

## Siblings-in-Arms

*Three Tufts fight choreographers grapple with their dual roles as scholars and practitioners.*

by Johanna Schlegel

*dramatis personae*

**MERON LANGSNER**, playwright, fight choreographer, martial arts expert, Tufts Ph.D. student

**HUGH LONG**, actor, fight choreographer, Tufts Ph.D. student

**KYNA HAMILL**, G06, lecturer, core humanities curriculum, Boston University; dancer; movement specialist; Tufts Ph.D. alumna in drama

**PABLO PICASSO**, artist

**LESLIE PASTERNAK**, contemporary scholar

**EDWARD GORDON CRAIG ("GORDON")**, influential 20th century scholar, actor, producer

**FALSTAFF**, companion to Henry IV

**KAPILA AND DEVADATTA** (from *Hayavadana* ©2002 by Girish Karnad): "physical wonder" and poet, respectively, who, their heads having been mistakenly switched after each beheaded himself over love for Padmini, now face each other in a fatal swordfight

**FIGURE SKATERS, JETI, PERFORMERS BRANDISHING FIRE, LEFT-HANDED TENORS, BIRDS, SHREWS, GHOSTS, AND PEDANTS**



A scene from the Tufts Department of Drama and Dance's fall production of *Kiss Me, Kate*. The production was directed by Department Chair Barbara Grossman, G84, with fight choreography by Kyna Hamill, G06.

Photo by Alonso Nichols

## *prologue*

**MERON:** I always wanted to be a writer, even in early childhood, so that came first. Then I got into karate, fencing, wrestling, marathon running—I just have a really active body.

**HUGH:** I got into fight choreography the way most actors come to it: through Shakespeare. I came to Tufts because inspirational Shakespeare studies Professor Don Weingust was on the faculty, and because he assisted Kyna Hamill, who was writing specifically on depictions of violence in the *commedia dell'arte*. Soon I discovered her book *They Fight*,<sup>1</sup> which she put together at Tufts with Don's help.

**MERON:** Hugh is doing stuff that hasn't been touched and bringing things together no one has considered. For example, Thibault's Circle hasn't been studied in conjunction with combat before.<sup>2</sup>

**HUGH:** Conventions were so ingrained at the time that plays by Shakespeare and his Spanish contemporaries leave out discussions of fighting. What mattered more to them was whatever acts lead up to the violence—the insult that leads to a counterinsult that leads to a challenge.

**KYNA:** (Reads) "Because it is often studied over only one or two days in a theatre history or survey class, the history of the *commedia* regrettably becomes understood as a conflation of two hundred years of performance tradition."<sup>3</sup>

## *scene 1. signifying nothing*

**PABLO:** Art is the lie that tells the truth.

**HUGH:** (Reads) "The art of stage combat is borderline magic as ritualized movements create the misperception of men bludgeoned, slashed, and sometimes fatally stabbed for entertainment. In truth, none of the actors are harmed, but the audience must believe the characters are injured for the performance to be successful."<sup>4</sup>

**LESLIE:** (Reads) "[Otherwise] the audience will be wrenched from its concern for the character to a concern for the actor—a transfer of attention from the signifier, the idea of a victim, to an unexpected signified, an actual victim."<sup>5</sup>

**HUGH:** (Reads) "For fight choreographers, the fundamental aspect of thrusting on the angle is that it allows the actors to position themselves, or angle their bodies, to alter the visual perspective of the audience

to hide or mask their thrusts. These thrusts then appear to strike though an opponent, creating the illusion of a near fatal attack."<sup>6</sup>

**MERON:** Stage combat is a combination of ballroom dancing and sleight-of-hand. I can make it look like one actor kicked another actor in the head when they're standing six or seven feet apart.

### *scene 2. pen vs. sword*

(Tisch Library stacks)

**MERON:** (Throws down gauntlet) Bookworms don't know anything about the physical life of the theatre.

**KYNA:** (Gazes past gauntlet) I was delighted when Barbara Grossman asked me to choreograph Tufts drama department's production of *Kiss Me Kate* last fall; it was great to work with her again. But Meron and Hugh do a lot more work as fight choreographers than I do; I'm more interested in historical application—violence in popular entertainment. For example, I have an article in *Print Quarterly* on the artistic side of fight manuals.<sup>7</sup> When I did *They Fight*, I tried to find good fight scenes for women. So I like to keep the academic and the practical in balance.

**MERON:** In my paper on Aristophanes I showed how some translators completely miss the point when it comes to stage directions. In *The Birds* I analyzed several translations of a scene involving a whip and puns on "whip" and "top." If the translator doesn't understand the nature of the weapon and loses sight of how a top works, the stage directions in the script will neglect to convey the visual humor—and the relatively safe staging possibilities—of wrapping a whip around a character, then unwinding him like a top.<sup>8</sup>

**HUGH:** There is a division in most drama departments between academics and practitioners, literature and performing art or craft. Academics write papers, but they may not help when you have to perform *The Tempest* later that night. At the same time, an actor needs an education in history, a background on changes that have occurred over the years. I approach my scholarship from the perspective that someone is going to use it in a professional setting.

### *scene 3. act won, seen too*

**GORDON:** (Reads) "The first dramatist was the dancer's son, that is to say, the child of the theatre, not the child of the poet."<sup>9</sup>

**MERON:** Most great plays are extremely physical pieces of writing. *Waiting for Godot* is a Vaudeville act. Even the etymology of the word "theatre" is, "a place you go to see things." Actions are the things characters say. You're not writing words, you're writing actions. Audiences don't see stage directions, they see actions.

**HUGH:** A simple stage slap can take one or two hours to stage, but the actual fight should only take about three seconds. Three maneuvers with a real sword, and the opponent would have been dead.

**MERON:** While I was working on my MFA a lot of my fellow playwrights were putting in fight scenes that couldn't be staged or would have been unsafe. Fight choreographers have to consider the play's dramatic structure, where you put the violence within that, and where stage combat works. Even choice of weapons—in my workshop on writing fight scenes I tell playwrights sugar glass bottles are expensive and don't always work, whereas a stage knife is pretty reliable.<sup>10</sup>

**KYNA:** I got choked really badly in a scene and I was really scared. It can get dangerous. There are a lot of compromising scenes for women—rape, domestic violence—and a young woman who isn't comfortable may not have the confidence to say so, especially if it's a guy directing.

**MERON:** There are lots of things you can do in movies that you can't do in the theatre. In *The Matrix*, they spent nine months training actors and doing lots and lots of takes. But because of the way martial arts is portrayed on film, people have an image of what they think martial arts is—and that image is what people expect to see on stage.

### *scene 4. air*

**FALSTAFF:** What is honour? a word. What is in that word honour? what is that honour? air.<sup>11</sup>

**HUGH:** Almost every actor learning a stage fight forgets to breathe. They hold their breath while doing punches, kicks, hairpulls, and slaps. The image is hilarious as they attempt deadly acts of violence without making a sound. Just try watching a fight in a movie with the sound muted; it looks strange. Once you

remind the actor to breathe, the tension is broken as they laugh at themselves, relax, and begin adding grunts, cries of pain, and heavy breathing, which brings the entire scene to life.

**KYNA:** I got in trouble from an opera conductor once because the tenor was so excited about his fight scenes that he wasn't singing "on the breath." So we had to change it up.

**HUGH:** You can't actually say your lines while fighting. You throw some punches and maybe say a line or two while breathing heavily and get back into it. We like breath.

**scene 5. a good lie; a good whack**

(A Scottish golf course, circa 1835)

**MERON:** (Swings a nine iron) You can't come in with this premade choreography and figure out actors are physically unable.

**KYNA:** It is difficult to teach someone to fight if they cannot move and they have no coordination.

**MERON:** I figure out how someone moves and thinks, then I choreograph according to their capability and the time I have. I once had a kid who was not physical at all and was uncomfortable with fighting, but his character was supposed to be this master duelist. He had played golf, and that was it. So I got him to do a golf swing. Then I built adjustments onto the golf club swing that were within his range of motion and comfort, and in the end I had this kid looking like a Jedi.

**KYNA:** In 2005 I worked on Boston Lyric Opera's production of *Lucie de Lammermoor*. It was choreographing to music, so there was a dance element. Yasu Nakajima as Scottish nobleman

Edgard Ravenswood was a Japanese tenor who spoke Italian, so I had to have a translator from Italian to English, and Yasu was left-handed, and the sword we got was initially too big for him. Still, he loved doing the fights—he had two rapiers. It was really fun.

**MERON:** One script I worked with in New York called for the actor to be knocked to the ground.

We had a sixty-something-year-old man who couldn't use his knees. Luckily, the other actor was made of protein. We got him to the ground by having the other actor slowly choke him down—it was horrific, but much safer.



Kyna Hamill, G06, fight-directed this production of Donizetti's *Lucie de Lammermoor* at the Boston Lyric Opera in 2005, featuring tenor Yasu Nakajima as Edgard, bass David Cushing as Raymond, and tenor Joshua Kohl as Arthur.

Photo by Richard Feldman

**"Once you remind the actor to breathe, the tension is broken as they laugh at themselves, relax, and begin adding grunts, cries of pain, and heavy breathing, which brings the entire scene to life."**

**KYNA:** In spring 2009, teaching in the core curriculum at Boston University, I did *Hamlet* with students, many of whom had no theatre or movement background. That's a much different challenge from a professional opera company staging an opera in which there's a fight. Well, I have a dance background so I can problem-solve around it.

**MERON:** When I put pieces together, I often have to explain base principles—so many actors end up in the hospital because even within the world of theatre, people don't understand fight choreography. When we did *Tonya and Nancy: The Opera* in 2006, it went much further. This was the biggest press event I ever worked at. I had a really good time and was happy with the product, but wow, that was crazy. The librettist was pretty established as a novelist and short story writer, and was the aunt of the student who composed

the music. But theatre and opera are their own monsters—and this one was getting national press before we ever put the production together. We had ART Zero Arrow Theatre; we had a date for the production; and we had me as director—but no production staff. I had to explain, "This is what a lighting manager is, this is why you need a stage manager." I brought in my own actor. We brought in Adam Grossman, an amazing music director; we got professional musicians; the guy who agreed to do costumes was a Tonya and Nancy freak. I bribed everyone by saying, "Look how much press we're getting—don't you want to get in on it?" And like, Tonya can't magically appear in boxing gloves. So we had two chorus members cross in front of her, and each put one glove on her.

## *interlude: they fight*

**KAPILA:** With what confidence we chopped off our heads in that temple! Now whose head—whose body—suicide or murder nothing's clear.

**DEVADATTA:** No grounds for friendship now. No question of mercy. We must fight like lions and kill like cobras.

**KAPILA:** Let our heads roll to the very hands which cut them in the temple of Kali!

*(Music starts. The fight is stylized like a dance. Their swords don't touch. Even Padmini's reaction is like a dance.)*<sup>12</sup>

**MERON:** (Reads; imitates legendary sports commentator Howard Cosell) "The sequence of events as it actually occurs would be as follows: first, eye contact is established between actors. The attacker breaks eye contact and looks up at the crown of the defender's head. He brings his blade in line to begin the attack, then moves his body. The defender follows first the attacker's eyes, then his blade, stepping back and raising his own blade into a head parry ('parry of five' in fencing jargon). The attacker, before his own blade makes contact with the parry, draws it back a bit and realigns it with the defender's flank, then steps forward and makes the cut. The defender follows the attacker's eyes and blade, and moves backward as the attacker moves forward. He brings his own blade into position to parry the flank cut, and after both parties have stopped moving their bodies the blades connect."<sup>13</sup>

### *scene 6. Tufts and the theatre of combat*

(Tufts Arena Theater. A ghostlight casts shadows upstage. Downstage, tables, benches, piles of books, and sketchbooks evoke the work of performing academics. Renaissance illustrations, stills of fiery martial arts performances, and publicity photos of all kinds line the walls.)

**KYNA:** Some see dance as an integral part of how you do fight.

Alice Trexler, associate professor and director of dance, was very supportive of me; she wants movement to get considered more in Tufts performing arts training. In 2003 we brought in Tony Wolf, whose Contact Improv, based in Australia, is Tony's interpretation of improvisational movement for fighting. We had him do a workshop so students could see that highly stylized choreography doesn't always work in certain scenes.

**MERON:** There aren't many places in the country at the moment where if you write about stage combat you have an academic mentor. There have been three or four dissertations on the subject; it's only recently been getting academic attention. And because it's relatively new, the department offers whatever support it can.

**HUGH:** When my mentor, Don Weingust, left, all at once there I was at Tufts—able to explore fight choreography, but maybe not focus on it right away. I was open to changing my research so it fit more with the expertise of the other faculty. However, over time I kept coming back to fighting and research—to explore the practical application of presenting or approaching golden age Spanish plays. Although Shakespeare had been done to death, this was a vein no one had tapped into.

**MERON:** I took flexible course assignments and could follow my



L–R: Timothy John Smith (Eddie) and Stacy Fischer (May) in *Downstage* @ New Rep's production of *Fool for Love*, Meron Langsner, fight director  
Photo by Christopher McKenzie

instincts. For example, my semiotics publication came out of a required course; my paper on Aristophanes was a piece of a summer course cross-listed with classics. You use the department to help create the thing you want them to create anyway.

**KYNA:** The department was pretty open to ideas and enthusiastic insofar as they let me teach a course, "Weapons and Words," first in 2001 with Tony Cornish, an acting teacher who has since died; and then on my own in 2003.

**HUGH:** Kyna forged new ground for us. I have lots of respect for her. I've been fortunate to have her work as a foundational piece. Meron and I are brothers-in-arms. It's unique that we found each other and ourselves. The one thing Tufts has shown me in terms of graduate work is that you have to be an independent scholar. There is no guidemap for your career path at this point. You have to find your own road.

## *epilogue and titles*

**MERON:** My biggest professional highlight was the New Repertory Theatre's National New Play Network Emerging Playwright Residency in 2007 and 2008. I was one of three writers in the country selected for the pilot year of this residency. I'm also proud of the work I did as fight director of the *Kentucky Cycle* with Zeitgeist Stage Company. The work, which calls for thirty fights including the entire Civil War, won an Elliot Norton Award for Outstanding Production by a Fringe Company. I was happy about a production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* with New Repertory Theatre (Rick Lombardo, director). And one recent Lyric Stage production in Boston, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, fits my dissertation; it has a martial arts fight—a comic one.

**KYNA:** I have some publications coming out soon. My chapter, "Branding Irish Violence: Spectacles of Rural and Urban Aggression" in *The Performance of Violence in Contemporary Ireland* will be published by Carysfort Press in 2010. An article titled, "A Cannonade of Weapons: Signs of Transgression in the Early *Commedia dell'arte*" is coming out in *Theatre Symposium: The Prop's the Thing: Stage Properties Reconsidered*, Vol. 18 (University of Alabama Press, 2010). And the *Print Quarterly* article is called, "Schiaminossi, Callot, and Fencing," appearing in volume XXVI:4, December 2009, pages 354 to 363.

**HUGH:** I'm a Boston boy, born here and raised in New Hampshire, so I would love to stay in the area. I just fight-choreographed the Wellesley Summer Theatre production of *Private Lives* by Noel Coward, which ran from January 7 through January 21. I have a review in *Theatre History Studies*, Volume XX, titled, "Book Review: *Honor and Violence in Golden Age Spain* by Scott K. Taylor." In March I defended my dissertation, *At a Sword's Length: Theatrical Dueling in Early Modern Spanish Drama*. And I may be presenting a paper, "The Rumble: Navaja Knife Fighting Technique in *West Side Story*" at the 2010 Comparative Drama Conference at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. In 2011, unless it gets cut, I'm appearing in *The Fighter* with Mark Wahlberg, which was shot in Lowell in summer 2009.

**MERON:** I recently signed a contract for a play to appear in a Smith & Kraus anthology. Two of my plays were in Whistler in the Dark's "Whistler Wednesday" series in January. Two more were in the New England Russian Theatre Festival in February. I did biomechanics movement for Framingham High School's production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, their Massachusetts High School Drama Guild entry, in late February. I'll be doing fights for *Family Stories: Belgrade* with Whistler in the Dark later in the spring. I'm teaching theatre appreciation with the Osher Institute this semester and a section of "Introduction to Acting" with the drama department at Tufts as well. And I'm participating in the Tufts President's Marathon Challenge Team. And of course, I'm writing my dissertation, *Martial Arts on the American Stage*.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hamill, Kyna, *They Fight: Classical to Contemporary Fight Scenes* (Manchester, New Hampshire: Smith & Kraus, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Illustration appearing in Long, Hugh, "The Swords of Lope de Vega," presentation copy of paper given at the Association for Hispanic Classical Theater's Spanish Golden Age Theater Symposium, March 2009, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Hamill, Kyna, "A Cannonade of Weapons: Signs of Transgression in the Early *Commedia dell'arte*," *Theatre Symposium: The Prop's the Thing: Stage Properties Reconsidered*, Vol.18 (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Long, "The Swords of Lope de Vega," p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Pasternak, Leslie, *Moving Violence from the Page to the Stage: Stage Combat in Theory and Practice*, master's thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1993, pp. 9-10; as quoted in Langsner, Meron, "Theatre Hapology: Simulations and Representations of Violence on the Stage," *Text &*

*Presentation* 2006, p. 117.

<sup>6</sup> Long, "The Swords of Lope de Vega," p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Hamill, Kyna, "Schiaminossi, Callot, and Fencing," *Print Quarterly* XXVI:4, December 2009, pp. 354-63.

<sup>8</sup> Langsner, Meron, "Lost and Found in Translation(s): Violence & Textual Analysis of Aristophanes' *The Birds*," *The Fight Master* XXIX (2), Fall/Winter 2006, pp. 16-17.

<sup>9</sup> Craig, Edward Gordon, *On the Art of the Theatre*, Google Books preview 2008, p. 142. Craig, according to Wikipedia, was the illegitimate son of an architect and an actress; his lover was the dancer Isadora Duncan.

<sup>10</sup> Langsner has taught his workshop, "Writing the Fight: What Playwrights Need to Know about Stage Combat" at the American College Theater Festival; at the Last Frontier Theatre Conference, Valdez, Alaska; and at the 20th ATHE (Association for Theater in Higher Education) Conference in Chicago.

<sup>11</sup> Shakespeare, William, *Henry IV Part 1*, Act V, Scene 1.

<sup>12</sup> From Karnad, Girish, *Hayavadana* (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2002), as quoted in Hamill, *They Fight*, p. 141.

<sup>13</sup> Langsner, Meron, "Theatre Hopology," pp. 119-120.