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The Society of American Fight Directors

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## Moulinet: An Action Quarterly, Volume 9, Issue 1

Moulinet Staff

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# MOULINET: An Action Quarterly

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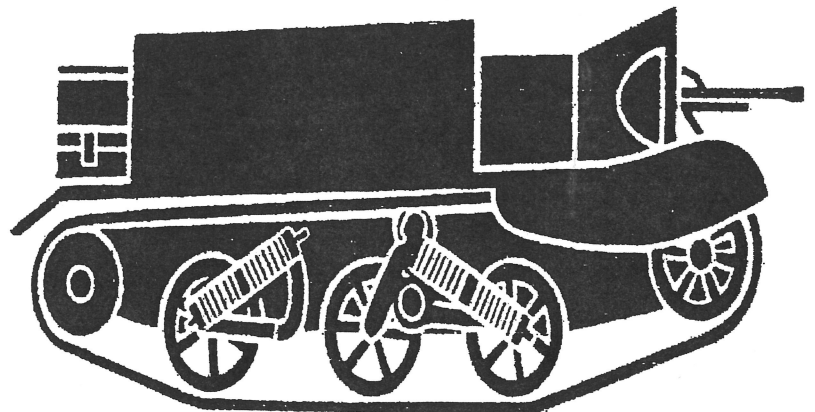
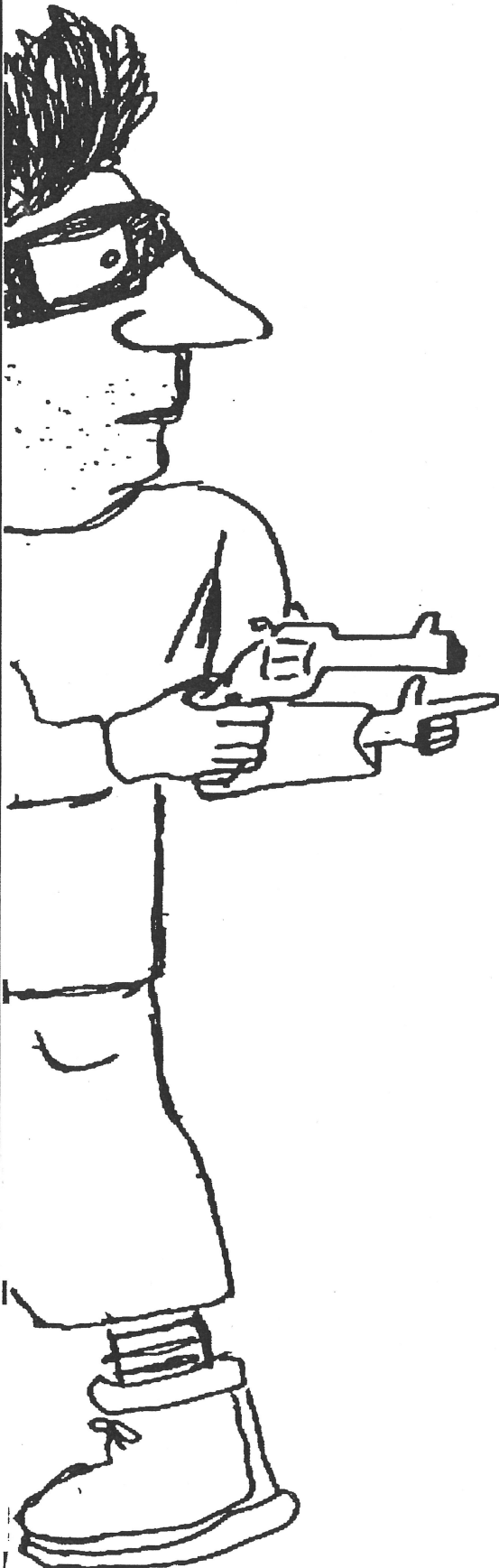
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## MOULINET: An Action Quarterly

Number One – 2008

**Publisher** - Charles J. Likar

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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.

**Laura Skolnick** is currently employed peacefully as stage manager for *Gypsy* on New York's Broadway.

**Robin McFarquhar** recently choreographed fights for *Carter's Way* at Steppenwolf Theatre and will direct fights for Chicago Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* later in the spring.

**Nick Sandys** is an instructor at DePaul University and a member of the Remy Bumppo Theatre Company, for whom he recently directed while simultaneously choreographing duels with Spanish rapier for *The Defiant Muse* at Victory Gardens.

**Tim Griffin** has been performing and choreographing stage combat in Chicago, Los Angeles and Moscow (the one in Russia) for twenty years. He currently can be seen in Schaumburg, playing the King at the Medieval Times tournament.

**Matthew Hawkins** has twice received Jeff Citations for his fight choreography, but this spring will be serving as director for the American premiere of Melanie Marnich's *Tallgrass Gothic* for 5th Floor Productions.

**Richard Gilbert and David Gregory** together comprise the team of R & D Violence Designers. Recent projects include *The Magician* at National Pastime.

**Caleb Mancini** is a freelance cartoonist and improv-trained actor with no fight training whatsoever.

## BARTER, HIRE & BROADSIDES

*Renaissance Men: The True Story of the Hanlon-Lees Action Theater*, DVD documentary by Kevin Leaser, starring the stunt-trope whose debut in 1977 became the prototype for American Renaissance Faire jousts to this day. For ordering information, log onto [www.3alarmcarnival.com](http://www.3alarmcarnival.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](http://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](http://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](http://www.thehousetheatre.com)

*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](mailto:webmaster@hanlon-lees.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](mailto: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](mailto:ChgosOldst@voyager.net)

## HITTING YOUR MARK WITH BOTH FEET: Laura Skolnick Talks About Stunt-Fighting

The term “stage combat” first calls to mind exactly that—slashing, stabbing and strangling in classical drama, with maybe an occasional slap or fisticuff to enliven a contemporary thriller, but always performed on a *stage* as an element in a *play*. “Stunt fighting”, on the other hand, is associated with entertainment more focused on sheer spectacle—movies, circuses and outdoor fairs—unhampered by plot, character or dramatic unities.

Laura Skolnick is a veteran of stage and screen, her professional credits encompassing violence design for Bailiwick Repertory Theatre’s award-winning *Kiss Of The Spider Woman* and the American premiere of *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, along with appearances in the films, *Night Fangs* and *El Día de los Muertos*. Though nowadays more often employed in the capacity of stage manager for productions locally and on the East Coast, her extensive training with the Asylum Stunt Team has enlarged her perspective regarding the similarities and distinctions associated with both disciplines.

**MARY SHEN BARNIDGE:** What first got you interested in stunt work?

**LAURA SKOLNICK:** I saw the Indiana Jones Stunt Show when I was eight years old and decided, then and there, that this was what I wanted to do. I’d been a gymnast for most of my life, so I’d already developed my body sense, and by the time I’d added some martial arts training, I had my basic skills.

**BARNIDGE:** Tell me about Asylum Stunts. Are you an actual *team*, with fixed personnel, or do your members also work individually?

**SKOLNICK:** Some Asylum shows are performed by all of us, but we also take individual jobs—*Jerry Springer* and me, for example. But no matter who is working a specific contract, *everyone* trains for that gig during class time. The purpose is for us *all* to learn new stunts, or to perfect/enhance the stunts we already have in our “arsenal”. So anything brought to the table is shared with the group.

**BARNIDGE:** How does stunt-work compare with stage combat in terms of opportunities for women?

**SKOLNICK:** In general, there’s more work for women in film and TV. Plays that involve female combat are mostly individual punches or sword-fighting in battle scenes. But *stunts* are frequently

*not* gender-specific—it doesn’t matter *who’s* driving the car, or who falls out a door. And since women are usually smaller than men, they can often double for children as well.

**BARNIDGE:** What’s the fundamental difference between stage and stunt combat?

**SKOLNICK:** Well, stage combat is always performed live, and stunt fights are most often done for cameras. This means that stunts aren’t always done sequentially. There is the possibility that you will have to stop a fight to change angles, or reset something for a different “look” the director may want. Obviously, you can’t do that onstage in front of an audience.

**BARNIDGE:** So does stunt-work, then, emphasize single moves in short bursts, rather than extended drills? How does this apply to *melées*, with lots of little fights proceeding simultaneously?

**SKOLNICK:** On the stage, in a play or in a live stunt-show, if you have a number of fights going on all at once, we have to see something happening with everybody—whether they’re fighting wounded, unconscious or dead. But for a multi-person fight onscreen, we don’t have to see each individual in action.

**BARNIDGE:** And do stunt-people also have to *talk* as they fight, like actors? Does their curriculum include vocal training?

**SKOLNICK:** A play’s intimate setting allows dialogue to be heard. And while live stunt shows have less talking, they have more grunting and yelling. But onscreen, when actors need to talk, those shots can be recorded ahead of time, or as close-ups at a moment when the speakers *aren’t* worn out from the exercise, *or* you can film a *wide* shot where we don’t even see *mouths* moving. Obviously, more stamina is required for live-action, but fighters need to be prepared for *whatever* the needs of the show demand.

**BARNIDGE:** How about novelty stunts—jumping barrels, getting shot out of cannons, or the kind of acrobatics that Blue Man Group and 500 Clown do?

**SKOLNICK:** The basic skills transfer to a variety of stunts. If somebody gets punched in the face, for example, they fall and land the same way whether they’re tumbling off a roof, or being blasted in an explosion—*or* jumping a barrel, or being blown out of a cannon. The same principles apply in each situation, with the only difference being the time in the air and the landing surface.



**BARNIDGE:** Do the techniques of stage combat and stunt work conflict, the way ballet and tap dance do?

**SKOLNICK:** Oh, no—the techniques cross over immensely. In fact, stage combat is a *part* of stunt work, which teaches things like gymnastics, high-and-low falls, wire-work and air-rams in *addition* to weapons, reactions, script analysis etc. So it's probably better to train in stunt-work, and then add stage combat skills as you need them.

**BARNIDGE:** But most schools include stage combat in their theatre curriculum. Where do you go to learn stunt fights?

**SKOLNICK:** Good question. Most of the time, the stunt co-ordinator for a film will hire performers for that particular job and only work on the skills needed for that job. So there aren't many places that train stunt-people. It's really up to the practitioners, themselves, to get together and share their knowledge and practice.

## A NIGHT WITH THE FIGHTS

### OTHELLO

#### fight choreography by Robin McFarquhar

There are no big battles, no dismembered heads or hands, no ferocious animals or bloody ghosts, but *Othello*—sometimes declared Shakespeare's most "domestic" tragedy—may be the most difficult for fight choreographers. Not only are the scenes of violence spread throughout the text, but each involves a diversity of motives distributed among several ambivalent characters, their every move commanding our attention. And just to complicate things further, director Marti Maraden's concept transposes the chronological locale to late Victorian period, a decision mandating that all soldiers be armed with English sabers.

Fortunately, Robin McFarquhar has had ample opportunity to familiarize himself with Chicago Shakespeare's curious configuration of proscenium and thrust stages. Fortunate, also, is the inclusion in the cast of Nick Sandys, himself a fight director (most recently for Shattered Globe Theatre's *Requiem For A Heavyweight*), in the role of the seasoned duelist Lord Montano, in this production, costumed in civilian clothes and—for reasons known only to the designers—an injured leg requiring him to walk with the assistance of a pistol grip-handled cane.

The initial scene has guards drawing their sabers in a manner to make Othello laugh at their expectation of a fight. This is truer in this production than Shakespeare himself may have imagined, since the swords, according to backstage reports, are "cheap American Civil-War sabers chosen by the design team, so that any action has to be limited to a single move, with no blade contact".

The first *real* fight, then, is the tavern brawl precipitated by Iago's getting Cassio drunk and thus, spoiling for a fight. After Cassio chases Roderigo off the street, the latter's first defense is to tip the inn-yard bench over onto its side, followed by a further retreat behind the likewise toppled table. This measure would appear to be a means of reducing the stage area taken up by the furniture, but, in fact, is a device for removing the pitcher and flagons atop the table from harm's way by creating a receptacle preventing them from rolling into the path of actors or audience. It also creates disarray sufficient to prompt General Othello, the moment he enters, to demand an explanation for the evidence.

Another curious motif is the rationale behind providing Montano with a disability—albeit one that does not prevent the Cypriot from fighting expertly when crossing swords with Cassio in defense of Roderigo. "Very little is said in the script about Montano," says Sandys of his character, "The design team decided he was the current governor of Cyprus and therefore, an ex-soldier, so the costume designer put him in civvies and a cane—making Cassio more culpable in the bar brawl, since he's attacking an unarmed man. I then decided that Montano had been wounded at Aleppo—where he served with Othello, the text tells us—and had wrecked the cartilage in his left knee. This meant that Montano's leg still worked, and could take *some* weight and bend *somewhat*, giving me enough mobility to avoid static sightlines in that thrust space."

A scene calling for tricky footwork is that in which Iago dupes Roderigo and Cassio into the duel that he assumes will be to-the-death, since when witnesses call the authorities, the duelists have only wounded one another. Introducing the bystanders at the house's far downstage *left* aisle, however, focuses our attention on *them*, while Cassio falls far downstage *right*, and Roderigo staggers into the shadows at *up left* to fall exhausted. With the wounded adversaries located thusly, the guards, likewise entering downstage left, are drawn naturally

to Cassio. This allows Iago to feign alarm and rush upstage, there finishing off the only participant who can testify to his part in the fracas.

Another sudden upstage rush figures in Iago's murder of his wife in the final scene after Emilia has retreated a full room's distance from the husband she has just denounced, leading us to think her safe. But when Othello attacks Iago in a rage, only to have his blade blocked by a well-meaning guard, Iago is freed to take advantage of the opportunity to avenge himself, dashing up to his startled prey and stabbing her before anyone can respond. "It's a purely impulsive move," says McFarquhar, "He doesn't think of killing Emilia until he sees an opening where he *can* do so—he's *already* been arrested, so what's he got to lose?"

The bigger problem presented by the final scene, in *every* production, is the seemingly endless number of weapons available to our hero, who is repeatedly disarmed by the saber-carrying guards, only to later attack with another blade. This time, the mid-sized sword that Othello claims to have acquired in Spain ("wrong style, wrong country, wrong period—just like the sabers," reports Sandys) is removed from its hiding place under the bed early in the scene to establish its presence later, while the suicide dagger is drawn from a concealed belt-scabbard in the small of his back. "It became a joke," Sandys confides, "we considered changing Cassio's line, after Othello dies, to 'This did I fear, for he was great of heart—and *really* good at hiding weapons!'"

## ART

### fight choreography uncredited

A French playboy unaccustomed to fisticuffs is overcome with fury and grapples with his likewise unathletic buddy. Their sidekick tries to break them up and gets a swat on the ear for his efforts. The play is Yasmina Reza's *Art*, and this, probably the shortest and most often fumbled fight on the American stage since the Barrymore duel in *I Hate Hamlet*. In most productions, the sequence usually begins with a scrum at up or mid-stage center from which the third actor suddenly emerges clutching one side of his face, with only the subsequent dialogue informing us of the source for his distress.

The first-floor studio at the Victory Gardens Greenhouse is too small to allow more than minimal cover of the body-contact itself, so the uncredited fight choreographer (probably William J. Norris,

creator of the legendary *Bloody Bess*) instead *opens* up the action, placing the combatants far downstage, almost on the curtain line, with the irate Serge and Marc both facing each other in profile. As they spring at each other, their hapless chum, Yvan, steps between them, but they continue their squabble as if he were invisible, pushing him to and fro until Marc throws a punch at Serge with his upstage fist grazing Yvan's ear as it passes.

Not only does this simple solution allow us to *see* the action surrounding the injury, from start to finish, but it also conveys to us the profound self-absorption of the two hotheaded egotists who can so thoroughly ignore the physical barrier presented by their buttinsky comrade. It's one thing to fight *over* an innocent bystander, and another to fight *around* one, but how often does one see a line of attack conducted *through* a living body?

## THE MAGICIAN

### fight choreography by R & D Violence Designers

The "Molière and Curly fight" is not a term you're likely to find in the official Stage Combat glossaries, but is often used in the field to refer to a comic fight introduced into an otherwise unfunny play—e.g. the scene in the recent production of *August: Osage County* where a pedophile's advances on his teenage niece are foiled by the housekeeper ambushing him with a skillet.

Filmmaker Ingmar Bergman has never been renowned for his sense of humor, but this early screenplay is gloomy and didactic enough to make Henrik Ibsen look like Alan Ayckbourn—except for the moment when two characters engage in battle farcical to the point of slapstick, but at the same time reflecting accurately the dynamic between the combatants. The situation is a pair of drunks fighting for a bottle of schnapps. And what, asked Richard Gilbert and David Gregory—who together comprise the team of R & D Violence Designers—would be the paramount concern in such a brawl? Why, the safety of the hooch, of course!

Thus, while the adversaries proceed through a standard repertoire of shoves, punches and kicks, the action is repeatedly frozen as one or the other of the contenders leaps into the air, Michael Jordan-style, or drops to the floor, or in some way rescues the precious prize from destruction. Ironically, the Marx-Brothers tone did not seem at all jarring in its contrast to the lugubrious action surrounding it.

## RICHARD III

### fight choreography by Matthew Hawkins

The thump of weapons hitting shields is rapidly becoming as much of a trademark in the soundtracks of fights choreographed by Matthew Hawkins as the kamikaze rock-and-roll that accompanied his martial spectacles for House Theatre. But Strawdog's restricted space would have forestalled massive battlefield scenes even if director Nic Dimond had *not* resisted the temptation to haul out the catalogue of flashy tech-F/X, instead focusing on the intimate family relationships of a pasty-faced prep-school prince. Half a loft is better than none, however, and Hawkins compensates for the lack of excursion room by relying on alarums—specifically, Miles Polaski's Mountains-of-Mordor music—along with Seth Reinick's chiaroscuro lighting to illuminate a series of Caravaggio-esque tableaux revealing the defeat of Richard's allies.

Fortunately, this Madame Tussaud approach does not extend to the entire action: eventually the evil prince, armed with sword and mace (the latter doubling as his royal scepter in previous scenes), faces off alone in a two-on-one match with Dorset and Buckingham, both wielding swords and shields. Curiously, after Richard has been brought to bay, only then does Richmond, the man who will succeed him to the throne, interrupt to order the others aside and slit the throat of his rival, thus claiming the *coup de grâce* for himself. What this addition signifies in terms of the production's artistic concept is still open to debate.

## CORONADO

### fight choreography by Tim Griffin

Dennis Lehane's background as an author of novels and screenplays is evident in his initial effort at writing a play, its plot interweaving three distinct scenarios over widely diverse locations to conclude with a vengeance-fueled exhumation in a remote Texas railroad yard. All in one of Lakeview's smallest storefronts.

Steep Theatre is well-acquainted with their home's limits, however, and Tim Griffin's first remedy is to place the disturbed grave deep into an

upstage corner atop a platform, thus permitting the digger to be immersed to collarbone depth *below* ground-level. Before delivering the *coup de grâce*, his executioner first pushes the latter back into the pit, then raises the shovel, blade straight downward, to strike his presumably supine victim a single *vertical* blow.

All that *we* see are the dying man's arms, struggling to lift him from the hole which will become his own unmarked tomb—a sight invoking more horror in our imaginations than could any amount of close-up grimaces and lurid cinematic F/X.

## REQUIEM FOR A HEAVYWEIGHT

### fight choreography by Nick Sandys

It's the first thing we see when the lights go up in the pint-sized studio, so we can't turn our eyes away: two solitary gloved men trading blows in the ring at close range. One of them is so tall that he looks like a giant, but he's clearly getting the worst of the punishment, gamely swinging away with flailing punches meant to repel, but that barely distract his opponent. And unlike most stage combat, this grotesque dance continues until it's as if they have been fighting for centuries, and we search the perimeters of the *mise-en-scène* in vain for the bellman who will signal a finish to this bloody spectacle.

Which is exactly what director Lou Contey and fight choreographer Nick Sandys had in mind when they decided to introduce this prologue to Rod Serling's modern tragedy of a boxing champion and his manager fallen on hard times. "The fight is actually just a few seconds over three minutes," Sandys shrugs, "That's long in theatrical terms, but not in boxing. We wanted to convey the feeling that the fight will *never* end. That it's taking place in some metaphysical realm—the Twilight Zone, maybe. I think Lou made a wise choice in adding the fight, because it opens the play with a *literal* bang. It acquaints us *immediately* with the visceral nature of this world, and what the stakes are for a fighter who can't fight any more."

A fake boxing match occurring barely six feet from the first row of spectators doesn't leave much room for knaps, however, which would ordinarily mean full-contact punches with gloves light-padded to the consistency of pool noodles. On the contrary,

says Sandys, "The gloves are just old gloves—nothing's been doctored—but the secret is that the fighters don't close their hands into fists, so the gloves remain relatively soft. And there are *loads* of knaps! Claps, shared, body, full-contact—all kinds! The great thing about boxing gloves is that all the knaps sound substantially the same—that is, like a glove hitting a face, even when it's glove to glove—and that most punches land even when the boxer tries to block them. So mixing up the knaps hides the biggest cheats from the audience."

A cynical ringside veteran in Serling's play *Jeers*, at one point, "If they had enough head-room, they'd hold 'em in the sewers!" An ancillary effect of Contey and Sandys putting a fight center stage—indeed, giving the fight its own *scene* altogether—was critics taking special note of this element in their coverage of Shattered Globe Theatre's already exemplary production. How long this attention will endure has yet to be seen, but not since Prop Thtr's seminal *Never Come Morning* have Chicago playgoers experienced down-and-dirty fisticuffs as vicariously as in this tears-and-testosterone classic.

## CALL TO ARMS

**March 29-30.** Virginia Beach Bash at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Teaching staff includes former SAFD-president Chuck Coyl, in addition to Dale Girard, Michael Chin and host Michael Kirkland. For further information, phone 757-226-4237 or e-mail michkir@regent.edu

**May 12-30.** Central Illinois Stage Combat Workshop at Eureka College in Eureka, Illinois. The featured curriculum for this year's workshop focuses on Single Sword and Quarterstaff techniques. Instructors include Paul Dennhardt, Jamie Cheatham, Neil Massey and D.C. Wright, a roster collectively connected to at least three Shakespeare festivals—take note if you're scouting for summer work. For further information, phone 309-467-6580 or e-mail hrocke@eureka.edu

**June 7.** Swords For Rusty Broads (And Gents). Babes With Blades-sponsored workshop at Chase Park Fieldhouse in Chicago, Illinois. The curriculum features classes with such provocative titles as "Found Weapons" and "Fighting Dirty". The instructors include founding members Stephanie Repin and Dawn "Sam" Alden. For further information, log onto [www.babeswithblades.org](http://www.babeswithblades.org).

## FIELD DISPATCHES

### JEFF COMMITTEE IS LOOKING FOR A FIGHT (SORT OF)

After decades of lumping recognition of stage combat under the heading of "special" awards requiring exceptional attention, the Joseph Jefferson Awards committee has finally passed a resolution declaring that when a season produces sufficient nominees in fight design, the committee will then be empowered to create a separate "fight choreography" category for competition. What this means is that even if there's only one winner, the other contenders can list their nominations on their resumé's, and that's a *big* step forward.

### THROW GRANDPA FROM THE TRAIN

Twenty-five m.p.h. is not a particularly high speed for a train to be traveling. But these were not young, athletic, well-drilled, professional stunt men spilling forth from the Burlington Northern Metra that Saturday morning in February. Mark May and Robert Stuart were two over-fifty commuters who had missed the Clarendon Hills stop and, rather than backtrack from the Westmont station some—oh, three minutes up the road, they decided instead to force open the doors and jump, just like action heroes in the movies. According to news accounts, fire department rescue workers arrived to find one lying face down in the snow and the other upright and mobile, but dazed with shock.

The Borgenicht brothers' *Worst-Case Scenario* handbooks don't include instructions in railroad escapes, so one wonders just what made these codgers decide against disembarking safely at the next station. Were they misled by the ease with which this means of egress is characteristically portrayed in films? Had they been drinking? Did they think the wet ground would make for a softer landing? *Sun-Times* columnist Mark Brown speculated on a possible answer when he noted that the addresses given by both men upon being taken to the hospital traced back to a transient hotel on Ogden Avenue, but no one knows for sure whether the jumpers' haste was connected to evasion of transit security. Still, wouldn't you think that two guys as likely to be *experienced* at bailing out of slow-moving trains could have executed their flight more skillfully?

**“It seldom pays to be rude.  
It never pays to be only half-rude”**

—Norman Douglas

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