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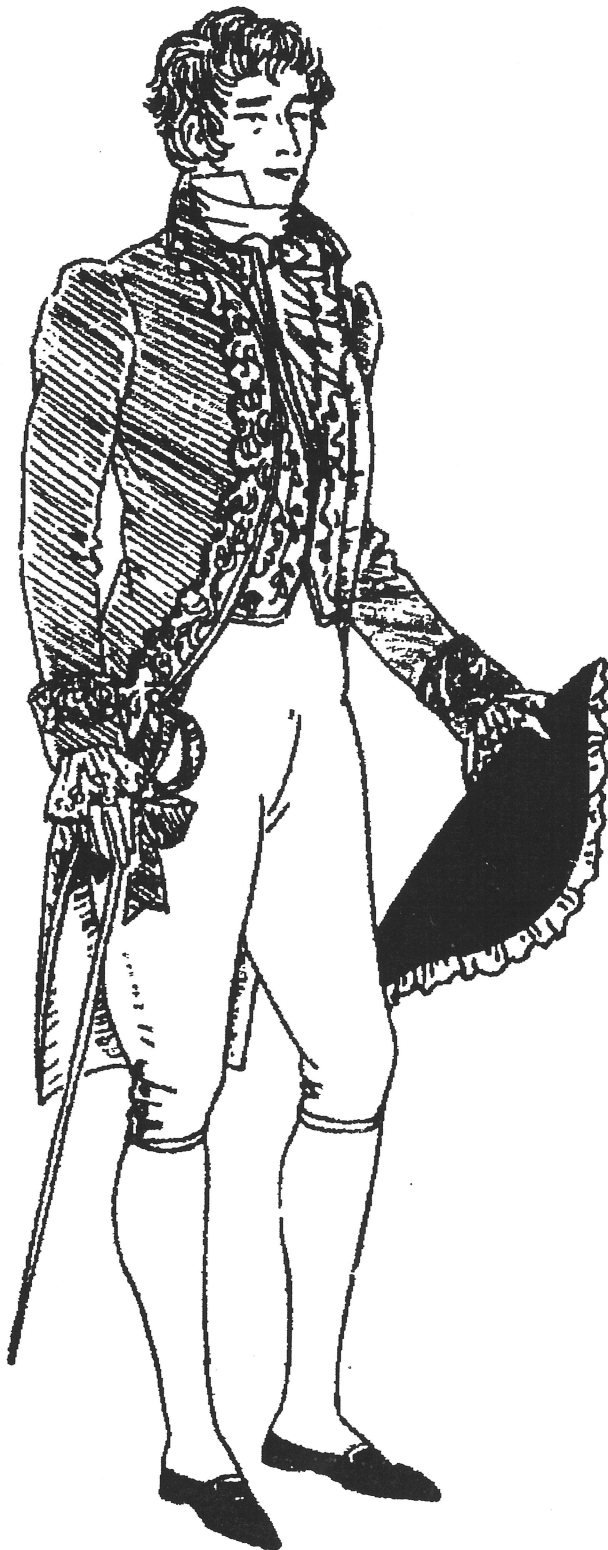
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MOULINET: An Action Quarterly



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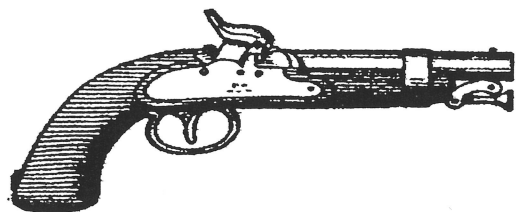
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MOULINET: An Action Quarterly

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mary Shen Barnidge is a freelance writer and theatre critic for the *Chicago Reader* and *Windy City Times*. She is a member of the American Theatre Critics Association, Poets & Writers, Inc. and a Friend in the Society Of American Fight Directors.

Geoff Coates is an alumnus of Columbia College, and a 2005 recipient of both a Jeff Citation and an After Dark award for fight direction.

Matthew Hawkins received a Jeff Citation in 2005 for his fight direction in House Productions' *Curse Of The Crying Heart*, and is currently supervising fights for and participating in House's *Valentine Victorious*.

David Woolley is a Fight Master in the SAFD and half of the popular comedy-fencing team, The Swordsmen, in addition to teaching at Columbia College

Shannon O'Neill can be seen in many guises on Chicago's storefront circuit. Her most recent project is *Of Mice And Men* for Steep Theatre.

Arik Martin was the guiding light for the ultraviolent Half-Cocked Theatre Company, long missing from its Uptown basement home. No word yet on whether he will be overseeing the bloodbaths in the upcoming film version of *Hack/Slash*.

Kevin McKillip is a company member of ShawChicago, currently appearing in *The Devil's Disciple*.

Bruce Hovanec is a patrolman working out of Chicago's 23rd District and can often be spotted at the Emerald City Coffee Shop.

BARTER, HIRE & BROADSIDES

Hanlon-Lees Theatrical Joust Extravaganza, DVD starring the Hanlon-Lees Action Theater. "A spectacular behind-the-scenes look at the history of the company, including rare film footage of the original Hanlons, from which the troupe takes its name". For ordering information, e-mail webmaster@hanlon-lees.com

Sword Of Hearts, DVD starring Kathryn Ann Rosen, Amy E. Harmon and Libby Beyreis of the Babes With Blades. "A rollicking comic adventure in the style of *The Princess Bride* and *The Three Musketeers*". Order from www.customflix.com/206814

San Valentino And The Melancholy Kid, DVD of the smash hit action-musical by House Productions. "There's more passion, exuberance, wit, imagination and sheer spirit in the first twenty minutes than most theatres serve up in an entire season" declared Chris Jones, reviewing for the *Chicago Tribune*. Order from www.thehousetheatre.com

Curse Of The Crying Heart, DVD of part two in Nathan Allen's action-packed trilogy for House Productions, featuring aerial fights à la *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, choreographed by Matthew Hawkins. Order from www.thehousetheatre.com

THE GALLERY BOOKSTORE at 923 West Belmont Ave. has back issues of *Moulinet: An Action Quarterly*. They are now also available on-line through Advanced Book Exchange, Gallery Bookstore Ltd. inventory number 060 (Abe@Abebooks.com). Price, \$4 per issue. For further information, phone William Fiedler at Gallery Bookstore (773) 975-8200 or e-mail; ChgosOldst@voyager.net

RAPIERS AND ROMANTIC ROMPS IN *THE TALISMAN RING*: a chat with Geoff Coates

When our practical-minded hero accuses his two lady comrades of behaving as if they were in “one of Mrs. Radcliffe’s novels”, his complaint sums up perfectly the tone of Georgette Heyer’s parody of/homage to that author’s gothic chillers. Our plot involves a stodgy elder son, Sir Tristram Shield, who—in the absence of his wrongfully-accused fugitive brother, Ludovic Lavenham—is being forced by inheritance laws to marry a French expatriate, Mademoiselle Eustacie deVauban. Further complicating matters is our villain, the foppish Basil Lavenham, who intends to claim the family fortune *and* the pretty Eustacie for himself. But with the assistance of chance acquaintances Miss Sarah Thane and her J.P. brother, all is put to right.

The premiere production in 1996 of Christina Calvit’s adaptation for Lifeline Theatre featured fights created by Ned Mochel and a seasoned band of stage combat-trained actors, among them Ric Kraus, John Neisler, and Elizabeth Laidlaw. But Geoff Coates, recipient of a Jeff Citation for his work on Defiant Theatre’s *Action Movie* and an After Dark award for *The Kentucky Cycle*, welcomed the chance to direct the violence for the 2005 revival.

MARY SHEN BARNIDGE: The first time around, Ned [Mochel] had all these actor-combatants he’d worked with before. *This* production has Peter Greenberg and Patrick Blashill repeating their roles, but how many more trained fighters did you have?

GEOFF COATES: Everyone in our show had *some* fight experience. Or they had some similar skill—gymnastics or martial arts—so we could all speak the same language. But what I really liked was that nobody said to me, “Well, *this* is the way we did it *last* time”. I wasn’t trying to recreate Ned’s fights, no matter how good they were.

BARNIDGE: Your other problem in that space is—well, the *space*. Your stage measures 28 X 30 feet *without* scenery. How did you deal with that?

COATES: It helped that we had the set in place from the first rehearsal. I walked around it, myself,

to get an idea of where the open spaces were and how far downstage we could go without hitting the audience. I’d ask anybody brave enough if they’d sit in the front row during the fights, and though they reacted like *anybody* would with things flashing in front of them, they weren’t afraid.

BARNIDGE: Nobody dived under a chair.

COATES: No, nobody. We directed the big swings that take up space *away* from the body—the cuts, as opposed to the thrusts—upstage. And when the movement *had* to go downstage, then we cheated a little and tucked the sword in close, rather than follow the logical path of the weapon.

BARNIDGE: I recall five fights in the show: The scuffle with the suitcase as Eustacie meets with highwaymen. The one where Ludovic fights with the Bow Street Runners and gets shot in the arm. The scene where Basil practices saber with his servant. The “weighty tome” fight in the library where the candles get snuffed out by pistolfire. And the big duel at the end where Sarah grabs the pistol from Basil and is knocked aside, then Basil and a Runner duel with rapier and baton, and THEN Tristram and Basil duel with the rapiers. Is that all of them?

COATES: There are actually seven of them—come to think of it, with the training sequence [between Basil and his servant], there are *eight* fights.

BARNIDGE: You *added* that scene with Basil and his valet. That’s not in the book.

COATES: Yes, we inserted that during rehearsals, so that Basil can show us his “indefensible attack”. It introduces the notion of fighting with swords, *and* of Basil being an expert swordsman—

BARNIDGE: making it all the more thrilling when Tristram kicks his ass.

COATES: Exactly! It gives the hero something to fight *against*.

BARNIDGE: But it doesn’t come until after the “strapping wench” fight, with Sarah disguised as the maidservant in order to fool the Bow Street Runners, where Tristram charges to the rescue.

COATES: Yes, and that’s the first time we see Tristram *fight*. All this time, everyone’s been talking about how he’s not interested in anything active and what an unromantic fellow he is—but then he comes

in and takes charge of *everything* from then on.

BARNIDGE: But he does it *reluctantly*, excusing himself—"I can't stand by and watch a lady get hurt."

COATES: That's right. And then we get the big scene in the library—what you call the "weighty tome" fight—where Patrick [Blashill] jumps from the upstairs level.

BARNIDGE: How high *is* that jump, by the way? It looks like an awfully long drop.

COATES: It's actually only about five feet. I'm six-foot-two, and when I stood next to the platform, it only came up to my shoulder. Blashill's character in this scene is better at distraction than actual fighting, but since we don't have much room to *run* in that space, I asked if he was comfortable with jumping off the ledge, and he said he'd give it a try. Of course, the first time, he landed like most people do who haven't done it before.

BARNIDGE: Feet apart? Knees and ankles taking the shock?

COATES: Yes. You *think* that you can catch yourself better if you land with a *wide* stance—but what usually happens is that you land with more weight on *one* foot than on the other. I told him, "You've got to fall like a paratrooper in the World War II movies. You land with feet *together*, then buckle and roll."

BARNIDGE: I want to talk about the Bow Street Runners for a minute. You have your Runners armed with constable's batons instead of the weighted walking-sticks that they actually carried. Why?

COATES: It's true that the billy-club wasn't the special weapon of the Runners, but law officers have used it, or something *like* it, for nearly two centuries. The fact is, *none* of our weapons in the show are *exactly* 1793. But in our tight space, the actors were more comfortable swinging a shorter stick.

BARNIDGE: I recall a fight pitting baton against rapier, with the Runner using his club as if it were a sword.

COATES: That would have been the final fight. When a Runner accustomed to using a certain weapon has someone coming at him with another kind, I thought he would probably try to adopt some of the other weapon's technique. In this case,

it's the *wrong* choice, and he loses, but it's still a *logical* choice.

BARNIDGE: That brings us to the big final fight, where you have a lot of people scrambling around onstage at once and chasing each other up and down the stairs. I recall Tristram uses his cloak to parry Basil's rapier at one point.

COATES: Set designers don't like it when we poke holes in their scenery with our swords. But this is something you can only find through trial-and-error. The actors have to remember what they did when they hit the set, and that if they hit the set, the set will hit *back*, and if it hits back, the set *designer* will hit back, and so they have to do it the way I told them.

BARNIDGE: Did the ladies—or the gentlemen, for that matter—have trouble moving in their costumes?

COATES: In the final fight, when Sarah grabs for Basil's pistol and gets thrown backward, I planned to have Elizabeth [Dowling] raise her hands above her head. But her sleeves were too tight for her to do that, and I didn't want her just falling into a pile of poufs and ruffles and all those things I don't know the names of. She had a nice solid *wall* behind her, though, so I had her crash into it, sway like she might be a bit stunned and then *lower* herself to the floor.

BARNIDGE: To keep her *involved* in the action.

COATES: Another problem we had is one that *often* occurs when you're fighting with rapiers in this period. Basil has a lot of lace at his wrists that *wasn't* there during rehearsals, and every time Rob [Kauzlaric] tried to parry, he'd get tangled up in it. Now, people actually *wore* these kind of clothes at that time, and they *could* have rolled back their cuffs, but they *didn't*. They paid a lot of money for that lace and that embroidered vest and they were going to look *good* as they died!

BARNIDGE: So *somebody* must have found a solution to being tripped by their own wardrobe.

COATES: And so did we. You know, probably the hardest part of my job is convincing actors that they can actually *do* the stupid stuff I ask of them, and do it safely and accurately—

BARNIDGE: And look *good* doing it, don't forget—

COATES: And feel *really* cool afterward.

A NIGHT WITH THE FIGHTS

VALENTINE VICTORIOUS

fight choreography by Matthew Hawkins

He fought a duel against, literally, a Neanderthal opponent, his only weapons twin bucklers strapped to his arms like vambraces, in *Cave With Man*. He single-handedly repelled a half-dozen samurai attackers in *Curse of the Crying Heart*. And even if he had *not* been required to stunt-double for the leading man after the latter sustained a broken hand during the show's final weeks, Jeff Citation-winning Matthew Hawkins would have once again assigned himself the heaviest labor in *Valentine Victorious*, this time portraying a character called "the Detroit Fist", whose cumbersome prosthetic arm renders him capable of delivering cardiac arrest with a single punch.

To be sure, this chapter in Nathan Allen's saga of the Valentine Kid signals the end of the trilogy and thus, is more plot-driven than the previous two, leaving less room for the brand of sheer martial spectacle that fueled previous episodes (sorry, no flying ninjas appear in this one). And since the period is film-noir 1930s, *coups de grâce* may be administered bloodlessly, with firearms, nuclear weapons and the Rappaccini's Daughter gimmick, introduced in *Crying Heart*, still very much in evidence.

Indeed, the author's decision to transform most of the fighting characters into cyborgs with the customary powers-beyond-those-of-ordinary-mortals allows for combat based in relatively simple step-by-step action. What supplies most of the thrill are the generically cinematic devices—percussion-heavy incidental music, foleyed-in sound effects and, of course, our emotional investment in the combatants.

THE SEA HORSE

fight choreography by David Woolley

Both of the actors in this courtship-by-combat comedy are in fine fighting condition—Guy Van Swearingen is a real-life firefighter, and at six feet-plus, Kirsten Fitzgerald could serve as stunt-double to the Statue of Liberty—but the stage measures a bare 14 feet deep when not cluttered by museum-grade paraphernalia replicating a salt-soaked waterfront tavern.

David Woolley employs his trademark boat-in-the-bottle techniques for the mid-story skirmish, with Fitzgerald using her lofty stature to back Swearingen to the wall, then delivering a right cross, followed by a pair of slaps and a shove that puts him on the floor. But as she closes in to kick him, he catches her with a sucker-jab to the belly, his unexpected riposte spurring her to retreat.

In the final showdown, later in the play, she threatens him with the bar's "peacemaker". But since the text now prohibits him hitting her, their scuffle is restricted to a few strikes at the furniture, and a short body-to-body struggle with the baseball bat wedged between them (always a smart idea with a flailing weapon) before the determined swain pins his intended in a straitjacket grapple. What could be more romantic than a friendly fight between evenly-matched adversaries?

A CEREMONY OF INNOCENCE

fight choreography by David Kelch

When the only death scenes in a play about the 10th-century King Ethelred are two stealth knifings less than ten minutes apart, special care must be taken to ascertain that they don't look too much alike—especially when staged in an in-your-lap space by day serving as Evanston's Main Street Metra station. Fortunately, David Kelch is blessed with a cast of fight-trained actors (among them Maggie Speer, artistic director of the ultraviolent Azusa Productions).

The first murder is set up by the King's hot-headed son's pursuit of a departing Danish ambassador, who, having previously been warned to expect treachery, turns and strikes before ascertaining whether his stalker is armed. The second is the assassination of a visiting Danish princess: Ethelred's mother, who has already proclaimed her hostility to all subjects of her country's former enemy, creeps up on her innocent target. After stabbing her prey in the back, however, she then escalates the cold-blooded efficiency of the deed by spinning the victim around, stabbing again as they face one another.

In both instances, the impact of the blade is concealed in the clinch. But with audience members seated a bare five feet away from the action, the swiftness of its execution sparks the requisite shock and dismay.

HACK/SLASH: NIGHTMARES

fight choreography by Arik Martin

"If you are sitting in the seats covered with trash bags, and you don't want to get blood on you, **MOVE NOW!**" reads a note in the playbill. The premise of Josh Blaylock and Tim Seeley's soon-to-be-a-movie comic book spoof of teen-slasher flicks—pint-sized existential chick and her quasi-terminator sidekick stalk and kill villains likewise culled from that Hollywood genre—offers, in addition to the usual blood and bikinis, a variety of confrontations employing handguns, daggers, plywood cleavers, rabid woodland-furrybeasts and large ornate crucifixes. But even with a janitor in Grim Reaper drag mopping gore from the floor between scenes (and earning a round of applause each time), there's no denying the wow-looka-*that* spectacle of the climactic stunt, when our heroine fires a bullet through a Bible (with a spray of tattered paper erupting out the far side), prompting its evil owner to open the book, only to be greeted by a burst of flame. Oh, where *has* Arik Martin been hiding since the mysterious disappearance of Half-Cocked Productions?

MEN OF TORTUGA

fight choreography uncredited

The topic under discussion at the conference table is a stealth murder and the actors are Darrell Cox and Keith Kupferer, so naturally, we anticipate violence. But playwright Justin Shepard surprises us by not allowing anyone to be killed—indeed, the only actual fight mandated by the text is a relatively simple block-grapple-and-roll. What rivets our attention, however, is the ingenious concealed weapon proposed by the Hit Boss: a fiberglass dagger disguised as the top of a briefcase handle. But the design, we soon learn, requires removal of the hinges on said handle, forcing that hardware to be displayed in a patently suspicious manner. And leaving the hinges intact turns out to render the knife impossible to draw forth quickly. The frustration of these amateur assassins makes for a hilarious parody of exotic James Bond-styled arms.

THE NUTCRACKER AND THE KING OF MICE

fight choreography by Cynthia Von Orthal

The danger of their strings becoming snarled in the scrum imposes restrictions on marionette fights rarely found in live-action combat. But long-time theatregoers may recall Cynthia Van Orthal from *A Pirate's Lullaby* in 1996, a production that offered

her the opportunity to work with Ned Mochel at thrilling scramble-up-the-rigging shipboard battles. The result is a duel between our Sardonicus-faced guardsman and the terrifying seven-headed Mouse King involving not only swordplay (though the blades, quivering in close proximity, never actually engage), but a pair of body-checks, produced by the operator lifting the entire puppet off the ground and swinging it like a wrecking-ball to crash into his opponent. When our hero emerges in the next scene bloodied, but triumphant, we do not hesitate to acknowledge the price of his victory.

RIKKI-TIKKI-TAVI

fight choreography by Shannon O'Neill

For starters, our hero is a mongoose. That's a large rodent built along the lines of a ferret. His adversary is a snake—specifically, a cobra—up to no good (as what cobra ever *is*?). But the challenge is not so much the limited movement dictated by only *one* of the combatants having hands/paws as it is their arena being a children's show with a running time of under an hour. Shannon O'Neill adheres to the body language of her characters, with the serpent swaying from the torso and darting with his head at his bobbing and weaving opponent, until the latter executes a successful helicopter pin to spin him in a circle before delivering the *morsure de grâce*. The entire sequence is over in under a minute, but the cheers from the audience amply evidenced the adrenaline generated by the anthropomorphic dynamic.

A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR'S COURT

fight choreography by Kevin McKillip

The playing space in the landmark-protected mansion is barely nine feet wide, the audience not much over four feet away, but the trial-by-combat lesson offered the time-traveling Henry by the gallant Sir Lancelot involves three-foot broadswords. Fortunately, the 21st-century teenager may be assumed to never have handled a sword before—or *any* kind of weapon, for that matter—so whenever the heavily-armored knight charges him, the agile youth simply whirls and dodges. But after essaying a successful sucker-beat on his teacher's stationary blade, Henry foolishly gloats, dropping his guard, and subsequently loses his weapon as he belatedly attempts to evade his opponent. Lancelot's advice to his inexperienced pupil: "Keep Moving!"

CALL TO ARMS

March 21-May 5. New York City. The Fights 4 faculty (Michael Chin, Robert Tuftee, Rikki Ravitts and J. David Brimmer) team up with members of The Lady Cavaliers to offer classes in basic skills leading to certification exams. For further information, phone (718) 857-2721 or log onto *either* www.ladycavaliers.org or www.fights4.com.

March 31-April 2. Regent University in Virginia Beach, Virginia. A faculty including SAFD fight instructors Dale Girard, Michael Chin, Richard Ryan and k. Jenny Jones will conduct classes at all levels. For further information, phone (757) 226-4730, e-mail michkir@regent.edu or log onto www.regent.edu/beachbash.

April 1-May 23. Victory Gardens Theatre in Chicago. SAFD instructor Brian LeTraunik will conduct classes in Single Sword Swashbuckling, with an opportunity to test for certification in the Society of American Fight Directors at the conclusion of the course. For further information, phone (773) 549-5788 or e-mail jricciardi@victorygardens.org

May 12-14. Roosevelt University in Chicago. Certified instructors Michael J. Johnson and Angela Bonacasa will conduct a symposium preparing actor-combatants for the 2007 Teacher Training Workshop through a curriculum emphasizing choreographic skills. Attendance is by application only. No phone numbers are available, but for further information, e-mail mj2rd@yahoo.com or goodhouse@hotplate.us.

June 5-24. International Stunt School in Everett, Washington. The United Stuntmen's Association, in conjunction with On Edge Productions, will conduct a three-week intensive training course in fundamental stuntwork skills, including high-falls, minitramp and jerk harness. For further information, phone (425) 290-9957 or log onto www.stuntschool.com.

FIELD DISPATCHES

A LESSON IN SPORTSMANSHIP

In previous years, a "special award" from the Joseph Jefferson committee meant that they had created a category in order to bestow one-time-only accolades on a specific recipient. These included awards for fight choreography, explaining why only seven have been given in nearly forty years. In the fall of 2005, however, Robin McFarquhar was nominated for his fights in Chicago Shakespeare's *Romeo And Juliet* under a category designated "special awards", along with other artists whose crafts—video projections, muralist set decoration, circus acrobatics—likewise fell outside the perimeters of the divisions already in operation.

McFarquhar didn't take home a prize that night, for which oversight condolences are certainly in order. Nevertheless, his loss speaks for the growing acceptance of Stage Combat as legitimate stagecraft, in that its consideration required no favored treatment, but instead was entered into the competition alongside its long-established fellows.

While it's too soon to expect the JeffCom to declare Fight Choreography a category in itself (logic dictates it belonging with Dance and Movement, but that might be *too* big a jump for the judges), this signals a heightened awareness of theatrical violence likely leading to more extensive recognition of its designers and participants.

THREE THINGS WE LEARNED AT THE 2006 WINTER WONDERLAND WORKSHOP

1. When delivering that blood-chilling scream of fury/agon/terror, don't vocalize on an "aaah" sound. If you do, you'll tighten up your throat and injure your voice. To stop the show with that cry again the next night, and for the rest of the play's run, go with a "waaa" or "yaaa" instead. This places the sound in the *front* of your head, where it belongs.

2. What female actor-combatants need are not only more roles written for fighting women, but more roles for *non-barbie* fighting women. Just because most fight-trained ladies—for now, anyway—are young and athletic doesn't mean they all look like Keira Knightley. Or dress like J. Lo, for that matter.

3. Never leave the building, even for a smoke break, without first putting on a dry garment—if only a sweatshirt or windbreaker—over your workout clothes. Maybe it's not snowing outside, but this is still *January* in a city by a *lake*. Interrupting a perfect parry-in-five to haul out your hankie and swab off your nose does *not* exemplify martial bearing.

CARRYING A BIG STICK

British policemen are called "bobbies" or "peelers" in honor of their founder, Sir Robert Peel. American patrolmen are "cops", after their practice of seizing wrongdoers. And France has its "*flics*", for reasons known only to their countrymen. But according to Officer Bruce Hovanec of Chicago's District 23, a "billy-club" has nothing to do with any historical William associated with law enforcement. Instead the name for this familiar constable's friend derives from "*bille*", the French word for—of all things—a rolling-pin. Whoever thought that "How do you like *these* cookies?" could be construed as fighting words?

**“When angry, count to four.
When very angry, swear.”**

– Mark Twain

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