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The FightMaster

Spring 2019 The Journal of the Society of American Fight Directors



The Squared Circle

How Blurring Reality and Fantasy Affects Technique

Boosting Creativity Within the Limits

Choreographing Silence and Sound in *Heathers the Musical*

A Little Heads Up

When Head Injuries and Stage Combat Collide

A Fight Director's Tool Kit, Part Two

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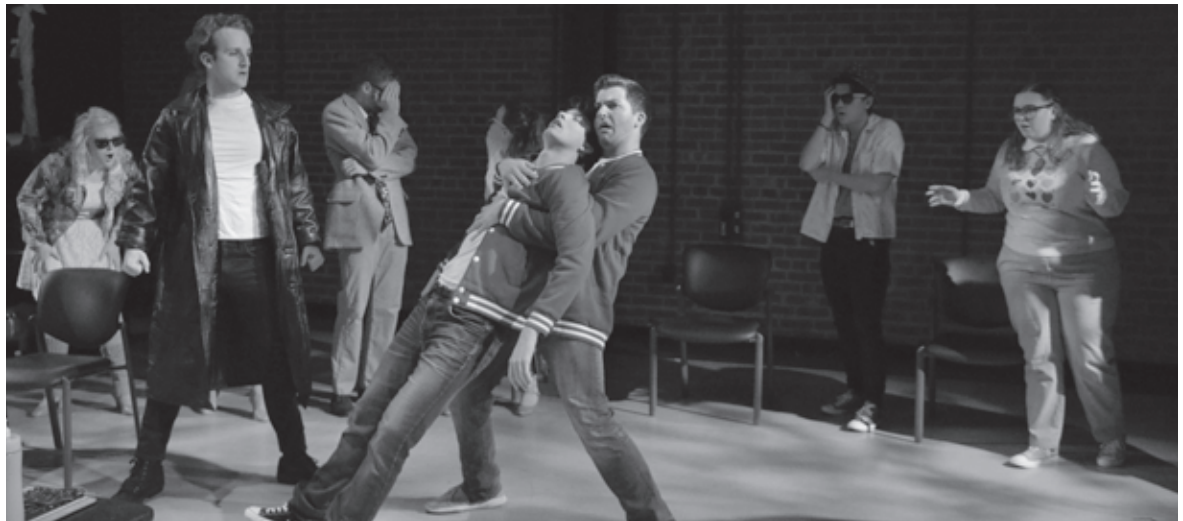
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Getting one's "bell rung" used to be a common phrase. Now it's a potentially dangerous signal. In this article to raise awareness on how Concussions, CTE and Brain Trauma can occur, **Eugene Solfanelli** directs concussion research towards its application in the stage combat profession. What changes do we need to make as stage combat and stunt professionals in order to have long and healthy professional careers?



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Editorially Speaking



“Am I supposed to use this? Like, try to attack them?”

“My advice? Never raise it once they’re in the room with you.”

I nodded, looking down at the red rubber blade. A red blade wouldn’t sell on stage unless it were some sort of artistic production, but to a Marine intent on capturing an intruder, it would be a very clear indicator not to incapacitate me with what is clinically referred to as “pain compliance techniques.” This is how I reach out to my SAFD training now—I participate in drills at the U.S. Embassy. Sometimes I play the victim. Today, I was playing the intruder.

As I barricaded myself into a meeting room, I stared at the knife in my hand. It felt very different from being on stage, and while I waited for the Marines to arrive and apprehend me (listening to my friend who I had “stabbed” call for help in the hallway) I thought about why. It was still playing a role. I was still finding a character of sorts. It was all practice. What had me on edge?

The tiny sliver of my brain that was curious about how far my knife training would take me winked out when the scope and barrel of the assault rifle came to rest on me through the window, and another Marine took up position at the door. That was why this felt different. I was bringing stage combat to a military simulation. They don’t quite mix; my knife was rubber, the rifle was not marked in orange. I kept yelling obscene French words at them, but the rubber knife came to rest on the table. A minute later I decided not to be holding it when they broke down my little chair barricade and came into the room. I would not antagonize the camouflaged figures.

It wasn’t fear, per se. It was recognizing that while I was enjoying the theatrical elements of the drill, those men and women on the other side of the door weren’t going to play along. They weren’t in character. They were going to follow a specific set of instructions meant to stop a legitimately dangerous person from hurting people. My role, my job really, was to give them specific attitudes to which they needed to respond—belligerence, fear, and not understanding English commands. They were real. I was the actress with a red rubber knife.

I was right. The chairs did little to stop them from coming in. I was also right that handcuffs are uncomfortable, being facedown on the floor is uncomfortable, and that forward fall techniques really do get you safely to the ground, even when being gently forced there by a Marine with whom you exchanged pleasantries earlier that day.

We never stop learning.

* * * * *

I resigned last issue—took my bow and walked off stage.

Did you notice?

I shouldn’t be here, but I had an “emergency brake” contingency issue lined up in case something went wrong in the process. Consider that brake thrown. Beyond this, it’s up to you as active members in the Society of American Fight Directors to stand up and take responsibility for this journal. It exists to help you, but like any symbiotic relationship it will not survive neglect nor indifference. I encourage you to reach out to your Regional Representatives and the Governing Body and see what you can do to help with the publication, if you wish it to continue. That is your choice. Use it.

Be well. Fight well. Write well.

Jean A. Monfort, Editor
fmeditor@safd.org

The FightMaster

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EDITORIAL STAFF Editor

Jean A. Monfort
fmeditor@safd.org

Art Director

Jonathan Wieder
fmartdirector@safd.org

Associate Editors

Michael Mueller

Advisor

Ian Rose
FMRep@safd.org

GOVERNING BODY

President

Scot Mann
President@safd.org

Vice President

Matthew Ellis
Vice-President@safd.org

Secretary

Christopher Elst
Secretary@safd.org

Treasurer

Adam Noble
Treasurer@safd.org

AAC/AC/Friend Rep.

Sarah Flanagan
ACRep@safd.org

Certified Teacher Rep.

Jenny Male
CTRep@safd.org

Fight Director Rep.

Robb Hunter
FDRep@safd.org

Fight Master Rep.

Richard Raether
FMRep@safd.org

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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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Jean A. Monfort, Editor
fmeditor@safd.org

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Please forward submissions and questions to:

Jonathan Wieder, Art Director
design@jonathanwieder.com

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Jessi Cosgrove is a graduate of University of the Arts acting program in Philadelphia, PA, and is a professional stuntwoman trained at the International Stunt School in Seattle, WA. She is also the founder and director of Route 33 Wrestling, a pro wrestling company based in Spencer, WV. Jessi has held eight weapons certifications under the SAFD, and is a current professional wrestler in-training.



Whit Emerson (SAFD Advanced Actor Combatant) is a PhD Candidate in Theatre History, Theory, and Literature at Indiana University. His research interests include modern Chinese theatre, stage violence, and the historical European avant-garde. Whit has worked in the theatre as an actor, director, producer, fight choreographer, dialect coach, playwright, sound designer, and dramaturg.



Eugene Solfanelli (SAFD Certified Teacher) has been a professional Actor, Stage Combatant, Stuntman and Teacher for the past 15 years. He currently teaches "The Art of Stage Combat and the Craft of Physical Storytelling" and "Fighting for Film and TV" at Brooklyn College. His work has been seen multiple times on *Gotham*, *Big Dogs*, *Tower of Silence* and *Wholly Broken*.



Joseph Travers (SAFD Fight Director/Certified Teacher) has been fight directing and teaching stage combat for over twenty-five years. Recent fight directing work includes the world premier of the musical *Treasure Island* at the Fulton Theatre, the Off-Broadway premier of *The View Upstairs* and the Broadway production of *Bronx Bombers*. He teaches stage combat for the Columbia University MFA Acting Program, heads the stage combat program at AMDA, NYC, and is the Managing Director of Swordplay, NYC's longest running stage combat school.

On The Cover



Kevin Inouye (center) having a "bottle" broken over his head at the 2018 Paddy Craen International Fight Workshop in Banff, Canada. *Photograph by Lawrence Carmichael.*

The Squared Circle

How Blurring Reality and Fantasy Affects Technique





BY JESSI COSGROVE

“Wow! You can’t even see the blood packets!”

This was the phrase my father uttered at his first ever pro wrestling event that made me chuckle. Dad was never into the “wrasslin” scene, but I had managed to talk him into accompanying me to an IWA East Coast event in Nitro, WV, so he could get a first-hand glimpse of what his little girl was getting into. To my surprise, he began actually enjoying himself, even offering to buy advanced tickets for IWA’s “Masters of Pain,” a death match wrestling event months later. When “The Bulldozer” Matt Tremont received several staples to the face at the hands of Viper, and blood began to stain the canvas, my dad exclaimed how impressed he was that the “actors” were so skilled at concealing the special effects.

When I informed him that there were no blood effects, he turned a rather frightening shade of green and replied, “Maybe I don’t want to go to ‘Masters of Pain’ after all...”

• • • • •

As an actor-combatant, I encountered a massive learning curve when I decided to dive into the world of professional wrestling. Stage combat within the world of theatre is built upon the almost universal structure of casting, direction, and rehearsal under the trained eye of a fight director, and the finished piece is performed multiple times to an audience that is generally aware it is observing a performance. Pro wrestling is different in that it relies a great deal on improvisation, no

two matches are repeated, and it breaks—no, utterly demolishes the very notion of—a fourth wall. The use of kayfabe—the presentation of staged conflicts or plotlines as genuine—in pro wrestling versus an audience suspending its disbelief during a play has a vast effect on the physical presentation and techniques of each of these forms of theatrical violence.

Kayfabe and Curtain Calls

When an audience member attends *Hamlet*, they receive a program that lists the characters and the name of the actors who portray them. They are expected to “suspend their disbelief;” after the “sweet prince” drifts off into his eternal sleep, the curtain falls, the slain rise from the stage floor, and the actors bow to thunderous applause. The actors receive great reviews and probably go out to get fro-yo afterwards.

Pro wrestling, however, is not so clear cut. Spectators don’t receive a program that says “The Miz, played by Michael Gregory

OPPOSITE: Gary Gandy puts Mongo in a headlock. Taken at the Route 33’s second event “School Yard Throwdown” at the National Armory in Spencer, West Virginia.

ABOVE: Robbie E clotheslines Chase Ryan as his tag partner “The Hawaiian Hurricane” King Kaluha recovers in the corner. Taken at Route 33 Wrestling’s debut event “Spring Breakdown” at the National Armory in Spencer, West Virginia

Mizanin.” And the show doesn’t necessarily stop after the final bell. The athletes don’t grab hands for a big curtain call bow. Wrestlers who come out to sign autographs and take pictures with fans typically do so in character (some “heels”—villain characters—rudely refuse to sign autographs or take photos), and



ABOVE: Randy the Rowdy Hillbilly prepares to give Tommy Forte a flying clothesline. Taken at the Route 33's second event "School Yard Throwdown" at the National Armory in Spencer, West Virginia

RIGHT: "Mr. Center of the Earth" Jimmy Fahrenheit flies through the air during a massive splash on The Abominable CPA. Taken at Route 33 Wrestling's debut event "Spring Breakdown" at the National Armory in Spencer, West Virginia



often use social media to continue their rivalries, causing spectators to wonder what's real and what isn't.

When kayfabe was king in the 70's and 80's, some wrestlers went more than the extra mile to preserve their plot-lines outside the ring. In 1975, Tim Woods and Johnny Valentine, two in-ring rivals, were in a plane crash together (the legendary "Nature Boy" Ric Flair was also onboard). Valentine was paralyzed, and Woods suffered severe injuries, including a broken back. At the time, Woods was a baby face (a good guy), and Valentine was a heel; if the fans discovered the two were chummy travel buddies outside the ring, the kayfabe illusion the pro wrestling industry thrived on at the time would have been shattered. So, when help arrived at the scene of the crash, Woods did the only thing he could think of to protect their characters; he told first responders he was a wrestling promoter instead of a wrestler, and gave them a different name².

Rumors, however, began to circulate that Woods had been traveling with Valentine. To preserve the storyline, Woods wrestled a match just two weeks after breaking his back in the crash to prove to fans he had not been traveling with a rival, despite the excruciating pain. Woods would then go on to wrestle for another eight years until his official retirement in 1983.

While the preservation of kayfabe is not as essential today, this blurring of fantasy and reality still increases the allure of sports-entertainment and brings the show outside the ring and into the world of the fans.

Rehearsal vs. Calling It

In the world of theatre, if a performance contains a fight scene, it is ideally directed by stage combat directors, and rehearsed and

performed by trained actor-combatants who are selected via auditions. Each move within the fight is carefully choreographed to support the characters and plot, and the actors repeatedly rehearse the fight, both for safety and the aesthetic. Because of this ability to choreograph and rehearse, performers are able to add specific theatricality and flair to the fight while preserving the illusion of spontaneity.

Putting together a wrestling match stands in stark contrast to rehearsing a fight scene. In the independent wrestling circuit, wrestlers often don't meet their opponents until they are about to make their entrance, and therefore have to "call it" in-ring. The next time you see a wrestling match, pay close attention to what the athletes do in the corners and in submission holds; they are talking to each other, calling spots (moves) for each other to do. But even when wrestlers have the time to talk with their opponents before the show and make a plan, they don't typically write it out step by step. Once the winner and loser are determined³, they decide how the match ends, how it starts, and a handful of specific spots in between. The rest is called on the spot, during the match, in front of the audience. This structured improvisation relates back to the preservation of kayfabe; many wrestlers feel that fully choreographing a match will result in more of a "dance" than a fight, causing the audience to lose that sense of real, nitty, gritty action. By calling it in-ring, the illusion of spontaneity is easier to

preserve because even the athletes are forced to react on the spot to their opponent's moves.

Bumps and Impact

So how exactly does this emphasis on spontaneity and authenticity affect the actual physical techniques of both stage combat and professional wrestling? Stage combat utilizes a great deal of non-contact, off-target, or out-of-distance moves to help keep the actors safe. Because the audience is typically further away, it is possible to angle certain attacks to be off-target without the audience seeing them as intentional misses. Additionally, thanks to the audience typically being on only one side of the fight, concealed knaps are possible, resulting in that nice "smack" that makes the audience go "Ooooooh!"

In contrast, pro wrestling capitalizes mostly on heavy contact (i.e. contact slaps, kicks, chops, forearm strikes, or clubs to the back), as well as a falling technique known as bumping (falling hard onto the mat and spreading the impact across the largest span of the body as possible). Deliberate contact is absolutely necessary in the squared circle, as it is almost always performed in the round; there are limited opportunities for concealed knapping, and with a close-up audience, moves that could otherwise be pulled or angled would be obvious to spectators, ruining the illusion of reality.

Additionally, where actors on a stage would utilize blood effects for a gory fight, wrestlers instead use a technique known as "blading" for more intense matches that require bloodshed; they carry a hidden razor blade into the ring, and when the moment calls for blood, they intentionally cut open their forehead. If they don't use a razor, they "do it the hard way," taking attacks or slams to the point that their skin legitimately splits open. And of course, when it comes to hardcore wrestling or death matches, the entire objective is to bleed, so wrestlers will use anything from thumb tacks to light tubes, barbed wire to barbeque forks, on each other. Not the safest technique, and certainly not one I'm a fan of, but it definitely embodies the idea of making the show the most realistic experience for wrestling fans.

Fake?

The question constantly surrounding the pro wrestling community is "Is it fake?" This question doesn't seem to be often asked of the theatre community, and I believe this is due to the audiences expected suspension of disbelief. The heavy-hitting, full-contact spontaneity of a pro wrestling match prevents the audience from fully accepting the action as merely a performance. Wrestling superstar Chris Jericho said it best:

Fake is not a word I like to use, because there's nothing fake about what I do. It's a show, it's a predetermined outcome; we're putting on a television drama, action, comedy, whatever you want to call it—but it's not fake. Fake would be if I was just about to take a body slam, and my stuntman did it. Fake would be if I was going to take a chair shot to the head, and the chair was made of rubber. I'll tell the world that it's a show, but I hate the word fake. It's such an unfair term to us. (114)4

This "realness" gives wrestling its impact and makes it stand out from other forms of theater. It's easier (arguably) to watch someone get stabbed and die when you know they'll pop up a few short scenes later and take a bow; this isn't always the case when you see someone taking back to back suplexes as they bleed from their face. As my pro wrestling fiancé Mongo likes to say, "It's hard to fake falling down."

The stage combat community could learn a few tricks from pro wrestlers. Perhaps we can start incorporating more contact-heavy choreography that makes the audience wonder if it's real (with consent, of course!). Maybe we can experiment with structured

improvisation in combat to help us more spontaneously react to our scene partner (and adversary). We could even encourage audience interaction during the course of a fight, allowing them to cheer for the protagonist to fight back or to boo when the antagonist cheats. Would they know it's "fake?" Probably. Or perhaps they'll go home with a small part of their brain shouting, "But maybe..."

Our job as performers, whether we wrestle or swordfight, is to offer our audience an experience, and hopefully make them *feel* something because of that experience. My dad certainly felt something (read: sick) when he realized Matt Tremont was actually bleeding. In contrast, he has also experienced a positive reaction to wrestling, such as when he ran to ringside to give Mongo a high five after his first victory at Route 33 Wrestling; he was genuinely excited, just as he was genuinely disgusted by his first hardcore wrestling experience. Regardless of how he felt, I know he will remember those moments for years to come.

That is what I hope to achieve in both professional wrestling and stage combat: creating a realistic, thrilling experience that will leave a lasting impact on the audience. —

Bibliography

Leiker, Ken and Mark Vancil. *Unscripted (WWE)*. Pocket Books, 2003.

Endnotes

- 1 He's said other, less chuckle-worthy things as well.
- 2 Tim Wood's actual legal name is George Woodin. This is the name he offered to the medical team at the hospital, rather than the name wrestling fans would recognize.
- 3 Apologies, but it is true—the winner is determined ahead of time. It's why you can't bet on pro-wrestling in Las Vegas.
- 4 Leikler, Ken and Mark Vancil. *Unscripted (WWE)*. Pocket Books, 2003.
- 5 The professional wrestling company I started in October 2017 in Spencer, WV.



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Boosting Creativity Within the Limits

Choreographing Silence and Sound in *Heathers: The Musical*



BY WHIT EMERSON

The fight choreographer in any show must walk a fine line between creating their own vision on-stage and conforming to the director's concept of the production. The confines of the script must also be taken into account—Romeo simply *wouldn't* fight Juliet. Embracing the limitations of the script while also fulfilling the precise needs of the production thereby becomes the primary goal of a successful choreographer. To illustrate the interdependent relationship between text and choreography, I am going to discuss two scenes from my violence design for *Heathers: The Musical* with a focus on the contrasting limits of the script.

The first fight is scripted to include three actors battling in slow motion without vocalization or knapping while the rest of the cast sings the number "Fight for Me." Kurt and Ram, the two football stars of Westerburg High, harass newcomer J.D., who surprisingly fights back. This fight promptly establishes J.D. as a force to be reckoned with and his victory jumpstarts his romance with protagonist Veronica. For the two "dumb jocks" I built a fighting style aptly informed by football plays; an abrupt, aggressive, and direct set of moves that, in effect, highlights their dominance. J.D., on the other hand, uses a more defensive "street-fighting" style, showing his hard-scrabble upbringing and belief in the importance of self-reliance.

LANE LOGAN



OPPOSITE: The cast of *Heathers: The Musical* running through one of the two stylized fight sequences. Presented at the Indiana University Studio Theatre, directed by Joshua Robinson.

ABOVE: Based solely on the imagery, can you guess which is the slow motion fight and which is the “at speed” fight?

Given the slow motion, which allows the actors a wide margin of safety and clarifies violent action, the first fight initially presented itself as an easy altercation to choreograph. However, the auditory restrictions called for a readjustment of my initial choreography. The script requires the fight to be silent, meaning I had to instruct the actors to neither vocalize nor knap. Instead, the effects of the violence were communicated through the characters’ facial expressions and body postures. Therefore, the faces of the victims were always cheated out to the audience, allowing everyone to clearly see the fear and pain.

An actor might be tempted to associate fight movements with certain audio cues in the music, but this would lead to awkward pauses that impede the fight’s credibility. By directing the actors to focus on their targets when attacking and to focus on their reactions when defending, I was able to create a fight scene that was as realistic as possible given the slow motion limitation. Fighting in slow motion also poses the challenge of ensuring the fighters move in the same “time zone,” in other words having the same rate of slowness in their movements. I introduced the concept of moving at a “Tai Chi speed,” taking advantage of Tai Chi’s slow and deliberate rate of movement to achieve better concentration through relaxed

motion. After a few runthroughs at this speed, all three combatants were attuned to each other’s tempo, thereby enhancing the reality of the fight. An additional benefit of such awareness is that it squelched their natural inclination to speed up during a lengthy fight.

Unlike the first fight, there were no musical or sound constraints on the second fight. The director communicated to me that he wanted the second fight to be especially vicious so as to motivate J.D. and Veronica’s revenge, which in turn drives the rest of the plot. The scene involves the same three characters: J.D., having witnessed his girlfriend Veronica slandered in front of the entire school by Kurt and Ram, loses his cool and wildly attacks the two jocks. This time expecting a fight, Kurt and Ram manage to overpower and humiliate J.D. in front of his girlfriend and the powerful Heathers. In order to show the brutality of the fight and for Kurt and Ram to “reclaim” their status after their defeat in the first melee, I chose to focus on vocalizations and knaps to highlight J.D.’s pain and choreographed moves that allow a range of grunts and yelps such as gut punches, heatbutts, and elbow drops.

Without the prescribed restriction of slow motion, the actors initially moved through the choreography at full speed but remained silent during the fight, which perhaps was due to the silence in the first fight. I explained to the actors that while the fight looked technically solid, the lack of a convincing vocal score was detrimental to the portrayal of the conflict. The silence was made more apparent by the fact that the orchestra was silent. The actors then proceeded to focus on vocal reactions that sell the moves and emphasized the use of open vowels that can be extended and modulated; they also highlighted the power behind each attack by emphasizing well-timed and aurally clear knaps. Indeed, the full array of sounds and knaps is essential to the illusion of a normal-speed, realistic fight, especially in light of the lack of dialogue and underlying music in this scene.

It is a challenge to situate these two drastically different fights in the same dramaturgical universe. The coexistence of slow-mo, silent fights on the one hand, and normal-speed, vocalized fights on the other, point to divergent aesthetics and storytelling techniques. To establish their coherence, I decided to style both fights in a realistic manner: the actors reinforced the reality of the situation by giving realistic reactions, such as grimacing in pain and clutching affected areas of their bodies.

In service of telling a great story, limits and constraints imposed by the script and the director could be turned into opportunities for creative adaptations. When facing the constraints of the text and the demands of the director, fight choreographers should consider the various aspects of theatricality and vary their techniques accordingly. ✦



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Fight Matters

A Fight Director

BY JOSEPH TRAVERS, SAFD CT/FD

Last spring, I offered an article on my version of a rehearsal toolkit, containing many of the items I find essential when working on a project. These were literal, physical tools that might come in handy, each for its particular reason.

This time, I would like to focus on some slightly more ephemeral tools—tools that are no less helpful and perhaps even more vital than those I mentioned last year. These tools include the personality qualities and behavior characteristics essential in the work I do. As all my fellow fight directors undoubtedly will admit, the temptation to get lost in the latest project, excited by choreographic and dramatic possibilities, can sometimes distract one from some simple truths. I am not just working on a production—I am collaborating on a production with others. I am not just choreographing and directing fights—I am choreographing and directing actors. These other artists all have approaches and points of view and opinions that must be taken into account and consideration as I work, and they are usually just as valid as my own. (Sometimes more so!)

The items in this toolkit have been acquired over many years, and I have come to find them helpful in balancing and collaborating with others in the rehearsal hall and the theatre.

Communication

By communication, I of course mean the ability to be clear in what one wants to express, to listen to others carefully, and to be able to understand. But good communication also includes asking questions when one doesn't understand, avoiding assumptions, knowing when not to speak but rather listen, and discerning the subtext in what others are saying.

In written communication, being able to be succinct yet detailed is crucial. When reading emails, especially long ones, remember that an email cannot convey tone. Most of the time, the tone I think I am reading in is my own—I'm hearing it when it may not be there. This sort of mindfulness can save me a lot of energy and frustration.

The ability to perceive non-verbal cues that will help others (and myself) through challenging collaborative moments is also vital. An actor may say, "It's fine!" when asked about a moment, when in fact it is not fine at all. Knowing how to read that contradiction,

how and when to either probe deeper or leave things alone, how to put myself in the other's shoes, will not only help me navigate this particular moment of interaction, but it will also help build trust and appreciation as I grow a new professional relationship.

Lastly, the consistency of my communication—responding to emails when received, checking in with director and actor about how things are going, even something as simple as saying "hello" and "goodbye" to the SM at the beginning and end of each rehearsal, establishes me as a reliable colleague who is open and communicative.

Collaboration

The many and varied perspectives that can all be brought to bear on a moment of stage violence—director, actor, playwright, costume designer, lighting designer, sound designer, technical director—are a lot for the fight director to take in, balance, respond to, and navigate. Remembering that each one of these colleagues is striving toward the same opening night, hopefully under the guiding vision of the director, is key. Everyone in the rehearsal hall or theatre is contributing something, creating something. Of course they are all coming from a different background, and may not be able to see things from your perspective. But most have worked long and hard to get where they are—their point of view is not only valid, it's invaluable.

Inclusion and synthesis are vital to the collaborative process. Make the effort to take in other's design ideas and express your own as early in the process as possible. Ask questions, and give compliments when you like something. Keep your own perspective as open as you can, without losing the vision of the fights or stunts as you may already see them. Learn as much as you can about how the other designers do their work—this can also grow an appreciation of their circumstances and points of view.

Often the sources of conflict or disconnect are actually not creative, but technical in nature, and technical problems can almost always be solved with a positive attitude and a bit of imagination.

er's Toolkit **PART 2**

Putting your head together with other designers to solve such problems can be one of the most rewarding—and challenging—parts of the process. Listen. Think before speaking. Breathe. Remember that being flexible for the collaborators around you will encourage them to be flexible with you.

Flexibility is also key in working with the actors and the director. However creative and exciting the move or sequence I have in mind might be, it is not better than a truthful, committed performance that fits the compelling theme and vision of the production. I've learned not to get attached to my idea or my choreography. I'm not the only creator of the fight. Just as the playwright might change or adapt a line to suit the actor's approach to the character and the director's vision of the scene, so must I with the content and shape of the fight. Just as changes might happen because of the level of technical ability the performers may or may not have, so it is necessary to make changes that insure the fight fits the play as directed and the characters as played. Learn to work *with* the creative impulses of the actors and director, instead of *in spite of* or *against* them.

Positive Attitude

Perhaps no quality is more important in any workplace than a positive attitude.

Of course, there are so many platitudes about positivity that perhaps it has become a painful cliché—I am not speaking of pretense or of the naiveté that simply ignores reality when difficulties or challenges occur. (People with a positive attitude do not necessarily always smile.)

The ability to see the challenge for what it is and to decide to move forward, trying every tack, because one is committed to

success—that is positive attitude. That is where real creative thinking, flexibility, patience, and communication are at work. “Our greatest weakness lies in giving up,” according to Thomas Edison, “The most certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time.” One more question, one more note, one more run, one more variation on a move or phrase of choreography.

The tenacity and positive attitude behind someone who knows *there is a solution* and that *it can be found* are palpable and sometimes infectious. Don't complain, don't just identify the problem—propose a solution. Even if your proposal is not the answer, it will spark an idea from someone else that will be, or it will inspire the other creative minds around you to focus on the problem anew until it is solved.

Conclusion

These three ideas—good communication, open collaboration, and a positive attitude—are not the only tools of interaction that I need for my work. Most of what we do in this communal art called theatre involves strong “people skills” of all kinds. I have found these particular three ideas of profound importance as my career has matured.

As a kind of postscript, I will offer one more tool. I have been lucky in the work I do—lucky in opportunities, lucky in colleagues and comrades, mentors and teachers, and lucky in the artists whose work I have helped bring to the stage. When I remember this, I am thankful for every moment I get to spend doing what I love. If I can hold on to this gratitude, if I can wake up saying, “Today I get to do this!” then all these tools, and many more, become easier to master, and easier to employ in my daily work.

Always remember—you get to do this! ✦



A Little Heads Up

WHEN HEAD INJURIES AND STAGE COMBAT COLLIDE

BY EUGENE SOLFANELLI, CT

Whenever I've heard that someone I know has sustained a concussion, before hearing any details, I assume it happened in the ring or on the mat. When I hear that my assumption is incorrect, my next thought is they must have been playing football over the weekend or maybe they were hit in the head while at bat in baseball game. These conclusions are not a stretch by any means. When we watch a football game or an MMA bout, we can see how easily head trauma and/or damage can occur based on the sheer impact the body (specifically the head) receives per game or bout. The measured impact a wide receiver or running back in football receives from a safety cutting across the middle of the field for example can equal or even excel that of someone in a car accident.¹

There is plenty of data to back up this claim. However, as often when this type of impact occurs in these sports or athletic contests, the *diagnosis* of a concussion and its long-term effects are not recognized. CTE (Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy), a progressive degenerative disease of the brain found in people with a history of repetitive brain trauma (often athletes), which includes symptomatic concussions as well as asymptomatic subconcussive hits to the head that do not cause symptoms, is an new discovery. In fact, it wasn't until the spotlight was placed on many retired NFL athletes and their battles with depression, anxiety, and for some eventual suicide that forced scientists to consider repeated head impact as the cause. It was from these studies that CTE was discovered and categorized. Since the NFL has had the most negative press regarding the results of long-term head trauma, one might think that concussions and long-term damage would be limited to Football. This however, is not the case.

When I was young I played organized sports until my junior year of high school, specifically baseball and basketball. I can recall quite a few times "getting my bell rung" as a result of receiving an impact to the head in a collision at 1st base, or an elbow to the head pulling a rebound under the boards ("Getting my bell rung" being a moment where, after receiving the impact, my vision would darken and I would see stars). In both incidents I was never held back from returning to the game, as long as I was physically able to do so. At this time (1980s and 90s) no one gave any thought to what head trauma could cause or if there was the potential for any long-term damage to the brain from repeated impact. Concussions were not an issue and the build up to CTE had no public base. It wasn't until the early 2000s that CTE would get the spotlight it deserved. This was thanks to Dr. Bennett Omalu.



Author Eugene Solfanelli contemplating his next stunt—a bounce and fall off a car—on the set of *Gotham*.

There is not enough space in this article for me to give a full accounting of the work of Dr. Omalu. The following summary, however, highlights the key elements of his discovery:

[Dr.] Omalu's autopsy of former Pittsburgh Steelers player Mike Webster in 2002 led to the re-emergence of awareness of a neurologic condition associated with chronic head trauma called chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE, which had been previously described in boxers[8] and other professional athletes. Webster had died suddenly and unexpectedly following years of struggling with cognitive and intellectual impairment, destitution, mood disorders, depression, drug abuse, and suicide attempts. Although Webster's brain looked normal at autopsy, Omalu conducted independent and self-financed tissue analyses.[9] He suspected that Webster suffered from dementia pugilistica, which is a form of dementia that is induced by repeated blows to the head, a condition found previously in boxers. Using specialized staining, Omalu found large accumulations of tau protein in Webster's brain, which affect mood, emotions, and executive functions similar to the way that clumps of beta-amyloid protein contribute to Alzheimer's disease.[9]

Together with colleagues in the Department of Pathology at the University of Pittsburgh, Omalu published his findings in the journal *Neurosurgery* in 2005 in a paper titled "Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy in a National Football League Player." In it, Omalu called for further study of the disease: "We herein report the first documented case of long-term neurodegenerative changes in a retired professional NFL player consistent with chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). This case draws attention to a disease that remains inadequately studied in the cohort of professional football players, with unknown true prevalence rates."²

Now you might be reading this article and question the need for it. As a stage combatant or a stuntperson, we spend our entire careers avoiding real impact, as a rule. I would have said the same thing until I was diagnosed with a concussion. I'll be the first to admit that it wasn't from performing in a show or a fall on TV, but after that diagnosis and in the light of what has been happening to some of these retired impact-prone athletes, I decided to take a deeper look into the causes and long-term effects of concussions. It was Dr. Omalu's research which opened my eyes to not only what I needed to know to protect myself as a martial artist, but also for what everyone who works in a physical field needs to know. Concussions and CTE are no longer isolated to articles about the NFL; they are now a health hazard affecting anyone not taking the proper precautions.

Let me elaborate with some recent experience with concussions. Besides high school athletics, I have been a Brazilian Jujitsu practitioner for over six years and have "rolled" with many an individual in that time. One time in particular, while I was trying to pass someone's guard, I received a hard descending heel to my left orbital as they were trying to defend. No, this is not normal practice. It was not an MMA match; it was a complete accident. The impact was powerful and hit quite a sensitive and dangerous spot just over my left eye. After a few minutes of shaking off the blow, I went back, finished the class, and headed home.

Later, I was definitely sore where I was struck (the soreness lasted for at least a week), but I didn't think much more about it. The following day I noticed a difference in my behavior, specifically the way I perceived the outside world. Upon waking, the world was "hazy," as if a film had developed over my eyes and would not go away no matter how many times I rubbed my eyes or shook my head. One would think that would raise an alarm, but again I didn't think much about it. As time passed, I also noticed a constant ringing in my ears. Again, I didn't think much about it; I simply thought I had tinnitus.

As I went about my normal day I discovered I could not read small print because the text was blurry. Did I worry? Nope, just thought I was just getting old and my eyes were going. Finally, that same day, I went to change a light bulb and when I looked at the new bulb in the socket, my eyes were in so much pain that I had to leave and go into a darker room.

The sensitivity to light made a light bulb go off (no pun intended) in my mind. I thought back on all of the symptoms that I was experiencing throughout the day. Like a math equation, I added up all the factors to this summation: I had received a concussion. With the alarming realization of the physical state I was in, and wondering if these symptoms were permanent, I worried what I could do, if anything, to cure myself of them. I then remembered Junior Seau, a retired NFL player who committed suicide, caused by depression linked to head trauma, concussions, and eventually CTE. It was a bit of an extreme reaction, yes, but I was very worried. Once my symptoms (thankfully) got a little better I delved into the world of head trauma.

Blurred vision is a possible symptom of CTE

With all that has happened to athletes diagnosed with CTE, I thought it would be worthwhile to begin my research there. Before I began, my initial thesis was that repeated blows to the head were the direct cause of the depression, memory loss, and eventual suicide that had occurred in some retired athletes. Shockingly, head impact was not the only thing that could cause these symptoms and behaviors. First let us look at how the American Association of Neurological Surgeons and Scientific American defines a Concussion and then how the Concussion Legacy Foundation defines CTE.

A *concussion* is the historical term representing low velocity injuries that cause brain 'shaking' resulting in clinical symptoms and that are not necessarily related to a pathological injury. Concussion is a subset of TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury). Minor revisions were made to the definition of concussion, which is defined as follows:

Concussion is a brain injury and is defined as a complex pathophysiological process affecting the brain, induced by biomechanical forces. Several common features that incorporate concussive head injury include the following:

1. Concussion may be caused either by a direct blow to the head, face, neck or elsewhere on the body with an "impulsive" force transmitted to the head.
2. Concussion typically results in the rapid onset of short-lived impairment of neurological function that resolves spontaneously. However, in some cases, symptoms and signs may evolve over a number of minutes to hours.
3. Concussion may result in neuropathological changes, but the acute clinical symptoms largely reflect a functional disturbance rather than a structural injury and, as such, no abnormality is seen on standard structural neuroimaging studies.
4. Concussion results in a graded set of clinical symptoms that may or may not involve loss of consciousness. Resolution of the clinical and cognitive symptoms typically follows a sequential course. However, it is important to note that in some cases symptoms may be prolonged.

Scientific American continues:

Indeed, it is the rotational movements of the brain inside the calvaria (meaning all of the cranium except for the facial bones) and the shearing forces affecting the upper reticular formation that create torque, which leads to the typical loss of consciousness. These forces also cause the brain to move in a swirling fashion and contact the inner prominence of the skull, particularly the petrous and orbital ridges and the wings of the sphenoid. Such movement makes the



brain bump into the interior of the skull at the point of impact, as well as on the opposite side of the skull, resulting in contusions (bruises) that damage two sites in the brain, called the coup and contrecoup injuries.

More so than the immediate impact (primary injury), however, a concussion involves a host of effects (secondary injuries) that emerge several hours or days after the trauma. It is critical for physicians to monitor these secondary tissue damages, as they are frequently the origin of significant long-term effects, including brain damage, cognitive deficits, psychosocial/behavioral/emotional changes, bodily damage and biochemical changes at the cellular level.

And now what is CTE from the Concussion Legacy Foundation:

Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) is a degenerative brain disease found in athletes, military veterans, and others with a history of repetitive brain trauma. In CTE, a protein called Tau forms clumps that slowly spread throughout the brain, killing brain cells. CTE has been seen in people as young as 17, but symptoms do not generally begin appearing until years after the onset of head impacts. Early symptoms of CTE usually appear in a patient's late 20s or 30s, and affect a patient's mood and behavior. Some common changes seen include impulse control problems, aggression, depression, and paranoia.³





ABOVE: Eugene Solfanelli (left) and Meron Langsner (center) grapple. Research suggest that indirect impact can also play a role in CTE.

As we take a step back to digest this info, we can at come to the conclusion that multiple head traumas and/or concussions can lead to CTE. And even though the physical effects of a concussion appear temporary, the effects of CTE appear to have a more permanent effect on the individual. So it's the multiple head trauma/concussions that we are looking to avoid in order to prevent CTE. It makes sense as the multiplicity of one causes the other.

This is all well and good as we learn to adapt, change, and make our sport/athletic activities more brain safe with new rules and better equipment. But will that guarantee eliminating concussions? At this point absolutely not, but we must use this knowledge as a guidepost as we move forward. This article, however, was not written for the sports athlete, martial artist, or combat sports aficionado. It was written for the stage combatant and stuntperson and how it pertains to their keeping their minds safe and healthy as they grow older in their profession. This is where one very important aspect jumped out at me during my research. If we look back at the definition of a concussion by AANS we can see as written: "Concussion may be caused either by a direct blow to the head, face, neck or elsewhere on the body with an 'impulsive' force transmitted to the head."

Sensitivity to light and sound is another potential warning sign of a concussion

By this definition, one can conclude that both direct and indirect blows to the head cause concussions. An impact that is "transmitted" to the brain, meaning the blow or impact occurs somewhere else on my body and then the kinetic force travels towards the skull, causes a concussion. It's like dropping a rock in a pond. The rock

can be dropped anywhere in the pond and the ripples will travel throughout, having an effect on the surrounding water. *Scientific America* discusses "rotational movements of the brain" and says these forces "make[s] the brain bump into the interior of the skull at the point of impact, as well as on the opposite side of the skull." Wait, you may cry, *the brain can "bounce" and "rotate" inside a skull?* Dr. Freudenrich helps us out by stating: "The brain and spinal cord 'float' in a sea of cerebrospinal fluid within the skull and spine." Apparently, when impact occurs the brain actually moves, slams into the skull, bounces off and hits the skull again on the opposite side of the impact. This causes damage.

Now we have a clearer picture. Say you've completely avoided direct impact to the head during your combatant career. You don't even do contact slaps. When you do falls your head has never hit the ground. The bottom line is this doesn't matter. The questions should be: how hard did *my body* hit the ground when I work on my falls? How hard am I jerking my head to sell that cross punch? When I took that contact stomach punch, *how fast* did I bend at the waist to sell it? And mind you, this is the tip of the iceberg. Take a second now and review some choreography and ask yourself these questions regarding your movements, then add in the adrenaline of opening night when Mom is sitting in the front row.

Let's continue this train of thought to a new question, in an attempt to answer the question I just posed. How much force is too

much force? How much impact is required to cause a concussion? Here is where it gets a little murky and where, for myself, I became the most fearful. As I did my research, I found different numbers for the amount of force needed to cause a concussion. Researchers at the University of Denver suggest “A head injury expert says that most concussions deliver 95 g’s to the human body upon impact. G-force is a unit of force equal to the force exerted by gravity. In addition, the average football player receives 103 g’s when hit during a game.”⁴ That sounds like a lot and much more than we could ever replicate in an average fall or fight on stage. Another NFL impact source done by UNC Research states set the impact point lower, at 85gs. Kevin Guskiewicz, director of Carolina’s Sports Medicine Research Laboratory, tested his theory on the field, where “His lab recorded thirteen concussions over five seasons. Six concussions came from hits at or below 85g.”⁴ Concerned yet? Then there are the individual factors—physiological differences, height, weight, and angles of impact—to take into consideration. An impact at one angle might be fine; a slightly different angle may get you concussed.⁵

So now not only have we made the answer to how much G-Force inconclusive; we’ve added the factors of each individual and their brain physiology. While an 85 plus G-Force impact may not cause a concussion in one person, a Sub 20 G-Force impact might in another. It is a lot of information and we still don’t have a solid conclusion. I believe this is the case because those out there doing the research still don’t have all the answers and for the most part, their research has created more questions than answers at this point.

When I started researching this article I really wanted to provide a guidepost for us as professionals moving forward. Almost like the do’s and don’ts that will help guide us to a long, productive, and most of all healthy career. It seems that I created more questions instead, but questioning is not a bad thing. At this point perhaps the best thing I can do is offer up some awareness. In our profession, concussions can happen to anyone at anytime with less force than we thought could cause them and also, most importantly, without taking a hit to the head. Every time we do a stage fall, sell a punch, take a bump off of a wall, or do any of the other numerous physical actions (that would take forever to list) there is the potential for long-term damage.

The best advice I can give would be this: do your own research, read about those that have CTE or have experienced TBI. Learn what caused it and what it is doing to their lives. Let that educate you and inspire you to take care of your brains before it is too late. The effects of CTE are irreversible and post-trauma changes will not heal you after the fact. Consider this a pre-emptive strike. Make the adjustments necessary because concussions and CTE are issues that

affect all athletes, even those of us on the outer rim.

I know that this is just the tip of the iceberg. I know that more knowledge and research comes out every day. All we can do is take what is given to us and make the changes necessary to have the long professional careers we all long for and deserve. ✦

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Vice-President
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Norman, OK
(405)204-7156
mellis@ou.edu



Secretary
CHRISTOPHER ELST
Milwaukee, WI
Chris@christopherelst.com



Treasurer
ADAM NOBLE
Houston, TX
(812)272-4148
nobledynamic@gmail.com



**Fight Master
Representative:**
RICHARD RAETHER
rraether@mac.com



**Fight Director
Representative:**
ROBB HUNTER
preferredarms@gmail.com



**Certified Teacher
Representative:**
JENNY MALE
jennymalefights@gmail.com



**Friend/Actor
Combatant/Advanced
Actor Combatant
Representative:**
SARAH FLANAGAN
acrepsafdf.org

Regional Representatives



Coordinator
DC WRIGHT
dc-wright@wiu.edu



International
BRET YOUNT
London, UK
44-020-8881-1536
IntRegRep@safdf.org



Northwest
JOHN LYNCH
Lynch_party@juno.com



Southeast
DAVID STERRITT
Atlanta, GA
(770)883-0168
SERegRep@safdf.org



East Central
**JACQUELINE
HOLLOWAY**
ecregrep@safdf.org



Middle America
AARON PREUSSE
MARegRep@safdf.org



Pacific West
COLLIN BRESSIE
PWRegRep@safdf.org



Southwest
ADAM NOBLE
Houston, TX
(812) 272-4148
SWRegRep@safdf.org



Great Lakes
CLAIRE YEARMAN
claireyearman@gmail.com



New England
JOHN CASHMAN
Ridgefield, CT
(352)208-2449
NERegRep@safdf.org



Rocky Mountain
SAMANTHA EGLE
humblewarrior@gmail.com

College of Fight Masters

GEOFFREY ALM

Seattle, WA
H: (206) 365-3870
C: (206) 920-1047
gbald@juno.com

J. DAVID BRIMMER

Yardley, PA
(347) 512-3932
jdavidbrimmer@aol.com

Emeritus

DAVID BOUSHEY

Everett, WA
(425) 290-9973
BUSHMAN4@prodigy.net

BRIAN BYRNES

Houston, TX
(713) 446-4004
bbyrnes123@yahoo.com

MICHAEL G. CHIN

New York, New York
(646) 246-4061
chinmichaelg@gmail.com

CHUCK COYL

Chicago, IL
chuckcoyl@prodigy.net

DREW FRACHER

Highland Heights, KY
(859) 760-6230
vern10th@fuse.net

ERIK FREDRICKSEN

Ann Arbor, MI
(313) 944-0116
hannis@umich.edu

DALE GIRARD

North Carolina
336.403.6434
dale.girard@ncstunts.com
www.dalegirard.com

MARK GUINN

Ruston, LA
(318) 614-1636
fmguin@me.com

k. JENNY JONES

Cincinnati, OH
kj_jones@msn.com

GEOFFREY KENT

Denver, CO
(303) 877-2670
Geoffrey@thefightguy.com
www.thefightguy.com

DAVID S. LEONG

Richmond, VA
(804) 986-4890
dsleong@vcu.edu

SCOT MANN

Macon, GA
(478) 787-7691
mann_sj@mercer.edu

Emeritus

J.D. MARTINEZ

Lexington, VA
H: (540) 463-3756
W: (540) 463-8005
martinezj@wlu.edu

RICHARD RAETHER

Rockford, IL
(815) 540-4717
rraether@me.com
www.rraether.com

IAN ROSE

Philadelphia, PA
(215) 802-3885
rosefights@comcast.net

RICHARD RYAN

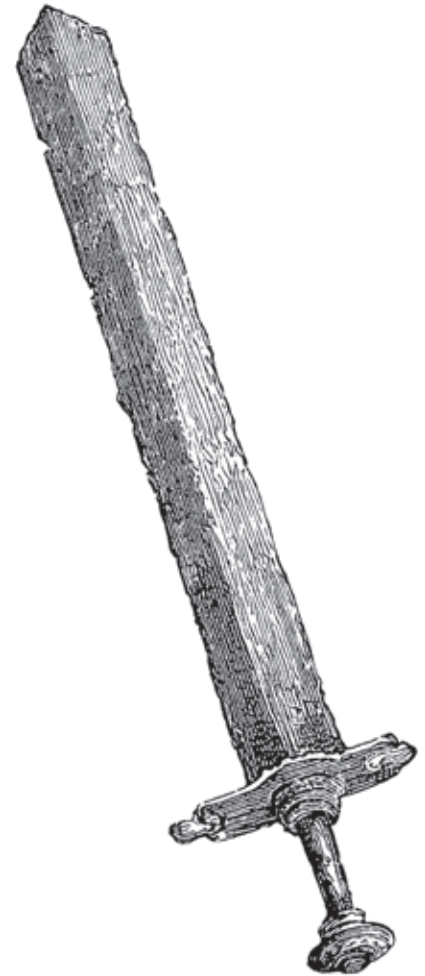
Charlotte, NC
(323) 209-5240
richard@stagefight.com
www.stagefight.com

J. ALLEN SUDDETH

Glen Ridge, NJ
H: (973) 748-5697
C: (973) 223-5056
nyfgtdlrcr@aol.com

DAVID WOOLLEY

Chicago, IL
C: (312) 560-5448
W: (312) 344-6123
guido@theswordsmen.com
dwoolley@colum.edu
www.theswordsmen.com



Fight Directors

GEOFFREY ALM

Seattle, WA
H: (206) 365-3870
C: (206) 920-1047
gbald@juno.com

AARON ANDERSON

Richmond, VA
(804) 683-3483
adanderson@vcu.edu

JASON ARMIT

Atlanta, GA
(404) 964-1957
jasonarmit@gmail.com
www.jasonarmit.com

JOHN BELLOMO

Philadelphia, PA
H: (215) 334-1814
C: (215) 262-1591
jvbellomo@verizon.net

J. DAVID BRIMMER

Yardley, PA
(347) 512-3932
jdavidbrimmer@aol.com

PAYSON BURT

Norristown, PA
(610) 389-7898
paysonburt@gmail.com

BRIAN BYRNES

Houston, TX
(713) 446-4004
bbyrnes123@yahoo.com

JAMIE CHEATHAM

Racine, WI
(262) 595-2522
cheatham@uwp.edu

MICHAEL G. CHIN

New York, NY
646-246-4061
chinmichaelg@gmail.com

CHARLES CONWELL

Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware
charlesconwell4@gmail.com

PAUL R. DENNHARDT

Stanford, IL
(309) 530-3069
prdennh@ilstu.edu

DEXTER FIDLER

San Francisco, CA
(415) 810-3476
dexfid@yahoo.com

BRENT GIBBS

Tucson, AZ
520-906-9497
brentg@email.arizona.edu

ROBB HUNTER

Fairfax, VA
(917) 604-3008
robbshunter@preferredarms.com
www.preferredarms.com

Emeritus

MICHAEL JEROME JOHNSON

Jackson, WY
(202) 258-1177
jjohnsonmichael@gmail.com

JEFF A.R. JONES

Raleigh, NC
(919) 325-2842
jarjones@nc.rr.com

k. JENNY JONES

Cincinnati, OH
kj_jones@msn.com

CASEY D. KALEBA

Washington, DC
(703) 568-7657
www.toothandclawcombat.com

COLLEEN KELLY

Staunton, VA
(540) 849-8870
colleenkhome@gmail.com

GEOFFREY KENT

Denver, CO
(303) 877-2670
geoffrey@thefightguy.com
www.thefightguy.com

RICHARD LANE

San Francisco, CA
(415) 336-8765
richardlane@pacbell.net
www.academyofthesword.org

BRUCE LECURE

Miami, FL
(305) 903-9250
Blecure@aol.com

DAVID S. LEONG

Richmond, VA
(804) 986-4890
dsleong@vcu.edu

Emeritus

RICHARD LANE

San Francisco, CA
(415) 336-8765
richardlane@pacbell.net
www.academyofthesword.org

ROBERT MACDOUGALL

Seattle, WA
(206) 522-2201
clandrmd@aol.com

MIKE MAHAFFEY

Hollywood, CA
(818) 749-8393
mike_mahaffey@hotmail.com

SCOT MANN

Macon, GA
(478) 787-7691
mann_sj@mercer.edu

JOHN MCFARLAND

Brookfield, IL
(708) 955-8767
mcfarland.john@sbcglobal.net

DR. ROBIN MCFARQUHAR

Urbana, IL
(773) 398 9500
rmcfarqu@uiuc.edu

ROBERT NAJARIAN

Ann Arbor, MI
(617) 413-7817
najarian@umich.edu

ADAM NOBLE

Houston, TX
(812) 272-4148
nobledynamic@gmail.com

DAN O'DRISCOLL

New York, NY
(646) 228-6878
thefightdirector@aol.com
www.swordandtherose.com

TIM PINNOW

Grand Junction, CO
(575) 496-2369
tpinnnow@mesastate.edu

RON PIRETTI

New York, NY
(917) 385-9750
ron.piretti@gmail.com

NIGEL POULTON

New York, NY and Brisbane, AUSTRALIA
US: (212) 941-7696
AUS: +61-423-865-839
kaboom@powerup.com.au

RICHARD RAETHER

Rockford, IL
(815) 540-4717
rraether@me.com
www.rraether.com

RICKI G. RAVITTS

New York, NY
(212) 874-7408
rickifights@yahoo.com

IAN ROSE

Philadelphia, PA
(215) 802-3885
rosefights@comcast.net

RICHARD RYAN

(323) 209-5240
richard@stagefight.com
www.stagefight.com

NICOLAS SANDYS

Chicago, IL
(773) 274-0581
Voice: (773) 398-3034
npullin@depaul.edu

JOHN TOVAR

Geneva, IL
(630) 330-4293
john_tovar@sbcglobal.net

CHRISTINA TRAISTER

Eaton Rapids, MI
(310) 213-2558
traimez@gmail.com

JOSEPH TRAVERS

New York, NY
(212) 726 2400
swordplay98@hotmail.com

ROBERT "TINK" TUFTEE

Brooklyn, NY
(718) 788-4957
Tink@fights4.com
www.fights4.com

STEVEN VAUGHAN

Buffalo, NY
716-474-1160
svsv55@yahoo.com

ROBERT WESTLEY

New York, NY
(617) 620-5057
rtwestley@gmail.com

DAVID WOOLLEY

Chicago, IL
C: (312) 560-5448
W: (312) 344-6123
guido@theswordsmen.com
dwoolley@colum.edu
www.theswordsmen.com

JACK YOUNG

Houston, TX
(610) 737-5092
jackyoung59@hotmail.com

Certified Teachers

GEOFFREY ALM

Seattle, WA
H: (206) 365-3870
C: (206) 920-1047
gbald@juno.com

LACY ALTWINE

Los Angeles, CA
818-749-8394
lacy_altwine@hotmail.com

AARON ANDERSON

Richmond, VA
(804) 683-3483
adanderson@vcu.edu

MICHAEL ANDERSON

Bloomington, MN
(612) 759-9711
JackMikeAnderson@gmail.com

LERALDO ANZALDUA

Houston, TX
(281) 732-4708
leraldo_a@hotmail.com

ROBERT ARANOWITZ

New York, NY
robertaronowitz@gmail.com

JACKI ARMIT

Gretna, LA
(404) 408-2221
jackiarmit@gmail.com

JASON ARMIT

Atlanta, GA
(404) 964-1957
jasonarmit@gmail.com
www.jasonarmit.com

DANETTE BAKER

Wichita, KS; Mid-America Region
danettemariebaker@gmail.com

JONATHAN BACA

Cincinnati, OH
(513) 295-4788
jbaca@newedgcliff.com

ROGER BARTLETT

St. Albans, HRT
roger@fights4stage.com

TIM BELL

New Orleans, LA
(954) 401-3445
TBellStunts.com
Stuntbell@earthlink.net

JOHN BELLOMO

Philadelphia, PA
H: (215) 334-1814
C: (215) 262-1591
jvbellomo@verizon.net

ANGELA BONACASA

Castine, ME
(207) 610-9970
goodhouse@angelabonacasa.com

IAN BORDEN

Lincoln, NE
(616) 826-3506
ianmborden@yahoo.com

BOB BORWICK

Athens, TN
(423) 381-9972
bobbyborwick@yahoo.com

COLLIN BRESSIE

South Pasadena, CA
pwregrep@safd.org

J. DAVID BRIMMER

Yardley, PA
(347) 512-3932
jdavidbrimmer@aol.com

H. RUSS BROWN

Whitehouse, TX
(903) 360-1026
hruss@revengearts.com
www.revengearts.com

JAMES N. BROWN

Wyomissing, PA
610-796-0288
jnb20@psu.edu

JAY BURCKHARDT

Chicago, IL
(312) 450-4173
jkchoreography@yahoo.com

T. FULTON BURNS

Greenville, SC
fultonburns@gmail.com
(864) 979-2744

PAYSON BURT

Norristown, PA
(610) 389-7898
paysonburt@gmail.com

BRIAN BYRNES

Houston, TX
(713) 446-4004
bbyrnes123@yahoo.com

JILL MATARELLI CARLSON

Greenville, NC
(252) 328-5489
carlsonj@ecu.edu

JOHN CASHMAN

Ridgely, CT
johncashmanjr@me.com
352-208-2449

GINA CERIMELE-MECHLEY

Cincinnati, OH
(513) 200-5866
swordlady@zoomtown.com

BARBARA CHARLENE

Macomb, IL
(703) 216-7532
bseifert82@gmail.com

JAMIE CHEATHAM

Racine, WI
(262) 595-2522
cheatham@uwp.edu

MICHAEL G. CHIN

New York, NY
(546) 246-4061
chinmichaelg@gmail.com

JONATHAN COLE

Salem, OR
(503) 798-2783
jon@revengearts.com
www.revengearts.com

CHARLES CONWELL

Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware
charlesconwell4@gmail.com

J. ALEX CORDARO

Philadelphia, PA
(267) 496-1497
jalexcord@yahoo.com

CHUCK COYL

Chicago, IL
chuckcoyl@prodigy.net

BRUCE CROMER

Yellow Springs, OH
(937) 775-2430
bruce.cromer@wright.edu
www.brucecromer.com

TED DECHATELET

McMinnville, OR
(503) 560-0636
ted@revengearts.com
www.revengearts.com

NATHAN DECOUX

New York, NY
(718) 683-0303
mrflightguy@yahoo.com
www.gothamarmory.com

PAUL R. DENNHARDT

Stanford, IL
(309) 530-3069
prdenh@ilstu.edu

OLIVER DONAHUE

Philadelphia, PA
j.oliver.donahue@gmail.com

CHRISTOPHER DUVAL

Salt Lake City, UT
(208) 310 - 2828
c.duval@utah.edu

ROBERT RADKOFF EK

Champaign, IL
(850) 322-4577
radkoff@yahoo.com

MATTHEW E. ELLIS

Norman, OK
(405) 204-7156
mellis@ou.edu

CHRISTOPHER ELST

Milwaukee, WI
Chris@christopherelst.com

BRIAN EVANS

Athens, OH
323-397-4952
evansb1@ohio.edu

DEXTER FIDLER

San Francisco, CA
(415) 810-3476
dextfid@yahoo.com

AL FOOTE III

New York City, NY
(917) 719-0433
alfoote3.com
alfoote3@gmail.com

DREW FRACHER

Highland Heights, KY
(859) 760-6230
vern10th@fuse.net

ERIK FREDRICKSEN

Ann Arbor, MI
(313) 944-0116
hannis@umich.edu

TIZA GARLAND

Gainesville, FL
(407) 256-9215
TizaG1@aol.com

BRENT GIBBS

Tucson, AZ
520-906-9497
brentg@email.arizona.edu

DALE GIRARD

North Carolina
336.403.6434
dale.girard@ncstunts.com
www.dalegirard.com

DAN GRANKE

Richmond, VA
(734) 340-0602
Dan.granke@gmail.com

DR. STEPHEN GRAY

Chicago, IL
(312) 420-0197
sgray@Elgin.edu

JAYME GREEN

Billings, MT
bucklesomeswash@yahoo.com

JAKE GUINN

Atlanta, GA
Jguinn09@gmail.com

MARK D. GUINN

Ruston, LA
markguinn@mac.com

ROBERT HAMILTON

Venice, CA
(310) 367-7396
ftnv21@gmail.com

ANDREW HAYES

Greencastle, IN
(765) 658-4596
amhayes@depauw.edu

CAITLYN HERZLINGER

Macomb, IL
caitlynherzlinger@gmail.com

JACQUELINE HOLLOWAY

Wilmington, DE
jackepaper@gmail.com

MICHAEL HOOD

Indiana, PA
(724) 357-2282
mhood@iup.edu

DENISE ALESSANDRIA HURD

New York, NY
(212) 243-4867
DAHurd2000@gmail.com

KEVIN INOUE

Cleveland, OH
action@fightdesigner.com

JONATHAN JOLLY

Waco, TX
jonathancjolly@gmail.com

JEFF A.R. JONES

Raleigh, NC
919-539-7674 (m)
919-325-2842 (h)
jarjones@nc.rr.com

K. JENNY JONES

Cincinnati, OH
kj_jones@msn.com

COLLEEN KELLY

Staunton, VA
(540) 849-8870
colleenkhome@gmail.com

PATRICK KELLY

Bloomington, IN
pkelly@indiana.edu

GEOFFREY KENT

Denver, CO
geoffrey@thefightguy.com

DR. MICHAEL KIRKLAND

Virginia Beach, VA
(757) 226-4730
michhil@regent.edu

MARIANNE KUBIK

Charlottesville, Virginia
(434) 825-1071
marianne@virginia.edu

MICHELLE LADD

Los Angeles, CA
(818) 438-8342
HRHmladd@aol.com

CRAIG LAWRENCE

Fairfax, VA
(240) 277-3850
FightGuyCL@gmail.com
fightguycl.weebly.com

BRUCE LECURE

Miami, FL
(305) 903-9250
Blecure@aol.com

BILL LENGFELDER

Rockwall, TX
(214) 768-3539
lengfeld@smu.edu

DAVID S. LEONG

Richmond, VA
(804) 986-4890
dsleong@vcu.edu

BRIAN LETRAUNIK

Beaumont, TX
773-805-0926
brian.letraunik@gmail.com
www.brianletraunik.weebly.com

GREGG C. LLOYD

Newport News, VA
fightdirection@gmail.com

MIKE LUBKE

Minneapolis, MN
Mike.lubke@gmail.com

ROBERT MACDOUGALL

Seattle, WA
(206) 522-2201
clanrdmacd@aol.com

MIKE MAHAFFEY

Hollywood, CA
818 - 749 - 8393
mike_mahaffey@hotmail.com

JENNIFER M. MALE

Columbia, MD
(410) 428-5482
female_fights@yahoo.com

KELLY MANN

Macon, GA
actresskm@aol.com

SCOT MANN

Macon, GA
(478) 787-7691
mann_sj@mercer.edu

ANGIE JEPSON MARKS

angiejepson@gmail.com

NEIL MASSEY

Brookfield, IL
(708) 485-2089
neil@roguesteel.com
www.roguesteel.com

JILL MARTELLI-CARLSON

Greenville, NC
(252) 412-7887
carlsonj@ecu.edu

MITCHELL MCCOY

New York, NY
Mccoy.mitchell@gmail.com

SAM MCDONALD

Atlanta, GA
samanthajmcdonald@yahoo.com

JOHN MCFARLAND

Brookfield, IL
(708) 955-8767
mcfarland.john@sbcglobal.net

DR. ROBIN MCFARQUHAR

Urbana, IL
(773) 398 9500
rmcfarqu@uiuc.edu

TERRY MCINTYRE

Mount Holly, NJ
fightingoneself@gmail.com

ADAM MCLEAN

Boston, MA
(804) 938-2222
mcleanadamb@gmail.com

ADAM MILLER-BATTEAU

Austin, Texas
734.476.5529
abatteau@gmail.com

NATE MITCHELL

Los Angeles, CA
natemitchellaction@gmail.com
natemitchellaction.com

MICHAEL MUELLER

Grand Rapids, MI
208-570-3096
mjmueller3@gmail.com
www.mjmueller3.com

DOUGLAS MUMAW

Statesville, NC
(704) 880-0819
drmmumaw@gmail.com
theswordsmen.com

ADAM NOBLE

Houston, TX
(812) 413-4148
nobledynamic@gmail.com

MARTIN NOYES

Savannah, GA
(714) 473 6279
bignoyes@hotmail.com

Emeritus**MARK OLSEN**

New York, NY
Meo1005@aol.com

CORY ROBERT PIERNO

New York, NY
(516) 993-7915
Corey.Pierno@gmail.com
CoreyPierno.com

PAUL PHARRIS

Natchitoches, LA
ppharr@hotmail.com

TIM PINNOW

Grand Junction, CO
(575) 496-2369
tpinnow@mesastate.edu

RON PIRETTI

New York, NY
www.ronpiretti.net
email. ron.piretti@gmail.com

CHRISTOPHER PLUMMER

Suffern, NY
845-574-4471 (w)
845-598-1501 (h)
cplummer@sunyrockland.edu (w)
Shaxpear@me.com (h)

NIGEL ADAM POULTON

New York, NY and
Brisbane, AUSTRALIA
US: (212) 941-7696
AUS: 61-423-865-839
kaboom@powerup.com.au

AARON PREUSSE

St. Paul, MN
MARegRep@safd.org

RICHARD RAETHER

Rockford, IL
(815) 540-4717
rraether@me.com
www.rraether.com

RICKI G. RAVITTS

New York, NY
(212) 874-7408
rickifights@yahoo.com

CARA RAWLINGS

Blacksburg, VA
(540) 449-2877
crawlings@vt.edu

ANDREW DYLAN RAY

Shreveport, LA
(859) 552-8785
ard612@gmail.com
a-rayfights.blogspot.co.uk

PAUL ENGLER RAY

Seattle, WA
Paully247@yahoo.com

ADAM RECTOR

South Bend, IN
ajrector@indiana.edu

DAVID REED

Waco, TX
(214) 458-0866
davidandreed@yahoo.com
davidreed-director.com

ANDREA ROBERTSON

Phoenix, AZ
(602) 384-7775
andrea@fightcall.com
www.fightcall.com

ALICIA RODIS

New York, NY
aliciarodis@gmail.com

RAY A. RODRIGUEZ

Far Rockaway, NY
(646) 373-8106
ranthrod66@yahoo.com

AMIE ROOT

Minneapolis, MN
root.amie@gmail.com

IAN ROSE

Philadelphia, PA
(215) 802-3885
rosefights@comcast.net

DARRELL RUSHTON

Frostburg, MD
(301) 687-4487
dsrushton@frostburg.edu

RICHARD RYAN

(323) 209-5240
richard@stagefight.com
www.stagefight.com

NICK SANDYS

Chicago, IL
773-398-3034
npullin@depaul.edu
nsandys@remybumpo.org

NICOLAS SANTANA

Palm Beach Country, FL
Nsantana25@aol.com

JOHN PAUL SCHEIDLER

Staunton, VA
(646) 337-7124
jpdoe@earthlink.net

STEVEN SCHWALL

Wyoming, MI
siremeric@yahoo.com

JAQ SEIFERT

Chicago, IL
jaqseifert@gmail.com

EDWARD "TED" SHARON

Fredonia, NY
(716) 673-3597
edwardbsharon@gmail.com

LEWIS SHAW

Towson, MD
(410) 340-1461
Lonniess@aol.com
www.lewisshaw.com

TRAVIS SIMS

Glendale, CA
Sims.travis@gmail.com

EUGENE SOLFANELLI

Brooklyn, NY
solfanelli@gmail.com

LEE SOROKO

Miami, FL
(305) 458-9306
lsoroko@miami.edu

MIKE SPECK

Winona, MN
Michael.h.speck@gmail.com

KC STAGE

Raleigh, NC
(859) 492-8215
SERegRep@safd.org

JIM STARK

Hanover, IN
(812) 866-7262
stark@hanover.edu

PAUL STEGER

Lincoln NE
402-304-3541
psteger2@unl.edu

ZEVE STEINBERG

Urbana, IL
847-207-7607
zev@zevsteinberg.com

DAVID STERRITT

Atlanta, GA
(770) 883-0168
dsterr20@gmail.com

RACHEL STUBBS

Chicago, IL
Rachelstubs001@yahoo.com

ELIZABETH STYLES

Chicago, IL
combat-ebeth@comcast.net

J. ALLEN SUDDETH

New York City area
email: nyfgtdirctr@aol.com

STERLING SWANN

Putnam County, NY
914-474-1848
sswann9@aol.com

JASON PAUL TATE

Lexington, KY
(502) 330-7299
jasonpaultate@gmail.com
www.jasonpaultate.com

JASON TIPSWORD

Eastern Iowa
319-530-0416
Jason.tipsword@gmail.com

JOHN TOVAR

Geneva, IL
(630) 330-4293
john_tovar@sbcglobal.net

CHRISTINA TRAISTER

Eaton Rapids, MI
(310) 213-2558
traimez@gmail.com

JOSEPH TRAVERS

New York, NY
(212) 726 2400
swordplay98@hotmail.com

ROBERT "TINK" TUFTEE

Brooklyn, NY
(718) 788-4957
Tink@fights4.com
www.fights4.com

STEVE VAUGHAN

Buffalo, NY
716-474-1160
svsv55@yahoo.com

BRAD WALLER

Springfield, VA
(571) 334-7060
GlobeFG@aol.com

ROBERT WALSH

West Newton, MA
(617) 448-5083
robertwalsh@rcn.com
ROBERT WESTLEY
New York City, NY
dpwestley@yahoo.com

MATTHEW R. WILSON

Oxford, MS
347-247-0755
WilsonMatthewR@gmail.com
MatthewRWilson.com

HEIDI WOLF

Seattle, WA
(206) 548-9653
comrades@bookrats.net

DAVID WOOLLEY

Chicago, IL
C: (312) 560-5448
W: (312) 344-6123
guido@theswordsmen.com
dwoolley@colum.edu
www.theswordsmen.com

D.C. WRIGHT

Macomb, IL
(309) 333-3438
DC-Wright@wiu.edu

MIKE YAHN

New York, NY
(832) 928-7577
yahn.mike@gmail.com
www.mikeyahn.com

CLAIRE YEARMAN

Elgin, IL
claireyearman@gmail.com

DAVID YONDORF

Chicago, IL
(773) 983-5156
davidyondorf@hotmail.com

JACK YOUNG

Houston, TX
jyoung59@uh.edu

BRET YOUNT

London, UK
44-020-8881-1536
IntlRegRep@safd.org





The Society of American Fight Directors is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to promoting safety and fostering excellence in the art of stage combat. The SAFD is committed to providing the highest level of service through initiating and maintaining guidelines and standards of quality, providing education and training, promoting scholarly research, as well as encouraging communication and collaboration throughout the entertainment industry.

Whether you are a producer, director, actor or teacher, we can help accelerate your stage combat skills. SAFD members gain access to a world class networking organization, high caliber stage combat training and mentorship designed to expand your career. Our members include professional actors, directors, producers, educators, dancers, singers, stunt performers, historians, scholars and armorers working in theatre, film, television, all levels of academia, stunt shows, opera and the video gaming industry.

The SAFD Recognized Membership Levels

Friend

One need not be a stage fighter, teacher, or choreographer to join and be active in the SAFD. Any individual who has an interest in the stage combative arts who wants to keep abreast of the field and receive all the benefits of memberships may join as a friend.

Certified Teacher

Any individual who has successfully completed the SAFD Teacher Certification Workshop. These individuals are endorsed by the Society to teach staged combat and may teach the SAFD Skills Proficiency Test.

Actor Combatant

Any individual who has passed an SAFD Skills Proficiency Test and is current in Unarmed, Rapier & Dagger (or Single Sword), and another discipline. The SAFD considers Actor/Combatants to be proficient in performing staged combat safely and effectively.

Fight Director

Any individual who has held the status of Certified Teacher of the SAFD for a minimum of three years and has demonstrated through work in the professional arena a high level of expertise as a teacher and choreographer of staged combat. These individuals are endorsed by the Society to direct and/or choreograph incidents of physical violence.

Advanced Actor Combatant

Any individual who is current in six of eight SAFD disciplines, of which at least three (3) must be recommended passes and is a member in good standing. The SAFD acknowledges Advanced Actor Combatants as highly skilled performers of staged fighting.

Fight Master

Individuals who have successfully fulfilled the requirements of Fight Master as established and published by the Governing Body and awarded recognition by the current body of Fight Masters (College of Fight Masters). Individuals must be members in good standing and engage in continued active service to the Society.

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How much does it cost?

If you have *never* been a member of the SAFD, you can join for just \$30.00 for your first year of membership.

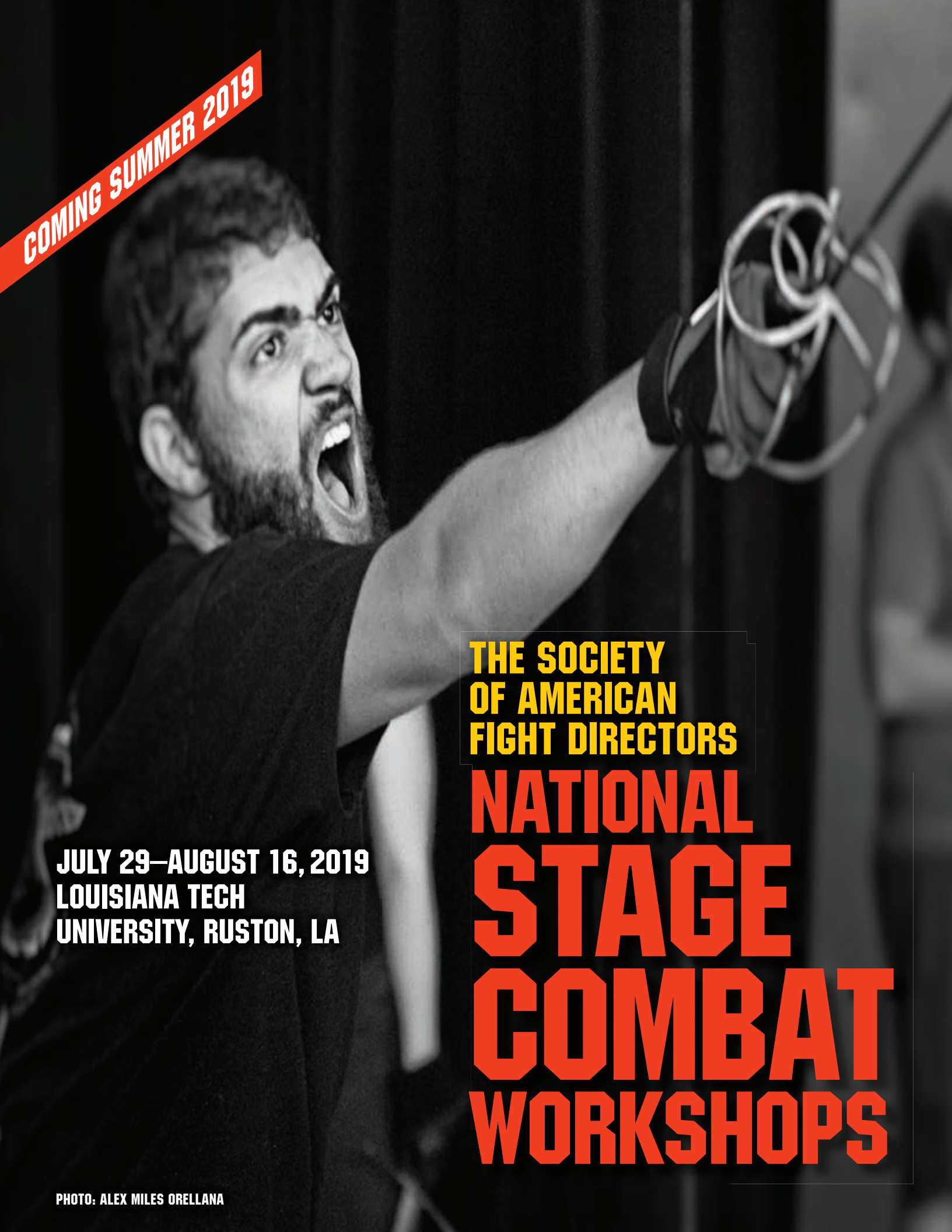
If you are a current or previous member of the SAFD, renewing costs as little as \$45.00 per year.

Ready to join or renew?

You will need to login or set up an account at through the SAFD website (www.safd.org). From there you will be guided through the membership payment process.

Thank you for supporting The Society of American Fight Directors.





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**JULY 29—AUGUST 16, 2019
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