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## **Moulinet: An Action Quarterly, Volume 7, Issue 4**

Moulinet Staff

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# MOULINET: An Action Quarterly



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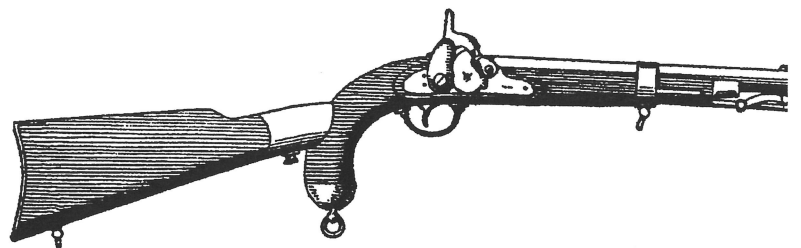
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## MOULINET: An Action Quarterly

Number Four – 2006

**Publisher** - Charles J. Likar

**Editor** - Bebe Swerdlow

**Staff Writer**

Mary Shen Barnidge

**Contributing Reporters**

Dawn "Sam" Alden

Stephanie Repin

Amy Harmon

Jimmy Ellis

Richard Gilbert

Nick Sandys

David Blixt

Robin McFarquhar

Matt Engle

Glenn Proud

Geoff Coates

Bill Walters

Denise Garrity

Michael Chin

**Consultants**

H. Gregory Mermel

William Fiedler

**Technical Support**

Gregory Zelchenko

Zoe Quan

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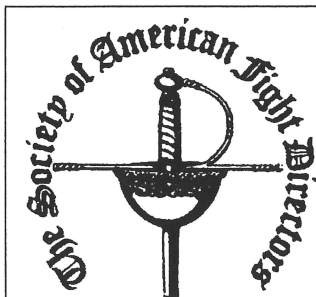
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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**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.

**Dawn "Sam" Alden, Stephanie Repin and Amy E. Harmon** are all members of the Babes With Blades ensemble, an all-female fight troupe whose projects include full-scale productions, workshops in theatrical combat and practical self-defense, as well as sponsorship of the annual Joining Sword And Pen playwrighting competition.

**Rick Sordelet** has choreographed fights for the Disney-produced *Beauty And The Beast*, *The Lion King* and *Tarzan*, in addition to *Elton John's Aida* and the upcoming *Curtains*. He is an instructor at the Yale School of Drama and New York City's New School.

**David Blixt** is a founding member of A Crew Of Patches Theatre Company and served as fight choreographer for the Jeff-winning Defiant Theatre production of *A Clockwork Orange*.

**Nick Sandys** recently choreographed sword fights for Vittum Theatre's *The Shakespeare Stealer* and is himself currently acting in *The Real Thing* for Remy Bumpo Theatre Company.

**Robin McFarquhar** recently directed fights for Chicago Shakespeare's production of *Henry IV*, for which he receiving critical praise both in the United States and in the UK.

**Glenn Proud** is a founding member of Live Wire Chicago Theatre and a certified actor-combatant in the SAFD. He recently choreographed fights for GroundUp Theatre's award-winning production of *Slaughter City*.

**Matt Engle** is a member of the Factory Theatre company, and has also counts among his production credits the Open Eye and Steep Theatre companies, as well as the Free Associates.

**Geoff Coates** is a past recipient of both a Jeff Citation and an After Dark award in recognition of his fight choreography.

**Bill Walters** is the "super captain" in charge of supernumeraries (non-singing actors) at the Lyric Opera of Chicago. His duties also include hiring fighters for nonsinging roles.

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*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](http://www.customflix.com/206814)

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*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](http://www.thehousetheatre.com)

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# BABES WITH BARE BODKINS: DUELING IN *AFFAIR OF HONOR*

A chat with Babes With Blades' Amy Harmon, Stephanie Repin and Dawn "Sam" Alden

As a rule, fencers are heavily armored in thick padding—indeed, outdoor combat often employs chest-protection equipment associated with dirt-bike races—but what happens when your play's costumes mandate fighting not only with naked steel, but nearly-naked bodies? While rumors circulate about a bare-ass brawl choreographed by Michael Sokoloff for his Aggravated Assault Ensemble (the combatants remain unavailable for comment), the members of the Babes With Blades all-female fight troupe found themselves faced with only slightly less daunting a challenge in their recent production of *Affair of Honor*.

The rules for the Joining Sword And Pen playwrighting contest stipulated that the scene depicted in Emile Bayard's painting of that name—two Victorian ladies dueling, stripped to the waist, skirts tucked into waistbands and rapiers crossed, while companions bear witness to the mortal conflict in progress—be incorporated into the action. Two winning scripts were selected: Byron Hatfield's *Mrs. Dire's House of Crumpets and Solutions*, a grotesque tale of a hit-squad in Victorian London comprised of formerly abused women now dedicated to liberating their hapless sisters, and Tony Wolf's *Satisfaction*, set in New Orleans, in which an innocent freethinker becomes the fall guy—uh, girl, for a guilty adulteress of high social status.

But then came the challenge of the—well, specialized costumes. How were fight choreographers David Woolley (for *Mrs. Dire*), Alison Dornheggen (for *Satisfaction*) and the ensemble to apply modern stage combat techniques to create a fighting style ensuring the safety of participants rendered more vulnerable to injury than is common to the craft, while still serving its dramatic purpose.

**MARY SHEN BARNIDGE:** How did the Bayard painting get chosen to anchor the contest in the first place? There are other pictures of women brandishing swords—Judiths, Delilahs, Joan of Arcs.

**STEPHANIE REPIN:** I think David Woolley suggested the idea at one of our benefits. We were chatting casually about *that* picture, which eventually launched the project.

**DAWN "SAM" ALDEN:** The Bayard painting—actually a lithograph—has always intrigued me.

Whatever the dispute that brought these six women to the point of drawing steel on one another, it is contained within their circle. The circumstance of its being *personal* is what makes for dramatic opportunity, and therefore a natural choice for a competition meant to generate scripts with fighting roles for women.

**BARNIDGE:** At what point did you decide to fence bare-chested? Was there any dissent on the part of the participants?

**ALDEN:** The decision to fight topless came with the decision to use the Bayard image. A few people reminded us that we *could* wear body-stockings, but the consensus was that since we had required the contestants to recreate the image *exactly* in their entries, then *we* would have to do so as well.

**BARNIDGE:** It's a fact that the Babes' best fighters are also their more—shall we say, *mature* ones. Did you consider using only the younger and smaller-busted women for the topless scenes, or was that never an issue?

**REPIN:** I recall the company meeting where we were asked who would be willing to do what Amy [Harmon] dubbed the "half-monty". Ironically, Sam and I were among the ones who did *not* raise their hands. It took me some time to work up the nerve to audition for the topless roles, but my size was never a factor in my decision.

**AMY HARMON:** There was the expected buzz over "Are you going to go for one of the topless roles?" leading up to auditions, but I never heard any discussion of who's "pretty" or not. Our policy is to cast the best woman *for* the part *in* the part, and we didn't see any need to deviate from that on account of a little skin.

**BARNIDGE:** You're thin, yourself—

**HARMON:** (sighs) Yes. Being small-busted myself, I was comfortable with going bare-chested—but I think that's more a state of mind, not a function of size. My rear end is small, too, but you couldn't *find* a script that would make me play bottomless!

**ALDEN:** The roles in the competing plays weren't written for youngsters, remember. We wanted the best show possible, and that meant using the fighting *and* acting skills of each actress for whatever task she was best suited.

**BARNIDGE:** Did you start stripping from the beginning, or work up to it gradually?

**ALDEN:** We choreographed all the fights first, concentrating on what you *always* concentrate on when creating a fight: what story is being told, how would these characters fight in these circumstances, what choices do they make to accomplish their goals and what do they do when thwarted? So when we began to rehearse with the shirts off, we found that no changes were necessary.

**HARMON:** We locked Woolley out for the first few topless rehearsals—*not* because his presence would have been in any way inappropriate, but just to help us stay fight-focused.

**BARNIDGE:** What problems did you encounter fighting without your customary protective garments?

**ALDEN:** I was self-conscious at first, but like any show with nudity, once you get over the initial “parts check”, you’re surprised at how easy it is. The biggest concern about fighting topless, actually, was covering our tattoos every night! It was always a race to see if we could finish the fight before we sweated through the make-up.

**REPIN:** My only precaution was to hold my rapier’s pommel in my hand prior to fighting—that metal is *cold* on exposed flesh!

**HARMON:** Exposed flesh is right! Even fully dressed, I am *always* cold. Once we got under the stage lights, things improved, but rehearsing in the Breadline space required some *serious* body temperature adjustment. And since I usually take a lot of crap for being skinny and slouching, I got Rachel Stubbs [Mary, the maidservant in *Mrs. Dire*] to show me some upper-body stretches that would improve my posture. The *last* thing I wanted was to look as if I were apologizing for my body in any way.

**REPIN:** Those *skirts* were a bigger problem. The hem on mine kept coming down, but even after we fixed that, I ended the fight on one night wearing leaves, grass and other foliage off the set.

**HARMON:** Oooh, those *skirts*! The fight in *Mrs. Dire* had two endings—one with me standing up, on a *good* skirt day, and another with me getting up on one knee after the petticoat had wrapped itself around my ankle.

**ALDEN:** Tucking the skirts into the waistband for the duels were supposed to help, actually, since it moved the bulk of the costume higher on our bodies. And in *Satisfaction*, my character—a woman accustomed to fighting in a fencing salon—expressed, through the

re-arrangement of her garments, her sense of frustration at being forced into a duel whose injustice is *intensified* by her having to fence in utterly inappropriate clothes. It also means the audience has to wait a little longer before the fight starts, so the tension has longer to build.

**BARNIDGE:** Has the launching point for the next contest been chosen yet?

**ALDEN:** The submissions for production in 2008, as part of the Babes With Blades 2007-2008 season, are to include the fight depicted in José Ribera’s *Duelo de Mujeres*, a painting in the Prado museum. The artist is also called, depending on your text, “Jusepe de Ribera” or “Guiseppe Ribera”, but those interested can find it posted on our website ([www.BabesWithBlades.org](http://www.BabesWithBlades.org)). It depicts two women in classical robes fighting with espadas while a group of men look on. Unlike the *Affair of Honor* plays, these will include male supporting characters.

**HARMON:** But everybody keeps their clothes on.

## KING LEAR

### fight choreography by Rick Sordelet

The fights in Robert Falls’ Wagnerian production of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, its locale transposed to the Serbian wars of the 1990s, are so elaborate as to almost require scoring, as with sheet music.

Take the scene in front of Gloucester’s castle, now a sumptuous villa, inhabited by guests who arrive in an authentic Mercedes-Benz (or exterior shell thereof) driven onstage. In the course of Kent and Oswald’s fight, the latter is thrown across the hood, setting off the car alarms to bring the householders running just in time to rescue Oswald, his pants now dragged down to expose his buttocks, from being sodomized with a tire iron.

Or how about the final battle scene, where all three of Lear’s daughters are present on the front lines: After Edmund dies in a careless moment of defiant blood-drunk ecstasy, chambering a round in his sidearm only seconds before Edgar kills him with a single shot, Goneril comforts her distraught sister, taking advantage of their embrace to stealthily smother her rival before herself committing suicide with Edmund’s automatic pistol. Minutes later, Cordelia is carried in after meeting her fate at the hands of an assassin.

But the horror most eagerly anticipated by audiences, even today, is the scene where Cornwall and his evil henchmen tear out Gloucester’s eyes—a

grisly spectacle carried out by no less than seven players in this production. After thugs drag the hapless captive into his villa's high-tech kitchen, they duct-tape him a chair. Regan interrogates the terrified old man until Cornwall drags her back roughly and hands her off to one of the thugs, who then seats her on the stainless-steel counter. As she slips out of sight behind it, our attention is drawn to Gloucester, still bound to his chair, being laid down supine, and a coked-up Cornwall diving to pluck out an eye with his fingers and fling it into a frying pan where it sizzles ominously.

At this point, one thug calls for a halt to the torture, throwing a potful of hot water at his comrade, who flees the stage in fright and agony. The would-be rescuer then knife-spars with Cornwall until Regan emerges from her hiding-place to stab the meddlesome samaritan, after which Cornwall removes Gloucester's other eye and the thug left onstage drags Gloucester out.

But it's not over yet! Cornwall, instead of dying from wounds received in his skirmish, is confronted by Edmund, entering a whole act earlier than in Shakespeare's text. The latter proceeds to garrote the former, Cornwall taking a long time to die. His death is hideously clinical, the helpless victim flailing and twisting like a hooked fish, gasping, drooling, coughing and clawing weakly at his attacker.

"The three major fights in the show were all taken farther in rehearsal than in performance," says fight captain David Blixt, "When we started, Cornwall's choking death was even *more* turbulent. And since [Robert] Falls doesn't care for undiluted heroism, we first had Kent—whom many regard as one of the great noble figures of literature—going ahead and bugging Oswald with the jack from the car."

Was the car fight part of the scheme from the beginning? "The car-fight was already decided when I arrived, but it was originally driven *all* the way across the stage, so the fight centered on the trunk instead of the hood. The car alarms were *my* little contribution. Since there were already alarms going off in the house, I mentioned how cool it would be if there was a car alarm, too, and Rick [Sordelet] agreed."

How was the eye-fry business developed? "Again, this was determined before rehearsals even started. We joked for awhile about making Gloucester eat the second eye, pouring a drink down his throat to make him swallow it. What we wound up doing, however, was to force the eye into his mouth, allow-

ing him to spit blood and aqueous fluids."

Edgar comes off considerably different in this production. How did the fights reflect the director's concept? "The Edgar-Edmund fight is usually the play's climax, but Falls wanted to flout audience expectations, so in *this* production, it's very quick and efficient. The death of Oswald, on the other hand, is very slow and agonizing, with a conflicted Edgar finally putting his enemy out of his misery."

How much fight experience did the principles have coming into the show? Were there problems with those who didn't have any—or with those who *did*? "The hardest part wasn't actors not being careful of each other, but of *themselves*. A few cast members, at both ends of the experience spectrum, were *determined* to take a beating for the show's sake. But a hallmark of a good fight director is his—or her, like with Deborah Keller's fights for the women—ability to choreograph for the actor inhabiting the role. By that criteria alone, Sordelet is a magnificent fight director."

## A NIGHT WITH THE FIGHTS

### HAMLET

#### fight choreography by Robin McFarquhar

When your show is paced at a gallop and your Hamlet is capable of declaiming at warp speed with all his end-consonants and subtext intact, there's no room for flourishes. An arras consisting of a mechanized drop means that moments after the suspicious prince, armed with a field-grade longsword, disappears behind it, noises of violence emerge and Polonius' body tumbles forth. Why did Hamlet arrive sword-at-hand for a bedside chat with his mother? Where did he get the weapon to threaten Claudius in the previous scene? Who has time to ask?

For the Big Showdown in the last scene, however, we must have sword *play*—but not so extensive that it impedes the dramatic momentum. Robin McFarquhar obliges with a trio of swift and efficient bouts, their visual variety supplied by the first being staged with the opponents placed mid-stage left-and-right. For the second, the line of attack is angled upstage-right and downstage-left, and the third reverses it, the fencers facing each other downstage-right and upstage-left.

The preliminaries over, Hamlet retires to his

corner farther upstage left, momentarily turning his back on Laertes, who darts in to sucker-wing him on the shoulder with the poisoned rapier. This triggers Hamlet's fury, his next attack drawing blood bare seconds before Gertrude cries out in distress. Amid the alarms, Hamlet makes straight for Claudius, impaling him downstage-to-upstage in a covered thrust that brings the tall victim to his knees, so that Hamlet can move behind him to apply a choke hold. From this position, he can force the helpless Claudius to drink from the fatal cup and allow us to see *both* their faces as fluid spills down the despot's tunic and the stepson has his revenge at last.

## **CARAVAGGIO**

### **fight choreography by Nick Sandys**

The stage hidden deep below the landmark Chicago Temple (talk about your church-basement theatres!) has lots of room for fighters to square off with ornate 17th-century rapiers (nearly four feet long, including the hilts). This is fortunate, since the Italian characters in Richard Vetere's biodrama repeatedly make a point of their *not* being Spanish, mandating a straight-line fencing style for the cast's marginally-experienced combatants—one of them left-handed, yet.

But nothing rivets an audience's attention like blades whipping through the air in big roundhouse arcs, so our first fight has a crowd of spectators surround the quarrelers, then suddenly part to reveal street-brawlers in the final throes of combat, their impatience reflected in swordplay combined with hand-to-hand tactics—as when one uses his *head*, in the manner of a charging ram, to pin his opponent to a wall—accompanied by an array of furious grunts, barks, and yelps.

The second fight, however, arises from our scrapper, after returning home drunk one night, finding himself facing a highly-trained and cold sober assassin, differences immediately evidenced in both technique and motive. “The assassin attacks directly in order to finish his mission as quickly as possible,” explains Sandys, “but unlike in the earlier fight, it's Caravaggio who ducks, dodges and flees—creating angles as he does.”

Indeed, audience members versed in Caravaggio's stylistic hallmarks—and perhaps

wondering what the character's girlfriend, hovering on the sidelines, thinks she's going to do with her tiny barmaid's dagger—will detect an uncanny similarity between the violence unfolding on the dimly-lit stage and that depicted in the artist's chiaroscuro representations of life in his own corrupt world.

## **MARATHON '33**

### **fight choreography by Matt Engle**

June Havoc's play doesn't tell us anything we didn't already know about Depression-era dance marathons, but Strawdog Theatre's production crams thirty actors (discounting the band) backside-to-belly, not to mention toe-to-toe, with each other *and* with the front row of seats, in a 20 X 30-foot loft space. If ever there was an occasion for boat-in-the-bottle fight techniques to be called into play, this is it.

The smaller fights include the predictable hair-pulling catspats in the women's quarters, some rough-house discipline by the floor referees, and a cleverly-staged fracas in which a cheerful chorus-line obstructs our view—partly—while one contestant gets his two-fisted revenge on a cheating rival. The highlight of the violence within this volatile environment, however, is a full-cast melee (sometimes called a “fruit-and-fabric fight”) incorporating all onstage personnel.

Matt Engle begins with skirmishing business to bring the play's onlookers away from the sidelines and closer to stage center, or to exits opening on braking distance. Once the combatants are relatively clear of physical obstruction, the brawl commences on a variety of levels—some opponents hitting high with uppercuts, others low with belly-punches, and others still lower with kicks and tackles. Recoils and ricochets are restricted to the upstage wall, or employed to propel the assailants into the aisles, where they can then stagger offstage. The results successfully create a general impression of furious movement without danger to scenery, musical equipment or audience.

## **BURN THIS**

### **fight choreography by Glenn Proud**

Ordinarily, a fight over a girl is a simple punch-up, ending with the first fall, but Lanford Wilson's script specifies that one of the suitors—significantly, the more sober one—be trained in akido. Thus, the compactly-built Burton easily foils his larger and drunker opponent's first attack, using the latter's momentum to send him rolling across the floor.

But the chivalrous amateur then assumes the fight to be over, dropping his guard stance. This permits street-scrapper Pale to spin him around for a covered sucker-punch that leaves him stretched prone on the ground, an easy target for several likewise covered kicks.

Humiliation, however, only incenses the victim. Quickly recovering, he executes an efficient series of grapples on his rival, culminating in a hammerlock with the hapless Pale's arm twisted up his own back, at which time the girl—remember the girl?—stops the violence.

## GAUDY NIGHT

fight choreography by Geoff Coates

If our hero is going to persuade his girl friend to wear a dog collar (for protection from a strangler on the loose, of course—what did you *think?*), he'd still better show evidence of his motive. The subsequent lesson in unarmed self-defense, however, matches opponents of nearly six inches' difference in height, the shorter of whom is wearing high-heeled pumps. Geoff Coates resolves the problem by first showing us a full-front view of how *not* to repel an attacker, then—after the lady masters the trick and deftly executes a shoulder throw on her instructor—relying on the agility of her lanky partner to launch himself, sprawling, to the ground.

## CALL TO ARMS

**December 31-January 6 2007.** The Paddy Crean International Art of the Sword workshop in Banff, Alberta, Canada. If winter in the United States isn't cold enough for you, collect your passport and phone (703) 978-2585 or log onto [www.iosp.org](http://www.iosp.org) for information on this annual event sponsored by the International Order of the Sword and Pen.

**January 12-14 2007.** Winter Wonderland Workshop in Elgin, Illinois. That's right—the Society of American Fight Directors weekend fightfest is being held in the far northwestern suburbs this year at Elgin Community College, with instructor Stephen Gray hosting. Information on lodgings, transportation, and amusement may be found at (708) 466-7055 or log onto [www.winterwonderlandworkshop.com](http://www.winterwonderlandworkshop.com)

## FIELD DISPATCHES

### HAVE CALCULATOR, WILL TRAVEL

Two images you never thought you'd find invoked in the same sentence: "Lyric Opera of Chicago seeks LARGE, STRONG, THREATENING-LOOKING MALE". The call was for an actor to portray the executioner in their upcoming production of *Salomé*. "This supernumerary role requires no singing or speaking, but does require appearing shirtless onstage," the notice warned as it went on to specify his other duties, to wit: "He holds aloft the severed head of John The Baptist, then strangles the title character and carries her body offstage."

So who wound up getting the part? One of Rick LeFevre's movie stunt-fighters? A brawny student from the Fight Shop or Actors' Gymnasium? A pro wrestler resting between matches at the Allstate Arena? Noooooooo, according to Bill Walters, the Lyric's "super" captain, the role went to a six-foot-five, 235-pound *accountant* performing under the name Marckarthur Johnson, whose resumé also includes *Tristan And Isolde* and *Billy Budd*. Bet he's a killer at crunching those numbers!

### BITING THE DUST

The Excaliber joust in Las Vegas is an indoor event, so you'd think every precaution would have been taken to forestall injury to both actors and audience. But the producers didn't reckon with asthmatic audience members too proud to carry their inhalers. In consequence of this oversight, a contingent from the Society of American Fight Directors workshop nearly lost one of their instructors to a respiratory attack triggered by the combination of synthetic sand, sim-smoke and equine dander raised in the course of the onstage combat.

Whether to avoid disrupting the show in progress, or disgracing himself by collapsing under physical duress, the victim's professional instincts propelled him as far as the theatre lobby, where perspicacious security staff and paramedics promptly identified the source of his distress and intervened, restoring him sufficiently to allow him to reassume his classroom duties the next day—considerably humbled, one hopes, at this reminder of the distinction between heroic invincibility and mortal discretion.



**“Violence is a social activity,  
inevitably thriving at the  
center of civilization.”**

– Martin Fido

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