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## **Moulinet: An Action Quarterly, Volume 12, Issue 3**

Moulinet Staff

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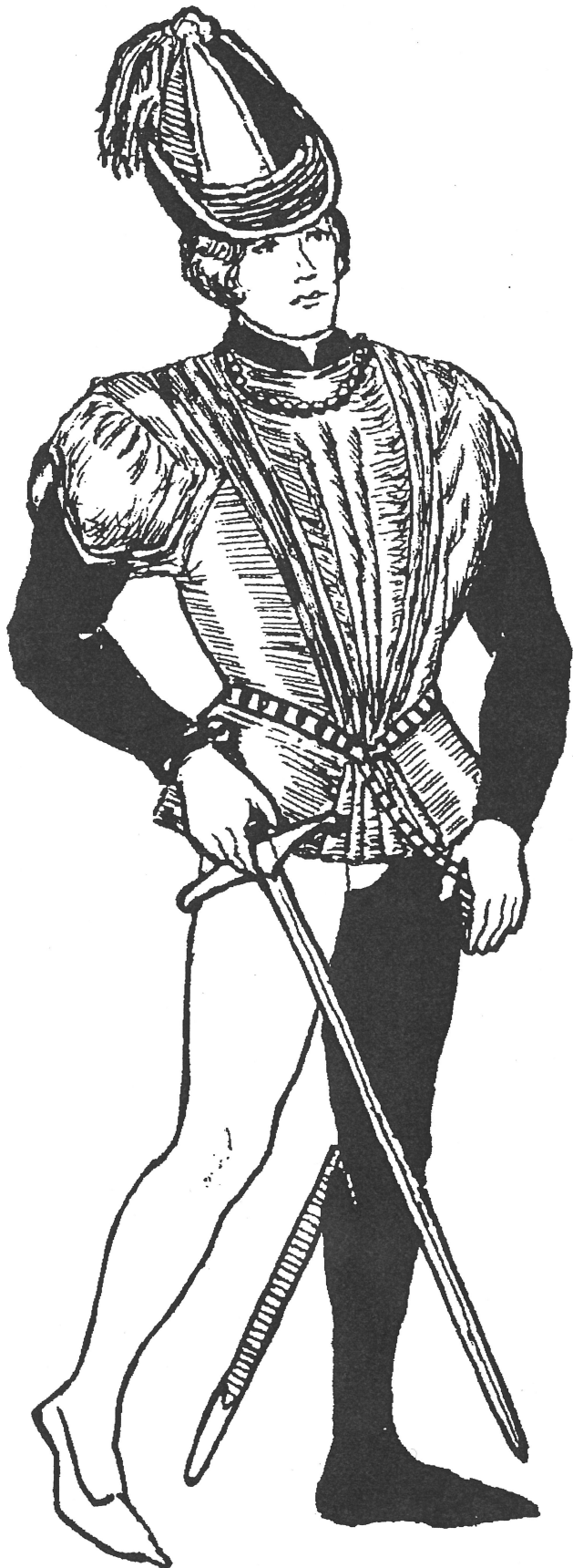
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# MOULINET: An Action Quarterly



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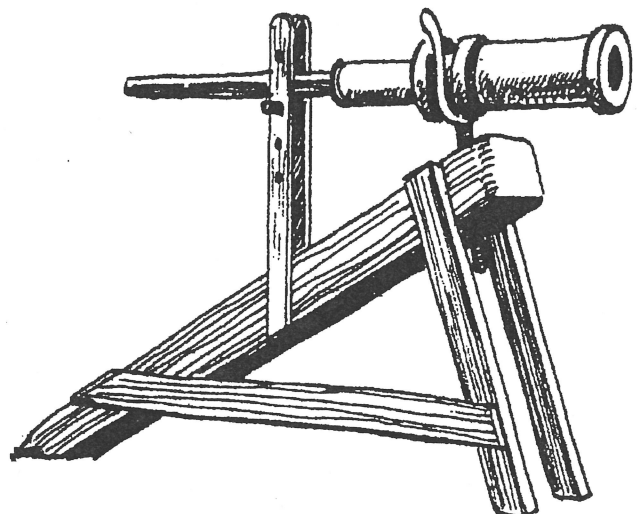
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## MOULINET: An Action Quarterly

Number Two

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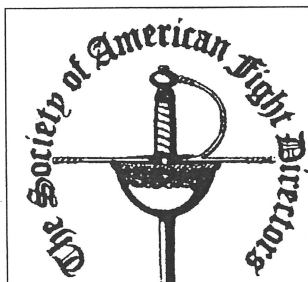
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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Mary Shen Barnidge** is an award-winning freelance writer and theatre critic, contributing regularly to *Windy City Times* and the website [www.theatreinchicago.com](http://www.theatreinchicago.com). She is a member of the American Theatre Critics Association, Poets & Writers, Inc. and a Friend in the Society of American Fight Directors.

**Ned Mochel** is currently receiving rave reviews for his geezer-fights in the West Coast premiere of Tracy Letts' *Superior Donuts*, featuring Gary Cole and Paul Dillon.

**Geoff Coates** hopes for good weather to enhance his outdoor battles for Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and *Henry V* in Oak Park's Austin Gardens.

**Nick Sandys** is presently putting the final touches on First Folio Theatre's production of *Romeo and Juliet* in Oak Brook.

**Libby Beyreis** is a member of the Babes With Blades and recently staged fights for *The Maid of Orleans* at Trap Door Theater.

**Richard Gilbert** and **David Gregory** together comprise the team of R & D Violence Designers. After supervising blood effects in *Salomé* for National Pastime Theater's Naked July festival, they will prepare for *The Count of Monte Cristo* at Lifeline Theatre in the fall.

**Greg Poljacik** is a founder of The Scrappers, sponsors of the Fight Jam workshops, and a winner of an Orgie award for fight choreography.

**James Newcomb** is a thirteen-season veteran of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, a member of the Oxford Society (where he took a 2006 award for Artistic Excellence), and an adjunct professor at the University of California in San Diego

**Tom Saaristo** is the chief cook and taster at the website *Confessions of a Foodie: An Entertainment Survival Guide* at [www.tomsaaristo.com](http://www.tomsaaristo.com).

### BARTER, HIRE & BROADSIDES

*A Terrific Combat!!!*, edited by Tony Wolf, with a forward by William Hobbs. Published by Lulu Press. A refreshingly entertaining compilation of documented and anecdotal commentary on theatrical combat from 1900 to 1920, by the cultural fight consultant for the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy. For further information and to order, log onto [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com).

*Renaissance Men: The True Story of the Hanlon-Lees Action Theater*, DVD documentary by Kevin Leeser, 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 film by Sword And Cloak Productions. A washbuckling tale of adventure and intrigue in the style of *The Three Musketeers*, filmed on the grounds of the Bristol Renaissance Faire and Stronghold Medieval Retreat, starring Kathrynne Ann Rosen, Zach Thomas, Amy Harmon and Travis Estes. For order information, log onto [www.swordandcloak.com](http://www.swordandcloak.com).  
*Welcome To Reality*, DVD by Locean Productions. What happens when a group of fantasy-gamers enlist the aid of a Medieval History scholar to embark on an adventure in 10th-century Italy—as it *really* was? For information, log onto [www.CreateSpace.com](http://www.CreateSpace.com) or e-mail [locean@gmail.com](mailto:locean@gmail.com).

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## PREMEDITATED VIOLENCE: Early Planning Wins the Fight

In theater circles throughout the United States, you still hear playwrights proclaim, “I want *real* combat, not stage combat!”, directors tell actors, “Just skip the fight business in rehearsal—we’ll work it out later”, and critics grumble about “phony-looking stage fights”. This commentary, based in misconceptions, continues to contribute to the undeserved reputation of “stage combat” as hastily-mounted gymnastics, assembled by inadequately-trained practitioners erring on the side of actors’ safety with baby-level fights. Most destructive, however, is the reaffirmation that this ignorance offers to the belief that this is what theatrical fighting is *supposed* to be.

Take the Chicago Lyric Opera’s production of Puccini’s *Girl of the Golden West*, for example. Blazing six-guns, right? Actors twirling Colt 45s without breaking their thumbs. Saloon brawls with big roundhouse punches. What could be more obvious?

“I offered to give the cast a little tutorial on gun etiquette,” recalls Nick Sandys, “but was told that since none of the weapons were loaded, it didn’t *matter*. So my job was restricted to teaching people who have never held a firearm to look like they *have*. This translated to lots of hidden fights and fiddling-around instruction: struggles over guns, prisoners being roughed up, quick draws, a shooting, lovers’ grapples, two bona fide punches—oh, and a bar fight where the director *insisted* that someone climb on a table to smack a hanging lamp so that it swings wide right-and-left.”

Musicals are the worst offenders. The recent pre-Broadway tour of *White Noise* featured a climactic beat-down between a rapper and a skinhead—but without the extra practice time needed for the artists to become comfortable with what they were to do. And so what audiences saw was knap-less *apache* dancing, lacking even a grunt or grimace to reinforce the violence. “The guys had problems with trusting each other—very important in making a fight look like a fight—and so were very tentative,” recalls Rick Sordelet, “But the director was busy with other aspects of the show.”

Some theater troupes incorporate the pursuit of professionally-crafted stage combat into their mission statement: Chicago’s Babes With Blades, Los Angeles’ Gangbusters, New York City’s Lady Cavaliers and Vampire Cowboys. But if you’re a freelance violence designer hired by a nonspecial-

ized company, how do you persuade those in charge to schedule the hours necessary to choreograph a safe and spectacular fight?

One way is to be cast in an acting role. James Newcomb, fight director for Chicago Shakespeare’s production of *The Madness of George III*, also plays the doctor who prescribes behavioral therapy for His Majesty. This arrangement not only guarantees Newcomb’s presence in the very first rehearsals, but that his character be onstage in every scene where the patient is wrestled into submission by burly hospital orderlies, and, furthermore, that he be conveniently positioned in a location offering the best vantage for viewing the action.

Another way is to develop a relationship with a particular playwright, director or company. This often grows out of a production such as *The Three Musketeers* or *The Mark of Zorro*—stories encompassing so much man-made violence that even the most clueless producer recognizes the need for lengthy fight rehearsals. Then, after the superiority of *planned* combat becomes manifest—whether through critical acclaim or burgeoning profits—the artist(s) responsible for these enhancements will likely be consulted on future projects.

Some such *de facto* contracts already exist: A play at Chicago’s Profiles or Lifeline Theatres calling for physical action even as minimal as a slap or stumble will likely have Richard Gilbert and David Gregory credited on the playbill for their services. And so anxious was Galway’s Druid Theater to have J. David Brimmer adapt his fights for their American tour of *The Cripple of Inishmaan* that the combat instructor found himself teaching fights via transatlantic Skype and YouTube from his home in Pennsylvania until he and his actors could meet in Boston for some hands-on drill.

Ned Mochel, a Jeff award-winning Chicago fight director who left the midwest to stage car chases for an Italian film company, now champions a creative approach, said to be growing increasingly prevalent on the West Coast, that integrates elements of both stage and screen protocol in the staging of violence.

“After working on the [west coast] premieres of *Killer Joe* and *Bug*, I realized that classic-curriculum stage combat was no longer enough to achieve the level of realistic action that playwrights and audiences expect nowadays,” he asserts, “You can’t just dismiss it by saying, ‘well, it’s *okay* for stage action to look fake, because it’s not film’. No, it’s time to rethink the whole vocabulary of stage violence.”

Mochel tested his theories in the 2008 production of John Kolvenbach's *On An Average Day*, employing for the scene involving a kitchen-scuffle between two brothers a method of choreographic notation blending musical scoring with the technique known in cinema as "storyboarding".

The stage directions specify that Bobby punch Jack, who falls backwards against the refrigerator, then forward onto the adjacent counter before collapsing to the floor. As envisioned by Mochel, the initial punch is knapped by a concealed stagehand slapping together a pair of leather gloves. The tumble against the refrigerator (reinforced to withstand a heavy impact) is accompanied by the sound of glass breaking inside the appliance and cookie tins stacked thereon toppling to the floor, with numerous empty beer cans scattered over the set contributing additional noise and clutter, and a picture hanging on the nearby wall that comes unfastened in a rain of plaster dust. The fall against the counter—padded on its inside surface for the actor's safety—becomes a plunge into the pantry, from which Jack emerges, after an exchange of thrown objects, with his jacket torn and his mouth bleeding.

Mochel lists the advantages to this kind of team-generated fight. "The set and costume design are now a part of the illusion, and the actors don't have to worry about supplying both movement *and* sound effects. I plan to try this on a larger scale at the Geffen Playhouse for *Superior Donuts*. The whole design team will be involved in making the fight—something that has *never* happened to me, in all my years of fight design! [Playwright] Tracy Letts requested that a fight choreographer be brought into the design meetings a *full year* before the start of rehearsals! This will be a new and wonderful experience!"

Evidence of increasing creative input for fight choreographers in tandem with the other design elements has been reported in other quarters as well: At the winter workshop sponsored by the Society of American Fight Directors—for over three decades, the first step toward a career in choreographing fights—Casey Kaleba demonstrated an increased number of blood effects assigning the victim, rather than the attacker, control of the wound's aftermath. More production companies, too, are making use of stageside DJs at high-speed computerized keyboards to Foley in (another technique borrowed from movies) the sounds associated with extended warfare of all varieties.

"I think there's a new breed of stage combat artist ready to change the game," Mochel suggests, "The days of fight choreographers being brought into rehearsals late in the game should be over by now. Instead the goal should be making *all* the design elements converge to create a *total* illusion of violence the way you would create a magic trick. *That's* the stage combat of the future!"

## A NIGHT WITH THE FIGHTS

### SOUL SAMURAI

fight choreography by Geoff Coates

Every stage combat class eventually generates a Kung Fu spoof, but the fight plays of Qui Nguyen, founder of New York City's Vampire Cowboys theatre company, are as dark and existential as your favorite graphic novel: Take his *Men of Steel*, for example, with its dramatic question centered on what might happen if a superhero, devastated by the loss of loved one, succumbed to the human desire for revenge? Subplots delved the responses of his like-wise gifted comrades, leading to such challenging combat-concepts as a skirmish with an archvillain named "The Mole", whose whip-like tail is his chief weapon, and another proposing an ordinary shlep suddenly endowed with preternatural powers that come and go in split-second bursts.

*Soul Samurai* tracks the progress of a single protagonist, but is no less psychologically complex. Our milieu is a post-apocalyptic New York City, now controlled by feudal lords—notably, Boss 2K, the evil shogun of Brooklyn (or "Brook-NAM" as one character calls it). There are hidden conclaves within the boundaries—among them, zenmaster Leroy's dojo on the Lower East Side and a monastery of templars in the Brownsville district—but the streets are an urban wasteland patrolled by Longtooth predators who, five years earlier, kidnapped the still-missing Sally December. Our heroine is scholar-turned-warrior Dewdrop, who, accompanied by her wigger sidekick, ventures into the darkness of the five boroughs to rescue her lover and destroy those who would do them harm.

It's not just sweat and adrenaline fumes, however. What's the significance of Boss 2K's origins as a meek office drone who, one fatal night, succumbed to savagery, never to return? Is the metamorphosis of Sally from do-good idealist to cold-blooded nihilist a

lesson in altruism gone sour? Do Dewdrop's confrontations with a succession of adversaries represent an increasing ambivalence over her once-unswerving loyalty to the woman for whom she now risks her own life and those of her allies? And do their deaths symbolize the failure of education, religion and filial ties to provide her the answers she needs?

There is no denying *Soul Samurai's* literary heft—hasn't the measure of a good fight play always been how much story remains if you take *out* the fights? Nguyen is as adept at the language of violence as he is that of poetry, however, enabling him to reverse the structural formula to allow the *spectacle* to propel the *story*, with the passages of dialogue serving as expository interludes not unlike title cards in silent cinema. The resulting integration of elements is so complete as to make telling the story by any medium but that of live performance unimaginable.

Physical action is inevitably inferior to verbal discourse for articulating long narratives—even the most ingenious of fight vocabularies cannot equal words for variety or exactitude—making the challenge in staging fights to keep the steady flow of martial confrontation from becoming repetitive. Fortunately, Geoff Coates has at his disposal a squad of athletic young actors as adept at sliding down firehouse-poles as at keeping their visual focus under strobe lights, as handy with ninja throwing-spikes (worn as hair ornaments by the evil Lady Snowflake) as with katanas and kendo *boken*. Further escalating the excitement is the Infusion Theatre Company's multi-media aesthetic mandating tagger-mural scenery, flow-morphic videos, peking-opera masks, black-clad koken, comic-book sound balloons ("smack", "boom" etc.) and a stageside DJ supplying a steady stream of hip-hop music.

However intricate the collage of special effects, the evening's undisputed highlight is Coates' innovative utilization of a cheap sword-cane from the Bud K catalogue. These devices are typically constructed with a screw-top handle, effectively encumbering any attempt at a quick draw. But for a duel between Grandmaster Mack and Lady Snowflake, Mack fights at some length with the knob-headed cane (hitherto carried only *as* a cane), leading us to assume that it is nothing more than a walking-stick—that is, until a few seconds of strobe-light obscures the loosening of the two parts, so that when the lights return to normal, Mack holds one end of the shaft and Snowflake, the other. They then spring apart, Mack now armed with

the wooden sheath and the Snowflake with the 14-inch blade concealed within.

Since these weapons are hardly a match for each other, necessity demands that the subsequent sword-play be brief, lasting barely longer than it takes for the collective gasp heard from the audience at this sudden turn of events to subside.

## WATERSHIP DOWN

fight choreography by Richard Gilbert and David Gregory

If *Lord of the Rings* was the *Morte D'Arthur* as transposed to an English fairyland, Richard Adams' 1972 novel is the lapine *Aenead*. Its intrepid adventurers in search of a new home explore unknown lands fraught with enemy confrontations violent and bloody. Adams' literary conceit of making his heroic warriors a band of Yorkshire rabbits did not in any way diminish what emerges an epic tale of Darwinian survival, but for it to retain its dignity in live performance by human-shaped actors is another matter. No flopsy-mopsy slapstick for *these* quick-witted creatures!

No swords or punches, either, says David Gregory (along with Richard Gilbert, the team of R & D Violence Designers). "Rabbits have an almost 360-degree range of vision, owing to their eyes being placed on the sides of their heads, with only *two* blind spots—one just behind their heads and another one directly in front of their noses—so they *can't* punch a target while facing it. They have strong front and back talons for digging, but they can't grasp weapons, or rotate their wrists to bat at an opponent like a cat would—so except for claw rakes, the actors can't use their hands much for *anything*. Oh, and though rabbits also have very strong *teeth*, the image of one human being *biting* another is not one that we wanted."

Fortunately, Lifeline Theatre makes a practice of convening production companies well in advance—sometimes up to six months before full-cast rehearsals—to allow designers plenty of time to develop a collection of visual and kinetic expressions conveying the dramatic metaphor demanded by the text and to shape it to the physiques of its portrayers. Paul L. Holmquist's Movement Design and Aly Renee Amidei's costumes help in realizing the illusion, but Gilbert and Gregory nevertheless embarked on extensive research, viewing dozens of videotapes to observe rabbit behavior when in the

exclusive company of their own kind.

“Rabbits will run to ground when confronted by a larger predator,” Gregory explains, “but when one rabbit fights another rabbit, they will leap and *crash* into one another, then *roll* on the ground while locked in struggle. So we focused on grapples and takedowns, with attacks initiated at angles reflecting the rabbits’ extreme peripheral vision, often preceded by a ‘freeze’ just before the action is launched.”

The long preparation period allowed the actors to experiment with these restrictions and drill themselves in a fight vocabulary dominated by headlong charges, body-checks, flat-footed kicks and drops cushioned only by their legs and bodies (*literally*, “Look! No Hands!”). The results are demonstrated most vividly in the climactic duel between Bigwig and Woundwort, played by the Wagnerian Christopher Walsh and the likewise brawny David Skvarla, who together comprise some four hundred pounds of muscle and bone, pancake-landing on the stage floor like pro wrestlers.

*Watership Down* opened to Jeff recommendations just days after the cut-off date for the 2011 competition. Whether the awards committee will preserve it in their memories for nomination time in 2012 is anyone’s guess, but its swift recommendation serves, nonetheless, to illustrate the enhanced level of creativity engendered by early planning.

## ROMEO AND JULIET

fight choreography by Libby Beyreis

In a season boasting eight productions of Shakespeare’s romantic teen-drama, you can’t blame a theater company for stretching to excess in their search for originality. As if the Babes With Blades’ characteristic unigender casting wasn’t enough of a novelty, however, their director opted to transfer his Veronese setting to an obscure historical period—the late 19th-century following the abolishment of Italy’s feudal governments and its subsequent unification—and then allow the designers to go their separate ways. But if this makes for a problematic hodgepodge of Caravaggio-esque scenery, nebulous music and *commedia* garb, one area where it works to advantage is in weapons technology.

When the local bucks gather in the square on the fatal summer morning, sharp-eyed playgoers may have noticed Benvolio wearing a side-arm, but assumed that it would be used later to disperse crowds with a shot fired into the air. Later, when

Mercutio and Tybalt commence to fight (on a precariously narrow downstage fencing strip), it is an old-school duel with rapiers. Mercutio is accidentally stabbed when Romeo grasps his arms from behind, preventing him from parrying Tybalt’s thrust. As Tybalt stares at his sword in bewilderment over what he has done, Romeo picks up Mercutio’s fallen sword and attacks Tybalt, but is easily repelled, falling backwards into Benvolio’s arms. Tybalt then turns to leave, whereupon Romeo, with a cry of fury, rises to his feet with Benvolio’s gun and, in one motion, shoots Tybalt dead.

Whatever else happened in the scene after that moment was lost on an audience left stunned and reeling with shock. However ingeniously-conceived Juliet’s later suicide—awakening to find herself pinned beneath Romeo’s inert body, but capable of turning his holstered pistol on herself—it couldn’t help but come as an anticlimax after the innovative and wholly unexpected introduction of a modern weapon to a well-worn confrontation.

## DOWN & DIRTY ROMEO AND JULIET

fight choreography by Greg Poljacik

The 2010-2011 theater season can boast eight separate stagings of *Romeo And Juliet*—with two left to go—but though wardrobes and wallpaper may vary between productions, only two can truly claim to inaugurate entirely new concepts in recounting the much-told tale of the Veronese teen-sweethearts: the Journeymen’s beachside staging of Joe Calarco’s *R & J*, and this bar-hopping venture by the recently-resurrected Shattered Globe Theatre Company. Based on a concept employed by London’s Factory Theatre for their production of *Hamlet*, this adaptation assigns playgoers the task of casting the main roles. They are also enjoined to assume the roles of auxiliary characters, and contribute gewgaws then utilized as props. The actors, all of whom have memorized the entire script in preparation for this anything-goes approach to the familiar story, must then accede to the audience’s wishes—that’s right, *just* like in improv (or, more historically, *commedia*).

But a *fight* is not something you want the combatants making up as they go, especially surrounded at close range by spectators who have been granted permission to join in the dramatic action. *Moulinet* field correspondent William Endsley reports on fight director Greg Poljacik’s solutions for dealing with

the spontaneity factor as practiced in the traveling company's performance in the observatory on the 94th floor of the Hancock Towers, where the actors "competed with spectacular views and the din of a coffee shop filled with polyglot tourists and pre-schoolers.

"The majority of the action was confined to a galley stage set up in the southeast corner, augmented by the occasional stroll or climb onto room dividers. Poljacik kept the fight scenes between the feuding progeny mostly hand-to-hand, with the addition of a razor and a knife, both rendered less menacing by the casually easygoing atmosphere. (Since the players were using 'found' props—a plastic cup for Juliet's sleeping potion, a morsel of cheese-cake procured for Romeo by the apothecary—Juliet, at one point, threatened to take her own life with a carrot.) The big three-way fight retained the text's confusion over whether Mercutio was Tybalt's intended victim, but there was nothing ambiguous about Romeo's revenge—while he and Tybalt were both locked in a clutch, he repeatedly reverse-thrust Tybalt's own knife-hand into the latter's stomach.

"In the pre-curtain speech explaining the rules and entreating participation, we were cautioned that if we interrupted the fights, the actors would stop the show. Would that Mercutio, in the play, had been so lucky as to have his comrades likewise warned."

## FIELD DISPATCHES

### CHICAGO THEATER CULT AWARDS FIGHT PRIZE

The identities of the anonymous group of theatre supporters who annually bestow awards for "originality in theatre arts"—hence, "orgies"—are a closely guarded secret, but this last April, they saw fit to give one for Fight Choreography to Greg Poljacik, in recognition of his bloody mayhem for the Side Project's production of *The Artist Needs A Wife*. Honors for theatrical violence being rare, the Orgie committee itself should congratulate itself on its originality in choosing to acknowledge this oft-ignored skill. Claire Yearman was not as lucky. Nominated for a Joseph Jefferson award (non-equity

division) in recognition of her violence design in Red Tape Theatre's production of *The Love of the Nightingale*, Yearman lost the award to robot-puppeteers and dancing-cat cosmeticians in the "Artistic Specialization" category. Nevertheless, in a season where the judges' range of contenders was conspicuously narrow, a fight director's name appearing on the ballot (and a *woman* fight director, at that) nevertheless counts as a step toward increased awareness of stage combat as a distinct design element in its own right.

### RAISING A GLASS INSTEAD OF A SWORD

Fight students socializing outside of practice sessions are not attempting to mimic the habits of posh Health Clubs, but, in fact, are engaging in an important part of stage combat instruction. During activity based in simulated violence, participants who have developed a camaraderie are more inclined to remain alert to each others' safety, making fraternization among training partners something to be encouraged.

To further facilitate the empathy acting as a deterrent to reckless behavior in the classroom, the Scrappers have requested that the lobby bar at Stage 773 open for business after their Saturday morning workouts for the purposes of dispensing alcoholic beverages—among them, such mid-day libations as Mimosas and Bloody Marys (along with the ubiquitous beer). However this decision may appear to contradict conventional notions of healthy diet for athletes, the sponsors of the Fight Jam workshops found their decision defended by culinary expert Tom Saaristo, who makes a case for the Bloody Mary cocktail as a restorative following exercise:

"The tomato juice forming the foundation of the classic Bloody Mary not only replaces fluids," Saaristo maintains, "but is a rich source of the antioxidant lycopane, in addition to the salt renewing electrolyte balance. The flavoring additives (pepper, tabasco and worcestershire sauce) stimulate the production of saliva, while the celery stalk garnish—or better yet, a spear of pickled asparagus—ups the vitamin and mineral content even more".

And the vodka? An extra dose of carbohydrates, to jump-start your metabolism for the remainder of a busy Saturday, declares Saaristo. Cheers!



**“We no longer see truly  
great sword-fighting  
in movies.”**

**—Roger Ebert**

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