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Marty Eich '03

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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Point - Counterpoint

Learning the art of theatrical combat, Illinois Wesleyan students let their swords do the talking.

**By Marty Eich '03
Photos by Marc Featherly**

The woman lunges forward, her rapier sweeping ahead in an arc toward its intended target. Anticipating his attacker's move, her opponent swipes the rapier away and counter lunges, barely missing the woman's hip. With a look of aggravation rather than alarm, the man strikes his attacker with an elbow, and sends her crashing to the ground.



Jean Kerr (center) instructs Phil Ocampo '04 and Brittany Morgan '05 on how to thrust and block with a rapier.

Welcome to Theatre 485: Rapier & Dagger, a class where budding actors and actresses learn how to make a stage fight look real.

Associate Professor of Theatre Arts Jean MacFarland Kerr teaches the advanced class, which is designed specifically for theatre majors who have already taken one of Kerr's introductory stage-movement courses.

The whole point of such classes, Kerr says, is to make stage fighting — from the elegant swordplay of Shakespeare and Dumas to the ugly domestic violence of *A Streetcar Named Desire* — both believable to an audience and safe for the actors.

“No matter what play, movie, or television show you're performing in, there will be an aspect of violence in the plot,” says Kerr. “Whether it be a slap, poke, punch, or even a sword fight, we are giving students a chance to have a leg up on many actors who do not receive stage-fight training before they graduate. This class makes students more marketable and confident on stage.”

Theatre 485 focuses on fights with two particular weapons: the rapier, a small sword with a narrow blade used for thrusting techniques (think *The Three Musketeers*), and the dagger, which is a much shorter knife with a wider blade.

Kerr says that the theatrical combination of rapier and dagger represents the “double fence” style of swordplay that was fashionable in the mid-16th to early 17th centuries. Improved metallurgy processes made this two-handed combat possible: with lighter swords, combatants could hold a sword in one hand, leaving the other hand free to brandish a second weapon, usually the dagger.

Kerr, who is also coordinator of the University's dance program, loves this form of fighting because the footwork involved to be a successful swordsman is very similar to dance. Indeed, "hundreds of years ago, a society's fighting masters were also their dancing masters," she notes.



Taylor Entwistle and Sarah Jensen use The Ames Library plaza as practice space as they prepare the routine they will perform for their final exam.

Of course, students in Kerr's class aren't actually learning how to wound or kill, but they do need to look like they are capable of rendering harm in order to effuse real dramatic tension in a staged fight scene.

To safely walk this fine line between drama and reality, students undergo weeks of preparation before engaging in actual swordplay, and are constantly cautioned about maintaining eye contact and keeping a safe distance. The course syllabus even warns: "Actions that will automatically result in not passing include injury, downstage or unsafe disarms, abuse of weapons, points in your partner's face."

How real is the danger? Kerr responds that, while swords provided to the students are dull, "they could cut with a thrust." But aside from the occasional scratch or poke, sword injuries are far less common than muscle strains and joint pain caused by all the lunging and jumping involved in stage-fight choreography. "That's why a proper warm-up is so important," says Kerr. "Stretching is as integral a part in stage-fighting as it is in any other sport. If your body is not prepared to move at the right time, someone could really get hurt."

Kerr keeps a close eye on practice sessions to assure that injuries are minimal. "At times it's a little scary, especially when we accidentally get a little too close to each other," says Max Levendel, a theatre major who took Rapier & Dagger before graduating last May. "But Jean keeps us safe so that's not really a big concern."

Theatre major Sarah Jensen '05 agrees. "I have martial arts training, which is quite stressful because the threat of injury is real and movement can be uncontrolled at times. However, with stage combat, everything is rehearsed, right down to how you breathe. There's a certain comfort in knowing what's coming, and that comfort allows you to relax and have fun."

To help achieve that level of comfort, Kerr had students who took the class this spring pair up to work together throughout the semester. Each pair selected a different scene to set to a choreographed sword battle which was evaluated for their final grade. Most picked classic scenes from Shakespeare, but Kerr welcomed less conventional sources, such as stage comedies or even Hollywood movies. Whatever the choice, the scene should engage the viewer "with a heightened sense of conflict and emotional stakes," Kerr told them.

These three-minute performances were evaluated by a professionally certified fight choreographer, Paul Dennhardt, who teaches at Illinois State University and has enlisted Kerr's dance skills to help stage fight scenes for several professional theatre productions. The two collaborators are also husband and wife.

In evaluating their scenes, Dennhardt and Kerr focused on the ease of rapport between the student partners. "The trick to stage fighting with rapier and dagger," Kerr explains, "is to make the communication between actors so slight and so quick that the audience does not notice it, and believes that all the actions that they see are completely unrehearsed."

Students were also graded on how well their stage-fighting movements revealed their character or told a story. Those who passed the test were officially certified in basic proficiency by the Society of American Fight Directors, represented by Dennhardt. However, Kerr urged her students not to focus on the goal of certification, but rather to "focus on your development as an actor, human being, and partner." Toward that end, students kept a regular class journal, noting their personal goals and self-assessment, that counted toward 20 percent of their final grade.

Due to the growing popularity of stage-movement classes like Rapier & Dagger, Kerr will be offering a new course next semester entitled Sticks and Stones, which she describes as a "found" weapons class. "Found" weaponry refers to anything that is used in a fight that can be picked up from a person's surroundings.

Kerr says, "This new class will really be an experiment. Students will be encouraged to bring items to class that they would like to use as weapons. We may see staplers, pool cues, or even telephones." Though the weapons may differ, the same mantra of "safety first" will apply in this class, Kerr promises.



Kerr demonstrates a "punto reverso" (reverse) thrust to her students.

"Part of the excitement of stage combat is realizing that in a real fight, there are no rules," she says. "Since anything goes in real fights, we as actors have to prepare our fight sequences so they are as believable as possible, yet entirely safe for the performers." In other words, expect a lot of rehearsals before that first telephone is hurled.

Marty Eich '03, from Palatine, Ill., was an English writing major and education minor at IWU. He played varsity basketball and was a WESN disc-jockey and Sigma Chi fraternity member. Graduating in May, he is back in the Chicago area to pursue a journalism career and a master's degree in creative writing.