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Moulinet: An Action Quarterly

The Society of American Fight Directors

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2000

## **Moulinet: An Action Quarterly, Volume 1, Issue 1**

Moulinet Staff

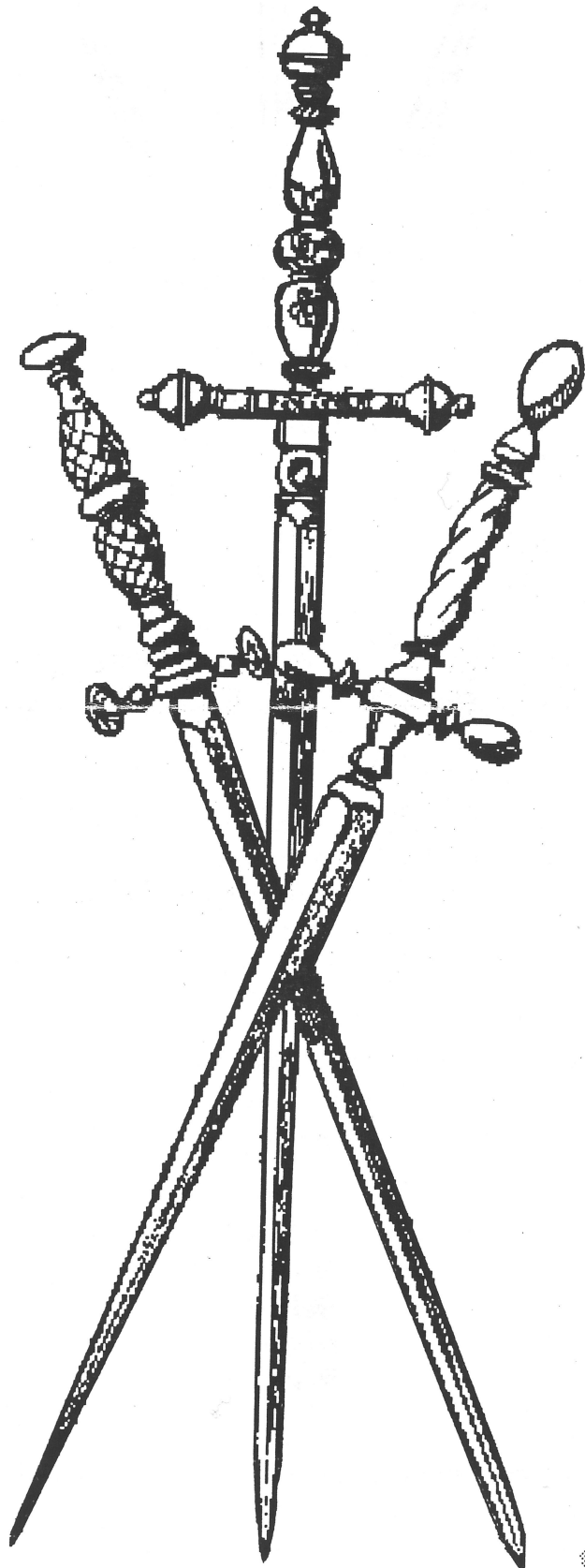
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# MOULINET: An Action Quarterly



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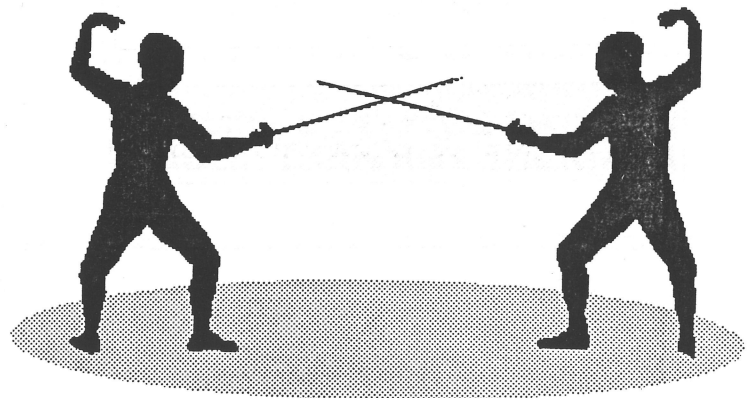
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## MOULINET: An Action Quarterly

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**Richard Weber** plays the peaceful Sir Edmund Tilney at Wisconsin's Bristol Renaissance Faire and Sir Percival Dégagé at Massachusetts' King Richard's Faire, where he also serves as costume designer and wardrobe master.

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## LIONEL LEE: A DIFFERENT KIND OF BLACK KNIGHT

By Mary Shen Barnidge

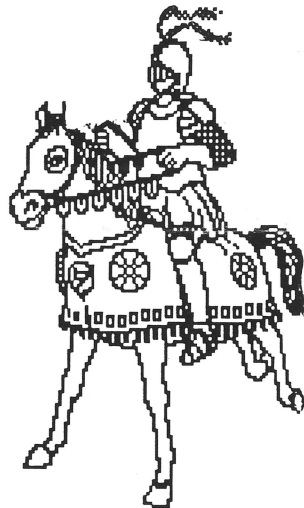
It begins as a peaceful contest, but a squad of highland rebels, led by a bully calling himself Sir Guy, have interrupted the proceedings to claim the field for Scotland. Sir Roland, the master of arms, protests and is promptly struck down by the kilted foot-soldiers. Suddenly, a knight comes riding at full gallop into the tiltyard, scattering the troublemakers in his path. "What's the matter?" he taunts them as his horse rounds the far end of the arena, "Haven't you ever seen a black knight before?"

As he reins in his mount, the spectators stare in astonishment that dissolves into delighted laughter. For the Saracen warrior—dressed, not in steel armor, but in a purple silk turban and a leather surcoat serrated like the feathers of a hawk—is, indeed, a black knight, played by African-American actor Lionel Lee.

"The character is named Muhammad El Raisuli," says the six-year veteran of the Hanlon-Lees Action Theater, "He's also called Lord Othello, King of the Moors—but he's not the Othello in the Shakespeare play. When Kent [Shelton] asked me to join Hanlon-Lees, I wanted to create some kind of Moorish knight, a mounted soldier and warrior. And he had to be African—that was the hook."

The roster of the Hanlon-Lees Action Theater, renowned on the Renaissance Faire circuit since 1979 for its period jousts, has previously included characters whose appearance and personae reflect the atmosphere of heightened cosmopolitanism, arising from the exploration of new continents and initiation of foreign trade, that accompanied that Age of Discovery: a swarthy Balkan-Coast knight, for example, played by actor-stuntman Taso Stavarakis, or an Alsatian mercenary whose coat-of-arms sports a Taoist emblem, (presumably acquired during the Mongol invasions of his ancestral home), portrayed by actor-director Stephen Ommerlé.

But El Raisuli/Othello was its most conspicuous departure from the near-uniform Northern European orientation of those historical-fantasy entertainments. Even his weapons set him apart from his companions—instead of the usual broadsword and dagger, El Raisuli is armed with



a curving scimitar, whose sheath and belt display finely-tooled Arabic letters. And on his shield, in the place of a standard family-crest, there is emblazoned a crescent, with braided triangles forming a six-pointed star.

Lee comments on this. "I've had people come up to me and say, 'hey, you got a Star of David on your shield'. But you find this symbol in many different cultures. The character, El Raisuli—who is wholly fictional, by the way—is Moslem, but I see him as a combination of the Eastern and Western cultures. And when I saw the way audiences related to Othello, I incorporated a lot of El Raisuli into *his* personality."

The violence in the Hanlon-Lees fights is an illusion, of course. Every moment of every fight is choreographed in advance and rehearsed for many weeks, with each move carefully scrutinized for any genuine hazard it may present to its participants. ("We try to go for the biggest and best effect we can, but if we have to tone it down or cut it completely, we will." says director Kent Shelton, "After all, we have to do it *again* the next day.")

The actor-fighters take turns from show to show playing the "good guy" or "bad guy"—the latter usually losing, but also sometimes winning the final showdown by less than sportsmanlike tactics. But do audiences ever object to the sole knight of color being cast as a villain?

"The guys in the audience usually like it when El Raisuli's the bad guy—everybody wants to be 'bad' nowadays." Lee shrugs, "But when we do shows at schools, in front of children, and [the script has me] say 'Cheat to win', I always turn to the audience and add '*but not in school!*'. The idea that you have to cheat to get ahead—no, I can't endorse that, even if it's just acting."

Despite our society's increasing multi-culturalism, do audiences accustomed to tales of Caucasian Christian chivalry sometimes find it difficult to accept a fourteenth-century North-African swordsman whose evenings are passed "reading the Koran by starlight"?

"I have people say to me, 'it's great to have something besides King Arthur and the Round Table', but I'm not sure if they *really* understand what's going on." Lee admits, "There are English knights, sure, but there are also Spanish knights, and Italian knights, and German knights, and they each had their *own* experience."

"Most people have such a myopic view of history, like their own heritage is the *only* one. But history is all-encompassing—it's everywhere, and it belongs to everybody. That's what I feel El Raisuli adds to that whole picture—and even if audiences don't *get* it right away, it's still there for them to see."





## SAFE STEEL ON TWENTY-NINTH STREET

by Anthony G. Fiala

The knife is a genuine commando knife, and not a novelty-shop toy. The short, balding fiftyish man gripping it tightly in his sweating hand is an actor, and so is the tall, pasty-faced, thirtyish man staring in fearful apprehension at the five-inch blade—which might not be sharpened, but is still capable of doing permanent damage to a man's future.

"You sonofabitch!" the old man hisses, "You killed my partner! I'm gonna kill you, you bastard!" He lunges at the young man, who deftly sidesteps out of the way, catching his attacker's wrist on the charge. The knife clatters to the floor.

"I don't like that." says fight choreographer J. David Brimmer, rising lazily from his chair. The combatants relax and face him, awaiting instructions. Opening night for the 29th Street Repertory company's production of Rooster Mitchell's *The Killer And The Comic* is only a week away, and the two actors have a little over an hour tonight to learn five fight sequences ranging from a slapstick vaudeville routine to a surprise evasion-and-disarm that will end with one of their deaths. In the intimate space of the Rep's playhouse, with front-row spectators sitting less than eight feet away, all the fights must reflect genuine pain and brutality—without anyone getting hurt for real.

"Our job is to create the *illusion* of violence", Brimmer tells me, "That's where the artistry comes in, since we're usually working with live weapons—like this" he gestures to the knife which David Mogentale, who plays the Killer, is now holding in preparation for his next attack on Paul Zegler, the *Comic*.

"I'm going to do something cheap with you." Brimmer tells Zegler. "You're on the ground, right? So how would an old vaudevillian get out of that fix?" He shows Zegler how to deliver a crotch-kick—which actually connects harmlessly with the inside of Mogentale's thigh, at which point the latter doubles over in simulated injury.

"That gives you time enough to get to your knees so you can grab him and turn around—no, your knees won't be able to take *that* for long!" Brimmer surveys the actors for a moment, searching for another way to execute the maneuver ("With older actors—or *any* actor, for that matter—you have to be aware of their limitations and their strengths, and use what they *can* do to best advantage.").

"*You*, David—you *wait* until he's up on one knee before you come down from above with the knife." he finally decides, "And Paul, you grab his knife-arm and just shift your weight from your left knee to your right, forcing his arm *over* and around in front—*that's* it. Now turn it back, and *up*, to stab him under the ribs and into the heart. *Oh*, yes, I like that better. This way, the audience can *see*

you do it. You want to run that and let's see how it works?"

The two actors do so. Even though they're not "selling it" with grunts and grimaces this time, concentrating instead on the body movement, the effect is decidedly more suggestive of a struggle to the death. ("You're both definitely gonna feel it in the morning!" Brimmer adds, wryly.)

As the actors prepare to go home, I thank Brimmer for allowing me to observe this creative process, expressing regrets that audiences are so often unaware of the work that goes into staging the simplest of physical confrontations—from the single slap in *Art*, for example, to the extended duel in *Hamlet* or a full-scale battle scene in *Macbeth*. And I ask Brimmer what advice he might have for beginners, whether performers or playgoers.

After a moment's thought, he shrugs, "Safety first. And remember that it's only acting. If you want reality, go start a bar fight."

## HORSEPLAY, HANLON-LEES STYLE

by Kent Shelton

The Hanlon-Lees Action Theater is now in its twentieth year of performing throughout the United States. This presents new challenges, requiring the strictest of training demands, for the horses of Hanlon-Lees. These disciplined horses and their trainers have worked in every medium, from print work to stunt work, and provided the Midwest with some exciting times.

Each venue presents its own problems, but the horses have learned to overcome these obstacles. With film and television, the unfamiliar set and equipment can be unsettling. The trainers lead the horses through the set and performing area, using a reward system to help them overcome their fear. This way, when the cameras roll, the horse and the stunt artist may hit their mark with no distraction.

In live stunt shows, gunplay on horseback is used more often than not, and it may take days for a horse to become accustomed to this. By starting the gunfire off in the distance and moving closer with each round, again using a reward system, we can train the horse to lose its fear of the noise. Saddle falls are a big part of the show, too, and require additional training and timing techniques for both horse and stunt man.

Print work is perhaps the easiest kind of assignment. With the exception of rearing shots, most stunts are not performed at full speed. Our biggest problem is getting our noble steeds to say "cheese" with every click of the camera. But how we get them to do that will remain our secret.

## PULLING NO PUNCHES

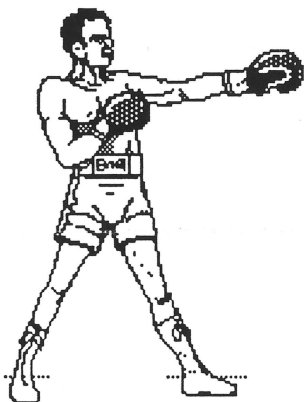
by Danny Rivera

The spectators enter to the sounds of such adrenaline-pumping anthems as "Tough Enough", "Eye Of The Tiger"

and “Saturday Night’s All Right For Fighting”, and the participants enter in a puff of artificial smoke, but this is the unchoreographed, unvarnished Real Deal. At this Golden Gloves tournament, matching amateur boxing champions from New York against those of Chicago (“the Big Apple vs. the Second Banana”, one promoter called it), the last thing on the minds of the combatants is character motivation or emotional subtext. That said, however, theatrical fight directors would profit by studying tapes of the match for physical means to convey these dramatic elements.

Take, for example, the bout between New York’s Demitri Salita and Chicago’s Jermaine Marks, both boxing at 139 lbs. Marks is considerably taller than Salita, a factor that would appear to give Marks a Tommy Hearn-like advantage, but instead forces him into an extreme crouch as he attempts to even up the punching lanes with his shorter opponent. This weakened stance then allows Salita to counter down over Marks’ leads, bringing the latter to his knees more than once. We don’t know anything about either of these men, but isn’t it fun to see the little guy get the jump on the big guy, just like in the movies?

The balance of power may also be shown by one man backing the other against the ropes—some vivid examples of this strategy may be found in the Luis Collazo-Jimmie Gonzalez bout (147 lbs.). The lightning jabs—think of a snake striking—thrown by Paul Magginari against George Gonzales (both boxing at 132 lbs.) are thrilling to watch, as is the heavyweight



match where Miguel Castillo repeatedly attacks Anthony Stewart with outside punches to the head—Stewart is a seasoned fighter, however, easily dodging his adversary and making for an exciting, fast-action match.

But for a fight that could be transferred straight from the gym to the stage, directors should view the show put on by New York’s Mark Anene and Chicago’s Rudy Cisneros—though free of any obvious grandstanding, this individual match packs more changes into its eight minutes, both in its variety of movement and the personalities projected by its contestants (some of it imposed on them by a vocal crowd of Cisneros supporters), than in any of the *Rocky* series’ dances-with-gloves.

“Dance”, as we all know, is a more applicable word to stage combat than “fighting” (“Never give a sword to a man who can’t dance” goes an old Celtic proverb). But many dance forms are based in warfare skills (Brazil’s *capoeira*, for example, and Scottish sword dances), making an education in the techniques of real combat an indispensable part of creating a convincing imitation of violence.



## A NIGHT WITH THE FIGHTS

### XENA LIVE! - fight choreography by David Woolley

Rough-and-ready vehicles for underemployed actor-fighters are nothing new, but a corporate-sponsored budget, a script written by an award-winning playwright and the blessings of the television show make this a spoof to raise the ante on the entire genre. Adding to the panache are SAFD Fight Master David Woolley’s dazzling combat spectacle, featuring some of the best action players in town—many of them choreographers in their own right. Their physical legerdemain keeps audiences—even those jaded by cinematically-produced stunts—enthralled, making the live-action *Xena* a candidate to run until the cast drops from exhaustion or Claudia Allen writes a *second* episode.

### CLASS ENEMY-fight choreography by Brian LeTraunik

Alley staging has been around for some time, but the configurations of Athenaeum’s Studio Two, originally created for a production of *Falsettos*, should rightfully be called “Overpass Staging”. For this play, a classroom’s worth of furniture, along with six long-legged, unruly teenage boys, must be packed onto a narrow platform standing four feet above the eye level of the audience seated on either side. But Brian LeTraunik has built a reputation on staging fights in small spaces: his ensemble of agile actors scuffle and scrap vertically for the most part, hoisting each other into the air and scrambling atop desks, or push one another up against the two walls available for such movement, all the while maintaining a keen awareness of distance, lest some misstep send them tumbling into a spectator’s lap. Actors may speak of “obstacles”, but never have these conceptual hazards been more literally rendered or bravely defied than in this boat-in-the-bottle environment.

### THE LAST DRAGON OF CAMELOT - fight choreography by Alan Malone

In a pinch, fight choreographers can usually fall back on standard classroom curriculum, but how often do training exercises pit broadswords against hand-to-hand? *The Last Dragon Of Camelot’s* Big Showdown has a king’s daughter donning arm or to battle the title character’s deadly claws and kick-boxer tail. Alan Malone solves the arms imbalance by slowing the action—dramatically plausible since a bantamweight princess might well have trouble hefting so heavy a weapon—to allow the megalizard to strike on his opponent’s follow-through. With both actors “selling” mightily, the results were sufficient to hold the jaded attentions of four hundred children on a Saturday afternoon. ■

## **THE PERSECUTION AND ASSASSINATION OF JEAN-PAUL MARAT AS PERFORMED BY THE INMATES OF THE ASYLUM AT CHARENTON UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE MARQUIS DE SADE – fight choreography by Mike Mazzara and Steve Wilson**

The rabble-rousing Jacques Roux is such a zealot that he's strapped into a straitjacket for most of his onstage time, but Mike Mazzara and Steve Wilson have him go down swinging—kicking, rather. Unlike most productions where the actor submits to his restraint after only a token struggle, this one fends off no less than four guards while speaking at high speed and volume, continuing to strike with his head and feet even after his arms are immobilized. The resulting skirmish makes for a short, but riveting, kinetic display to alleviate the play's predominantly verbal focus.

## **THE TRUE DEADLIEST GAME OF DEATH: A KUNG FU MUSICAL – fight choreography by Richard Gilbert and David Gene Gregory**

The songs could have been ad-libbed by Adam Sandler and the script improvised at the wrap-party for the obscure film on which this spoof of Martial-Arts flicks is allegedly based, but the fights in this exercise for unemployed actor-fighters more than compensate for the flimsiness of their premise. Richard Gilbert and David Gene Gregory, aka R & D Fight Choreography, tailor the individual bouts to the personalities of the characters executing them—Yvonne Landry's prissy Irene Meak, for example, or Ghuon "Max" Chung's laconic Near Freezing—to make the most of the tiny Angel Island space and the cast's largely entry-level abilities.

## **ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS**

### **AUDUBON WOOD RENAISSANCE FAIRE Schlitz Audubon Park and Nature Center: Milwaukee, Wisconsin**

A RenFaire held in a Nature Preserve on the fringes of a metropolitan city is not without its disadvantages—tight consolidation of litter-producing concessions (e.g. food vendors, smoking areas and latrines), for one, and parking lots so distant as to require shuttle buses to shlep fairegoers to the grounds—but the fledgling Audubon Wood Renaissance Faire puts on a brave show within its budgetary and environmental restrictions.

The densely-timbered site precludes jousting on horseback, but fight-fans hungry for the clash of steel will find plenty of it at the presentation mounted by David Krajec and Steve Covey under the collective banner of Sword And Masque. Assisted by members of the Renaissance Military Association, they lecture on the era's weaponry, enlivening the historical material with commentary on its social context (did you know that the English court ladies' complaints about the difficulty of dancing with gallants wearing the long Italian rapiers were what prompted Elizabeth I to set limits on blade-length that exist to this day?).

Their documentation is illustrated by such martial demonstrations as an infantry drill with pikes, broadsword bouts by the husband-wife team of Bruce and Leslie Aller, and several rapier-and-dagger duels by Krajec and Covey themselves (using theatrical weapons, carefully distinguished from the period-accurate replicas on display).

For fairegoers accustomed to buckets of blood and bluster, this may seem a bit mild—though the hand-cannon, operated by the charismatic James Aldrich, supplies a Bang big enough to satisfy any ballistics buff. But the response to this second-year Faire, whose quiet charm contrasts sharply with the commercialism and congestion of the Bristol Renaissance Faire (Wisconsin's only other such event at this time) would seem to ensure its future success.

## **KING RICHARD'S FAIRE**

### **Myles Standish State Forest Preserve: South Carver, Massachusetts**

Soothsayers foresee changes next year for this granddaddy of Renaissance Faires, but the millennium incarnation of this venerated prototype for countless other such events continues to offer all the giddy magic one expects from seasoned entertainers who meet yearly as at a shrine to manufacture their hollywood-historical fantasies (this year features a *Macbeth* masque, performed by the nobles of the King's Court, with songs set to Broadway show tunes) for devoted RenHeads throughout Southern New England.

Likewise venerated in this region is the Hanlon-Lees Action Theater, whose stunt-jousting remains fresh and innovative after more than twenty years. While the Carver scenario adheres to their original clean fighting vs. dirty fighting dynamic, a contemporary gang-warfare note is sounded in the incorporation of an innocent bystander in the royal court struck down by a stray bullet—oops, arrow, during a struggle among the knights for a loaded crossbow. The rise of the Common Man as Hero, another modern theme, is also evidenced in a humble Squire gifted with supernatural powers (played by the stouthearted Don Gonzales) having the last quiet word after the battles and bloodshed.

And while young actor-fighters are constantly developing new characters, one must admire the perseverance of so many of this troupe's original personnel, some of whom are

fast approaching AARP status, but who somewhere discover the stamina and spirit to make it all seem easy. (King Richard's regulars reappearing this year include Hanlon-Lees founder Kent Shelton as well as the popular Stephen Ommerlé.) Whatever the coming century may bring, this company's quality and professionalism looks to prove enduring.

## FIELD DISPATCHES

### FOURTH WALL BREAKDOWN

by Richard Weber

I once played the Evil Sheriff with the Ring Of Steel company. Our scenario was building up to the big show-down scene, with me bullying the good people, yelling at everybody, and being a real hard-ass.

Suddenly this guy in the audience, who's obviously been really into it for some time, breaks off the end of his beer bottle and grabs me by the front of my costume. This is a potentially dangerous situation—he's big, he's drunk, and he's holding this broken bottle at my throat!

I kept my voice quiet so as not to ruin the moment for the rest of the audience, and I got right into the guy's face. I looked him in the eyes, I dropped all the accent, and I told him, 'I am an *actor*. This is a *scene* I'm doing. You are getting in the way of that scene. Now put down the bottle.'

In the meantime, I'm having a panic attack, of course—but I got through to him. Once I knew I had done it, I was back into the scene and being the bad guy again.

### THE CALL TO ARMS

by Dawn "Sam" Alden

My first encounter with violence onstage, I was an undergraduate rehearsing a play called *The Maid Of Judah*, one scene of which takes place in an orphanage. The Director wanted the actress playing the headmistress to slap an unruly orphan across the face.

Having an aversion to physical violence stemming from her own childhood, the actress was very uncomfortable with the director's insistence on a full-contact slap. Rather than give her a non-contact alternative, or stressing the choreographic nature of the move to distance it from the emotional impact, he instead began to verbally abuse her, attempting to manipulate and provoke her into striking her fellow actress in anger.

Any reasonable person could predict the result of that method. The actress broke down sobbing, her repugnance to stage violence now magnified more than ever. Watching this ordeal, I knew that there had to be a better way. but it

was almost five years before I learned that this better way had a name—Stage Combat.

### SISTER SLEDGEHAMMER

by Karin McKie

My inauguration into stage combat came at the feet, figuratively and literally, of my sister. She was three years older, three feet taller (or so it seemed) and was wont to whomp me on a regular basis. Using the cunning of those cursed with Napoleonic stature, however, I soon discovered the immutable power of the "pretend fight".

This was revealed after a particularly brutal session of punching and tickling. Our parents were out shopping and we were left under our grandparents' somewhat lax supervision. The row was over, with Sis triumphant, and I was lying on the floor, attempting to re-train my lungs in their *raison d'être*. It came to me that revenge is indeed a dish best eaten cold. Several hours later, untouched and unexpectedly, I erupted into piteous wailing. Grandma and Pop-pop rushed to my aid, banishing my sister to her room, and leaving me to enjoy my victory.

But the vocal part of the "pretend fight" was merely the tip of the iceberg. When next my sister hit me, I played dead. The realization slowly dawned that her punch had dispatched her little sister. After she ran, distraught, to confess her capital crime, I clued her and our parents to my ruse. It was the birth of the combat "sell".

I love my sister. As adults, we became the best of friends. She chaperoned me when I got my ears pierced and taught me to care for the environment. But to this day, I still incorporate a long response to every hit I take. My sister was my first stage combat teacher. Thanks, Sis.

### THE WRONG SAMARITAN

by William Burch

We had an accident once, in California, where one of our knights went into a dismount. But when he was all the way down on the ground, his horse stepped on his helmet—yes, he was still *wearing* the helmet. He only got a small cut on the temple, but we didn't know that until later.

So he's lying there out on the field, unconscious and bleeding. The horse has wandered over to the edge of the tiltyard and is sort of scraping his hoof on the ground—and we're all hoping that it's not our man's *brains* he's scraping off—when this woman we've never seen before comes charging out from the audience. And what does she do but go straight to the *horse*! Our man could be dead, for all we knew, and she's making sure the one who *did* it was all right! ■



“Never give a sword  
to a man  
who can't dance.”

— Old Celtic Saying

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