sexuality and graphic depictions of the effects of violence, it makes very few attempts to depict violent action to the same high standard. In most ways the show aims to appeal to mature audiences, but swordplay and related action are left behind, aimed at eighth graders. What follows is an examination of several critical scenes from *Game of Thrones* in terms of weapon use, as well as how we, as practitioners of theatrical violence, can learn from the show's successes and missteps.

I'm not so much bothered by what is shown as by what is not shown: master swordspersons demonstrating real mastery. *Game of Thrones* fights show plenty of bravado, bluster and appeals to stereotypical adolescent sensibilities and tastes (Exploding heads! Cleaved bodies!), but hardly any sophistication in technique. I'm bothered by the ease with which the mastery of Jaime Lannister

(Nikolaj Coster-Waldau), for instance, could be made clearer to discerning eyes with some basic technique changes. I'm bothered that the show sacrifices maturity for action when it comes to swordplay.

Let me be clear: the production team puts a great deal of work into the fight effects, and I am not criticizing that effort. What I would like to see is a shift in content only, and sources for that shift in content abound.

OPPOSITE: Lady Brienne of Tarth (Gwendoline Christie) comes into guard well out of distance of Ser Jaime Lannister (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau). LEFT: Captain of the Dornish guard, Areo Hotah (DeObia Oparei). In both book and show, Hotah carries a fantastical glaive. Fantasy literature allows unlikely weaponry—this glaive is beautiful, but probably very top heavy.



OPPOSITE: HELEN SLOAN, COURTESY OF HBO MEDIA; RIGHT: MACALL B. POLAY

Theory and technical resources are readily available from the Historical European Martial Arts organization and the Association of Renaissance Martial Arts. It is my opinion that these resources could easily improve *Game of Thrones*' sword action. As a Renaissance fencing master might say, it could inspire a more authentic, realistic, and mature use of *Time*, *Distance*, and *Proportion* in its depictions of swordplay. These are the three primary components of both real and staged combat, and so we will examine each one.

For our purposes, *Time* here includes timing, speed, pace, tempo, rhythm, and duration. The Japanese swordsperson's notion of "initiative" (先 *sen*) is useful and not that different from much of the historical European personal combat theory. Theories of timing had nothing to do with dramatic content; they helped a fighter avoid getting maimed or going home in a box. Looking exclusively at duels in *Game of Thrones*, time means that one fighter can attack first, both can attack simultaneously, or one fighter can defend and then attack. *Game of Thrones* relies overmuch on the latter of the three. Thus, it has much more in common with modern foil fencing than with medieval swordplay. Modern foil fencing makes the sequence of attack, parry, and riposte *central and essential* to the sport to such an extent that a "hit" is not valid without the correct sequence.

The problem is that real weapons play delegitimizes the third form of initiative. A skilled swordsperson will, *as far as possible*, avoid the parry-repost in favor of simultaneous *avoidance and counter* that blends with the actions of the opponent in such a way as to make a decisive and immediate counter. The works of Salvator Fabris, for instance, are full of these direct and decisive techniques. A little Fabris would go a long way towards rehabilitating the swordplay of *Game of Thrones*, not to mention our longstanding addiction to staging foil fencing and its attack-parry-riposte timing.

Time, in the terms of physics, is tied up with Distance (speed + distance = time). For simplicity, and for our present purposes, we can say that *Distance* is spacing. To borrow again from the Japanese, distance is "combative engagement distance" (間合い *ma-ai*). Based on this principle, and a little common sense, we can identify three distances: close, medium, and far. When two fighters are close they can hit or be hit without advancing. At medium distance a step or two is needed to "engage." At far distance, ranged weapons such as bows are more effective than melee weapons. *Game of Thrones*' fights are all staged at medium distance or "out of distance." There are exceptions, but these usually involve "finishing" moves, such as assassinations. In *Game of Thrones*, sword fighting in earnest is always staged out of distance. While most likely done for the safety of the actors, it creates a plausibility problem for the discerning viewer. For example, Jaime Lannister engages Brienne of Tarth (Gwendoline Christie) on the bridge in "Dark Wings, Dark Words." They are both using longswords, yet neither closes distance, resulting in strikes and parries landing at the foibles of the blades. Even if they weren't parried, it is obvious that most strokes in this fight would miss the target. The show sets up both characters as superb swordspersons, yet examination of fight stills from the show demonstrate particularly damning evidence of bad Distance.

Another irritating illustration of bad distance is pictures of Arya Stark (Maisie Williams) being trained by Syrio Forel (Miltos Yerolimos). The Forel and Arya scenes work perfectly well for character growth, but as a depiction of a sword master teaching a student, they are mostly poppycock, filed to the brim with bad depictions of Distance. Syrio does not close distance during training, except to deliver fancy end moves. The fighting is done well out of distance—neither teacher nor student is going to hit the other, as evidenced by Arya's constant attacking of the blade. The same may be said of the



scenes showing Bronn (Jerome Flynn) instructing Jaime after Jaime has lost his hand later in the series. Distance is again a central issue to the trained eye, and nothing resembling *pedagogy* is shown; the two men just spar, and they spar, no surprise, well out of distance. The depiction of distance in swordplay in *Game of Thrones* would be greatly improved if Master Forel (“Dancing Master” indeed!) appeared to teach just a little more of, say, Fiore dei Liberi, and a little less of Errol Flynn.

Proportion is harder to define. In terms of this examination, I will define it as economy of movement. *Game of Thrones* uses far too much elaboration in technique and weapons, happy to put on as many flourishes as possible without reflecting on how much work is needed to maintain such a show. There is too little refined elegance of the sort that looks simple but is actually deeply sophisticated, the true evidence of mastery. There is a “Keep It Simple” principle in real life and death struggles that few of us civilians comprehend. Pragmatic technique *must* get the job done with as little effort and in as *few steps* (as little Time) as possible. This is Proportion, and is directly tied back to Time and Distance.

Proportion is particularly important to the concept of simultaneous defense-that-is-attack. Forel and Arya demonstrate reasoned and appropriate Proportion in practicing with wasters and not with live, dangerous steel. That’s to the good. Non-realistic examples of Proportion include fantastical or impractical weapons. For example, Prince Doran’s bodyguard Areo Hotah (DeObia Oparei) uses a large, top-heavy glaive. Hotah’s showy, baton-twirling flourishes with his glaive show bad Proportion, as he has to compensate for the off-balance weapon in his movements, showing off his non-technique to no purpose. The Sand Snake Nymeria (Jessica Henwick) uses a bullwhip as her primary weapon – she brandishes it at a man armed with a rapier in close quarters (fortunately her sister

ABOVE: Arya Stark (Maisie Williams) receives training from the Bravvos trainer Syrio Forel (Miltos Yeremelou), in Season 1. OPPOSITE, LEFT: The Mountain, Ser Gregor Clegane (Hafþór Júlíus Björnsson) fighting The Red Viper, Oberyn Martell (Pedro Pascal) in a trial by combat. The Mountain uses a giant greatsword and doesn’t move that much, and the Red Viper uses a flashy, twirling spear and acrobatics. I will not tell you who wins. OPPOSITE, RIGHT: Jon Snow (Kit Harrington) and his sword Longclaw. Again, as a pommel, the wolf’s head is questionable, but fantasy shows allow for such things.

is flanking with a spear). It’s showy, but impractical. Arya Stark’s sword, Needle, figures prominently in the show, but it appears to be nothing more than a cut-down epee blade with a ring-hilt. John Snow’s (Kit Harrington) sword, Longclaw, has what appears to be an ivory wolf’s head pommel, and is thus striking both for its showiness and (to sword historians) unworkman-like design and construction.

Proportion issues abound in all levels of the series. The tournament helms shown lack the bracing and reinforcement needed for the sport of tournament fighting. Knights in *Game of Thrones* might always wear armor, but only background guards wear their helmets. Sword and shield fighting in *Game of Thrones* shows little evidence of the understanding that the *shield*, not the sword, is the primary offensive weapon. A short glance over some of the material published by Roland Warzecha (among others) might convince the redoubtable *Game of Thrones* action directing team to try a different approach. Likewise, such combatively useless movements are glaring in the trial-by-combat duel between Gregor Clegane (Hafþór Júlíus Björnsson) and Oberyn Martell (Pedro Pascal). Gregor’s sword seems selected to impress *us* with its size and weight. The

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contrast between the fighters here is made far too aggressively, and it makes both look bad. Martell's acrobatics and flourishes do get him killed, and the character's awful grasp of Proportion suggests he deserved it, in a way. Both characters (and both characterizations) would benefit from a small dose of Ridolfo Capoferro.

Proportion, Distance, and Time were real concerns of real swordsman fighting in real fights. Master teachers of swordsmanship like Ridolfo Capoferro, Fiore dei Liberi, and Salvator Fabris taught these principles systematically. Furthermore, the specific and exhaustive technical repertoire of these master swordsmen, and many more like them, is readily available for the action director's use, thanks to technology and the revival of old traditions by practitioners and teachers. *Game of Thrones* is marked by lush production values, good writing, exceptional directing, and stellar acting. It is notorious for its frank and blatant use of nudity and gore. It's disappointing that the violence lacks the appropriate punch.

The fight choreographers for *Game of Thrones* are informed by different concerns than those of the historical fighter. Film fighting requires multiple angles, movement constraints, and of course, the safety of the performer is paramount. And *Game of Thrones* is a fantasy show, so there are going to be elements that require the audience to suspend their disbelief (such as dragons, or ice zombies). But there is also no doubt that it would take very little extra effort to make the violence itself, especially the violence enacted by characters who are supposed to be masters of violence, more mature, believable, and credible to discerning eyes. All it would take is a dash of historical European or Eastern martial arts. I don't think it is too much to ask that depictions of swordplay, or personal violence in general, in *Game of Thrones* match or even excel the level of maturity seen in the rest of the show. The show, and this fan, will be better for it. —

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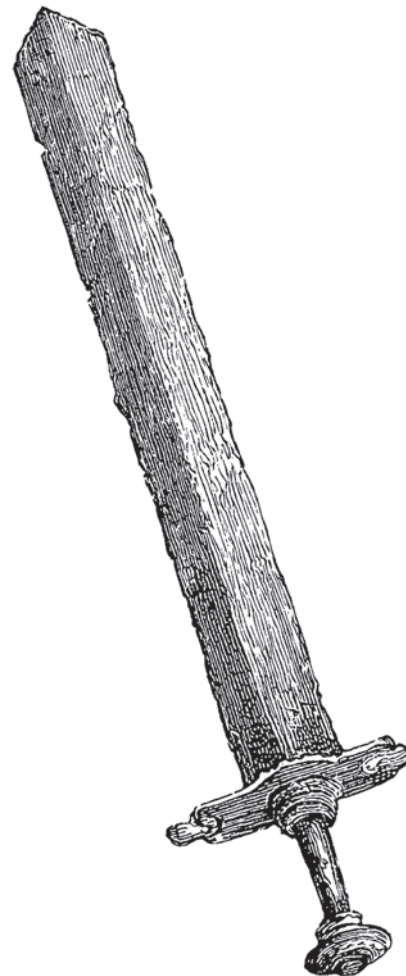
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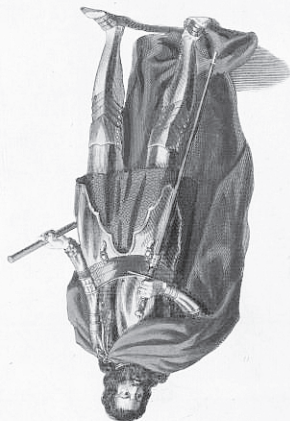
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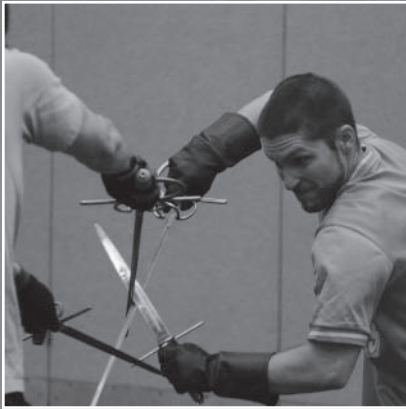
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Movement for Everybody

MACE was created out of the need to have one place where people could study physical movement in all its forms. We are continually progressing toward that goal by offering more workshops and classes each year in more movement styles. We bring in some of the best instructors in their fields of expertise because students deserve nothing less. If you want to be the best, you need to train with the best.

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