Impossible Bodies in Motion:
The Representation of Martial Arts on the American Stage

A dissertation

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Abstract

This dissertation explores and interprets the representation of martial arts on the American stage as a specific manifestation of stylized stage violence. These appearances of simulated physical conflict relate to the larger embodied practices of both stage combat and martial arts, as well as how this phenomenon reflects societal understanding of the potentialities of the human body in motion.

Chapter One is an analysis of the semiotics of simulated violence. Chapter Two is a series of case studies of mainstream plays and musicals that involve martial arts, and concerns both dramaturgical and production issues of staging simulations of advanced physical agency. Chapter Three concerns contemporary adaptations of *Macbeth* set in feudal Japan and the production and dramaturgical concerns of having samurai characters on the stage. Chapter Four discusses the Vampire Cowboys Theater Company, an award winning troupe based in New York City that is famous in part for their martial arts based action sequences.

The term “Impossible Body” is used throughout this study to describe those movements that represent events that are in violation of Newtonian mechanics. The Impossible Body is often one with exaggerated agency and physical prowess, and is a phenomenon that often appears in various forms of entertainment when a character is written as a martial artist.

These elements are placed in context by contemporary writings on violence and self-defense, existing scholarship on stage combat, martial arts history, humor, and critical theory.

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Introduction

Martial Arts on the American Stage

How does the portrayal of Asian martial arts on the American stage differ from other forms of stage combat in terms of both dramaturgical and physical considerations? Dramaturgically, Asian martial arts (such as Karate, Kung Fu, and Aikido) often have a sense of magic attributed to them in the plays into which they are written, allowing for characters to turn situations around in unexpected (and often unrealistic) ways and changing the physical power dynamic between characters. Physically, actors and fight directors often have to represent skills that might take years to develop in real life under the time constraints of a standard rehearsal process and with actors who most likely have not had exposure to the type of training needed to portray the skills in question. In addition, theatrical representation of Asian martial arts is often based more in mass media representations of the fighting systems in question rather than the realities of the actual embodied practices. The audience expectations of martial arts are drawn primarily from big budget films (both Hollywood and Hong Kong), where time, money, cinematography, and stunt doubles bring out the illusion of extreme skills that manifest themselves in disproportionate effects in relation to the efforts of the combatants. These expectations create a unique, exciting, and constantly evolving problem for those professionals who are called upon to stage this genre of violence. The interplay between actual martial practices, what is portrayed on film, and what fight directors put on stage is at the center of this project.

This study explores various manifestations of martial arts[1] on the American stage. By analyzing plays that incorporate martial arts and then exploring the stage combat aspect of their production history, I trace how the fight directing community addresses the inherent production problems associated with staging martial arts. These problems include creating the illusion of years of martial arts training in a short rehearsal period, creating and implementing a physical vocabulary for the stage containing recognizable signifiers of Asian disciplines as represented in mass media (such as the "crane stance" or poses associated with the late Bruce Lee), and working the aura of magic associated with martial arts into the staging of fight scenes.

In addition, training actors to duplicate popular impressions of Asian martial arts is different from other stage combat training. As a subgenre of stage violence, it is akin to period movement. Accordingly, there are a number of well known fight directors and teachers who specialize in staging martial arts. This study explores their work in this specific area of stage combat and its impact on both the stage combat community and the American theatre as a whole. Martial arts in mass media have a cultural aura about them which endows their practitioners with unusual, and oftentimes unrealistic, abilities. The mass media presents martial arts as a means of acquiring greater personal agency through the romanticized study of specific disciplines that endow their students with extraordinary fighting prowess. Evoking this cultural reference point through movement practices on stage offers fight directors very specific challenges and opportunities. Fight directors and actors with or without a foundation in an actual martial discipline rely on choreography that must reference archetypical poses and rhythms associated with martial arts in order to meet these challenges. An analogy would be directing a movement sequence for an actress playing a prima ballerina without that actress having had any training in classical ballet.

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[1] I will mostly be dealing with Asian martial arts, however Brazilian Jujutsu, Capoeira, Mixed Martial Arts, and other systems also factor into this study.

The first chapter examines stage combat as a system of signs and simulations. As the events represented in a piece of fight choreography would by their very nature cause harm should they actually be performed, fight directors create a system of simulacra customized for each production that they work on to allow the actors to physically and vocally refer to the violent events that their characters experience.

I then address three plays by popular writers that feature martial arts in their plots. My concept of the impossible body is introduced along with these plays. The impossible body describes physicality that violates the laws of classical mechanics. This concept applies to the level of agency with which martial arts are endowed with in popular entertainment.

This study also examines the practices of eminent fight directors who do not specialize in portraying Asian martial arts and how they deal with the production problems associated with creating those illusions on stage. Their work tends to be based largely on simulacra of martial arts as a reference point rather than an in depth study of one or more fighting forms. The generally accepted ideas of martial arts are more important than any specific system. I also discuss some of my own choreography in instances where I faced this same task.

Furthermore, simulations of Asian martial arts are called for by many directors in their interpretations of Shakespeare and other canonical texts in order to help create or establish an otherworldly or universal setting. To this end I examine two prominent recent adaptations of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Pan Asian Rep's *Shogun Macbeth*, and Ping Chong's *Throne of Blood.* Both of these adaptations place the story in the context of Japanese feudal warriors, creating large scale simulations of a warrior culture centered around the katana, or Japanese sword.

The award winning Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company is prominent among companies that focus their productions around martial arts choreography. Their primary source of inspiration comes from comic books, a genre where the impossible body is central. This study includes an in depth examination of their history, dramaturgy, and methodologies.

Though their presence predated this period, Asian martial arts made their way into the American popular imagination in the years following World War II. Though there are records of American Judo practitioners in the early 1900s, Judo did not achieve any lasting popularity. Karate became known to the American public through returning soldiers who were exposed to it during the Japanese occupation, and then the Japanese and Okinawans sent teachers to the United States as missionaries of their arts. Then, during the 1960s and 1970s, Hong Kong cinema started to achieve a cult following and also influenced the genre that came to be known as Blaxploitation. Films such as the Shaw Brothers' *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* and Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon* became iconic examples of dynamic, though fundamentally unrealistic, unarmed combat that added to the mystique of these practices. Also important were the two television series

The Green Hornet and *Kung Fu*, both of which exposed martial arts to a wider audience. As the decades progressed, more martial arts came into the forefront of popular culture. The 1980s saw a rise of Aikido with the films of Steven Segal, and there was a brief Ninja craze in the same decade. The 1990s saw a rise in interest in Brazilian Capoeira and Muay Thai Kickboxing, while the early and mid 2000s seem to have focused on Brazilian Jujitsu and what has become known as Mixed Martial Arts or MMA. Often a rise of popular interest in a martial art as a practice has led to a film. David Mamet's recent film *Red Belt* is symptomatic of the MMA trend, while *Only the Strong* in1993 was symptomatic of the rise in interest in Capoeira. This is significant as audience expectations of martial arts are established by their film portrayals.

The standard in martial arts films is to portray stylized fighting skills as the means through which a character can achieve personal agency. The choreography is rarely if ever realistic and violence is a path to a positive end through negative means, often by a reluctant protagonist. The main draw of these films is dynamic movement which emphasizes advanced technical elements of a given fighting system, real or imaginary. These movements endow the characters with superhuman skills and reflexes, which in turn lead to some fulfillment for the protagonists. In a successful film, the choreography of the violence is specific, dynamic, and possible to follow on a moment-to-moment basis.

Stage choreographers work in an environment wherein their audiences have been exposed to martial arts films and the mythologies about violence, which those films perpetuate as a condition of their narrative. When called upon to stage martial arts they must be able to create stylized movement that can be safely performed on stage in real time before an audience that might view the action from a variety of angles (as opposed to film), often with actors who are not specifically trained for such movement. This might be because of the dramaturgical demands of the script that they are working on or a directorial choice. Either way they must train actors to simulate advanced stylized techniques during a short rehearsal period that fit within the mythologies of movement that the audience has been conditioned to expect. Though this dissertation is not about film per se, it does discuss the influence of film on stage choreography.

Plays by mainstream writers that include martial arts and have been published and widely produced include Lanford Wilson's *Burn This*, Stephen Sondheim's *Company,* David Mamet's *Revenge of the Space Pandas*, and Noah Haidle's *Mr. Marmalade*. The tendency throughout these plays is to treat martial arts much the same way they are treated in film: as an unrealistic means of characters quickly and efficiently removing physical threats represented by other characters lacking the same training. In the cases of *Company* and *Mr. Marmalade* the characters are written as having very little training, and yet they prevail over their untrained opponents. In the case of *Burn This*, the character of Burton is an instructor of Aikido and a relatively high-ranking student of Karate; his fight scene is written accordingly, with him dispatching a street fighter with relative ease. *Revenge of the Space Pandas*, being a children's play, takes place in a fantasy world. The stage direction "Vivian holds back the hordes of attacking space pandas using Karate" suggests that a young girl with martial arts skills can hold her own against an entire alien army.

All of these plays are alike in their presentation of Asian martial arts in that in each case the character's exotic fighting skills give them an unnatural, almost magical edge over their opponents. This study analyzes the role and portrayal of martial arts in these plays, as well as looking into their production histories and examining how the problem of safely portraying martial arts has been handled in major productions. I have personally fight directed university productions of both *Company* (at Tufts University, directed by Barbara Grossman) and *Revenge of the Space Pandas* (at Brandeis in a project supervised by Arthur Holmberg.)

Other plays that contain portrayals of martial arts include *Essential Self Defense* by Adam Rapp, Sondheim's *Pacific Overtures,* and Charles Mee's *Snow in June*.

I have also noticed a marked difference in the way martial arts are portrayed in the writings of David Henry Hwang and Philip Kan Gotanda, both prominent Asian-American playwrights. There is a far more realistic portrayal of trained fighters, akin to the way hegemonic American plays might treat a character who is a boxer.

I analyze not only the portrayal of martial arts as written, but the production history of the selected plays. *Burn This* for example, was first performed in 1987, a year before Steven Segal's first film *Above the Law* was released. Any stage portrayal of Aikido taking place after 1988 had to take into account an audience that was familiar with Segal's portrayal of the art form in big budget Hollywood films. I have located fight directors who have worked on productions of this and other plays mentioned above and interviewed them about their processes and the techniques they used in their composition.

When martial arts appear on stage they tap into the powerful place that they hold in the popular imagination. Since violence is and always has been a factor in several genres of live entertainment, a specific manifestation of violence that follows its own set of rules is especially ripe for serious study.

The separate but related fields of stage combat and martial arts are only recently getting serious scholarly attention, with many aspects of both remaining virtually unexplored. That said, the intersection of these areas is in particular need of serious attention. There is a recent spike in writings by scholars who are practitioners of one or the other, but few by scholars who are both (though there are a number of fight directors who are accomplished martial artists, few that live in both those worlds are also scholars.) There have been some short non-scholarly articles on this subject, most of them either technical or trying to define a martial form for the use of other theatrical practitioners. There has been scholarly work on martial arts in actor training, including a volume edited by Philip Zarilli, who also authored one of the more important scholarly studies on a martial art, *When the Body Becomes All Eyes: Paradigms, Discourses and Practices of Power in Kalarippayattu, a South Indian Martial Art*. Until now however, there has been nothing scholarly written on the representation of high levels of skill in an Asian martial art in theatrical productions (especially not by a scholar who is an advanced practitioner of both martial arts and stage combat). Aaron Anderson has written on the disjunction between the reality of techniques as opposed to the representation of them, but there is a dearth of scholarly material or documentation of stage combat portraying Asian martial arts. As a scholar of martial arts and stage combat who is also an active practitioner of both stage combat and several martial disciplines, I am in a unique position to be a binary intermediary and complete a study that brings them together. By closely studying and recording this particular aspect of staged violence, I hope to foster a better understanding of how we as scholars look at violence as a whole.

The fields of both stage combat and martial arts have had most of their literature produced not by scholars but by enthusiasts. While enthusiasts may have a wealth of knowledge of their chosen fields, they are often handicapped by their own enthusiasm due to the tendency to be advocates for their subject area rather than scholars. Martial arts texts especially suffer from this tendency, with even greater difficulties arising in descriptions of martial arts written for stage combat practitioners. In these cases it is common for martial artists to perpetuate the mythologies associated with their given discipline for the benefit of those intending to stage their simulations.

The study of this heavily coded and referential stage movement is important because it takes place at the crossroads not only between East and West, but between live performance and mass media, between violence and dance, and between orientalism and multiculturalism. An exploration of how this specific aspect of stage combat manifests itself can also lead to a greater understanding of the relationship between personal violence and individual agency in contemporary theatre.

Though martial disciplines have become a global phenomenon, losing many of their points of reference to their countries of origin, they still retain their mystique. The representation of these disciplines on the stage demands a special set of techniques to create the air of magic, the impossible bodies, that such skills have come to suggest in the popular imagination. Most representations of martial arts on stage are almost a manifestation of magical realism. This is true not only of disciplines originating in Asia, but also of such forms as Capoeira, Jeet Kune Do (which originated in the United States), and Brazilian Jujitsu.

The staging of martial arts is also indicative of another overall trend in the theatre, that of theatre imitating film. An important factor in this study is the understanding that the movements being developed are an emulation of and reaction to martial arts in film.

There is also a subgenre of theatre which seeks to replicate Kung Fu movies on stage. Though relatively rare, there have been shows such as *The Jaded Assassin*, which played Off Broadway at the Ohio Theatre in New York City in 2007. This production was fight-directed by Rod Kinter, who was the former fight director of the Metropolitan Opera. There also exist groups such as the No Refunds Theatre Company in Minneapolis that have built an aesthetic around martial arts movies. The Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company is heavily influenced by film, but they themselves consider comic books their main influence.

Ever since Asian martial arts entered the mainstream American consciousness in the later half of the twentieth century, they have been mythologized and exoticized. The study of these disciplines has been popularly understood to grant the student extraordinary abilities in the execution and prevention of personal violence. While there is a grain of truth to these myths, the reputation exceeds the reality.

This mythologized concept of martial arts has been further reinforced by mass media, both film and television, and both imported and domestic. In the 1960s *The Green Hornet* put Bruce Lee in the spotlight as the character of Kato, a nearly unstoppable fighter. Then in the 1970s the popular series *Kung Fu* established Chinese martial arts as a mystical practice granted the advanced practitioner both incredible fighting prowess and a deep understanding of philosophy. More recently, in the popular television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the protagonist fights in a markedly Asian style with a heavy influence of Tae Kwon Do, and these skills add to her mystique and supposed skill in dispatching the villains. Likewise, when the protagonists of *The Matrix, Kill Bill,* and *The Karate Kid* develop their skills, those skills are all exoticized Asian forms, and those forms give those characters greater agency within the worlds they inhabit. This power attributed to Asian martial arts can be traced to Bruce Lee's popularizing of Hong Kong action cinema several decades earlier, as well as to the influence of his many imitators and the conventions of the genre spreading to other cinematic genres from blaxpliotation to spy thrillers. The spread of martial arts on screen was parallel to the spread of martial arts schools in the United States, and the assimilation of those traditions into popular physical culture. Both of these factors together would eventually lead to manifestations of martial arts in theater, both as a dramaturgical factor and as a choreographic option. Because of this it is impossible to divorce film from the study of martial arts on the stage.

As stage combat grew and became a standard part of actor training, along with its standardization through the advent of the Society of American Fight Directors, Asian martial arts came under specific scrutiny. Asian martial traditions are often lumped together as a homogeneous set of disciplines, while in reality they are as varied as the cultures that originated them. As different theater artists examined different forms, aspects of those forms would make it onto the stage. Since the martial arts themselves often have multiple conflicting narratives as to origin, effectiveness, proper training methodology, the ways in which they are being assimilated into what must be a fairly standardized method of training actors continues to be in a state of flux. This is also true of the media influences on the popular perception of martial arts, and the interplay between media portrayals and the expectations of neophyte practitioners.

While appearances of martial arts in film are relatively easy to track as the film itself serves as its own record, the history of martial arts on the American stage has yet to be seriously documented. From speaking to several fight directors, my theories of the link between stage practice and film have been reinforced. Mike Chin for example, who has fight directed both *Company* and *Burn This* in the past, postulates that a contemporary audience would expect far more dynamic choreography than what he has done in the past because of their exposure to film representations of martial arts.

As I believe that films are a major influence on the image of martial arts in the popular consciousness, and that certain films have been seminal influences on that consciousness, I hypothesize that by isolating pieces of choreography in these seminal films, I can analyze and then trace the development of movement patterns historically as they influenced the stage. The films that I believe are the most influential are *Enter the Dragon*, *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin, Master of the Flying Guillotine, Drunken Master, The Karate Kid,* and more recently, the *Matrix* franchise, *Crouching Tiger/Hidden Dragon*, and *Kill Bill 1 & 2*. In each case, martial arts are presented in ways that they cannot be performed in real life. There is also a particular aesthetic in the choreography that creates an exaggerated agility and precision in the movements of the characters that articulates an extra-daily exoticized movement vocabulary. For instance, in the case of *The Karate Kid*, there is the famous "crane technique" which, in the storyline of the film, serves as a major turning point. The character Mr. Miyagi (named for an actual Okinawan Goju-Ryu Karate master) claims that this technique has no defense, and so the protagonist uses it in the moment of greatest need and it does in fact have an almost mystical effect in defeating a very powerful adversary. This same formula of martial arts training equaling invincibility is seen in *Company, Burn This, Mr. Marmalade* and *Revenge of the Space Pandas.* In *Enter the Dragon*, Bruce Lee redefined the way that action scenes were filmed. By having his action sequences filmed in long takes from a side view, he advanced a school of action cinematography that allowed audiences to see advanced skills in a format that brought technical virtuosity to the forefront of the audience's attention. In doing so he set the standard for what martial arts were "supposed" to look like. As he was a highly proficient martial artist adjusting his techniques for the screen, his choreography referred to a more solid reality than many other action films and established the reality that later choreographers would work to simulate. Bruce Lee as an iconic figure is invoked in *Burn This* in reference to the fight scene in the play.

Of particular interest among Hong Kong action cinema are Jackie Chan's *Drunken Master* films and the cult classics, *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* and *Master of the Flying Guillotine*. These films display martial skills as a form of magical realism, later to be explored with more advanced technology in the United States in the *Matrix* and *Kill Bill* films, as well as *Crouching Tiger/Hidden Dragon*. In these films, martial prowess endows characters with superhuman skills that are far removed from reality, while attributing these abilities to the rhythms and discipline of Kung Fu or other fighting forms. By establishing a tight choreographic pattern, these films play into the aesthetic that disciplined, dance like movements have superhumanly deadly potential. This plays into popular conceptions of martial arts, which in turn relate to how those arts are presented on stage.

As the body is the first instrument of theatrical expression and staged violence is perhaps the most immediate expression of dramatic conflict, this study of bodies in conflict on stage is an exploration of essential building blocks of theatre. This study departs from much of the extant work on “The Body” in contemporary critical theory in that it is concerned first and foremost with the actual physical manifestations of technique in time and space, rather than on the political and theoretical abstractions which much of contemporary theory is most invested in. The use of semiotics is applied towards the analysis of performed technique and its reception, as the movement itself is my central focus.

Chapter 1

Violence on the Stage: Simulation and Representation[2]

There is a phrase attributed to Picasso that goes, “Art is the lie that tells the truth.” This statement provides a useful starting point in examining stage combat. What is the “truth” about violence that stage combat tells? How does stage combat “lie” in order to tell us that truth? How does the craft of arranging sequences of simulated violence fit into the art of theatre as a whole?

Though stage combat techniques have become common convention, there have been few critical analyses of how the techniques actually convey information to the audience. There is a wealth of information in print by high level practitioners and teachers such as Dale Anthony Girard, Richard Lane, J.D. Martinez, and J. Allen Suddeth on production concerns in fight scenes and training techniques for actor combatants, there is also abundant literature concerning application of force in self defense, martial arts and sports, military history, and the history of swordplay, as well as abundant scholarship about the appearance of violence in various forms of media. However, there is as yet very little about what those techniques meant to portray violence onstage have or do not have in common with that which they represent or how those techniques differ in content for the audience as opposed to performers executing the movements.

Violence on the stage is traditionally represented by choreography meant to communicate a sequence of physical events relating to one party attempting to inflict physical harm on another for the benefit of an audience within the context of a stage production. Actors performing this choreography make use of movement, sound (both percussive and vocal), and spoken text to communicate the physical conflict of the characters in a drama.

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[2] Note: This chapter appeared in *Text & Presentation 2006* and appears here with the permission of McFarland.

What is being signified on the stage in these sequences is physical violence. There is a tremendous disparity between the representation of physical violence on the stage and the execution of physical violence in either social competitive situations such as sports (boxing, fencing, wrestling, Judo, MMA, etc), actual physical altercations or assaults, military combat, or other situations in which one party is in fact trying to apply varying degrees of physical force against another.

The relationship between simulated and actual violence is often a distant one. But as modern society most often experiences violence through very controlled prepackaged means, the simulation carries more weight than the real. Baudrillard's comments on the murder of the real by imagery is a useful starting point for beginning to examine representations of violence:

> Thus perhaps at stake has always been the murderous capacity of images, murderers of the real, murderers of their own model as the Byzantine icons could murder the divine identity. To this murderous capacity is opposed the dialectical capacity of representations as a visible and intelligible mediation of the Real.[3]

While Baudrillard's attestation that the Real can be negated through imagery would be naively utopian when applied to images of violence, it is applicable to the discipline of stage combat as it relates to acts of real violence as well as in comparison to martial arts, contact sports, and military practices which either express or mediate the application of force. That images of violence in the world might eliminate real violence is unlikely at best. However, it is arguable that images of simulated violence in various entertainment media create coded systems through which actors and audiences read physical conflict in ways that distantly resemble actual altercations. Stage combat is a discipline of simulation. The discipline has been disseminated so far as to refer to itself and include historical texts relating to violent practices as resources for further simulation. For some actors and audiences, the simulacra is all there is, with no thought for the real.

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[3] Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 10.

There is an anecdote passed around stage combat circles about a high-level fight director who is also an accomplished martial artist; the story relates that this man once got involved in a bar fight and knocked out his assailant with a single punch. But… his body had so assimilated the discipline of simulation that he knapped[4] the punch upon impact. That is, he created the sound effect as used onstage by slapping his non-punching hand against his chest. In a moment so rare and so telling as to be worthy of canonizing (whether it occurred or not), a master practitioner of both real and simulated violence simultaneously performed and simulated the same act. In this instance map and territory were indistinguishable.

While a punch to the head in a boxing match or an altercation will make a dull thud and the receiver may or may not react to the impact either psychologically or physically, neither of these conditions (audio and reactive) would necessarily be the case in a stage combat situation. The greatest reason this is so is the primacy of storytelling in the discipline. Stage combat as practiced today is first and foremost a method of communication meant to express character conflict in a drama by physical means. Let us take for example a variation on what is known in American stage combat circles as “The John Wayne Punch,” named for the famous movie star. This falls into the general category of non-contact blows, meaning that the illusion of impact is created by sleight of hand, as opposed to contact blows, which rely on impact control on the part of the performers and in which a simulated blow does actually land. Like almost all stage combat techniques, the John Wayne punch relies on both parties for effective execution. What the audience should see is one actor delivering a powerful blow to the jaw of another and the actor being hit having a reaction proportionate to the power invested in the blow. The execution is as follows: with two actors facing each other, the attacking actor places both hands on the shoulder of the receiver, the attacker steps back with his right foot and raises his right fist in the air with his elbow bent at a right angle and his fist by his ear. Next, he moves his fist in a diagonal arc that crosses in front of his partner’s face by several inches, while the receiving actor turns his head as if struck. The fist is opened and the hand that remained on the victim’s shoulder comes up to meet the punching hand and create the clap (known as a “knap”). The punching hand closes into a fist again immediately after clapping, and remains at full extension for an extra moment to complete the image in the audience’s eyes. Often, the person receiving the punch will stagger back as well, and place a hand on the side of their face that was meant to have received the blow. If this technique was meant as a knockout punch, the receiver will act accordingly, and may even end up lying on the stage floor[5].

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[4] A "knap" is a stage combat term describing the sound made by the actors to signify the impact of a strike. This is usually done by clapping one's hands or slapping part of the body. It can come from either or both actors involved in a stage fight, or from a third party. It is generally masked from the audience's view.

Each step in this technique has very different significance to actors and audience. To the actors, each step is either a cue or the mechanical execution of a performance technique, while to the audience, each step is part of the story unfolding onstage. In this case, that story being one of one character punching out another. Each beat is coded differently depending on the positionality of the receiving party.

Taken again step by step: the first moment where one actor places his hands on the other's shoulders has different readings for both the audience and the actors. For the actors, it is a cue and a safety precaution, it is built into the technique so that the actors can check in with each other and continue the fight safely. The pause serves as a moment for them to prepare for the rest of the technique. For the audience, that pause is a moment where there is a setup for something else to follow. If it occurs at the beginning of a stage altercation, it freezes the action momentarily, preparing them for what is to come. If it is in the end or middle of a longer sequence the effect is similar, but is more of a moment for them to mentally digest whatever has just occurred before the scene continues. Bringing the fist back is again cue from one actor to another, and from the audience perspective it establishes the weapon about to be used. The brandishing of the fist in such a position (in most pairings) creates a moment of tension. In fact, if the action was arrested in this position and dialogue occurred without the technique continuing there would still be the potential for a very powerful moment from the audience perspective.

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[5] Of course, all directions would be reversed for a left handed punch and the male pronoun is arbitrary.

The movement of the simulated punch is a cue for the receiver to begin their reaction. The action of the punch itself and the head turn indicating victim reaction would most likely be lost without the knap and the actions taking place before and after the movement. The knap, a clap in this case, is particularly important because it is that sound that signifies the moment of impact to the audience. That sound acts both as a signifier of impact to the audience and a simulacrum of the highest order in Baudrillard's sense; the sound representing the landing of the punch has replaced not the impact itself, but the empty space where an impact would have been had the "punch" itself existed as a real movement. Dale Anthony Girard explains the importance of this sound in his essay, "Listening to the Language of Violence:"

> In addition to the actors' voices, the orchestration of a fight consists of the sounds of body against body, fist to flesh, bone on bone. Such sounds are essential to a fight because they convey not only that contact has been made but the strength or degree of that contact as well. Whether these sounds are created manually or mechanically, they must create the impression of truth.[6]

The last step of the technique, the momentary freezing of the attacker and the continued reaction of the victim (overlapping the previously mentioned physical reaction during the punching motion), help the audience to make sense of all that they've seen before. Often in performing this technique, the victim will turn his body completely away with the twist beginning at the head and continuing through to the feet, and continuing into a fall.

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[6] Girard, "Listening to the Language of Violence: The Orchestration of Sound and Silence for the Stage and Screen," *Theatre Symposium*, 91-92,

Delivered properly, the entire sequence is perceived as one character delivering a powerful blow to another.

It is useful to examine such sequences within the framework of Meyerhold's biomechanical concept of the acting cycle, broken into three segments: intention (*otkas*, also translated as "rejection" as it typically indicates moving away from the intended action), realization (*pasil*), and reaction (*stoika*). Meyerhold explains his own concepts best, as quoted by Braun in *Meyerhold on Theatre*:

> The *intention* is the intellectual assimilation of a task prescribed externally by the dramatist, the director, or the initiative of the performer. *The realization* is the cycle of volitional, mimetic and vocal reflex. *The reaction* is the attenuation of the volitional reflex as it is realized mimetically and vocally in preparation for the reception of a new intention (the transition to a new acting cycle)…
>
> [Meyerhold, V.M. Bebutov and I.A. Aksyonov, *Emploi aktyora*, Moscow, 1922, pp 3-4][7]

Much of stage combat works on identical principles, as illustrated by the steps of the John Wayne Punch. Drawing the fist back is the intention, delivering the false blow is the realization, and the rest is the reaction. Similarly, the opposite side of the story is told in the movements of the victim's reaction, which in turn works with the attack to form a complete symbolic sequence on the stage. As the separate steps of the punch carry semiotic weight, and the entire technique carries another, fuller significance than the separate parts, it is important to break down the steps in order to understand the illusion, or rather, the construction of the agreed upon fiction.

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[7] Quoted in Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 201.

In his book, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, Lt. Col. Dave Grossman describes the study of lethal violence in today's society as "a world of virgins studying sex."[8] It can be assumed that this is an accurate assessment of most theatre audiences watching a fight sequence. While modern society on the whole is sufficiently separated from first hand experiences of violence on a regular basis[9], simulated violence on television and in cinema is omnipresent. A punch to the head does not make the same sound as two hands clapping, but if the dull thud of actual impact of fist to head were to make it onto a stage, the sound would be unlikely to carry into the back row. This is to say nothing of actual injuries that might be sustained by both puncher (broken knuckles) and victim and the effect that such an event would have on a performance. We have the exaggerated sequence of the John Wayne punch that exists as a simulacrum of a real punch, performed using a discipline created to communicate signifiers of violence in complex sequences that exist as simulacra of the "real" event. In actuality, the simulacrum is more real than the real for stage purposes. Furthermore, any substitution of real violence for the simulacra, either by accident or misguided design, would compromise the entire production on both a practical and aesthetic level. Leslie Pasternack offers an explanation of why this is so:

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[8] Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, 2.

[9] Self-defense experts such as Rory Miller, Peyton Quinn and Luciano Silvera apply sociological and psychological methods based on research on how assaults happen to their training programs. Very little of their work even remotely resembles what their students may have been led to expect by a lifetime of exposure to simulated violence in the media, though some of their principles have been studied and adapted by various fight directors for their own work.

Now, if an apple onstage is exactly like an apple offstage, that likeness will probably not interfere with its ability to perform as a signifier. The audience might be aware that, in addition to signifying an edible fruit, the onstage object actually is an edible fruit, but that knowledge will probably only minimally affect the reception of the overall signification. The audience might feel hungry or wonder if an actor is really going to eat the apple. But the use of real violence onstage has at least three immediate results which will damage the signification:

1) The victim will experience pain, which could certainly stop the performance completely or which could require improvisation to allow the victim time to recover sufficiently to continue the performance. At the very least, the pain will split the victim's focus and disrupt the trust between the fight partners.

2) The attacker will suffer split focus: he/she will wonder if the victim has been hurt, perhaps feel guilt or a lack of control, and will feel pressed to think forward to later actions in the same scene which might need to be improvised to prevent further injury.

3) The audience will, in that moment of actual injury which is immediately obvious to most spectators, 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.

> The semiotic unit of actor-as-victim is suddenly signifying him or herself.[10]

Pasternack's analysis of what happens when the real either replaces the fake in terms of an accident, or worse, is used either out of ignorance or in the interests of "realistic" staging, illustrates the importance in stage combat of signifying a series of events which *never actually happen*. It is arguable that all of theatre signifies events which do not in fact occur, but there is an important distinction in the case of stage combat. An actor saying a line that a character says is in fact saying the line, two characters dancing the tango are signified by actors who are in fact dancing the tango, but two characters engaged in a life or death physical confrontation cannot and must not in the interests of safety be signified by actors who are in fact actually fighting.

The idea of the audience being pulled out of the play by the intervention of the "real" in the stage violence highlights the importance of the simulacrum. The audience insists on the simulation in order to enjoy the play, the moment this simulation cannot withstand an assault by the "real." The John Wayne Punch is pure simulation: all the actions are designed to create a simulacrum of a punch within the codes of realistic theatre. No contact is ever made and both performers are operating in complex temporal and spatial relationships to create the signifiers read by each other as cues and by the audience as an act of aggression and a physical reaction to same.

The area of stage combat where the simulacra are most complex is where it has no current model: swordplay. Though fight directors conduct in depth research on historical fencing, all they really have to refer to is other stage combatants and sport fencing. While fencing is an active practice, it is itself a simulacra which, though it evolved more directly from the actual combative practices, evolved in an entirely different direction. Period fencing manuals are essentially instructions on how to kill. The practice of rapier fencing evolved into smallsword fencing, from which the foil, the mainstay of sport fencing, evolved as a training weapon. Modern fencing evolved according to Baudrillard's model:

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[10] Pasternak, *Moving Violence from the Page to the Stage: Stage Combat in Theory and Practice*, 9-10.

> This then would be the successive phases of the image:
>
> -it is the reflection of a basic reality
>
> -it masks and perverts a basic reality
>
> -it masks the *absence* of a basic reality
>
> -it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum[11]

The history of sport fencing is important when discussing stage combat as coaches were hired to create stage fights: much of early to mid Twentieth Century sword work for the stage descends from saber fencing. When the shape of stage combat as we know it today came to solidify, fight directors cared far more for the older fencing for blood than the current fencing for sport. Capo Ferro, a master who wrote in the early 1600s, was given precedence over Barbasetti, who wrote in the 1930s. There are fight directors who see modern actors as the heirs of the great fencing masters of the Renaissance -- a Baudrillard field day. If the simulacrum of Italian rapier fighting is the modern equivalent of that tradition, what is to be done with the Japanese martial tradition? Are those who choreograph *Rashomon* the heirs of legendary samurai such as Musashi, Yamamoto, and Tsunetomo? Would anyone who has done so make such a claim in the presence of a Kenjitsu instructor? How would we measure a simulacrum against the living tradition that it is meant to simulate? There is a question of what would in fact be murdered in such an encounter, the image or that which it means to simulate.

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[11] Baudrillard, *Simulations,* 6.

In the case of swordplay for the stage, what is the final image? The first difference between fencing as a conflict and stage fencing is the difference between opponent and partner. One faces an opponent in open conflict. One works with a partner with the shared goal of simulating conflict for the audience. The clearest example would be the case of feints. A feint is a false attack meant to draw a parry towards a specific line of defense, thus opening another line for a real attack. In the case of fencing for sport, the feint is a specific semiotic device through which one combatant attempts to lie to another, getting the other to act upon that lie and thus open himself up to an attack. In the case of the stage, the feint tells the story of a lie to the audience. It is in effect, a lie about a lie, but, it is an agreed-upon lie.

Let us take a feint to the head followed by an attack to the flank. In the case of sport fencing, this move would be a matter of a split second. If the attack lands it is registered by an electronic scoring device and the point is scored. In the case of the stage, the feint to the head is a cue for one’s scene partner to raise their sword up to parry. It must be obvious enough both for the other actor to see it coming and act accordingly, and to be clear to the audience that one character tried to mislead another with that movement. Using Meyerhold to examine the next step, the intention (*otkas*) is the cue, which prepares both audience and partner. The cue is given by bringing the sword level to the target and drawing back for the cut. The realization (*pasil*) is the cut itself, which ideally travels on an arc that expends all of its energy and stops several inches away from the other actor's body. And the reaction (*stoika*) is the choreographed result of that cut, possibly either a parry by the other actor or a landed blow. The overall dramatic effect of the feint attack is one of narrow escape and quick reflexes if the parry is made.

The audience sees deception, agility, and a narrow escape from death by a three-foot long piece of sharpened steel (or rather, a prop signifying as much). But 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.

Clausewitz wrote that war is a continuation of diplomacy by other means. This is true of violence on the stage in the sense that it is a pursuit of character objective by means other than dialogue. Characters pursue their objectives. When the best or only means of pursuing that objective is physical violence, that is what will appear on the stage. This may be explicitly stated in the dialogue or a stage direction, or it may come from a director's impulse. Either way the actions themselves communicate very specific circumstances to the audience.

Stage combat, then, is a discipline through which actors communicate violent circumstance by way of a system of signs. These signs signify attacks, defenses, injuries, and the attempts to make the preceding events occur. The system as a whole is a simulacrum in the sense of Baudrillard. Though it refers to physical altercations, it merely simulates them and serves as an index to those occurrences. These simulations have overtaken the actual events in the eyes of the audience, and the "real" would be unacceptable for aesthetic reasons on top of safety concerns. Audiences are acculturated to images and sounds of violence, but those images and sounds are not necessarily accurate representations of the real event. In *Simulations*, Baudrillard refers to the story by Borges in which imperial mapmakers create a map so detailed that it covers the entire empire. In the case of stage combat as simulacra of actual violence, the map has not only covered the territory, the map has expanded far beyond it. The challenge now is not so much understanding the tension between the real and the simulated as relocating the real so as to better understand that which has come to represent it.

Chapter 2

Contemporary Plays by Mainstream American Authors containing Martial Arts Sequences

Introduction: Martial Arts, Drama, Mass Media, and the Impossible Body

What follows are case studies of three plays from different decades by mainstream authors in which incidents of violence involving martial arts appear in the script: *Company* by Stephen Sondheim, *Burn This* by Lanford Wilson, and *Essential Self Defense* by Adam Rapp. In the first two cases I examine the fights both in Broadway productions with violence composed by major fight directors and recent New England area productions with fights composed by myself. With *Company* and *Burn This* the fact that a character has recourse to skill in martial arts enables physical dominance over another character, which is the case in most mainstream plays where martial arts appear. Likewise, in both of these instances (and others in the appendix), the opposing character is more aggressive and is established through previous events in the play as presenting a danger before the martial arts techniques come into play. The fight sequences also more often than not contain elements of comedy in that they cause unexpected reversals and lighten the scene. The case of *Essential Self Defense* is different in that the martial arts sequences take place outside the context of any other violence in the play, existing in a specific place separate from all other action.

In this section I will also explore a concept that I have come to refer to as "technique of the impossible body," in which real and/or imagined bodies are portrayed as having skills and/or properties that defy the principles of Newtonian mechanics. The impossible body exists today primarily outside of live performance but is distributed for mass consumption through cinema, prose literature and mythology, and, in more recent years, graphic novels and electronic games. When it does appear onstage it is through choreography or special effects. The impossible body on the stage goes as far back as the *deus ex machina* of the Athenian theater and continues with the evolution of stage effects throughout theatrical history. What is a more recent phenomenon is the advent of seeing the impossible body through impossible eyes. The capture of human motion on film and digital media, as well as the portrayal of the human body in mass market visual media, enables the normalization of visual portrayals of impossible movement on a grand scale.

The relationships between film, television, and comic books go back to their origins. By way of example, Superman was introduced as a lithographed man accomplishing the impossible in a series of drawings, and then quickly made the transition to both television (animated and live action) and film. This relationship continues with the advent of video games, wherein these same heroes are controlled by the player to perform physically impossible movements. There have been and continue to be several highly successful video games based on martial art tournament combat. There is an interchange between these games and cinema as well. *Street Fighter*[12] includes characters that pay homage to the influential 1976 Hong Kong film, *Master of the Flying Guillotine*, and in turn was itself made into a live action Hollywood movie starting Jean-Claude Van Damme in 1994. Another highly successful martial arts gaming/film franchise was *Mortal Combat*, in which characters had supernatural techniques including fireballs, encasing their opponent in ice, and defying gravity, mixed in alongside their punches and kicks as a matter of course. As these feats have become standard fare in portrayal of the human body in various mediums, further impossibilities become easier to accept, and appear in multiple genres with hardly an explanation.

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[12] *Street Fighter* is a seminal martial arts fighting game franchise first released in 1987. It included a technique known as the “hadoken” in which a character would throw a fireball or other energy projectile at their opponent. The hadoken is portrayed in this context as a high level martial arts technique.

Martial arts as a technology of the body are portrayed as being akin to magic and in fact allowing serious adherents the ability to accomplish feats outside the realm of Newtonian mechanics. This description is no hyperbole. The seminal 1978 Hong Kong film *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin*[13] included a scene in which the protagonist encounters Shaolin priests practicing the highest level of Kung Fu[14] who demonstrate their skills on him without even moving. This film exists in a continuum that goes back to the origins of the genre wherein early camera tricks were used to create simulacra of impossible techniques. It is these portrayals of actual or imagined bodies accomplishing the impossible that have become a mainstay of martial arts in the popular imagination. Major American film franchises such as *Star Wars* and *The Matrix* have laid the foundations of their dramaturgical mythologies with techniques of the impossible body. These images of impossibilities have a long history in film, going as far back as Marie-Georges-Jean Méliès, an early filmmaker with a background in stage magic who pioneered special effects in the late 1800s. Another landmark in filming impossible bodies exists in the work of Maya Deren, who revolutionized the filming of dance in the Post-War era.

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[13] This film is also known by the title *Master Killer*.

[14] Kung Fu is an umbrella term borrowed into English that has come to include nearly all of the Chinese martial arts. The term Wushu is somewhat more accurate, but has come to stand for a competitive forms practice.

While there are no clear statistics readily available, major cinema successes of martial art films are reported to coincide with rises in enrollment at martial arts schools. As many martial artists may never use their skills in modern life and receive most of their images of violence from media, there is a tendency to create what Peyton Quinn has referred to as "brilliant solutions to non-existent problems" as a matter of course, such as knife defenses for types of attacks seen in film that in reality are statistically nearly nonexistent in crime statistics.[15]

Stage combat is simulated violence under highly controlled circumstances often bearing minimal resemblance to that which it represents. Stage combat portrayals of martial arts in the theatre alternate between simulating mass media portrayals (often of impossible bodies), or actual embodied practices. When choreography for the stage simulates actual martial arts practice, it may in fact resemble techniques used in training, though those techniques as practiced in the training hall may in fact be simulacra of actual violence, as martial arts in assault or even tournament situations does not often resemble drills. When martial arts are adapted, the stage choreography is often composed around how things "should work" based on the theories of the dojo rather than experience in application. That is to say, many martial arts practices do not necessarily have a direct bearing on actual violence. The fine motor skills required for the performance of advanced techniques under the controlled circumstances of the training hall would not necessarily come into play in the types of circumstances that are portrayed in realistic entertainments. Circumstances that interfere with the performance of such techniques include adrenaline first and foremost, as well as clothing, environment, surprise factors, and social elements of violence wherein assailants seek to mislead and/or intimidate potential victims. Furthermore, it is possible in many martial arts systems to train for years and develop impressive skills in the controlled setting of the training hall and never know what it feels like to be on the receiving end of a full power attack. Training exercises in many martial arts have predetermined sequences and start and end points, and as they exist for the development of specific techniques, those techniques are at some level allowed to happen. The preset attacks and defenses match up, and while they may develop speed, power, and accuracy, that same sequence of events does not often match the conditions of actual altercations.

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[15] Peyton Quinn is a self-defense and martial arts expert and a pioneer of Adrenal Stress Conditioning scenario based self-defense training (a method in which I am a certified instructor). He has regularly used this term on popular internet message boards and in personal communications to describe various martial arts techniques.

It is into this context of imaginary martial artists with impossible bodies performing amazing feats for impossible eyes that theatrical fight directors must create their work within a standard rehearsal process for today's stage.

***Company* by Stephen Sondheim and George Furth (1970)**

Company is a musical about marriage and relationships told largely through the protagonist, Robert, as he relates to different couples he is acquainted with as well as women with whom he is involved. The couple highlighted in scene two, Sarah and Harry, engage in a friendly sparring match/demonstration after Robert learns that Sarah has been studying Karate[16].

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[16] Karate is an umbrella term for a several martial arts originating in Okinawa that combined indigenous forms with Chinese systems. To simplify, Karate is mainly concerned with punching and kicking, and also contains several open hand techniques that have become widely known in popular culture as the "Karate chop." Karate became very widespread in Japan following World War II, and was adapted to suit that

In this scene Sarah's martial arts ability is revealed while the friends are having coffee. Her husband treats her practice as a joke, and he and Robert begin to pressure her to demonstrate her skills in a more or less good-natured and friendly manner:

> Harry: Look at this Robert. Wrestling. She even subscribes to a magazine on wrestling.
>
> Sarah: Karate, not wrestling. It's karate.
>
> Harry: Wouldn't you like to see it? All those fat broads in her gym learning karate. What wouldn't you give to see that?
>
> Sarah: Strangely enough, darling, I'm terribly good at it.
>
> Robert: How long have you been studying it?
>
> Sarah: Who asked that question? Oh, Robert! Seven months.
>
> Harry: Show us some karate.
>
> Sarah: No. Robert, would you like some more coffee, love? You, Harry?
>
> Harry: No. I want some karate. I want to see how my money is being wasted.
>
> Sarah: No.
>
> Robert: Do one thing.
>
> Sarah: No.
>
> Robert: Come on, Sarah, I really would give anything to see you do just one. I bet you are excellent. Hey, I'll be your partner.

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population. Karate was first brought to the United States after World War II by returning soldiers who had been exposed to the form while stationed in occupied Japan and Okinawa. The Korean version of Karate, Tae Kwan Do, though developed later, may be the most popular martial art in the world. Okinawan, Japanese, and Korean forms have all been popularized in the United States.

Sarah: No. Oh, Harry, this is embarrassing.

Harry: Aw, come on.

Sarah: My God – All right.[17]

Harry does not take Sarah's martial arts practice seriously, and there is no element of danger whatsoever inherent in her training from his perspective. This is notable because she is in theory studying a martial art with potentially lethal techniques.[18] During the period in which the play was written Asian martial arts had not yet been as widely assimilated into American culture as they are today and they had perhaps an even greater aura of mysticism about them.

Shortly after that exchange, Sarah and Harry have a sparring match:

Sarah: Harry, do you want to stand there?

Harry: Where?

Sarah: There.

Harry: All right. I'm standing here. Now what?

(Sarah goes into her karate preparation ritual)

Sarah: Okay. Now come at me.

Harry: Okay.

(Harry goes at her and she lets out a piercing samurai sound, flipping him to the floor)

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[17] Sondheim, *Company*, 25.

[18] There was an explosion of interest in Karate and other martial arts in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, with news media and mass entertainment portraying it as an exotic and powerful unarmed combat system. There continues to be a widespread belief that a single properly executed Karate blow can be fatal. This is in part perpetuated by the existence of breaking demonstrations, in which Karate practitioners punch or kick through boards, bricks, or other materials with their hands. Breaking techniques are a common requirement for advancing in rank in these systems.

Robert: Fantastic. That's hysterical.

Harry: Actually, I could have prevented that.

Sarah: How?

Harry: By blocking it.

Sarah: No, that can't be blocked.

Harry: Let's do it again.

Sarah: All right darling.

Harry: I'll come at you again.

Sarah: Okay.

(He goes at her. She attempts the same thing and he blocks it)

Oh, I see. Put me down. Okay, do it again.

(He does it again and she overcomes his block, throwing him again. She then screams and jumps on top of him, holding him down. Joanne appears and looks at them for a moment)[19]

The character of Joanne begins to sing a song, "The Little Things You Do Together," as the fight continues. The depiction of the fight in the published text makes it a mostly even exchange, with Sarah coming out slightly ahead. There is also a stage direction that inadvertently involves Robert in the couple's match at the end.

There are several noteworthy aspects of how the beginning of this fight scene is written. First is the "karate preparation ritual," which serves several functions. In addition to suggesting the exotic nature of Sarah's practice, it is an opportunity to introduce referential movements from popular-culture portrayals of martial arts, as well as a wonderful opportunity for comedy - albeit comedy at the expense of a serious cultural practice.

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[19] Sondheim, *Company,* 25-26.

Second is the fact that the stage direction calls for Sarah to flip Harry, which actually conflates Karate and Judo.[20] This is unsurprising as Judo would have been widely known in Western culture long before Karate and the uniforms and ranking systems are extremely similar[21]. Also important dramaturgically is the fact that grappling and throwing techniques are not read by an audience as being nearly as aggressive as striking techniques. If in that scene Sarah had reacted in a way more in line with most Karate systems, punching or kicking her husband in vital areas with tremendous force and with the intent of causing serious injury, it would be a very different scene.[22] Ironically enough, the application of impact, or *atemi-waza,* is the foundation of Karate despite the fact that the inclusion of such techniques into such a scene would run contrary to the needs of the dialogue and stage directions. The text also includes stage directions that require Sarah to pin Harry. Once more, pinning techniques, or *osea-waza* in Japanese, are non-existent in the curriculum of the major schools of Karate, but are most definitely included in Judo training even at the earliest stages.

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[20] Judo is a modern Japanese martial art concerned primarily with the use of leverage to throw and subdue an opponent. It was developed out of JuJitsu, an older warrior tradition that contained potentially lethal techniques. The innovation in Judo is that it allows its students to safely practice full power against resisting opponents and thus develop their skills in a reliable fashion. Judo is known primarily for its dramatic methods of flipping and throwing opponents. It was introduced to the Olympic games in 1964.

[21] In fact, the belt system and uniform of Judo was adopted and adapted by several martial arts, Karate among them.

[22] When discussing this play with Mike Chin, a Fight Master with the SAFD as well as a martial artist who composed violence for a production of *Company* in the past, he referred to the scene as containing Judo.

Also noteworthy in the text of this scene is the piece of exposition that Sarah has been training for only seven months. In that short time she has achieved a level of proficiency wherein she can easily overcome her husband in two out of three throws, with the third throw being a counter to whatever method Harry used to block the technique she repeated from the initial assault. The fact that Harry immediately figures out how to counter that first throw is consistent with the portrayal of martial art techniques as tricks that can be overcome through brute strength.

This scene takes place in the context of a musical comedy. It is one characteristic of comedy to reverse expectations. All other things being equal (such as age and health), it is a fair assumption that an adult male will overcome a female in a contest of strength. Scene two of *Company* is built around the reversal of that assumption, using martial arts for comic effect. If at the outset of the fight Harry had managed to subdue Sarah through brute strength and she had no recourse to any skills, *Company* would be a far darker play.

In the spring of 2007 I had the opportunity to compose violence for a Department of Drama and Dance production of *Company* at Tufts University directed by Barbara W. Grossman. I had the good fortune of having actors with very high physical aptitude[23] as well as what only can be described as a luxurious amount of rehearsal time in which we were able to explore options at our leisure. These conditions allowed for rather elaborate and advanced choreography. What follows is a description of the fight choreography that became the final product.

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[23] The performers playing Robert and Sarah were both former stage combat students of mine, and I had fight directed the actors playing Robert and Harry in another play the previous year. In addition, the actress playing Sarah was at the time the president of the Tufts University Tae Kwon Do Club, which was a factor in her casting.

Once the characters had agreed to the match, furniture was cleared and a mat was laid out on the stage. There was a fair amount of character business in setting the stage for this event and building up to the fight itself. After Harry and Sarah had assumed their positions on the floor (with Robert at a safe distance) Sarah executed the "Karate preparation ritual," which began with a breathing exercise with her hands at chest level, continued into a short series of center punches[24], and then led to a short sequence of repeated open-handed double blocks of the head and chest, modified from the initial movements of the *Pinan Yondan* kata[25] of Okinawan Matsubayashi-Ryu Karate. She completed the last of these double blocks while facing Harry, after which she posed for a moment. After that, Sarah turned the palm of her forward hand upwards, and beckoned Harry over with her fingers in a manner made famous by Bruce Lee in his films and oft repeated since.[26] During this sequence her vocals included variations of "HIYA!" and other such exclamations.[27] Harry then imitated her ritual in an act of friendly mockery. This preparation sequence was played for laughs, and was thick with referential movements recognizable through several sources from Bruce Lee to *The Karate Kid* to *The Matrix* to actual martial arts practices.

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[24] Center punches are common to all martial arts related to Karate. One arm is fully extended to punch in front of the chest while the other arm simultaneously recoils to a chambered position alongside the torso. Each punch reverses the position of the arms relative to each other.

[25] *Pinan Yondan* is the fourth in a series of five kata, or traditional pre-choreographed exercises in the Matsubayashi-Ryu Karate system. The *Pinan* series has been adapted and reinterpreted in several other Karate styles including those of Japan and Korea, and is known as *Heian* in Japanese Karate.

[26] This same gesture was used by the protagonist in *The Matrix* (1999) during climactic fight scenes.

[27] The shouts themselves are references to what is known in Japanese as *kiai*, or "spirit shout," which is the act of yelling from the abdomen at the precise moment of impact. This action increases the power of a technique by adding a moment of additional rigidity to the core area of the body where momentum is generated, as well as making sure that the *Karateka* is breathing properly. It is also understood to be an expression of the spiritual force of the practitioner. The exclamation "HIYA!" has become a catchphrase closely associated with the character of Miss Piggy from *The Muppet Show*.

When Harry came at Sarah (as per her character's instructions), she first grasped the arm with which he reached for her and used it to swing him around in a sort of do-si-do[28]. She then feinted towards his head with both hands, causing him to raise his arms. Once his arms were safely out of the way, she dropped into a handstand in front of him and wrapped her legs around his head. (As stage combat is a cooperative venture the actor playing Harry is helping to guide her placement in this portion of the fight sequence).

Once the wrap was established, she returned to a standing position while the actor playing Harry went into a dive roll onto the mat that had been prepared on stage ending with a breakfall[29] that left him flat on his back with Sarah on her feet. The illusion created was that Sarah has thrown Harry with her feet and legs from a handstand position and used that momentum to bring herself up while dispatching him. This move elicited applause at every performance. While the actors were successful in creating the illusion of a very powerful and advanced technique, it is important to call attention to the fact that a throw from that position as executed by the actors does not exist in any major technical manual of Karate or Judo. There are some techniques in Capoeira[30] that have a similar visual profile, but the actual mechanics of performing such a throw are nearly impossible.

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[28] A basic square dance maneuver. In this instance a dance technique was made to look like one character was controlling the momentum and balance of another in a violent manner.

[29] Breakfalls, referred to as *ukemi* in Japanese martial arts, are techniques which allow one to hit the ground after a throw and recover uninjured. There is some direct overlap between martial arts and stage combat as far as this type of technique is concerned.

What choreography of this nature plays upon are the myths of martial arts as hyper-effective powerful systems of movement perpetuated by both popular cinema and even the martial arts industry itself. This is the impossible body in action, and up close and personal in a thrust stage before a relatively small audience. The fact that the technique portrayed is not only completely fictional, but defies the laws of physics makes it more appealing to an audience. The impossible body of a martial artist need not limit itself to what might actually work. This is another area in which stage combat martial arts differs from what might be applicable in an actual assault: flashiness and theatricality equates effectiveness. The simulacra no longer bears any relationship to those movement systems that it references.

Returning to *Company,* the second phase of the fight, in which Harry overcame the technique, was choreographed to have him simply lifting her into a fireman's carry at the moment that she attempted to initiate the do-si-do. He then paraded around the stage with her in victory before the next phase of the fight. This moment illustrated the idea that the simple application of brute force could overcome the most advanced technical skills. The magic tricks achieved in Sarah's martial art practice are sophisticated physical con games. She may be able to defy Newtonian mechanics when Harry is not expecting such a ploy, but when he knows what is coming even the most sophisticated "Karate" moves fall apart.

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[30] An Afro-Brazilian martial art/dance form believed to originate in the time of slavery. Much of Capoeira involves kicks performed from an inverted position and various acrobatics. Capoeira is believed to be a major influence on break dancing.

One might ask what scene might have taken place if Sarah had been studying wrestling, boxing, fencing, or pistol marksmanship. These are martial activities that do not have the mystique of martial arts which originate from the East (though historically there were schools of fencing that did cultivate and/or command such an aura). Would a modern audience accept a woman who has been studying wrestling for under a year to be in possession of an impossible body? It seems unlikely.

In the third phase, Harry attempted to repeat this attack and Sarah countered with a variation of a *tenkan irimi nage* throw from Aikido (a Japanese martial art to be described in more detail in the section on *Burn This)*. Once more, Harry went to the mat. This time Sarah followed him down and pinned him with a cradle hold[31] from American freestyle wrestling[32]. It was possible to use an actual cradle hold as it only immobilizes a person as opposed to doing any actual physical harm. What followed this was a standing struggle that did not include any martial arts, but ended with Harry holding Sarah on the mat, followed by Sarah reversing their positions, and then applying a modified Judo *kesa-gatame* or scarf hold. Again, it was possible to use the actual hold as it does not in and of itself cause any harm to the person on the receiving end and allows the performer to struggle against the leverage realistically. This sequence supports the implication in the script that Sarah is a formidable enough fighter to successfully adjust to what had just been established as an effective counter-technique to an attack (or trick) that she up until moments ago believed to be unstoppable. Tactical thinking of that level of sophistication often occurs at pivotal points in Hong Kong martial arts films, though rarely from hobbyists who have trained under a year.

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[31] The cradle hold involves having one arm around the back of the opponent's neck and the other around the back of a knee, and clasping one's hands together and then rolling the opponent onto their shoulders for a pin.

[32] Freestyle wrestling is referenced as it is a system wherein an American audience is likely to see such a technique. Like any other movement, techniques appear independently of each other in different cultures and movement systems.

The next martial art technique in our production appeared when Robert became involved. The couple had gotten back to their feet and were facing off against each other when Robert tapped Sarah on the shoulder from behind while asking for another glass of bourbon. In the script, the stage direction is, "Robert is hit from the front and rear by Harry and Sarah. All three go to the floor. The couples enter and sing with Joanne."[33] As we staged it, Sarah grasped his arm and executed another Judo technique. This time it was a modified *seoi-nage,* or shoulder throw. This throw utilizes leverage to displace an opponent's balance and lift them off of the ground in a semi-circular path that culminates with their back on the mat. In our production we had Robert act as a projectile towards Harry, causing him to trip forward, in turn knocking down Sarah and creating a three-person pileup. At this stage the movement composition was primarily based on contact improvisation[34].

Our interpretation cast Sarah as a highly proficient and effective martial artist. This decision came out of pre-production conferences with the director, Barbara Grossman, as did the subtext that these two characters were a loving couple engaged in playful roughhousing that did not involve any risk of either person sustaining injury. My cast was quick to point out the humor in that she was performing highly sophisticated sequences after only seven months of training. In essence the character of Sarah had acquired an impossible body in just over half a year. This is well in line with narratives of many films, wherein characters achieve high levels of skill that would normally take several years within incredibly short time periods, sometimes literally overnight. We experimented with including techniques based on Karate or Tae Kwon Do but in the end those were far too aggressive and dangerous looking for the tone of the scene, as well as being contrary to anything suggested in either the dialogue or stage directions.

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[33] Sondheim, *Company*, 29.

[34] Contact improvisation is an American dance form that originated in the 1970s and is based on physical communication achieved through the sharing of weight. Aikido was an influence in its early development.

By way of further example, this same scene as portrayed in the 2007 DVD release of John Doyle's 2006-2007 Tony Award winning Broadway revival also played the martial arts sequences for humor. This interpretation of the scene made the fight somewhat more even (in part by abridging it). In this production, the actors playing Harry and Sarah never touched each other, but rather performed movements in the air along with sound effects played on various instruments while facing outward towards the audience on opposite side of the stage and reacting to those movements in real time as if they were in physical contact. The movements that they portrayed are somewhat more aggressive than what could be played for laughs had the actors been performing them in contact with each other, while the tone that the performers playing the couple took with each other is more flirtatious.

Sarah's "Karate preparation ritual" in this recording appears to be derived from Japanese systems of Karate. There is what appears to be a *yoi* (ritualized ready position) entered into with a synchronized breath and movement chambering the fists at hip level, followed by low blocks on either side of herself in a front stance, a kicking stretch, and a similar Bruce-Lee-style finger beckoning as used in the Tufts production. The appearance of this same gesture in two unrelated productions points to the iconic nature of various portrayals of martial arts in the popular imagination. I believe that this gesture (which I have seen reproduced in numerous contexts involving stylized violence meant to represent martial arts) has entered the cultural consciousness as a signifier that prepares an audience for a specific genre of choreography, and perhaps even a specific outcome to the physical conflict about to be portrayed.

When Harry comes at Sarah, he does what appears to be a lapel grab with both hands. She then performs a set of moves that appears to simulate a two person teaching sequence of a type characteristic of various styles of Japanese Karate. In this variation she first brings her own hands under where his would be if he were in fact grabbing her, then strips one of them off of herself sharply, finally using a similar motion to twist his other arm into a position where he simulates pressure being put on his wrist and shoulder. In the second pass, Harry simulates the same double lapel grab, but this time when Sarah attempts her self defense sequence it is only partially successful on his first arm, so that the choreography leads to Harry bringing that arm back and appearing to get Sarah into a tight headlock. The camera work does not show both performers in the same frame, but it can be interpreted from the footage that he is meant to be banging her head against something. This impression is heightened by Robert yelling “Don’t!” at that moment.

The next phase, in which they are in a mutual hold that first Harry breaks and gains dominance in and then is reversed by Sarah, involves an ending sequence of aggressive elbow strikes by her that Harry simulates receiving in the solar plexus.

The staging choice of having the actors never actually touch during the fights and having moments of impact be symbolized by instrumental effects allow the direction to use more pure Karate techniques while still keeping the tone of the scene very light. This also creates an illusion of high level skills on the part of the character of Sarah without requiring the performer to have to execute the techniques with the crispness and precision that would characterize an actual advanced martial artist. The fight direction in this scene is very successful at maintaining a flirtatious and comic tone to the scene while representing techniques that would have the potential to cause grievous injury were they actually executed at full power.

***Burn This* by Lanford Wilson (1987)**

Though it calls for very specific martial arts choreography, Lanford Wilson's *Burn This*, which premiered at the Mark Taper Forum in 1987, is not a play about martial arts. It is a play about loss, mourning, and two people finding love amidst bereavement. The single fight sequence in the play involves a character written as an advanced practitioner of Aikido and Karate versus an untrained but dangerous brawler.

Burn This tells the story of Anna, a choreographer living in Greenwich Village, after the death of her longtime friend and roommate Robbie, a dancer killed in a boating accident with his gay lover. Anna begins an affair with Pale, Robbie's brother, while still involved with Burton, her screenwriter boyfriend. The action takes place entirely in the loft that Anna shares with Larry, her remaining roommate. The play is primarily an exploration of Anna and Pale coming together as a reaction to their shared grief over the death of Robbie. Pale is a restaurant manager with tendencies towards violence. He carries a gun and during the scene in which his character is introduced, he has a monologue in which he describes battering a man at a bar after minimal provocation:

> There was this character running' off at the mouth; I told him I'm gonna push his face in, he don't shut up. Now, this should be a fairly obvious

> statement, right? But this dipshit starts trying to explain to me what he's been saying *ad nauseam* all night, like there was some subtle gradation of thought that was gonna make it all right that he was mouthing this horseshit. So when I'm forced to bust the son of a bitch, he's down on the floor, he's dripping blood from a split lip, he's testing a loose tooth, and that fucker is *still talking*.[35]

Thus, Pale is established as being both readily aggressive and possessing a pretty solid punch from the very beginning. His overall portrayal as a character is rough and representative of a type of blue-collar masculinity that engages in bar fights over points of machismo. This is in strong contrast to Burton, Anna's boyfriend at the start of the play, who, though an advanced martial artist, up until the fight itself shows no tendencies at all towards violence and even states that he has never used his martial skills.

We find out about Burton's skills late in the play, through a playful exchange with Larry that, though it takes place quite a bit before the fight, establishes him as a proficient martial artist:

> Burton: Happy New Year, Uncle Larry.
>
> Larry: Burton – you're a black belt in karate –
>
> Burton: Brown.
>
> Larry: You teach judo at the "Y" –
>
> Burton: Aikido.
>
> Larry: I don't care. One more crack and I'll rip your eyes out.[36]

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[35] Wilson, *Burn This*, 34.
[36] Ibid, 58.

This is the only mention of Burton's involvement in martial arts prior to the fight scene itself. This piece of exposition reveals Burton as a fighter with extensive training in two separate disciplines. It is implied that as an instructor of Aikido[37], he would hold a black belt rank. While ranking systems in Japanese-derived martial arts are far more complex than popularly portrayed[38], we can understand that a black belt is an expert in their particular martial arts style. Similarly, brown belt is the color designation that precedes black in the vast majority of Karate systems, and thus connotes strong punching and kicking capabilities.

This information comes into play later in the script when Burton attempts to eject Pale from Anna's apartment, which prompts Pale to assault Burton. In this scene, Pale enters Anna's apartment drunk, and Burton tries physically to remove him:

> Burton: He's gonna pass out. Unless you intend to put him up here, I'm gonna help him out into the street. I seem to remember we were having a party.
>
> Pale: You're not "right," are you. You're a little funny.
>
> Burton: We'll see if you laugh.
>
> Pale (to Anna): Tell your friend good night. Let's go.
>
> Burton: You're the one who's leaving, buddy.

---

[37] Aikido is a modern Japanese martial art based around throwing and locking techniques and the manipulation of an opponent's momentum through small joint locks. Philosophically, it is based on tenets of non-confrontation and peace, and in theory practitioners make special efforts not to harm their opponents. It is primarily adapted from Daito-Ryu Aikijujitsu, which was considered one of the most effective combat forms descended from the samurai.

[38] Generally speaking, rank is designated by color. The darker the color, the more advanced the rank. Once a martial artist reaches black belt (or *yudansha* rank), there are several degrees, though the belt color does not change again except for only the most advanced masters of a given style.

> *(Pale lunges at Burton. Burton, with a deft move, drives Pale straight into a wall headfirst. Pale sits on the floor, his back against the wall, staring at them)*
>
> Anna: Burt. Pale. Oh, for godsake.
>
> Burton: What the hell does he think he's doing?
>
> Anna *(to a blinking Pale)*: I should have mentioned, Burt teaches aikido at the "Y."
>
> Burton: Six years, that's the first time I ever used it.[39]

Before the fight resumes, Pale has the line, "Who's Bruce Lee? You're cute. You think I can't break a candy ass like him?" (70). He continues to refer to Burton as "Bruce" throughout the rest of their interactions in the play. This identification of a specific type of fighting skill with that particular movie icon is representative of the perceived extraordinary agency which martial arts bestow upon their practitioners. The linking of Burton to a film star who had been dead for over a decade at the time of the play's premiere is indicative of the staying power of various entities as symbols of martial arts. Bruce Lee has come to personify Kung Fu specifically and Asian martial arts in general to the American audience. Though he completed only four martial arts films in his lifetime[40], those films (as well as his television appearances and his work as a martial arts instructor and founder of Jeet Kune Do[41]), have earned him a seminal place in the American cultural imagination.

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[39] Wilson, *Burn This*, 69.

[40] The most famous of these films is his last, *Enter the Dragon* (1973). The others include *Fists of Fury, Return of the Dragon*, and *The Chinese Connection*. Another feature film *Game of Death*, was incomplete at the time of his death and was released with extensive edits. Lee was also a child actor and appeared in several films during his youth, though those are rarely discussed.

This conjuration of the cultural aura of Bruce Lee and the following continuation of the fight also signifies that the agency supplied by martial arts technique is somehow dishonest, working best when it is a surprise, and something that might be overcome by brute force and ferocity. After a brief discussion concerning the offstage death of Pale's brother, which is the inciting incident of the play, Pale collects himself and the fight resumes:

> Pale: …I can't stay here *(Getting up)* with you assholes. I got me a reputation to uphold here. You're too stupid for me to stay with.
>
> Burton: If you know something-
>
> Larry: Or think you do, you should-
>
> *(As Burton approaches Pale, Pale decks him; tripping him, kicking him in the groin and again in the back as soon as he hits the floor)*
>
> Anna: Pale-damnit. Burton, are you all right?
>
> Pale: Nobody does that shit, nobody pulls that shit.
>
> *(Burton is up, winded and shocked; they square off, circle)*
>
> Burton: All right, fella, I was being nice, I'm gonna take you apart. I'm gonna enjoy this.
>
> Anna: Burton, stop it, goddamnit. Both of you. Come on.

---

[41] Jeet Kune Do is a martial art/philosophy developed by Bruce Lee. The term translates into "Way of the Intercepting Fist." The principles are outlined in *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, a book compiled from his notes and released in 1975. Philosophically, Jeet Kune Do suggests that each individual creates their own style optimized for the way they fight. Practically, techniques and concepts are drawn from several martial arts and sports from various points of origin, including Western fencing.

> Pale: Come on, come on- *(He makes a lunge and Burton sends him flying)*
>
> Anna: Burton! Goddamnit, for Christ's sake, this is my apartment! What the fuck do you two think you're doing? *(She steps between them. Burton shoves her aside very roughly; she falls. He clips Pale – Pale sprawls)* Burton. Goddamnit.
>
> Burton: No way, buddy, nobody blind-sides me, no way.[42]

In this last passage what we essentially see is Pale's dismissal of Burton's prowess as a mere trick, "Nobody does that shit. Nobody pulls that shit." This is after having staged an ambush of his own with a sucker punch[43]. The rest of the fight comes after the two square off, and it is in this exchange that Burton dispatches him.

Randy Kovitz[44], who fight directed the premiere and covered both combatant roles at various times in the run, is in fact a student of Tomiki Style Aikido[45]. Though he stated in an interview that his Aikido background was not a factor in his being hired, he did adapt martial arts techniques to the needs of the play. Kovitz echoes many fight director/martial artists (including his own mentor, B.H. Barry) when he states that a martial arts background is secondary to stage combat skills for choreographers and performers. That is to say, proficiency in any given martial art implies the ability to execute effectively techniques designed to work under adversarial conditions to cause harm to another human being while preventing harm to oneself. Proficiency in stage combat on the other hand, is the ability to safely safely the illusion of violence with a cooperative partner for the sake of an audience within the context of a performance.

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[42] Ibid, 70-71.

[43] A surprise blow that is outside the social context of an agreed upon face off.

[44] Phone interview conducted April 1, 2009.

[45] Tomiki Aikido is an offshoot of the main style of Aikido founded in the 1960s in which techniques have been adapted to make them suitable for competition.

Kovitz's choreography was described as "uncomfortably realistic" by Michael Kuchwara of the Associated Press when the play opened on Broadway in 1987.[46] At that time Aikido was becoming trendy in actor training programs and was known in artistic communities through its influence on the development of contact improvisation, but had not yet made its way into mass media culture as it would with the release of Steven Segal's *Above the Law*[47] the following year.

The video in the archive at the Billy Rose Collection in New York City shows rather spare but effective choreography. Kovitz related that Jonathan Hogan, the actor playing Burton, did not have any Aikido training, so he created the illusion of martial arts proficiency by teaching Hogan a basic Aikido fighting stance. Kovitz reported that he worked to create a contrast between the two actor-combatants, and that Hogan was directed to play Burton as completely surprised at the effectiveness of his own skills after the first throw. While he tried to make Burton's fighting accurate, Kovitz stated that he would have choreographed a "very different fight had it been for a martial arts convention."

Kovitz said about this moment, "I think there is a magic attributed to martial arts," in reference to both Burton's extreme effectiveness as a fighter and his own surprise at it. The throw as seen at the Billy Rose Collection is extremely simple and does not read as a spectacular display of skill, probably due to the limitations of the actor. The next act of violence, Pale's sucker punching of Burton, is far more graphic than the preceding moment. Pale, originated by John Malkovich, has been handed a towel to wipe himself off, which he throws into the air, creating a distraction, then uses that moment to assault Burton. Though it does not read as such, the trick with the towel was taught to Kovitz as a martial arts technique by a stuntman he had recently worked with. What follows is an exchange in which Pale mocks Burton's martial arts, "Nobody does that shit. Nobody pulls that shit," while striking a mock kung fu pose, drawing laughter from the audience.

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[46] Kuchwara, "Lanford Wilson's *Burn This* Opens on Broadway," Associated Press.

[47] *Above the Law* was the first Hollywood movie to feature Aikido. It opens with the main character voiceover concerning his introduction to Aikido over pictures of the system's founder, Morihei Ueshiba, in action. The scene in which we first see Segal involves him leading an Aikido demonstration in a Japanese dojo.

The squaring off that follows is an agreed upon engagement between the two characters[48]. In this segment of the fight Burton's body language is that of an athletic kickboxer while Pale is a blustering overconfident street fighter. It is very clear in the choreography before the first punch is thrown that Burton is meant to be a far superior fighter. Hogan is choreographed to be in an Aikido stance, but to use Karate punches. As these are two very different physical vocabularies the difference is striking. The first exchange in the faceoff is a punch from Pale that Burton captures and then uses to send him flying. Pale is shaken up by this but continues to fight. While the Aikido in the footage is fairly accurate, it does not resemble the techniques that became familiar with the popularity of Steven Segal movies later that decade. The Karate however, is far more recognizable in relation to the mass media portrayals that would have been familiar following the mainstream success of movies such as *Enter the Dragon* in 1973 and the appearance of Karate in various Blaxploitation films in the 1970s. As this fight continues, it becomes clearer that Pale is outclassed and Burton handily defeats him.

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[48] This type of consensual violence is what combat expert Rory Miller describes as the "Monkey Dance" in *Meditations on Violence*. He explains it as a ritualistic primate behavior through which dominance is decided.

Mike Chin, a prominent New York fight director and a Fight Master with the Society of American Fight Directors, cites the influence of film in the fight direction of current productions of *Burn This*, stating that the bar has been raised in terms of audience expectations of martial arts sequences. What was artistically effective in early productions will read as too bland for today's theatergoers who have been regularly exposed to mass media representations of martial arts.

I had Chin's statement in mind when in 2009 I had the opportunity to fight direct a production of *Burn This* in Nashua, New Hampshire, for Yellow Taxi Productions. By that time I already had conducted interviews with Chin and Kovitz and had watched the archival footage of the 1987 Broadway production. I had been exposed to both the Hollywood version of Aikido as popularized by Segal and had dabbled in multiple interpretations of the traditional Japanese martial art at various times.

The production was to take place in an intimate space with alley seating. The house could hold perhaps 30-40 people at most and no audience member would be more than a few feet away from the action at any given moment. The set in the area in which the fight would take place included a couch, a coffee table, and a window. The window and supporting wall could not take impact. It was in this area that I was to transform an actor into a martial arts expert in two rehearsals, one ninety-minute composition rehearsal and one follow-up visit during tech week. It should be noted that the actor playing Pale was significantly larger and more muscular than the actor playing Burton. I would argue that this lent more "magic" to the portrayal of martial arts in this play.

The first throw was extremely important, as I felt it was the moment that would establish Burton's Aikido expertise and was the greatest opportunity for spectacle in the space I had to work with. The Aikido technique I replicated is called *tenkan irime-nage*, which translates into "turning entering throw." In this technique an Aikido stylist receives an incoming attack and turns one's center with the flow of the attacker's movement, breaking the attacker's balance and bringing him into a forced circular step with the defender at the center. Then the Aikidoist reverses the direction of his own circle, which forces the attacker into an outstretched arm and then backwards onto the ground. There are, of course, far more destructive variations of the technique but that is the basic sequence. I chose it because it is easy to replicate safely by actors without extensive movement training, would fill the available space, and allows the recipients of the technique (when modified) to choose carefully where they will fall, thus avoiding audience members, delicate set pieces, or anything else that might risk the actor's safety.

Much like Randy Kovitz, I spent a considerable amount of time working on the stance of the actor playing Burton. The throw itself I built around a dance embrace, though I demonstrated what the actual technique might feel like to both actors. The initial attack by Pale was choreographed so that the cue would lead directly into the capturing element of Burton's throw: the spin to maximize visibility for the audience and to allow the actor playing Pale to control his fall so as to land with the most possible space. The narrative priority in that phase of the composition was that the audience clearly see both Pale's attempted attack and Burton's advanced skills in response to that attempt. The movement we used was one that has made an appearance in several Segal movies, though I hoped was not so over the top as to be out of place in a naturalistic play.

The sucker punch phase, as it is driven by the non-martial artist character, was designed out of a conventional, non-martial-arts-based vocabulary. In contrast, Pale's mockery of the martial arts incorporated the iconic "crane stance" popularized in *The Karate Kid*: standing on one straight leg with the opposite knee held high, arms up and out to the sides at forty-five degree angles, and wrists bent down with the fingertips loose and pointed towards the floor.[49]

The last phase, though containing the most movements, was perhaps the easiest to choreograph. The move that sends Anna flying was choreographed as a throw triggered by an unconscious reflex. It was not based on any specific Aikido technique, though the actor playing Burton spun 360 degrees, creating the illusion of launching Anna into the couch. Being well cushioned, the couch allowed the actress to crash into it safely and convincingly, and remain there for the rest of the fight. There was an exchange of blows in which Burton used Karate style blocks and punches; that is to say, he moved his forearms to deflect incoming blows by intercepting the approaching arms at the wrist and knocking them away from his body. The blocks were held for a split second after each interception so as to recreate the rhythms popularized in mass media portrayals of martial arts. This exchange was kept very short as an extended sequence would have compromised the illusion, since precision in representing such techniques is difficult to sustain without extensive training. By keeping this exchange brief, the fight was kept at a length conducive to the actors maintaining the illusions involved. As fight director I preferred the performers to execute a shorter sequence well rather than a long and more complex sequence poorly. While the fight happens at a pivotal moment of the play, *Burn This* is not a play about an Aikido instructor's first application of his skills against a drunken street fighter. The overall priorities of the play and my own limited access to the actors dictated that this altercation be kept short.

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[49] There are in fact several Kung Fu forms based on the movements of cranes. Some of these are detailed in the *Bubishi*, a Chinese text that was highly influential in the formation of Okinawan Karate. Crane forms are also commonly referenced in Hong Kong action films, though their movements in that context are more likely more influenced by Beijing Opera than any actual fighting system.

The fight ended with Burton holding Pale in a pain compliance[50] hold simulating an Aikido style arm bar. The specific hold was a modified *Ikkyo* hold, which in actual application would put stress on the shoulder and elbow joints. This was represented by the actor playing Pale turning away from his partner while bending over and wresting his arm on Burton's torso. The actor playing Burton placed his hands on his partner's arms as he assumed the position, signifying a restraint, and then Pale spread his fingers out and bent his wrist downwards, thus completing the illusion of being held in a painful position. Our production had more dialogue from this position, with Pale being released when he asks Anna a pointed sexual question with the direct implication that she is cheating on Burton with him. This acting beat also afforded us the opportunity to end the fight in such a way that communicates to the audience that though Burton has established physical dominance by virtue of his martial arts, it is clear that Pale has won over Anna, who was in fact the person over whom they were fighting.

I approached this production as a participant-observer. Earlier interviews made me realize that putting choreographic styles into words was not necessarily something that fight directors were used to, even the best of them. At that stage it was easier to communicate certain concepts physically rather than verbally. What I learned was that the illusion of martial arts proficiency was communicated by control of tempo, rhythm, poses, and by the use of iconic positions. As I have a martial arts background that includes a black belt in Karate and I have dabbled in two different lineages of Aikido, I knew that I was entering the project with preconceived notions of what such an altercation might look like. That said, I know as well as any fight director that good martial arts often makes for horrible and unsafe stage combat. In fact, actors with a martial arts background often experience a great deal of frustration in the early stages of learning stage combat, as the physical conditioning that they have spent so long developing is in direct conflict with the safety and often the aesthetic needs of stage combat technique.[51] At the end of the day it was still my job to have a safe and effective fight for the production, whether or not I would be able to articulate how it worked.

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[50] A pain compliance hold is a technique in which the practitioner applies pressure and/or compression to a joint or other sensitive area in order to subdue an opponent. Many such techniques can cause serious damage if applied with excessive force.

One example of rhythm in motion to symbolize advanced martial arts skill is the use of stillness after smooth motion. It is even more recognizable if that stillness is in a recognizable pose. It is these iconic rhythms and positions that Western audiences understand as symbolizing martial arts. In my interview, B.H. Barry[52], one of the most prominent theatrical fight directors in the world says of such movements, “We often perform clichés on stage, and we enjoy them.” Certain movements have come to symbolize the superhuman fighting skills attributed to martial arts in the popular imagination.

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[51] Over the years I have developed several approaches to “untraining” martial artists and fencers in my stage combat courses. The first step is to acknowledge their training and make them aware that much of what they are about to learn will feel counter-intuitive. Once they are able to compartmentalize their skills, their martial arts background becomes an asset once more.

[52] Phone interview conducted on December 9, 2009.

By way of example, Barry explains that "the 'Karate Chop[53]' became the key to what Karate was." The "Karate Chop" generally refers to an open handed strike using the outside edge of the hand. Such techniques do not exist in boxing, the dominant mode of striking-centric combat sport (and would in fact be impossible to perform with boxing gloves), and thus were alien to the general American population when they were introduced with the art of Karate. Add to this the breaking demonstrations associated with Karate and the "Karate Chop" might appear to be almost a form of magic in which people can shatter boards or tiles with an unfamiliar gesture[54]. By way of an example from film, *The One-Armed Swordsman* (1967), one of the first Hong Kong films to make an impact in the United States, contains a scene in which the protagonist splits a large rock in half with an open hand strike after reading a secret manual. Such a break is beyond anything expected at even the highest levels of training. In the film it functioned as a narrative moment that signaled the acquisition of an impossible body. The open hand strike became an icon of martial arts. Thus, simulating this icon became a signifier that certain skills (based in either embodied tradition or in fiction) were coming into play.

This type of referential movement is perhaps one of the most powerful elements available when staging a martial arts scene. The idea that someone with martial arts training will use a specific physical formula to defeat a more aggressive adversary is a powerful one that has travelled to live theatre from film and television. Even the mockery of martial arts with the "crane technique" is a reference strong enough to contextualize the rest of the fight. The actor portraying the martial artist in my production did not identify as being particularly well versed in movement and was dealing with an old injury that limited his upper body mobility. As modern stage combat is generally reliant on the victim controlling the action this was not a terrible setback since he was meant to win the fight, but it placed limitations on the physical vocabulary that he might be able to perform, thus making moments of recognizable iconic martial arts references that much more important.

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[53] It should be noted that dictionaries list the origin of the phrase as being introduced to the English language between 1965-1970. Neither Gichin Funakoshi nor Shoshin Nagamine, two of the most prominent Karate masters to document their styles, refers to any open-handed striking technique as a "chop" in the English translations of their work. The *shuto-tsuki*, the open-handed strike that is often referred to as the "Karate Chop" is generally referred to in translation from the Japanese as a "Knife Hand Strike." Mas Oyama, a later master known for a particularly aggressive training philosophy does refer to the attack as a chop, though the group of techniques are still referred to as "sword hand" or "knife hand" strikes. It should be further noted that the English translation of Mas Oyama's work is dated 1978, years after the term was already in circulation.

[54] Breaking techniques are in fact entirely based on physics and are in many systems introduced in even the earliest rank tests.

***Essential Self Defense* by Adam Rapp (2007)**

The martial arts in Adam Rapp's play are a departure from how they are usually manifested in mainstream drama. *Essential Self Defense* is concerned primarily with the relationship of Sadie, a young woman, and Yul, an outcast whom she meets when he is employed as a human attack dummy at the Big Beatdown Self Defense Studio. Throughout the play we learn that children are disappearing, and that the townsfolk suspect Yul. The following stage direction opens the play:

> The encounter mat, which is a polyurethane rectangular wrestling mat. YUL is standing in the center, wearing a large suit of sponge. His hair is a mess and he looks as if he hasn't slept in years. He stares out at the audience. A loud industrial-sounding buzzer sounds and SADIE, thirty and small, enters in a fury. She wears sweats, headgear, and boxing

> gloves. Through an unseen bullhorn we hear the incantation "Take it back! Take it back! Take it back!" over and over again. SADIE begins using a series of pugilist-slash-martial arts combinations to attack YUL, who simply stands there and takes the beating.[55]

The first scene involves two more attack sequences, the third of which involve Sadie accidentally knocking out one of Yul's teeth.

Rapp states in the introduction to the published version of his play:

> *Essential Self Defense* started out as a lark. An ex-roommate was telling me how she had been in a women's self defense class in New York, in which she had to assault an attack dummy that was an actual man dressed in an enormous foam suit. My first question to her was, What does this man do? She told me that he simply stood there until he was put down. My second question was, Who would take a job like this? I imagined the late Andy Kaufman in some oversized Nerf costume. Theatrically, the image of a man wearing such a thing, being assaulted by a woman who intends to take him down, seemed like a great idea to jump-start a play. [56]

The "pugilist-slash-martial arts" movements happening in the self-defense studio are not the only incidents of violence in the play, but they are the only manifestations of martial arts[57]. Martial arts are relegated to the fantasy world of the self-defense studio, and do not come into play when Sadie faces actual violence. It should be noted that the suits created by Mark Morris, one of the founders of this method of training, do not leave any part of the head or face exposed and would make the inciting incident, the knocking out of an armored instructor's tooth, all but impossible.

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[55] Rapp, *Essential Self Defense*, 7.

[56] Ibid, ix.

[57] The armored assailant training that the play refers to has existed in some form or another since the 1970s, and was in part an outgrowth of the popularity of martial arts during that period. It was also a response to the realization that many martial arts training methods failed when practitioners encountered real life assaults due to the fact that they were unprepared for the effects of adrenaline. At its best, this method of training

In August 2010 I interviewed Joe Travers[58], the fight director of the premiere production of *Essential Self Defense* (and a former instructor of mine), about his participation in the production and the manifestation of martial arts on the stage in other contexts. He stated that the fights in the show were stylistically differentiated from each other, with the fights in the self-defense studio being played for comedy. The actress playing Sadie was put through what Travers referred to as "typical self defense moves," including a moment of throwing Yule to the ground. She was choreographed with starting and ending postures derived from martial arts, and was able to "embrace her own enjoyment of looking cool." According to Travers, the character was meant to appear "really into it and committed, but overdoing what she was doing," and "a little too Gung-Fu[59]." The actors were given the actual suit itself about halfway through rehearsal. In actuality it was "cushy but not dense" and could not be relied upon to protect the actor, though narratively it was meant to be very protective of the character wearing it.

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recreates assaults as realistically as is safely possible, allowing for adrenal stress conditioning, and is in fact one of the most effective methods of self defense training available.

[58] Phone interview conducted August 30, 2010

[59] Gung Fu is an alternate spelling/pronunciation of Kung Fu, which is the umbrella term commonly used for a wide variety of Chinese martial arts. The late Bruce Lee favored this Anglicization of the term.

This enjoyment of "looking cool" is a motivator of many performers who become stage combat enthusiasts. The simulation of poses and movements that signify physical power are often fun to perform, as is the illusion of tremendous personal physical agency. This, once more, is a simulacrum with only the most distant relationship to any real application of force to another human being. Security footage of actual altercations, even if the combatants are martial artists, will not likely yield images of anyone "looking cool." As artists and craftsmen of the theatre, fight directors working with these iconic postures and movements deal in the fantasy of violence as it drives narrative, not the reality of it.

As for the production process, Travers related that he had three or four visits in the rehearsal hall, followed by one tech and one dress rehearsal. The self-defense studio fights were not the only violence, and a considerable amount of time was spent on a more realistic knife fight that happens elsewhere in the play and does not require martial arts. The movements that take place in the studio do not appear elsewhere in the play.

The actors playing Yule and Sadie were good physical performers and were game for all manner of physical comedy. Much of the comedy was visual, the suit looked like the Michelin Man, while Sadie was in a bright colored sweat suit. The comedy of the scene came from how seriously the character took the martial arts. The more seriously she took her movements, the more ridiculous the figure in the armored suit became. She was overdoing everything and seeking precision while Yule was half hearted. It was possible to hit the suit itself but not to strike the face or head. The production team had to accept that strikes to the face or head would not look as if they were making contact, and there was no attempt at knaps.

Dramatically, the person in the self-defense studio was very different from the person outside of it. Those scenes were intended to create the relationship between Sadie and Yule, rather than to present any believable violence. What the play was attempting dramatically and what might happen in a self-defense class are very different things. Only Travers had any qualms about the scenes not having any clear relationship to authentic practices, but in his words, "When you are in a world with improvised karaoke, anything can happen."

Travers did not do any special research into armored assailant training for this production but instead drew from his experiences throughout his career. As an experienced fight director and director with high-level certifications from both the SAFD and FDC (Fight Directors Canada), he has had what he termed "short relationships" with several martial disciplines in order to expand his own choreographic palette. He stated that putting martial arts on stage tends to be about creating a specific vocabulary. He echoes many of his colleagues in stating that they are a tool to solve the conflict at hand and should always be in service to the story, and that all too often when martial arts are on stage, they are the main event rather than an element of dramatic context.

Further addressing his process and the use of martial arts in stage combat, Travers said that when directors ask for martial arts in a fight he needs to ask what they mean by that, and that he has the same policy with period sword fights. He stated that everyone has some context for martial arts from film, and that the larger question becomes whether the point of a scene is seeing a martial art in action or telling a story: "I didn't come to the theatre to see a cool move. I came to see a character in trouble."

Conclusion

These three plays serve as a sampling of work by mainstream authors that feature martial arts related stage violence. In this case they are all white men who include martial arts sequences as narrative devices that draw upon cultural expectations of the forms they are referencing. There are of course numerous other incidences of martial arts in mainstream plays, with the pattern of comic reversal of power remaining consistent textually. The production problem that such texts create is the necessity to safely replicate recognizable and culturally marked advanced fighting skills in a very short rehearsal period. Those fighting skills exist within the character, though not necessarily in the actor, and may be articulated on the stage in part by directing the recipient of the strikes or throws to react disproportionately.

In many cases, mainstream plays refer to a martial art that is especially culturally visible during the time of their writing. It is no accident that *Company* mentions Karate or that *Burn This* contains Aikido, as these arts were gaining visibility in the period when those plays were written. Likewise, it is no surprise that *Mr. Marmalade* contains Brazilian Jujutsu, as it was written during the recent upsurge in the popularity of that fighting system (*Mr. Marmalade* is described in the appendix). The cultural visibility of a martial art has as much or more to do with its media presence as it does with a proliferation of instructors. That media presence includes not only film, television, video games, and comic books, but also televised tournaments such as the UFC.

It is also noteworthy that the physical power dynamics of martial arts are treated differently by Asian-American writers. In these cases, such as the work of David Henry Hwang, Philip Gotanda, and Dan Kwong, martial arts are rarely given any special agency in terms of the application of force, though they are often symbols of cultural heritage. The power of a martial art as a signifier of culture tends to trump its power as a means of combat. It is not uncommon among Asian-Americans to enroll their children into martial arts schools as a means of strengthening their pride in their cultural identity. Thus, it is no surprise that these practices serve the same purposes in drama.[60] As this study is mostly concerned with martial arts as they apply to stage combat, I will not focus on these playwrights at this time, though it is important to acknowledge them.

When playwrights includes martial arts as a plot element they are tapping into cultural signifiers based on very old mythologies of the body that have been reimagined through the modern phenomenon of globalized martial arts instruction and distribution of mass media martial arts entertainments. Those signifiers must then be shaped by fight directors to then be mediated by the audience, who have entered the theatre already indoctrinated with what one might expect from a character who is the modern recipient of those skills. The cultural transaction is a complex one, and is in a constant state of flux as our images of impossible bodies engaging in these violent dances continues to change.

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[60] Interestingly, in the United States and Canada it does not always seem to be important that Asian-American children study a martial art that comes from their own country of origin, or even from an Asian instructor. What is important is that they come to embody within themselves a physicalization of Asian culture A prime example of this phenomenon on stage is the one-act *Little Dragon* by Chinese-Canadian playwright Keira Loughran, in which the Japanese art of Aikido is a central theme of the play and the means through which the protagonist comes to terms with her identity. Bruce Lee also serves an important function in this play.

Chapter 3

Samurai of the Scottish Play:

Pan Asian Rep's Revival of *Shogun Macbeth* and Ping Chong's *Throne of Blood*

The samurai have a powerful hold on the popular imagination, making them potent symbols when they appear onstage. As members of Japan's historical warrior class they were highly trained fighters adhering to *bushido*, a strict code of honor. The very appearance of a performer costumed as a samurai immediately puts a production into the context of feudal Japan. Furthermore, the very fact of being costumed as a samurai carries with it the signification that said character is trained in the classical Japanese warrior tradition, and that each and every movement made is dictated by said traditions. The actor of course, is unlikely to have gone through a lifetime of training in the Japanese martial arts of whatever period is being portrayed.

Samurai on stage refer not just to martial arts, but specific history. Because they were members of a specific segment of society trained in several weapons and fighting skills and bound by stringent codes of honor, any actor portraying a samurai on stage is *de facto* portraying a highly trained warrior that adheres to a code of conduct. As these are warrior characters, they are often ready to fight whenever their characters appear, whether or not a fight actually takes place. The level of readiness for combat can be communicated by the placement and handling of their swords. As different sword positions are more or less conducive to a quick drawing and deployment of the weapon, the very action of wearing or touching a sword is an instance of martial arts on stage. It is in fact arguable that the moment a samurai character appears onstage martial arts are in effect, regardless of the appearance of open physical conflict.

The martial art that focuses primarily on sword drawing is Iaijutsu, which is the parent form of the modern art of Iaido. In *Secrets of the Samurai: A Survey of the Martial Arts of Feudal Japan*, Oscar Ratti and Adele Westbrook describe Iaijutsu:

> The initial movement or drawing of the sword became a major art in its own right (iaijutsu). The art was based on instantaneous, coordinated speed in unsheathing the sword and delivering a searing and often fatal blow as a continuation of the unsheathing motion. Particularly suited to an armed encounter in the course of daily life, as opposed to combat on the battlefield where weapons were already unsheathed, iaijutsu could be employed without warning against an unwary opponent or against one or more adversaries preparing to attack.[61]

This widespread systematization of the instantaneous deployment of a sheathed sword to deadly effect appears to be unique to samurai culture. No equivalent techniques are emphasized in the sword manuals of Europe or the United States[62], and if there are systems in other parts of Asia they have not surfaced in the public awareness in the same way.[63] It is this element of lethality from the scabbard that is central to many aspects of etiquette surrounding the Japanese blade. The implied option of instantaneous lethal blows from a weapon that is technically at rest at any given moment is a central character element for any actor portraying a samurai. The potential for violence is constant for such characters, thus vigilance is (or should be) constant as well.

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[61] Ratti and Westbrook, *Secrets of the Samurai: A Survey of the Martial Arts of Feudal Japan*, 275-276.

[62] The United States Army has published several manuals on the use of the saber in military combat and drill both mounted and on foot. Some of these manuals are reprinted in *Swords and Sabers of the Armory at Springfield* by Burton A. Kellerstedt, a book which catalogues the collections and archives of the Springfield National Armory. While there are instructions on the proper drawing of the saber, they are not designed for instantaneous cutting in the manner of Iaijutsu.

Just as an actor costumed as a doctor carries the signifier of extensive training in saving lives, the actor attired as a warrior signifies training in taking them. The actor portraying a doctor, who will handle a stethoscope, scalpel, and other props while dressed in medical garb, perhaps will have done research or consulted with a dramaturg on how to handle said props and what some of the spoken terminology means in laymen's terms. Such actors are unlikely to have in fact completed a medical degree, yet if they are successful, an audience will suspend disbelief enough for them to perform "medical procedures" on the stage, some of which might in fact take high levels of physical skill when performed by actual physicians. Similarly, the actor playing a samurai will most likely wear a katana (or perhaps even daisho[64]), be costumed appropriately, and possibly even be armored. The actor will be expected to handle the sword and armor in ways that are referential to both the etiquette and pragmatics of such objects.

Armor changes one's center of gravity and often places limitations on mobility and sometimes range of vision. An actor wearing even the lightest replica of samurai armor will have to be trained in how to move while wearing it. Wearing armor on stage does not necessarily mean fighting in it. But it does mean that the actor wearing it, if the production team has done its work, can look as if he *could* fight in it. Similarly, the Japanese sword, in part because of the myriad ways it can be deployed to lethal effect directly from the scabbard nearly instantaneously, has very specific etiquette in terms of its handling. The side of the body on which the sword is worn has very specific meanings concerning the bearer's willingness toward and expectation of violence. The simple act of placing the sword on the right or left side can be a powerful indication of character intent whether or not violence actually takes place in the scene.

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[63] The nearest approximation would be modern police and military practices of training to fire handguns directly from the holster, which involves near instantaneous threat assessment and targeting (as opposed to aiming and firing a drawn weapon). Shooting from the holster is forbidden at many civilian ranges.

[64] A matched pair of swords that only the samurai could wear, typically portrayed as a pairing of a katana and wakizashi.

How the actors walk, bow, and otherwise carry themselves are also strong indications of membership in a warrior class and the skills inherent in that existence. These subtleties can create an illusion of advanced skill in a performer and make them inhabit the time and place the play is meant to be set in, with or without engaging in any fights. These details can often come from an informed fight director, may come from a dramaturg, and in some cases are created on stage by hiring a martial arts instructor to teach workshops on movement and weapons handling[65]. All together, these signifiers create the implication that the actor is capable of engaging in mortal combat at any instant with a great deal of skill, without necessarily ever having to display those skills in action. Arguably, an actor dressed in a modern *gi*[66] and wearing a black belt would also signify a high level of skill and training without having to demonstrate a single move.

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[65] As most widely practiced Japanese martial arts (with the notable exception of Japanese systems of Karate, which trace their lineage to Gichin Funakoshi, an Okinawan master who introduced the form to Japan in the 20th century) are descended from those practiced by the samurai, much of the movement and etiquette remains symbolic of their practices.

[66] Japanese and Okinawan martial arts uniform.

In his dissertation, *Reading the Fights: Toward a Semiotics of Staged Violence*, Aaron Anderson discusses the relationships between movement, power, and training:

> One of these concepts related to martial movement entails a romanticized empowerment relative to a displayed level of skill and training. Practiced martial movement is different than un-practiced martial movement insofar as the former implies a certain investment of time and training, while the latter can be a simple reaction to desperate circumstances. Practiced martial movement is often, in fact, described with the label "martial-art." Here, the term *art* in reference to movement qualifies the movement as specifically skilled or practiced. The time and training of practiced martial movement, in turn, implies a certain level of readiness for physical confrontation and is thus a type of empowerment through movement potential.[67]

The actor costumed as a samurai signifies a character with a strong movement potential. The entire history and mythology of Japanese warfare is signified in the costumes, props, and carriage of these performers. That history and mythology has made its way into the American popular imagination by way of several mediums.

Several key texts about the samurai are in mass circulation and continue to shape our understanding of them. Chief among these is *The Book of Five Rings* by Miyamoto Musashi (1584-1645) a treatise on swordsmanship and strategy by the most celebrated swordsman in Japanese history. This text is a favorite of both martial artists and businessmen and has been translated or adapted many times. Also very well known is

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[67] Anderson, *Reading the Fights: Toward a Semiotics of Staged Violence*, 98-99.

Yamamoto Tsunetomo's *Hagakure*, written in the early 1700s, an influential treatise on *Bushido* (the way of the warrior). This document gives us a detailed picture of the behavior samurai expected of themselves[68]. Also important are Issai Chozanshi's treatise on swordsmanship, *The Demon's Sermon on the Martial Arts*, and Yagyu Munenori's *The Sword and the Mind*.

Most Japanese martial arts practiced today descend in some way from those practiced by the samurai. This is especially true of the various styles of Kendo[69] and Iaido[70], that are centered around the Japanese sword. [71] Though only one of several types of Japanese sword, the katana has come to symbolize the samurai from the American popular perspective. Often referred to as simply a "samurai sword," this style of blade has become the dominant symbol of the Japanese warrior. Like any other sword, the katana requires a specific movement system (or in this case several families of movement systems) to facilitate its proper use.[72]

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[68] The *Hagakure* makes an important appearance in the 1999 film *Ghost Dog*, in which Forest Whitaker portrays an African-American hitman who sees himself as a samurai and uses the book as the foundation for his own moral code. While *Ghost Dog* was playing in theaters, copies of the *Hagakure* were sold with stickers on them proclaiming that this was in fact the book featured in the film.

[69] Kendo, often referred to as Japanese fencing, is a competitive form in which armored opponents strike each other with *shinai*, simulated swords constructed from strips of bamboo.

[70] Iaido is the art of drawing and cutting with the Japanese sword. Its current incarnation is much more meditative than its parent art of Iaijutsu. While students of Iaido must have some knowledge of Kendo (which in theory would encompass anything that occurs once the sword is drawn), the reverse is not true.

[71] It should be noted that there is a distinction between those Japanese martial arts that end with the suffix "Do" and those that end with "Jutsu." "Do" forms are designed to be spiritual practices that lead to enlightenment of some kind. They evolved during peaceful periods when the samurai were not in a constant state of war. Jutsu (or jitsu) forms are more invested in combatative application. There are several Dos and Justsus with the same prefix (Aikido/Aikijujitsu, Kendo/Kenjitsu, Iaido/Iaijitsu, etc) that coexist and apply different philosophical approaches to the same martial area.

This chapter will focus on two recent high profile productions in New York City wherein Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was adapted to take place in the context of a Japanese warrior society. The productions under examination are Pan Asian Repertory's 2007 revival of John R. Briggs' *Shogun Macbeth* and Ping Chong's stage adaptation of Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* with Oregon Shakespeare Festival that was remounted at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) in November 2010.

To provide further context for the Japanese sword in stage combat, this study will include an account of a workshop held at Combat Inc. in New York City on January 25, 2009 wherein stage combat practitioners had the opportunity to train in Japanese swordsmanship with Senesi Sang Kim, an advanced Toyama Ryu Batto Jutsu[73] instructor. The goals and methods of that workshop in the context of popular portrayals of the katana on stage and screen and the quest for authenticity in a discipline of simulation are illustrative of the attitudes of many people in the stage combat community towards martial arts. As there is some overlap between the communities of stage combat specialists and martial artists the moments where they intersect reveal the distances between the simulation and the simulated, as I will now explicate.

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[72] The condition of movement systems evolving alongside weapons is not unique to the katana. There is a specific movement system for the Olympic style fencing foil, which differs from the sabre or epee, which in turn are far removed from the rapiers of the Italian renaissance or the two handed swords of medieval Germany.

[73] Toyama Ryu Batto Jutsu is a Japanese sword art first developed in the late 1800's to train the Japanese military. It was distilled from the knowledge of the sword masters practicing at the time and then later refined and developed. It should be noted that this was a fighting system that was taught with the intention of being used in combat as the Japanese did in fact issue katana to officers in WWII.

The topic of samurai adaptations of *Macbeth*, including Pan Asian Rep's original production of *Shogun Macbeth*, were the subject of a chapter of Robert Dillon's 1989 dissertation, *Towards a Theatrical Hoplology: An Approach to Staging, Performance, and Critical Theory for Weapons Play in the Theatre*. Dillon's work provides a starting point for some areas of discussion, particularly in his documentation of the original production of *Shogun Macbeth*, though his study is founded on a completely different theoretical framework from my own. He primarily is concerned with explaining the culture, techniques, and fighting styles of the samurai along with an analysis of the Shakespearian text and its suitability for adaptation into a feudal Japanese setting:

> Three productions, all firmly entrenched in hoplogical sensibility and theatrical fitness, lifted *Macbeth* from eleventh-century Scotland and re-set it in Japan. This startling change in *mis-en-scene* was motivated in part by a desire to find a new environment which would firmly contain the central motif of warfare coloring *Macbeth*. Since warfare is almost a cultural tradition in Japan, no more appropriate world exists.[74]

The three productions described are the original staging of John Briggs' *Shogun Macbeth* by Pan Asian Rep in 1986, Akira Kurosawa's film, *Throne of Blood*, and the Wooster Group's *Kabuki Macbeth* in 1981. Dillon's study is most concerned with why such adaptations were successful.

This chapter will focus not on why one might put samurai and ninja onstage, but how it has been successfully accomplished and what movement elements account for performers having their characters recognizable as feudal Japanese warriors. It is, however, useful to revisit Dillon's study as he provides a strong framework from which such adaptations might be approached aesthetically before we even begin to discuss the movement:

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[74] Dillon, *Towards a Theatrical Hoplology: An Approach to Staging, Performance, and Critical Theory for Weapons Play in the Theatre*, 126.

> The world of *Macbeth* and *Shogun Macbeth* are essentially the same worlds. A hoplology of the Renaissance and a hoplology of Japan share a common spirit. Manhood and martial accomplishment went hand in hand, and violence was common in both cultures, particularly during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. *Shogun Macbeth* is itself an invocation of a military title – besides being a familiar term to American's who made the television mini-series *Shogun* and the novel of the same name popular hits.[75]

Dillon is of a school of stage combat scholars that valorizes authenticity in their stage reproductions. His project is as much a history and explication of traditional Japanese martial arts as it is about their stage presentation. My own theoretical framework regarding stage combat (as explained in my chapter on semiotics) is that it is a language of symbols that represents what audiences might believe is a violent altercation. This is further complicated by recent studies on martial arts and self-defense that argue quite persuasively that there is in fact a disconnect between most martial arts training and actual incidences of violence. Basing stage choreography on martial arts practice in the interest of creating "realistic" violence instead becomes a simulation of a simulation.

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[75] Ibid, 134.

In his book, *Meditations On Violence: A Comparison of Martial Arts Training and Real World Violence*, Rory Miller[76] discusses what he refers to as "the flaw in the drill" within martial arts training:

> In the end, a martial artist is training to injure, cripple, or kill another human being. In any drill where students are not regularly hospitalized, there is a DELIBERATE flaw, a deliberate break from the needs of reality introduced in the name of safety. In every drill you teach, you must consciously know what the flaw is and make your students aware of it.
>
> Let me be clear. There is no way to exactly replicate breaking people without breaking them, and a large part of the history of martial arts has been in finding safe ways to approximate that action.[77]

Taking into account the impossibility of accurately simulating life-threatening techniques in martial arts, any stage combat built around martial arts would be even farther from actual violence, as, in addition to replicating the deliberate safety features of martial arts, the additional safeguards demanded of the stage would have a higher priority than martial authenticity. Storytelling would also take precedence over realism, for even if a character does fall victim to a lethal cut on the stage, it must happen in a way that the audience can follow. Considering that he was not involved in professional entertainment in any way when he wrote *Meditations on Violence*, Miller shows an astute grasp of the filmmaker's craft when designing fight scenes:

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[76] It is worth briefly summarizing Rory Miller's background in regards to martial arts and violence: in addition to being a high ranking martial artist, he is a former veteran corrections officer and CERT team member (CERT being the correctional equivalent of SWAT), and he teaches and designs courses in use of force and defensive tactics for police, military, and civilians, and is a highly regarded security consultant. Also worth noting is that he has a background in psychology and biology.

[77] Miller, *Meditations On Violence: A Comparison of Martial Arts Training and Real World Violence*, 171.

> Each piece of a well-choreographed movie fight scene is designed to entertain you. The distancing lets the techniques show to the best effect. The timing is designed for drama, rhythm, and pacing, not for finishing things. The choice of technique showcases the actor's flexibility.[78]

Miller, a self-defense expert concerned with adapting traditional martial arts to serve contemporary needs, discusses misconceptions of violence created by fight directors. In the context of Miller's study and those like him, Dillon's assertion that fight directors should strive for accuracy in presenting martial arts becomes problematic. In the case of presenting samurai, are American producers and fight directors referring to historical warriors? Modern martial traditions descended from those warriors? Media images? Or some combination of these factors?

Perhaps most important in shaping the image of the samurai in the popular imagination are Japanese films. The influence of Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998) on the development of modern cinema would be difficult to overstate. As one of the most important filmmakers of all time counted several samurai films among his masterpieces[79], his work is a reference point for popular understanding how the samurai lived, fought, and died. Kurosawa's samurai were gritty, so when they engaged in combat it was not presented in the crisp rhythms of Hong Kong cinema (though did influence that genre as well). As *Throne of Blood*, Kurosawa's adaptation of *Macbeth,* is influential to both of the productions that this chapter focuses on, it is worth taking a moment for a brief discussion of the film. It is important to understand the film as an adaptation of the Shakespeare rather than a mere transposition of the action from Scotland to Japan. In her notes on creating new subtitles for the Criterion Collection edition, Linda Hoaglund writes:

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[78] Ibid, 29.

[79] Aside from *Throne of Blood* (1957), notable samurai films by Kurosawa include: *Ran* (1985)*, Rashomon* (1950)*, Seven Samurai* (1954)*,* and *Yojimbo* (1961).

> *Throne of Blood* is Kurosawa's brilliant adaptation of *Macbeth*, and though his screenplay is clearly based on Shakespeare's "Scottish Play," script supervisor Nogami Teruyo recalls that the director never consulted that text while shaping his adaptation of it to the conventions of Japanese Noh drama. Instead, he reconceived the story within Japan's organic linguistic and dramatic traditions.[80] (14)

Because this film influences stage adaptations, it is important to acknowledge the Noh influences as much as the Elizabethan sources. Also noteworthy is the narrative distance created by applying stylistic shifts as transitions within scenes, Alain Silver comments on this technique in *The Samurai Film*:

> Kurosawa erects a dynamic historical distance around his characters, as he shifts from a convention of realistic action to a much more ritualized one, from the "present" perspective of the *kabuki*-like chant of the first scene to the to the "long-ago" past time of the main narrative, without a cut, as the first messenger's horse parts the mist.[81]

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[80] Hoagland, "Notes on Subtitling Japanese Films," Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*, 14.

[81] Silver, *The Samurai Film*, 56.

This narrative shift makes for a smoother acceptance of supernatural action in the plot (the appearance of the androgynous sorcerer being another manifestation of the impossible body), while also creating an aesthetically pleasing visual transition that guides the spectators' awareness to the next scene.

It is beyond the scope of this study to catalogue Kurosawa's many contributions to the art of cinema, though the theatre productions examined in this chapter serve as examples of how his films reflected back onto the stage.

Pan Asian Rep's *Shogun Macbeth*

Pan Asian Repertory's 2008 revival of *Shogun Macbeth* was regarded by some critics to be as much a staging of Kurosawa as it was of Shakespeare:

> *Shogun Macbeth* transposes Shakespeare's "Scottish play" to samurai-ruled Japan. It's an idea clearly inspired by Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*, a 1957 film loosely based on *Macbeth* and also set in medieval Japan.
>
> Playwright John R. Briggs doesn't just copy Kurosawa. He goes several steps further. Briggs stays truer to his source material, and he ups the theatrical ante. The result is a play that's essentially Shakespeare's text with some name changes and a few new characters. Not scintillating on its own, perhaps, but breathtaking when infused with the Japanese theatrical traditions of Noh and Kyogen. And Pan Asian Repertory's current revival of *Shogun Macbeth* is breathtaking indeed.[82]

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[82] Heather J. Violanti, nytheatre.com review, November 9, 2008

Critics also consistently noted the fight direction of this production, for example, this statement from the *New York Post* review:

> But at its best, such as the sleepwalking scene in which Fujin[83] MacBeth (Rosanne Ma) incorporates stylized Japanese rituals into her monologue, or the elaborately choreographed fight scenes that incorporate martial arts into the mix, "Shogun Macbeth" delivers on its intention to offer a new way of looking at this oft-told tale.[84] (NYP)

It is ironic that *Shogun Macbeth* was described as a staging of Kurosawa just a few years before an actual stage adaptation of *Throne of Blood* came to New York (with one overlapping cast member), but perhaps the comparisons to Kurosawa were inescapable due to the film's stature.

In researching this chapter, I attended a rehearsal[85] and two performances, one of which was an early preview[86] and the other which included a specific stage combat talkback and reception with New York SAFD representatives[87]. Interviews included fight director Mike Chin, director Ernest Abuba, artistic director Tisa Chang, Calvin Ahn (MacDuff/fight captain) and Sascha Iskra (Lady MacDuff). It is noteworthy that Mike Chin and Ernest Abuba were both in the original Pan Asian Rep production in 1986 that was fight directed by David Leong, with Abuba playing the title character. The rehearsal I attended was in part preparation for a promotional performance at the New York Anime

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[83] In the context of the play "Fujin" is equivalent to "Lady."
[84] Scheck, Frank, "Double, Double Toil and Trouble in Japan," *New York Post*, November 17, 2008.
[85] I attended the September 22, 2008 rehearsal, during which the bulk of my interviews regarding this production took place.
[86] Preview performance: November 5, 2008.
[87] Stage combat night: November 20, 2008.

Festival[88]. At this rehearsal I witnessed Chin create a stand-alone samurai fight with strong elements of Iaijutsu specifically for the NYAF event and also work on the kata[89] that opens the play. These two combat elements, along with one of the *Yojo* sequences, were going to be performed at the festival out of context of the rest of the play.[90]

The NYAF fight is of special interest because as a self-contained piece of physical theatre it is clearly illustrative of stylized combat being used to tell a coherent story through movement simulating both advanced fighting skills and the traditions surrounding them by actors who themselves are advanced stage combatants choreographed by a Fight Master[91]. The following description is recreated from my own notes as well as various fan videos of the performance itself.

The fight opens with one actor (whom I shall for the sake of clarity identify as the hero both because of his eventual victory and because he is attacked first by two assailants) sitting on one end of the stage. Two men approach him, one obviously senior in rank to the other (I shall identify these as villain and apprentice). The newcomers stop, and all three bow, the hero from *seiza* (kneeling) and the other two standing. The bows are shallow and eye contact is maintained, implying lack of trust. All three have their swords on their left side, meaning that they are ready to fight. After the bow the villain and apprentice slowly and simultaneously sit, the villain directly in front of the hero on the opposite side of the space, the apprentice creating a triangle sitting equidistant from them on the hero's right.

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[88] The New York Anime Festival, or NYAF, is an annual convention celebrating Japanese popular culture, particularly animation. As fantasies of martial arts are common in anime, promoting *Shogun Macbeth* with stage combat at this event was an astute marketing move.

[89] In the context of martial arts, kata are preset sequences that constitute both a library of technique as well as a means of teaching and disseminating said technique. Depending on the art form in question they may be solo forms or done in pairs. They are also considered to be a form of moving meditation. Each moment in the kata, down to the movement of the eyes, is dictated by the specific martial tradition it belongs in. There are several kata that exist in more than one style (such as the Naihanchi sequences in Okinawan Karate, called Tekki in Japanese traditions), and these forms are obviously related with the differences existing in the details of their performance.

[90] The segments performed at NYAF were filmed by attendees and posted on the video sharing website YouTube.

[91] Fight Master is the highest rank granted by the Society of American Fight Directors. There are currently only seventeen holding that rank.

The apprentice removes his sword, and places it, still in the *saya*, or scabbard, directly in front of himself. After the apprentice withdraws his hand from the sword, the hero and villain simultaneously remove their own swords, also placing them in front of themselves. This is done slowly and while watching each other closely. Withdrawal of their hands is also slow, and they almost mirror each other. The placement of the sword in front of the fighters in this context is an intermediate level of truce. Though the weapons can be retrieved quickly, the instantaneous deployment possible with a sword worn on the left side is no longer a tactical option.[92]

The villain then looks to his apprentice and signals to him with his head. The apprentice looks at the hero, who is watching this exchange. The apprentice is hesitant, and the villain insists, wordlessly. The apprentice shifts his focus to the hero, takes his sheathed weapon, and places it at his right side, close to his body. This is a deliberate position of disadvantage, and deployment of the sword from that position would be even more delayed. It is also a sign of respect toward whomever one is dealing with. The villain looks to his apprentice again and signals. The apprentice is unhappy with his instruction, but moves his own sword even further to the right, then quickly returns to the formal kneeling position.

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[92] As the katana is wielded primarily with the right hand and is a long weapon, it can be deployed with great speed from the left side, but is be awkward to draw from the right.

At this point not a single blow has been struck, nor has an explicit threat been made, yet Chin has already established a semiotics of danger between all three characters as well as hierarchy and a sense of adherence to shared tradition-- all of this without a single word being spoken. We as the audience know that there are two sides being represented by three characters, that those characters share the same code of conduct, and that not all of the characters represent the same level of threat to each other.

Once the apprentice has returned to his sitting position, the hero and villain both reach for their own swords very slowly with both hands, again maintaining eye contact and moving simultaneously. They begin to move the swords to their right sides, presumably to complete the conditions necessary for a full truce. It is as the swords are just about to touch the ground that the villain draws his blade and begins to attack the hero. There is a moment when the hero has in fact dropped his own sword and has to retrieve it while under attack.

The narrative sequence of the preceding events makes it clear that this attack is a breach of protocol and ethics. Having the conditions of the truce be physically obvious and the disarmament happen in slow stages reinforces the idea that either party can quickly attack the other unless they deliberately place their own swords in disadvantageous positions, as well as lends both greater danger and greater betrayal to the villain's initial assault. In composition, Chin carefully crafted the truce conditions, giving special care to the moment the apprentice was required to move his sword even further to the right.

The villain's first cuts are performed while still low to the ground; he moves to the hero while still on his knees, and cuts sideways. This attack follows the principles of

Iaijustu in that the cut comes directly from the movement of unsheathing the sword. This also highlights the level of danger inherent in even the sheathed katana when in skilled hands. The hero leans back to dodge the blow and retrieves his own katana, which is still in the *saya*. The villain stands and cuts downwards, and the hero rises and beats away the attack on his way up with his sheathed sword (which in this context essentially functions as a stick). The apprentice has not yet risen at this point and is retrieving his own weapon. The actors are now vocalizing as they fight, though there is no verbal dialogue at any time in this scene.

The villain is forced back for a moment by a thrust from the sheathed weapon as the apprentice rises, weapon drawn. The hero kicks the apprentice in the chest, forcing him back, then draws his own sword and faces his attackers with his katana in his right hand in a low guard and his scabbard held left handed over his head confronting the villain in what might be called a modified parry of five[93].

The next phase of Chin's choreography involves the villain attacking the hero with running downward slash using both hands. The hero deflects the attack and discards his *saya*, taking his own sword in both hands and essentially switching places with the villain. The apprentice attacks next, with a series of spinning cuts that are deflected, and then followed once more by the villain, with the hero once more switching spots with his attacker.

There is a pause wherein all three face off. This allows the actors to collect themselves before the next phase and make any necessary adjustments and/or signals to

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[93] The number five parry in Western fencing systems consists of the sword being held over one's head with the blade parallel to the floor and is meant to protect the head against downward blows.

each other. This also allows the audience both the opportunity to process what has just happened and prepare for the next segment, and raises the dramatic tension as any pretense of truce between these characters is now gone and forgotten.

The spatial arrangement between actor-combatants is a constantly shifting triangle. This allows for a clear perspective of the scene from any angle, and also allows for the simulation of tactics wherein the outnumbered party attempts to keep his attackers in view while the attackers attempt to flank their intended victim. As the exhibition is taking place on a relatively small platform (and was rehearsed with this is mind), this also optimizes the use of the space.

All that has been described thus far has taken roughly a minute, with the bulk of that time being the silent negotiation of the false truce. The majority of the blows, parries, and evasions have been nearly identical to SAFD recognized broadsword techniques. The differences at this juncture have been in the postures and the use of the *saya* and the quick draw techniques. Of course, the context created by the prelude to the violence as well as the costumes also set the scene. However, on a technical level, the blows themselves were not so different than broadsword technique.

The next phase however, marks more of a departure. The hero shifts his guard to the *jodan no kamae* position, in which the sword is held nearly straight up, while the villain shifts his guard to reinforcing his sword by placing his hand under the blade, which is now held at a forty-five degree angle with the point down. The apprentice is in the *hasso no kamae* position[94], with the sword held alongside his shoulder facing upwards. While this last position exists in non-Japanese fighting systems as well, its use in this context is clearly a reference to the martial art being simulated. The hero's guard is designed to create the opportunity for a powerful downward strike and is a very aggressive posture with a visual profile unlike those to which an American audience is accustomed. After a brief circular movement by all three, the hero slashes at the villain, who evades, then continues his offensive with a thrust at the apprentice, who parries. The villain attempts to take advantage of the hero's position focused on the other end of the choreographic triangle and slashes at his head. The hero ducks, performs a forward roll, then while still kneeling puts up a reinforced parry of five to protect his head from a downward slash from the apprentice that is coming from behind him. This last parry is an example of nearly unrealistic skill, as he is parrying a blow that comes from completely outside his line of sight without making any indication of seeing it coming. While in reality it is possible that a combatant might see shadows or reflections or possibly hear the attack coming[95], it is not likely. In this particular moment the hero is not articulating the possession of an impossible body so much as a highly improbable one. The mechanics of this attack and parry from the perspective of stage combat involve the defender parrying as the cue for the attack. Well rehearsed and skilled performers can do this smoothly enough to create a credible illusion. That parry ends this phrase of the fight, and the hero rises to face his attackers again.

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[94] This position has become iconic from its use in the *Star Wars* films as lightsaber guard position. The lightsaber fights in *Star Wars* were based on Kendo.

In the next segment of the fight the hero exchanges a brief sequence of attacks and parries with the villain while the apprentice hangs back. This is slower and their movements suggest that they are measuring each other, also that the conflict is primarily between the hero and villain. As the ambush and exchanges that followed do not result in any fatalities, it is clear to the audience (and the characters) that the hero is a superior swordsman, having successfully held off a dishonorable surprise attack and held his own against two attackers.

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[95] Hearing the attack is particularly unlikely as one of the effects of adrenaline is auditory exclusion.

The villain attacks again with a shout, and there is a short exchange wherein the apprentice has several blows aimed at him by the hero. There is one technique of special note in this section: while the hero is focused on the apprentice, the villain approaches from behind and is warded off by the hero (who at that moment is holding his katana with only his right hand), twisting his wrist so as to point the weapon behind him and delivering a quick thrust before twisting it back to point where he is facing. There is a short pause following this sequence wherein the three face off, and then a clear change in strategy by the hero. It is at this point in the fight that the hero concentrates his counter-offensive on the apprentice, who has been clearly marked as the lesser threat. The villain attempts to intervene and his blows are warded off, and the hero dispatches his lesser enemy in short order, as he is far overmatched. The villain then attacks with a shout and a powerful downwards cut, which the hero parries while making a diagonal motion[96] that places him essentially behind the villain (who has not yet exhausted his forward momentum) and strikes him down.

As the hero looks at his fallen enemies, he holds his katana in front of him and slaps his own forearm, which transmits a strong shake to the blade. This motion is called *chiburi*, and signifies shaking blood off of the blade. Various methods of performing

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[96] Such motions are known as *tai sabaki* in martial arts that use Japanese terminology (including Okinawan Karate). The concept is at play constantly in the fight described, and involves using full body motion to avoid attacks and position oneself for counter-offensive actions.

chiburi are included in Iaido curricula. Had he not thrown his *saya* away during the conflict, the next movement would likely have been to sheath the sword.

This fight encapsulated many themes inherent in *Shogun Macbeth*: honor, betrayal, loyalty, adherence to the traditions of a warrior culture, and skill at arms and superior tactics being the final determination of who lives and dies. A complete story was told that was clearly set in a specific cultural context and the simulation of advanced sword skills was very successful. That said, these performers were chosen for this performance specifically for their skill in stage combat and did not have to be taught basic principles and movements, but rather, Chin was able to jump right into directing the action. The simulated martial arts were as much part of the world of the play as the set and costumes.

The concepts of Iaijutsu and Kenjutsu as displayed in the promotional fight are primary factors in character behavior of anyone portraying a samurai in this context. In fact, the presence of this particular aspect of swordplay heightens the level of danger that the characters are in, as a surprise attack can come at any time from anyone carrying a sword. Ratti and Westbrook discuss this at some length:

> The use of Iaijutsu in this context against an opponent who had not yet drawn his own weapon from its scabbard often lent a certain air of disrepute to the art, however. The adjective “treacherous” crops up frequently in many records, and in numerous instances where Iaijutsu was used (or , rather, misused), this characterization would seem to have been justified. Many a warrior and scores of unsuspecting *heimin* (regardless of sex or age) fell beneath a sudden arc of steel slashing through the air either

> to take professional advantage of the possibility of tactical surprise when facing the possibility of a potentially dangerous opponent – or merely to test the edge of a katana on a human body… [97]

In the context of adaptations of *Macbeth*, where betrayal and assassination are constants, the inclusion of this art is a powerful choice. Also powerful is the choice not to romanticize the earlier incarnation of what has today become a form of moving mediation. Don Draeger, one of the most eminent and prolific historians of martial arts, describes Iaijustsu very differently:

> *Iai-jutsu*, or sword-drawing art, made it possible for the bushi to develop the power to triumph over mere violence. This art is essentially a defensive one, dealing as it does with methods of using a sword that must be drawn from a position of rest inside its scabbard. The technical rationale of iai-justsu permits the swordsman to respond to situations imposed upon him by an aggressor.[98]

This much more romantic view of an art built around the effective rapid deployment of a deadly weapon from a position of rest implies an ethical standard not quite present in *Macbeth*.

One problem that must be dealt with in creating simulations of Iaijutsu is that the audience must be able to track movements and intentions that the characters themselves are trying to hide. Simulating an ambush of this nature includes the element of making visible to an audience what is meant to be unseen. Composition of narrative is the fight director's primary concern (after safety). Aaron Anderson writes, "Martial movements that are intended to be seen are necessarily designed to be expressive in some way." (98). There is a choreographic art in making what is meant to be invisible or deceptive to a character visible and clear to an audience.

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[97] Ratti and Westbrook, *Secrets of the Samurai: A Survey of the Martial Arts of Feudal Japan*, 276.

[98] Dreager, *The Martial Arts and Ways of Japan: Volume One: Classical Bujutsu*, 69.

Unlike portrayals of martial arts in other theatrical contexts, their use in *Shogun Macbeth* is a matter of stylistic consistency and not a story device meant to shift a balance of power between characters. Everyone on stage fights within the same stylistic context, and that style is influenced by the arts of the samurai. In discussion, Mike Chin stated that a character performing martial arts on stage is a character who is trained. As the training they display is not something the average person possesses, by displaying that training, the message is sent that "this person is not average" (Chin). While that statement is useful in examining manifestations of martial arts in any play or production, it makes sense that this play, where nearly every character is a member of a warrior society, should be populated by characters who are "not average." There are layers of reality at play here. The actors' training in simulated violence and their consistent adherence to what stands for the prescribed behaviors of a historical warrior class signifies the characters' training in very lethal practices and their membership in a warrior society.

The play opens with the entire cast performing an Iaido based kata with their katana. The kata is called for in the script, and in this production serves to set the tone and style of the movement for the entire play. This device also immediately calls into focus the centrality of the sword in the culture of the play. Tisa Chang said that the martial arts are in fact part of the "Japaneseness" of the whole production. Cultural cues must be in place in and around the fighting. Handling of swords is an important cultural signifier. Consistent proper handling of swords is also an aspect of Japanese sword arts and a manifestation of martial arts and martial skill while open physical conflict is not happening. One of the effects of this is the creation of the mood of constant alertness and readiness for combat, a trademark of the bushi classes. In the performance, the swords are very much "alive" as props.

The kata that opens the play illustrates several cuts and thrusts that the curved blade of the Japanese sword is particularly well suited for, and establishes the style of the fights from the very start. The Samuel French edition of the play contains notation for the kata, but I do not believe that this production adhered strictly to that notation. The cast does begin from a kneeling position and opens the sequence with a speed draw, and then what follows are a sequence of cuts, thrusts, parries, and spins occurring on right angles to each other (which is not uncharacteristic of Japanese kata), but that are obviously adjusted for maximum visibility on a proscenium stage (at no point do the actors face upstage). The kata ends with a flourishing *chiburi* before the katana are returned to the *saya*.

One fight that was particularly memorable took place between Fujin MacDuff and several ninja[99]. This was made more pronounced in this production as the actress, Sascha Iskra, was proficient in stage combat and martial arts. Fujin MacDuff fights an intense but losing battle using a staff against several ninja, which highlights the concept that these characters were all living within a warrior society. Though she proves to be a dangerous fighter, in the end it is the fact that she is outnumbered that ends the fight and that character's life. The presence of ninja in this play fill in another aspect of the cultural context of this adaptation. There are several conflicting descriptions of ninja available. What most sources agree upon is that they were professional spies and assassins of a different class than the bushi or samurai, often belonging to specific clans, and that they were spies and assassins for hire. Since the 1980s, ninja have a strong presence in today's popular culture, perhaps even stronger than the samurai. The main trait of the ninja is stealth, though they are also recorded as being proficient fighters in their own right. Stephen Hayes, the only American to have reached the rank of *shidoshi* (teacher) in Togakure-Ryu Ninjutsu, decribes the ninja as follows in his book, *The Ninja and Their Secret Fighting Art*:

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[99] For the purposes of this study, I use the term "ninja" (pl) to designate these types of spies and assassins in or derived from their traditional Japanese context, whereas "ninjas" refer to the popular culture manifestations divorced from context.

> Ninjutsu flourished amid the civil turmoil of if the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries. During this period the art was refined into a deadly science, incorporating sophisticated techniques for warfare, intelligence gathering, and spiritual development. When the odds were unfavorable or dishonor threatened, the ninja could be hired to bring victory and restore the harmony of society through espionage or assassination.[100]

This is of course a very positive spin on assassins for hire, and other sources paint a far less honorable picture. That Fujin MacDuff could hold her own against several ninja before finally being taken down says quite a bit about the way this character was portrayed.

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[100] Hayes, *The Ninja and Their Secret Fighting Art*, 15.

Mike Chin's fights were highly effective in this production. They were dynamic, visually and dramatically engaging, and in service to the development of the story at all times. There was also a stylistic consistency about the violence and handling of weapons that made them one of the foundations that supported the overall aesthetic of the production. Chin was aided in part by the fact that Pan Asian Rep prioritized the combat to the extent that it was a major factor in the audition process, thus ensuring that he would be able to make the most of his time with the performers. Though he is not a student of the Japanese martial arts himself, Chin is adept at Chinese Long Fist Kung Fu and had done considerable research for this production. While much of what the actors did fit well within the SAFD broadsword curriculum[101], what differentiated their fights from those that might be set in a Scottish context (other than the weapons themselves) was their use of stance and rhythm. To make an analogy with vocal work, they fought with an accent. The place where that accent was most pronounced was in the guard positions. There was much use of the *jodan no kamae*, or high guard position, in which the sword is held above the head with only a slight tilt back. In martial practice, this posture sacrifices protection in order to enable initiative for powerful attacks. On the stage, it is different enough from any popular Western positions to be "recognized" as a Japanese form.[102] As sword guard positions are somewhat iconic, deviation from norms is noticeable. If we take the Western broadsword (or at least its manifestation on stage and screen, since the term "broadsword" can cover an array of weapons) as our point of reference, then the visual profile of a performer holding a Japanese style sword in a high guard position is instantly "recognizable" as belonging to a separate set of skills.

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[101] I should point out that Mr. Chin was my instructor during my own SAFD broadsword training.

[102] While the Fifteenth Century master of arms Hans Talhoffer does have a similar guard position for the broadsword in his 1467 *Fechtbuch* (a popular resource for modern fight directors), no similar guards for the broadsword appear in the popular contemporary stage combat manuals by Jonathan Howell, Richard Lane, or Keith Ducklin and John Waller.

Chin's background in Chinese martial arts was not unapparent to the trained eye. There was a moment between Macbeth and Fujin Macbeth where she attempted to strike him and he responded with movement very reminiscent of Chinese Wing Chun Kung Fu. My companion for one of the performances I attended was Jennifer Goodlander[103], a specialist in Asian theatre and a fellow martial artist. She observed that the fights had elements of Beijing Opera in their execution. As the cast came from several different movement backgrounds, this should not too surprising. The popular images of martial arts come from Hong Kong cinema, which in turn was influenced by Beijing Opera. The rhythms of fights meant to portray martial arts in action could not help but be influenced from that quarter. As far as composition in the rehearsal room goes, Chin stated that he does not come in with preset choreography. He observes what actors are capable of and composes from there (I share this practice in my own work). The cast represents a wide range of movement disciplines which form an extensive palette for Chin to choreograph from.

Shogun Macbeth successfully used martial arts as one of the main elements building the world of the play. Particularly effective were the elements of samurai culture surrounding the treatment of swords both in and out of combat.[104]

Ping Chong's *Throne of Blood*

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[103] Currently Assistant Professor at the University of Kentucky.

[104] The director, Earnest Abuba, pointed out at a talkback that the katana in *Shogun Macbeth* were in fact anachronistic. The production was set in the Twelfth Century while katana did not appear until the Fifteenth Century.

Ping Chong's *Throne of Blood* was an unusual venture in that it was a stage adaptation of a film adaptation of a Shakespearian tragedy: in this case, Kurosawa's adaptation of *Macbeth*.

Ping Chong and Company was founded in 1975 as a non-profit experimental arts organization dedicated to exploring Ping Chong's aesthetic. They are largely concerned with multi-disciplinary explorations of race and culture in modern society. Their work often includes multi-media elements, as well as strong physical theatre elements. They are a highly regarded company that regularly performs around the world at major venues and festivals. *Throne of Blood* was originally produced at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and was later moved to BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music).

During an artist talk at BAM that preceded the performance I attended, Ping Chong stated that this was the first production in which he had ever worked with a fight director. This production worked not just with a fight director, John Sipes, but with a high ranking Aikido instructor, Shihan[105] Darrell Bluhm, as well, credited in the program as the Movement Consultant (a function he serves regularly for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival).

The purpose of the Aikido instructor was not so much to work on the fights, but rather to instruct the cast in movement and postures that were deemed appropriate for samurai characters, which supports the idea that the very presence of a samurai character on the stage is symbolic of martial arts whether or not they are fighting. As the majority of performers onstage at any given time were portraying samurai, there was a strong martial arts flavor even when violence was not being performed. The majority of the performers were not Asian, though one performer did overlap with *Shogun Macbeth*.

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[105] Master Instructor

Bluhm described his application of Aikido to me in an email dated November 17, 2010, as follows:

> The response to your question regarding how much Aikido technique was included in the show is - virtually none. I was primarily involved in trying to give the cast a sense of the physical qualities essential to Samurai culture, to understand the importance of stillness (poised for movement) and the centralization of movement in the "hara" or "tanden, especially in the transitions from standing to sitting and other basic actions such as walking and running.
>
> I also practice and teach Iaido (the art of drawing and cutting with a "katana") which was incorporated into much of the show, as you may have noticed.[106]

Hara and *tanden* are Japanese terms for the body's center of gravity. Japanese martial arts place tremendous focus on how this center of gravity is controlled and utilized. The concept of being poised for action is central in Iaido, and was rightly considered a matter of life or death in its parent art, Iaijutsu. At the BAM artist discussion with Ping Chong that I attended prior to the November 11, 2010 performance, he discussed how Bluhm changed the way the ensemble moved. He declared that it was an impossibility to assimilate another culture in a six week rehearsal process, though he also said that "adaptation is really reinvention" and did not seem troubled by any concerns about authenticity. The hiring of an Aikido instructor in and of itself is already a historiographical problem as Aikido did not coexist with samurai. Artists are concerned with effectiveness more than accuracy, so historical consistency is not a decisive factor. Ian Buruma, the discussion facilitator, declared that the samurai genre itself "takes place in some vague nameless past," a position which by nature makes consistency far more important than the impossibility of accuracy.

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[106] Bluhm, personal communication.

The actual violence is highly abstracted; for example, when the guards are killed, the Macbeth character faces outwards towards the audience, does a cut in the air, and the guard has a red special shine on him as he falls. This is repeated for each guard. The cut itself was a large swipe with the sword very similar to the types of cuts used in katana cutting demonstrations.[107] As this is not conventional stage combat, the mystique of the Japanese sword and of the samurai wielding it is not under any danger by comparison to martial arts films. Ping Chong discusses the differences between theatre and film in an article by Alan Lockwood in the November 2010 edition of *The Brooklyn Rail*:

> "*Throne* came from a theater sensibility," Chong said. Kurosawa had directed theater productions in the late 1940s; in 1957, when *Throne* was made, he also filmed *The Lower Depths*, from the Gorky script, with a powerful ensemble warrened into a set as contained as any stage. "With that said, *Throne* is a film and there are things you can't do on stage that

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[107] Cutting demonstrations involve a *shinken*, or sharpened blade and rolled up bound *tatami* (rice matts) soaked in water. The rolled mats are placed on a spike to hold them vertically, and the practitioner cuts them with the sword. The soaked mats are said to approximate the resistance that would be offered by human bodies. In feudal periods condemned criminals would be bound together and executed in this manner. It is said that swords would be marked with a number signifying how many bodies they had cut through while being tested.

> you can do on film," the director continued. "For instance, when you try realistic combat on stage, I don't really believe it. I prefer poetic forms, as in the Chinese opera and the Kabuki. And I've never seen fighting in Noh, it's so essentialized." War scenes in his *Throne* are waged in stylized, abstracted sequences "where nobody actually touches anybody—no blood, you know?"[108]

This is one of the only mentions in the press of how the hand-to-hand violence is staged. The reviews speak in depth of the costumes and the abstraction from film, but gloss over the movement other than mentioning Noh influences.

In the group battle scenes the violence is abstracted, just as Chong states, and bears a similarity to Kabuki performance. Again, no contact is made between weapons and performers respond to cuts that, while precisely performed, obviously are nowhere near them. Unlike more conventional stage combat practices there is no attempt to create any illusion of contact. Actors playing slain soldiers get up only to be slain again. Group fights are also signified by the performance of sequences similar to kata practice. Collections of performers costumed as samurai run onto the stage in various patterns and formations, make cuts in the air, and occasionally die. The patterns they create with their swords are fairly simple, and it is the fact that they move in a synchronized fashion that brings across the idea that they are highly trained warriors.

The group battles were also abstracted in that the magic tricks usually associated with stage combat were not present. The fights resembled dances in which cuts that were obviously in the air had consequences for characters who were in the general direction of the cut, but there was no attempt whatsoever to create any illusion of contact with an opponent's flesh. Fights were elaborate and complex and flashy, but non-realistic to the extreme. It is clear that the actors portraying samurai were simulating advanced sword skills, though those skills were signified through movements greatly abstracted from actual combat. Aaron Anderson discusses abstraction of performed violence:

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[108] Lockwood, "The Macbeths in the Prism of Noh: Ping Chong stages Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood,*" *The Brooklyn Rail*, 70.

> In essence, theatrical fights represent real fights in a codified way, and are thus consciously designed to convey a narrative story of conflict through representational movement. This means that any time the primary purpose of a fight ceases to be about actually damaging an opponent and begins to entail presenting a movement-story to a viewing audience, a certain amount of stylization is automatically employed. […] The degree of stylization varies considerably depending on the medium or concept employed.[109]

As Ping Chong states a strong preference for abstraction in staged violence, the level of stylization in these fights makes them almost unrecognizable compared to more conventional models of stage combat. They are pure "movement–story" and from the perspective of an American audience unfamiliar with Kabuki (but accustomed to SAFD style stage fights) they could be read as a higher order of simulacra evolved from standard broadsword stage combat.

What was almost more impressive in this production (as well as in Pan Asian Rep's offering) was the constant attention paid to samurai character movement. The martial arts instructor hired by Oregon Shakespeare Festival had more to do with the general movement of the production and coaching the sitting, standing, and handling swords than any of the actual fighting. The sense of combat readiness and proper weapons handling was as much a manifestation of martial arts in this production as any actual fight scene. This is also a testament to the costume designer, Stefani Mar, and the prop master, James N. Clark. When Taketori Washizu (the Macduff character) and Yoshiaki Miki (Macbeth) appear in Kumote Forest in their first scene, they are in full battle armor and carrying numerous weapons including daisho (paired swords), bow, and spear. There is an element of combat readiness to their movement, though they do not engage in any armed conflict. It is fitting that the bow makes an appearance at the beginning of the play, since the play ends just as the film does, with Miki shot to death by the bows of his own army.[110]

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[109] Anderson, *Reading the Fights: Toward a Semiotics of Staged Violence*, 96.

This close attention to the details of martial behavior also reasserts Chin's statement that a trained person is not an average person. Anderson observes,

> Practiced martial movement has an elitist nature, which also contributes to empowerment potential. Connerton describes the elite nature of certain practiced skills, historically principle of which was "the profession of arms." In the West prior to the sixteenth century, part of what granted a man honor from the wearing of arms was the class distinction the arms themselves signified.[111]

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[110] Kyudo, or Japanese archery is today more a meditative form of movement than a fighting art. The 1953 book on the subject, *Zen in the Art of Archery* by Eugen Herrigel, is an interesting case of a philosophy book based on a martial art becoming very popular with actors seeking greater focus.

[111] Ibid, 101.

The majority of characters who inhabit the stage are of a warrior class, and thus would be beneficiaries of the privileged training required to acquire elite skills. Perhaps it is the distance created by the class distinction that creates the air of mystery around the Japanese sword as much as any miraculous skill level attained by legendary samurai.

By comparison, many of the fights in the original film are highly realistic. For example, when the Macbeth character, Taketoki Washizu, as portrayed by Toshiro Mifune, kills one of the guards who was set to protect the shogun, he dispatches him with a single thrust of his sword under the arm. According to the commentary on the Criterion Collection edition of the film, that actor had a block of wood under his costume to protect him from the thrust. Mifune's blow was so powerful however, that it penetrated the wood and wounded the actor, giving him a scar that he carried with him for the rest of his life. This piece of violence is over in a matter of seconds, and is portrayed simply and directly. Kurosawa's violence in this film is not elaborate, so there are no drawn out duels. The battle scenes have more parallels with Western war movies than with martial arts films. The constant is the presence of samurai, lifelong professional warriors, who by necessity would strive to finish violence quickly. These fast and decisive kills would be difficult to adapt effectively to the stage and would probably disappoint an American audience, but the movements around them, that sense of danger and inherent readiness, is what is consistently powerful in the staging of samurai.

Combat Inc.'s Japanese Swordsmanship Workshop

In the time between these two productions, Combat Inc., one of the newer stage combat teaching organizations in New York, hosted a Toyomo Battodo workshop with

Sensei Sang Kim on January 25, 2009.[112] The workshop consisted of an accelerated version of the curriculum condensed into three hours, as well as a cutting demonstration. The main objective was to expose actors to authentic technique. In his introduction, Mike Yahn stated, "You guys already know all the magic tricks. The magic tricks don't change." Sensei Kim said that the purpose of the workshop was so that "actors would not look stupid. " These statements reflect both a valorization of authentic technique as well as an agreement that these techniques can be made into illusions for the stage.

The creation of illusion out of authentic technique might be described as increasing the magnitude of the flaws in the drill as per Rory Miller. The flaws are there to insure the safety of students of any given art while still allowing them to learn the skills that the drill seek to inscribe in their muscle memory. Those skills are meant to be dangerous. By making the flaw the focus of the exercise, the illusion of the skill becomes central to stage practice in a safe manner while still simulating the events that the original drill itself was abstracted from. Unfortunately, while the instruction and demonstrations of the sword work were clear and the skills of the instructor were exemplary, no mention of how the "magic tricks" of stage combat might be applied was made. As Kim was teaching from the perspective of a martial arts instructor rather than a theatre artist, this is understandable.

The workshop was taught entirely by Battodo guests (Sang Kim and his assistants) after Mike Yahn introduced them. Its structure was as follows:

Traditional mini warmup consisting of stretches and breathing exercises.

Stance training.

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[112] Two Combat Inc. instructors, Mike Yahn and MJ Johnson, are in fact advanced martial artists in addition to their stage combat credentials.

Drawing and sheathing.

8 angles/cuts.

2 man kata demo by guest instructors.

Two person drills with bokken.[113]

Cutting demos.

There were constant pauses for questions and explanations. What was most directly applicable to stage practice was the training in stance and in drawing and sheathing the blade.

As stance is among the most recognizable traits of martial training it would form the basis of the illusion of advanced skills. Stances form the foundation of the visual profile of any piece of choreography. From a pragmatic and tactical perspective, stance determines stability and mobility. Many (though not all) martial arts have codified their stances, some of which might appear to an audience as specifically culturally coded. An actor assuming a martial arts posture has already created a visual signifier of stylized violence.

The exercises in drawing and sheathing the blade were also very applicable as they are culturally specific actions that evolved for that particular type of sword. As discussed earlier in reference to Iaijustu and Iaido, the Japanese sword has unique qualities and tactics with regard to deployment of the weapon from a position of rest.

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[113] Wooden swords shaped like their steel counterparts and meant to replicate their weight and balance. They are a relatively safe and inexpensive substitute with a long history. Safety is still relative only to the steel swords as a full power blow from such a weapon in trained hands is potentially lethal. The legendary samurai Miyamoto Musashi was said to have fought one of his most famous duels wielding a bokken.

One element of this that Kim stressed was the stages of the return of the sword to the *saya*, because the bearer must be ready to reverse intentions and return to action even as the weapon is being sheathed. Also, the visual dynamics of *noto*, or returning the blade to the scabbard, are quite specific and create an interesting movement pattern useful for those who might put such weapons on the stage.

The question arises of whether or not authentic technique is in fact visible to the audiences who see those plays and films that may make use of Japanese swordsmanship. As much of the technique is incredibly subtle (as it would be in advanced schools of swordsmanship of any origin), authenticity may in fact be invisible in many instances (let alone incredibly dangerous). Techniques meant to replicate wrist cuts and evasions would be too fast and too small to replicate effectively on the stage. The means of generating power would also be difficult to make stageworthy as the application of the forces that might be generated would be unsafe for performers, invisible to an audience, and completely unnecessary in creating stage illusion.

As the American general audience would not necessarily know the difference between proper and improper use of the katana,[114] instruction in authentic technique is an interesting touchstone for actors and choreographers, but in the end it is always storytelling that is paramount. The focus developed by training in the proper use of the katana is useful for actors. Richard Nichols discusses this in "Out of Silence... Action: Kendo and Iaido," an essay in *Asian Martial Arts in Actor Training* edited by Philip Zarrilli:

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[114] This is true of many weapons and fighting systems regardless of origin. In fact, it is said that the pose of holding a handgun pointed upwards near one's head was invented by a cinematographer to get the hero's face and the gun in the same shot.

> Despite the frenetic clamor of *kendo* and the seemingly sinister aspect of *iai-do*'s flashing blade, stillness in motion—the combination of discipline over self and a concomitant inner quiet—is what *kendo* and *iai-do* possess. Practitioners of *kendo* and *iai-do*, great athletes and actors all possess this inner peace in the heat of the moment of combat, competition or performance. The practice of *kendo* and *iai-do* can develop and heighten such feelings in the young actor. (103)

I would add the caveat that it is the advanced practitioners of a martial art who display the calm described, and that such calm might take years to develop. Performer training is another means leading to increased focus. It was clear from the workshop that focus is a transferable skill. There is a saying among fight directors that "it is easier to teach an actor to fight than a fighter to act."

It is my opinion that the workshop served more as field research for actors and fight directors who might portray characters skilled in the use of katana rather than an actual stage combat class[115]. This was made most clear in the cutting demonstrations at the end of the workshop, in which Kim performed advanced cuts on tatami mats that could not easily be replicated on the stage without either advanced skills or elaborately engineered special effects. These included cutting the target twice in succession with such speed that the pieces stayed in place and did not fall. Also, while those cuts were incredibly impressive to those observers who knew what they were seeing, like many advanced martial arts skills they would be meaningless to an uninformed observer. It would not be a difficult task to apply the lessons of this system to the SAFD broadsword curriculum, though in doing so much of the subtlety that is at the root of the style would be lost.

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[115] It should be noted that several advanced nationally recognized fight directors were in attendance as the stage combat community in New York has a strong sense of community and spirit of exchange. The information presented at the workshop to influential teachers and choreographers may yet influence how the Japanese sword is portrayed on the stage.

Another problem for those seeking authenticity is the application of these techniques to period shows considering that Toyama Battodo is a modern style. Similar discussions are persistent regarding Western fencing on stage and the desire to replicate period styles. These arguments seem to come up less often in regards to Japanese styles of fighting, though that may change as more styles become known to the public. That said, it might be dramaturgically appropriate for Sondheim's 1976 musical, *Pacific Overtures*, which is set in Japan in 1853, not long before the system emerged.

The katana and its use are no longer relegated to the samurai. It is a standard weapon in the productions of the Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company (discussed at length in another chapter), and makes numerous appearances in science fiction. The protagonists of the *Highlander* films and the television series it inspired, both Scottish clansmen, carry Japanese steel as their primary weapon. In reality, katanas are so readily available that on January 30, 2011 CNN reported, "People who were trying to protect their property said they are worried about criminal gangs armed with samurai swords, clubs or rifles" during the recent unrest in Egypt.[116] Perhaps the diverse skills of the modern fight director will have to be applied to a Japanese sword in an Egyptian context if and when those events become dramatized.

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[116] http://news.blogs.cnn.com/2011/01/30/latest-developments-in-egypt-unrest/

The samurai and their weapons are potent symbols on stage, invoking centuries of history and mythology. As visual signifiers, they are dramaturgically loaded. Since they are representatives of a warrior society, their presence signals the potential for violence whether or not it actually occurs. Their signature weapon, the katana, has evolved to have a symbolic life of its own, though even divorced from the samurai, the katana is still at its best when wielded in some accordance with the arts that evolved specifically to utilize its unique qualities.

Chapter 4

Action-Packed, Kind of Absurd… And Utterly Awesome:

The Vampire Cowboys and Geek Theatre

The Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company is resistant to categorization. Too popular to be fringe, too diverse (and too weird) to be "mainstream," too populist to be avant-garde, and yet too successful to be ignored. They have won an Obie award and New York Innovative Theatre Awards, and been nominated for a GLAAD award. While the primary focus in this chapter will be on their use of martial arts, it should be noted that this company is worthy of a more comprehensive scholarly exploration. The Vampire Cowboys are innovative not only in their material and their staging, but in their marketing, pedagogy, and business model. Their shows frequently employ devices ranging from puppetry to multimedia. They often borrow the methodologies of experimental theater while being highly referential of both comic books and various movie and television genres.

This chapter will discuss the history of the company and the collaborative process of the two co-artistic directors, Qui Nguyen and Robert Ross Parker, as well as analyze five plays by Nguyen. Four are Vampire Cowboys plays, *The Vampire Cowboy Trilogy*, *Living Dead in Denmark*, *Soul Samurai*, and *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G,* and the fifth, *Aliens Vs. Cheerleaders,* is a recent commission by Playscripts.com that came about as a result of the company's growing popularity. The life of the scripts after publication will also be discussed, as will their uses of combat showcases in their marketing and the experiences of performers in their classes and productions. There will also be a brief description of the No Refunds Theatre, a similar but lesser known company based out of Minneapolis.

Much of the history of the Vampire Cowboys is well documented on their blogs, websites, and various social media. They regularly keep video blogs (or vlogs) of their rehearsals and showcases, much of which includes elaborate fight scenes. Some of the fight scenes recorded are parts of rehearsals for their myriad productions, but they also create combat showcases for the New York ComicCon. Their participation in ComicCon is both a testament to their artistic identity and an unusual marketing initiative wherein they are able to expand their audience base beyond the typical Downtown NY theatre crowd.

The company started at Ohio University, where the founders and co-artistic directors were pursuing their respective MFAs in Playwriting and Directing. The story goes that the two bumped into each other in a comic shop (which they describe in interviews as being almost as embarrassing as running into a classmate in a pornography shop), and they started a discussion that laid the groundwork for their collaboration and eventually their company. After completing their MFAs they began producing shows in New York City, beginning with *The Vampire Cowboys Trilogy*. It was early in this phase of their careers that Abby Marcus became their producer (and later married Qui Nguyen). It was Abby Marcus who was responsible for much of their success as a company in terms of marketing and promotions and getting an audience, and later on in acquiring their own space in Brooklyn (The Battle Ranch). She was also the source of the idea of the Vampire Cowboys presenting at New York ComicCon[117], which is one of the events that defines them as a company.

The program note in their latest production, *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, begins with a reflection of their original goals:

> When Vampire Cowboys began nine years ago, our goals were simple:
>
> *One:* To bring pop-culture, comic books, and innovative stage combat to the New York stage with a kind of theatrical originality, professionalism, and craftsmanship so often not given to this kind of work.
>
> *Two:* To create "superheroes" for people of color, women, GBLT, and peeps who often felt neglected in their usual popcorn entertainment. [118]

The second goal is more often that not almost a hidden agenda. In a statement published in September/October 2010 issue of *The Dramatist: Journal of The Dramatists Guild of America, Inc.* Nguyen states, "In a scale from pho to football, I'm far more SEC than VC,"[119] and concludes with,

> This is not to say that I have anything against writers of color who do indeed write about their specific ethnic background, I just resent the notion that those are the only stories we're allowed to tell. We're all much more complex than just the color of our skin. Seriously, did we learn nothing from Michael Jackson's "Black or White" video? That video was

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[117] NY ComicCon is the largest popular culture convention on the East Coast. It showcases comic books, graphic novels, anime, films, etc. It attracts tens of thousands of attendees a year.

[118] Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company, *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G* Program Note

[119] Nguyen, *The Dramatist: Journal of The Dramatists Guild of America, Inc.*, 23.

> awesome.[120]

This statement is in apparent disagreement with the goals of the company, however it is arguable that in representing minorities as "superheroes" on stage the characters' status as "superheroes" takes on more importance than their ethnicity. In fact, the Vampire Cowboys Manifesto states,

> Vampire Cowboys plays must not conduct "lessons". "Lessons" and "Morals" are for propaganda plays that wish to manipulate the society to mindlessness and obedience. The job of the Vampire Cowboys artist is to ask questions and, above all, entertain. (Article 6)[121]

This is not to say that ethnicity or other identity politics never factors into the plays, but they are rarely a focal point. If anything, ethnicity is mediated almost as much through simulation of movement systems in a Vampire Cowboys production as it is through casting. Aaron Anderson discusses the potential for movement to evoke its own origins:

> …if movement has the potential to re-enact elements related to the historical origin of the movement itself, and since memory is "sedimented in the body," memories of historic origins can be evoked through bodily movement.[122]

He goes on specifically to discuss Asian fighting systems,

> Likewise, Asian martial-arts movement may evoke images of Asia and, correspondingly, all the exoticness – and as Edward Said notes, "Orientalism" – associated with those images. Romanticized aspects of

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[120] Ibid.

[121] http://www.vampirecowboys.com/manifesto.htm

[122] Anderson, *Reading the Fights: Toward a Semiotics of Staged Violence*, 100.

> movement are not necessarily evoked through this process of bodily-sedimented memory, but surely a certain romanticism does accompany many people's perceptions of martial movement.[123]

Choreographically, a great deal of the combat is strongly influenced by Asian martial arts (and more recently, Brazilian as well), many of which exist with a narrative of augmented physical agency for those who train in them. This is especially true as it relates to their manifestation in popular culture, where they are a signifier of impossible bodies. The film genres that are borrowed from include Hong Kong action cinema as well as samurai movies, both of which center on characters with exceptional physical agency.

Even so, the primary influence on the company's work remains comic books, a genre where the impossible body is a central element. They apply all of their skills as professional theatre artists to creating work based on their love of these mediums. In their first nine years, they created plays based on science fiction, super heroes, slasher films, and zombies. These genres have long been the domain of the impossible body, and so this phenomenon is well represented on their stage. They borrow heavily from film and popular culture, as well as from avant-garde experimental theatre. The techniques of the avant-garde often come into play in their staging of scenes not often represented mimetically, motorcycle chases and spaceship battles for example. They expanded their project to include both the showcasing of new works by other writers in their Saturday Night Saloon series, as well as the creation of a stage combat school, the Rabid Vamps Fight Studio. It is particularly relevant to this study in that they diverge from the standard courses being taught by the high ranking SAFD members in New York City, which are often concerned with getting students through the certification process in SAFD approved weapon disciplines[124], and instead they teach the weapons and techniques that commonly appear on their own stage. These include nunchaku[125]. Japanese swords, chainsaws, different martial arts, and so on.

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[123] Ibid.

Qui Nguyen is trained extensively in more traditional stage combat and is active as a fight director in other theatres (also having taught stage combat at Columbia University). The stage combat studio at the Battle Ranch is not in competition with the more mainstream stage combat teaching organizations in New York, but augments the available training. It attracts not just professional actors who are seeking to diversify their skill sets, but Vampire Cowboys fans who wish to imitate what they have seen on stage. This is a testament to their connection with their fan base. It is common practice for comic book and science fiction fans to dress as their favorite characters at conventions such as ComicCon. By extension, the opportunity to fight like those characters would have a strong appeal. As it is obviously a theatre company that is holding the classes, those students coming in who are not professional actors are under no illusion that they are learning anything other than a simulation of martial arts.

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[124] The SAFD (Society of American Fight Directors) currently certifies actor/combatants in eight disciplines: unarmed, single sword, rapier & dagger, broadsword, quarterstaff, smallsword, sword & shield, and knife. They've also recently introduced a theatrical firearms safety certification program.

[125] Nunchakus, or rice flails, are traditional Okinawan weapons consisting of two sticks connected by a rope or chain. Historically they are farming implements that were used as weapons when Okinawa was ruled by Japan and more conventional weapons were outlawed. One of the best known appearances of this weapon in cinema is in Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon*.

During one of my interviews with Nguyen, I asked him this question: "What do you see as the main differentiations between stage combat martial arts, actual martial arts, and 'pedestrian' stage combat? Can you address this as a writer and fighter?" In this instance (one of two interviews, the other being in person) I had emailed the questions and then followed up by phone. I had asked this question of many of the artists I interviewed and his answer was the most in-depth. He began with "It is the difference between the fantasy, the reality and the nightmare. On stage is the fantasy, in the dojo is something else. In reality it never looks like either. Wing Chun[126] never looks like Wing Chun [in a real fight]," and later elaborated "The nightmare is the pedestrian; no story, no technique. I've seen Shaolin Monks on stage, they did these magnificent demos that fell flat. Choreographers who don't know martial arts can do better martial arts on stage than real martial artists." Nguyen himself has a fairly broad background in martial arts, having studied Vovinam[127], Tae Kwon Do, Isshin Ryu Karate, Jeet Kune Do[128], Mixed Martial Arts, Capoeira Angola, Arnis[129] and other forms. He credits his stage combat training with Mark Guinn[130] as what shaped him as a choreographer.

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[126] Wing Chun (also called Ving Tsun) is a form of Kung Fu first brought to prominence in the United States by Bruce Lee., and served as a basis for Jeet Kune Do, the martial art he later developed. It is characterized by rapid hand movements at close range that trap an opponent's hands while striking through the openings created. One popular legend claims that the style was created by a woman to prioritize speed and agility over strength. It is a focal point of the 2008 Hong Kong film, *Ip Man*, a fictionalized biography of Bruce Lee's teacher.

[127] Vovinam is a Vietnamese martial art that is not widely disseminated in the United States.

[128] The "Way of the Intercepting Fist." A martial art/philosophy developed by the late Bruce Lee.

[129] One of the blanket terms for Filipino Martial Arts, the others being Kali and Escrima. They are usually associated with stick fighting, though they also incorporate empty

In many of his interviews and profiles, Nguyen discusses having experienced violence in the town he grew up in. As someone who understood the realities and potential consequences of actual violence, when asked about the attraction of highly stylized simulacra, he related that it was "The fantasy of it all," and a form of wish fulfillment. He elaborated on his growing understanding of the differences between the dojo, the street, and entertainment;

> I remember doing really stupid things as a fighter as a kid. I was a good fighter and got into a lot of fights. I would do really stupid things like flying side kicks or some really fancy movie move and get hurt rather than stick to fundamentals, cause I was still a kid. I was dismayed by the stuff I was studying because I realized that it was all theory and it never work in a real life situation and I would always end up using good boxing technique and Jujitsu. I know that I wasn't attracted to the realities of fights when I started putting shows together. It was the fights that as a kid I wish the move would really work out. I wish real fights were as easy as drills in the martial arts class.

There is little irony in a person who has experienced real violence desiring to focus HIS choreography on fantastic simulacra. The simulacra are aesthetically pleasing and of no consequence in so far as actual injury is concerned (provided the choreography is safe and executed correctly), and can provide a sense of exhilaration without fear of harming anyone. In *Facing Violence*, Rory Miller suggests that people "Train in something that

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hands, knives, swords, and other weapons. These martial arts are often taught alongside Jeet Kune Do.

[130] Mark Guinn is an SAFD Fight Master based in Louisiana.

makes it a joy to move" (52). The violence-as-play offered by stage combat, especially that genre of stage combat that the Vampire Cowboys indulge in, provides a virtual playground of violent delights.

The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G by Qui Nguyen (2011)

The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G played to sold-out houses and critical acclaim in March and April of 2011 at St. Marks Church in Lower Manhattan. At its heart the play is a very personal story about Nguyen's cousin, who came to the United States from Vietnam as a child after a very difficult journey during which he lost both of his parents when their refugee boat went adrift on the South China Sea. The events of the play include several gunfights, a motorcycle chase with ninjas[131], hand-to-hand combat with katanas and nunchakus[132], a giant rapping puppet named "Gookie Monster" that expounds on Asian-American identity (a rare inclusion of identity politics), a dance battle with ninjas that ends in a gunfight, several meta-theatrical elements including a rap battle between an actor portraying Qui Nguyen (played by William Jackson Harper, an African-American actor) and David Henry Hwang (played by Jon Hoche) for supremacy in

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[131] Ninjas have taken on a complex place in contemporary popular culture as their popular portrayals are often heavily mythologized. Historically (as stated earlier in this study), they were Japanese spies and assassins. There was an explosion in their media presence in the 1980s. They are popularly portrayed as masked figures engaging in both stealth and direct combat. The historical art of Ninjutsu allegedly included an understanding of explosives, poisons, projectiles, disguise, and other skills necessary to their specific tasks.

[132] I used the anglicized plurals for these weapons (and for ninjas) because they appear here in an American pop culture context.

Asian-American playwriting[133], numerous references to Nguyen's earlier works (both Vampire Cowboys and otherwise) and personal life, and several multimedia elements including short films.

I attended the April 9 performance after a personal interview with Robert Ross Parker, where we discussed both the play I was about to see and the company's aesthetic. This was my second interview with Parker, the first having been over the phone several months earlier. Parker explained that this was probably "their least fighty show," and that the company used to list the fights in the program, much like musical numbers. That said; the number, intensity, and complexity of the fights scenes were far beyond even Shakespeare's bloodiest plays. As the production was receiving quite a bit of positive critical attention, he observed "People see this one as a play and not some bizarre downtown entertainment." The *New York Times* review stated,

> Mr. Nguyen finds his first truly complex character in the onstage version of himself, and also a fertile theme, which he explores: What does assimilation mean to a Vietnamese-American playwright who grew up in Arkansas, married a white woman and feels black in his "heart"?
>
> In an impressive feat, the Vampire Cowboys become serious without giving up any of their silliness. Until, that is, the end, when the jokes stop and Mr. Harper faces the audience and gravely discusses the meaning of the play. There is something jarring about this

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[133] David Henry Hwang posted the following reaction to this moment on his Twitter account on April 8, 2011: "Loved @VampireCowboys AGENT G, including the character of "DHH:" hunkier, more bad-ass and a better rapper than me!"

> earnestness, which telegraphs "importance" in a way that makes the heartfelt speech seem like the only real gimmick in the show.[134]

Zinoman does not describe any of the company's signature action sequences in his review, focusing mostly on the content of the script though he praised Parker's "broad stroke style." There is some irony in this, as prior to my seeing the production Parker stated to me that he felt American theatre had "Too much Stanislavski, not enough Meyerhold." Parker picked his inspiration well. His style is innovative and energetic, making use of every element available. He stated prior to the show that "the poverty of theatre can be a virtue," and his art held up to his statement. The theatre space at Saint Marks Church seats perhaps one hundred people. By use of sound, light, projection, and sophisticated choreography, effects usually relegated to cinema came to life before an enthusiastic audience.

The motorcycle chase, by way of example, took place essentially as a combination object performance and fight scene. Blocks were lined up at the front of the stage when the "chase" began. Two actors, Bonnie Sherman and Paco Tolson, appeared wearing motorcycle helmets with Sherman's arms around Tolson, who in turn held before him a prop appearing to be the handlebars and windshield of a sport bike type motorcycle. As their lower extremities are hidden by the blocks, this (along with a projection and a music track) was enough to suggest that these characters were in fact riding a motorcycle through the Vietnamese countryside so long as they swayed their bodies in unison as if swerving on the roads. A second "motorcycle" appeared alongside them, this time occupied by a pair of ninjas. It was soon clear that a violent pursuit had begun, with the ninjas attempting to bump the protagonists off of the road, gunfire[135] (gunshots were all sound effects), and attempts to jump from one motorcycle to another. By the time this sequence occurred we as the audience had already been exposed to several elaborate fight scenes with ninjas as well as a fantasy guerilla warfare sequence that included both martial arts and assault firearms. The fights were co-created by Qui Nguyen and Adam Mazer, and were complex affairs clearly influenced by both cinema and comic books. Bodies did not operate in these fights as they do in the real world, but followed a fantasy logic.

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[134] Jason Zinoman, "Identities as Elements to Play With and Juggle," *The New York Times,* April 3, 2011.

Time Out New York's review is typical of the critical reception the play enjoyed. The reviewer, Helen Shaw, also discusses the trajectory of the company and Nguyen's work as a playwright:

> It has been five years since Qui Nguyen's wrenching boat-people drama *Trial by Water*[136], and during that time the young playwright's reputation has mainly depended on ironic chop-socky mayhem. He and his Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company make badass action-theater mash-ups (e.g. *Soul Samurai*), an aesthetic system only

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[135] One detail of the gunplay in this production that was particularly impressive was the consistency of trigger discipline. This means that the performers' trigger fingers were consistently placed alongside the trigger guard when handling prop firearms, only moving to the trigger when their characters made definite decisions to shoot. Lack of trigger discipline in entertainment occurs constantly to the chagrin of many who are educated in firearms. As a fight director I have been overruled by artistic directors on this practice multiple times because they believed that it would confuse the audience.

[136] *Trial by Water* was an early play by Nguyen and his first attempt to tell his cousin Hung's story. It has little in common stylistically with his Vampire Cowboy plays. Its writing and reception are part of the subject matter of *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*.

> occasionally visited by a long-orbit comet of sincerity. In the schizophrenic, wonderful *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G,* the comet at long last returns, drawing Nguyen into profound metatheatrical self-examination. He can't stay serious for long—insights alternate with dance battles and the Vampire Cowboys' usual barrage of inside jokes. This confusion of gravities keeps the play fascinatingly off-balance: In its very wonkiness, we feel a playwright tearing himself apart to find his own first principles.[137]

The "inside jokes" concern previous Vampire Cowboys productions (a luxury of having a strong fan base) and the genres that provide the source materials for the company's parodies. As this is theatre by fans of the source genres and created for other fans, the references were thick, complex, and constant.

Linda Hutcheon quotes Sir Theodore Martin in *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, "Let no one parody a poet unless he loves him." (30). The love here is obvious. Elsewhere in the book, she discusses the inclusive nature of parody:

> Parody is one of the techniques of self-referentiality by which art reveals its awareness of the context-dependent nature of meaning, of the importance to signification of the circumstances surrounding any utterance. [138]

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[137] Shaw, "Review: *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G," Time Out New York*, April 4, 2011

[138] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, 85.

Hutcheon's ideas give a certain clarity to Robert Ross Parker's statement, "When you describe what we do people think that is it campy and silly. In actuality, we are trying to deliver it seriously, which is where much of the humor is coming from. Parody but also Tribute. *Fight Girl Battle World*[139] is not about how stupid SciFi is, it is about how awesome it is. That said, they [the shows] are not without irony. Though the more seriously we take it, the harder the audience laughs. If it's only silly then it's hard to sustain it." Here Parker is reminiscent of Susan Sontag's seminal essay, "Notes on Camp,"

> The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to 'the serious'. One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious.[140]

Much of the Vampire Cowboys' source material was created in earnest. Because the audiences attracted to a Vampire Cowboys loves said source material, the humor is that much stronger.

Recent psychological research on humor by Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren has yielded the Benign Violation Theory. In their 2010 paper published in *Psychological Science*, they explain:

> Humor is aroused by benign violations. The benign-violation hypothesis suggests that three conditions are jointly necessary and sufficient for eliciting humor: A situation must be appraised as a violation, a situation

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[139] *Fight Girl Battle World* was Vampire Cowboys' 2008 production. Parker and Nguyen are co-authors of this piece.

[140] Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 62

> must be appraised as benign, and these two appraisals must occur simultaneously.[141]

They elaborate on ways in which a situation might be a violation and/or benign, and test their hypothesis on numerous situations. Their model works for the Vampire Cowboys in that the "inside joke" concerns genres that are highly valued by their audience base. By making fun of beloved material they create a violation. By doing it with love, that violation is benign. Add to this the tendency for martial arts on the stage to be comic, and the "inside joke" is even funnier. Martin Denton weighs in on this in his review on NYTheatre.com:

> Though there are a few places in the script where Nguyen pokes fun at his downtown theater home, *Agent G* exemplifies everything that's great about indie theater and represents it at its pinnacle. Will folks who haven't seen Vampire Cowboy action theatre get everything that's going on in this play? I suspect not; my own experience as a long time VC fan (and—disclaimer—publisher of *Vampire Cowboy Trilogy*, the play that started it all) certainly informed my experience here. [142]

While this was my first experience at a full production of a Vampire Cowboys play, I came in having done my homework. I'd read several of their plays, blog entries, and reviews, attended a Saloon, seen quite a bit of video, and interviewed both artistic directors and one of the performers. It is possible that the *New York Times* did not get this particular joke, while the fan base, and most of the other reviewers, laughed on.

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[141] McGraw and Warren, "Benign Violations: Making Immoral Behavior Funny," 2.

[142] Denton, Review Archive, nytheatre.com, http://www.nytheatre.com/showpage.aspx?s=inex12297

As for my own reaction, *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G* was one of my best experiences as an audience member in quite some time. The production values and the performances were of exceptional quality, the story was engaging, and the intricacies of the interplay between various narrative elements created a synergistic unified aesthetic experience. The fight scenes were expertly executed and all essential to the story, and the elements of impossible bodies came to life quite strongly. The inclusion of multimedia elements was seamless and complemented the actions of the performers. Furthermore, the emotional power of the ending monologue was enhanced by the humor that was present throughout the rest of the play. I have a personal theory that audiences do not cry in the theatre until after they have laughed. This production provided strong evidence for my theory.

Soul Samurai by Qui Nguyen (2009)

For lack of a simpler descriptive term, *Soul Samurai* is a post-apocalyptic urban kung fu lesbian Blaxploitation vampire revenge comedy. It was first performed in 2009 and was published by Broadway Play Publishing the following year. At the time of its production Qui Nygyen saw it as his "finest play and masterpiece," as well as the most personal thing he had written at that time. The play was written for five actors playing multiple roles. Major influences on the play include *The Last Dragon* (1985), *Blacula* (1972), and *Kill Bill I & II* (2003 & 2004). The Blaxploitation genre as a whole body of work is referred to throughout, as are the Japanese Musashi films of the 1950s, and arguably Hong Kong action cinema as well.

The influence of QuentinTarantino's *Kill Bill* films is seen very strongly in the anachronological structure of the play, as well as in the dialogue, styles of violence presented, and the fact of female protagonists seeking revenge throughout the play with a samurai sword. As Tarantino himself is heavily referential and *Kill Bill* is an amalgamation and homage to Shaw Brothers films, Bruce Lee, Japanese samurai films, westerns, Blaxploitation, the *Kung Fu* television series of the 1970s, and so many other sources, *Soul Samurai* is in effect an advanced cultural homage to several films. It is essentially a revenge play, primarily concerned with the struggle of Dewdrop, a young Asian woman whose lover, Sally December, has been murdered by a gang of vampires, known as Longtooths, in post-apocalyptic Brooklyn. The story is told anachronologically, with much of it in flashbacks, though the play does take on a more linear structure towards the end.

As with many Vampire Cowboy plays, there is a certain camp sensibility to the text. The more familiarity the audience has with the various source materials, the greater their potential enjoyment of the piece. Both Qui Nguyen and Robert Ross Parker agree that they are often not setting out to be funny, though they are very aware that they are creating comedies. Susan Sontag describes such work in "Notes on Camp," "Camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is 'too much'."[143] A trash-talking, samurai sword-wielding, kung fu-fighting heroine battling overwhelming odds in pursuit of revenge was campy in Tarantino's *Kill Bill* franchise.

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[143] Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 59.

By echoing those films so strongly, *Soul Samurai* brings an even more powerful element of Camp to an audience intimately familiar with the source materials. Furthermore, Camp increases the potential for humor in martial arts sequences that involve the impossible body in that the disproportionate cause-and-effect relationships between movements and their consequences are also often “too much.” The worlds of Vampire Cowboy plays dramaturgically allow for extremes in movement composition, creating a venue wherein “too much” is in fact the only aesthetically logical choice. Such is the case with fighting skills developed by Dewdrop, *Soul Samurai*’s protagonist.

Dewdrop begins as a shy college student working in a library who comes to bloom as her relationship with Sally deepens. After the death of her lover at the hands of Longtooths, she becomes dejected and despondent, then realizes that her quest for revenge would be served by learning to fight, and thus becoming the titular Soul Samurai. The Vampire Cowboy mission of creating minority superheroes did not go unrecognized. AFTERELLEN: A Pop Culture Site That Plays For Your Team, a website dedicated to lesbian and bisexual women, had this to say in an article entitled “*Soul Samurai’s* Fearless Lesbian Hero”:

> A lone warrior, a broken world, shadowy villains, and heart-stopping fight scenes: this is the classic backdrop against which playwright Qui Nguyen creates the most unique lesbian heroine the New York indie theater scene has ever had a chance to cheer for […] he's offering up a lesbian warrior to inspire queer folks.

> And it's great, geeky fun.[144]

To achieve this warrior status, she seeks out Master Leroy Green. This character is a direct homage to the 1985 film, *The Last Dragon*, in which a young African-American martial arts student, Leroy Green (Bruce Leeroy) seeks out a new teacher to reach the highest level of mastery, and in the process must confront Sho' Nuff, The Shogun of Harlem, and save his neighborhood and his girlfriend from his evil clutches. Master Leroy Green is an older and more fatherly character in this play than the character in the film, but shares the name and the mannerisms (and is based in Queens rather than in his native Harlem). Master Leeroy Green is also very similar to Pai Mei in *Kill Bill II* in both function and mannerisms, which in itself is an homage to a recurring character in many Hong Kong films.[145] Dewdrop seeks him out for training, and the following exchange occurs:

> DEWDROP: I first came to Queens to escape. Brooklyn was too dangerous, Manhattan was ruled too rigidly by Grandmaster Mack. Queens became the last refuge for regs like me. This was all to the credit of my then teacher, Master Leroy Green.
>
> *(Cut to..)*
>
> *(Lights up on MASTER LEROY, an African American martial arts master who strangely speaks with a deep, yet noble, Japanese accent and dresses like a Kung Fu movie extra.)*
>
> MASTER LEROY: Get offa my step!
>
> DEWDROP: No.
>
> MASTER LEROY: Reave!

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[144] Warn, "*Soul Samurai*'s Fearless Lesbian Hero," AFTERELLEN, http://www.afterellen.com/theater/2009/3/soul-samurai-review

[145] Pai Mei is also historically the name of a priest who allegedly betrayed the Shaolin Temple and is the founder of a style of Kung Fu known as the "White Eyebrow" style.

> DEWDROP: No.
>
> MASTER LEROY: Don't make me show you back of hand. I willa hurting you very badly.
>
> DEWDROP: I know you will.
>
> MASTER LEROY: Then why so obstinate?
>
> DEWDROP: I wanna train.
>
> MASTER LEROY: I no teach no more.
>
> DEWDROP: Master Leroy. I need to learn.
>
> MASTER LEROY: What for?
>
> DEWDROP: Revenge.
>
> MASTER LEROY: You wanting revenge. You go buy gun. Much faster.
>
> DEWDROP: Guns don't work.
>
> MASTER LEROY: I no teaching no more. You want that, go learn from different teacher.
>
> DEWDROP: It's against the Long Tooths.
>
> MASTER LEROY: What you have against the Wrong Tooths?
>
> DEWDROP: They killed my girlfriend.
>
> MASTER LEROY: You a gay?
>
> DEWDROP: Yes.
>
> MASTER LEROY: I don't care about your love life. I care about peace. My peace. And my peace requiring you to go away.[146]

This exposition of pilgrimage to a master teacher as a step toward revenge, supplication, and initial refusal plays out constantly in the source genres. In *Kill Bill* it occurs when

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[146] Nguyen, *Soul Samurai*, 33-35.

The Bride[147] seeks out Hattori Hanzo[148] to have a sword made in order to get her revenge. Here it also functions as parody on multiple levels. First in that it presents a version of a common scenario adjusted for the Vampire Cowboys aesthetic, secondly in that it is a parody of a parody. Much like in *Kill Bill*, it is an invocation of the intended master's former student that causes him to agree to aid the heroine:

> DEWDROP: My girlfriend was Sally December. I think you know her quite well.
>
> MASTER LEROY: Sally.
>
> DEWDROP: She was a student of yours, correct?
>
> MASTER LEROY: She was very bright girl. Angry, but very smart.
>
> DEWDROP: The Longtooths killed her. I want revenge.
>
> *(MASTER LEROY suddenly attacks DEWDROP. She blocks two moves, but gets knocked on her ass by the third.)*
>
> MASTER LEROY: You have no skill.
>
> DEWDROP: I know that
>
> MASTER LEROY: You block ok. Not good, but better than nothing.
>
> DEWDROP: I did take a year and a half of Taekwondo[149].

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[147] The Bride is how the protagonist of the films, played by Uma Thurman, is referred to in the first movie.

[148] In the *Kill Bill* films, a master forger of katana. The name is a reference to a famous samurai who is a popular hero in books and films.

[149] Tae Kwon Do (Commonly abbreviated to "TKD") is a Korean martial art derived from Japanese Karate. The name translates to "Way of Punching and Kicking." While many of the basic techniques are similar to Karate, TKD places a greater emphasis on high kicks. It became an Olympic sport in the 1988 games in Seoul, South Korea. Many claim that it is the most popular martial art in the world. There are two main governing bodies for the sport, one, the International Tae Kwon Do Federation, or ITF, based in North Korea, the other, the World Tae Kwon Do Federation, or WTF, in South Korea, with different teaching and training philosophies. The narrative of the history of TKD is highly contested, the common stories give it a far longer history than is accurate and do not attribute any Japanese origin to the art.

> MASTER LEROY: You took a year and a half of shit. You try to fight with skills like that, you die very fast.
> You want to learn?
>
> DEWDROP: Yes.
>
> MASTER LEROY: Take this.
>
> *(MASTER LEROY tosses DEWDROP a towel.)*
>
> DEWDROP: What? You want me to go wax something?[150]
>
> MASTER LEROY: No, stupid. I wanting you to clean dirt off of your face. Come inside. Training begins tomorrow.[151]

It is a common trope of martial arts action films that the protagonists must seek out a master to teach them to fight that they might gain revenge. Typically they will learn a new form of fighting that will allow them to defeat their adversaries, in many cases it is a "secret" art known only to that master and perhaps their one disciple who has been led astray. In this case the art itself is no secret, but the earlier disciple will soon become the story's antagonist. Often, the instructor is hesitant, and convincing them to teach is an early obstacle. Once that is accomplished, the training is difficult, and in the early stages progress is slow and painful. In *Soul Samurai* we see this through montages that also include hip hop dance.

After watching Dewdrop become proficient, her master is killed by Lady Snowflake, a new adversary. *The Last Dragon* is once more directly referenced when Lady Snowflake kills Master Leroy Green and states, "Who's gots the glow now, bitch?"[152] "The Glow" is that elusive quality of true mastery set up as a final goal in *The Last Dragon* that that same character achieves in his final confrontation with Sho' Nuff.

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[150] This is a reference to the 1984 film *The Karate Kid* , in which the protagonist is taught martial arts techniques through repeating movement sequences during manual labor. The first task in the movie is waxing a car.

[151] Ibid, 35.

We learn more about Lady Snowflake as she appears in a subplot wherein we discover Marcus Moon, an office worker who learns that he is in fact a vampire, Prince Mamuwalde (the protagonist of *Blacula*), who elsewhere in the play is known as Boss 2K, the Kingsborough King, the vampire overlord of Brooklyn. After Dewdrop and her sidekick kill Boss 2K, they must deal with the rest of the vampires and their new leader, Lady Snowflake. As the play goes on, it is revealed that Lady Snowflake is Sally December's new identity after having become a Longtooth herself. This structure echoes Tarantino's films, and also allows for the script to place the major fights along a logical plot succession that makes dramaturgical sense. The play is bookended with high stakes personal duels. We begin with the Boss 2K fight, a major battle against a powerful adversary. Then we learn how this battle came about as we follow our heroes through the immediate repercussions of their actions, and finally the play ends with the protagonist defeating a far more powerful and emotionally relevant adversary.

Dewdrop and Lady Snowflake have a final, tragic confrontation resolving both their love and their enmity:

> LADY SNOWFLAKE: You and I were meant to be queens baby girl. We were meant to rule the world, not stand here on this old bridge fighting like a pair of some sad samurai. Let me give you what you deserve.
>
> DEWDROP: You're not you.
>
> LADY SNOWFLAKE: Oh, it's me. Every fiber, every delectable inch. I'm that girl you loved and lost now see again. And I'm asking you – girl who once broke my heart – are you really going to kill me?

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[152] Ibid, 38.

DEWDROP – Sally, stay / away from me.

LADY SNOWFLAKE – Shhhhhhhhhhh.

(LADY SNOWFLAKE *calmly approaches* DEWDROP. DEWDROP *lowers her weapon as* LADY SNOWFLAKE *leans in to kiss her.* DEWDROP *reciprocates*. *It's a very loving moment*.)

(*Abruptly,* DEWDROP *Shoves her away.*)

DEWDROP: NO. I won't be one of you.

LADY SNOWFLAKE: I'm not here to give you that choice, baby girl.

(DEWDROP *raises her weapon again.*)

LADY SNOWFLAKE: Oh baby, I like it when you play "hard to get". Cause, baby, I'm gonna getcha.

DEWDROP: I'm no longer afraid to die.

LADY SNOWFLAKE: Good. Cause I'm gonna kill ya hard, slow, and sexy -like.

DEWDROP: Correction, bitch, you mean you're gonna try…

(*And now, in the best girl-fight ever to be seen on a N Y stage [to a song like Kanye Wests's* Welcome to Heartbreak*],* DEWDROP *and* SNOWFLAKE *go at it Kung Fu style. Think of the fight in* Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon *except even better, And live. And more awesome.}*

(The fight begins with one slow methodical circle. As the fighters find their in[153]*, they suddenly rush at each other. The fight goes back and forth with breaks in between to address wounds, but* LADY SNOWFLAKE *in the end gets the advantage when she disarms* DEWDROP*.)*

(As DEWDROP *lies on the ground,* LADY SNOWFLAKE *gives* DEWDROP *a kiss on the forehead. She then goes to bite her, but right before she can sink her teeth,* DEWDROP *reverses the hold and impales* LADY SNOWFLAKE. LADY SNOWFLAKE *looks at her wound and falls.)*

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[153] The situation described implies defensive postures wherein the combatants look for opportunities while seeking to deny any for their opponent. "Finding their in" means that the combatants perceive an opening for a strike or counterstrike.

> (DEWDROP *somberly stands above her fallen love.* LADY SNOWFLAKE, *though not dead, is very helpless at this point.)*
>
> (DEWDROP *raises her blade, but still does not have the strength to finish* SALLY *off. So instead she holds her and looks up into the sky. She notices that the sun is about to rise.)*
>
> DEWDROP: Look, baby, the sun's coming up.
> It's almost over now.
> It's almost over.
> I love you.[154]

The excerpts above are indicative of the style and frequency of violence in the entire play. Promotional footage of *Soul Samurai* shows a myriad of influences on the stage combat, including Japanese swordsmanship, various forms of Kung Fu, and Capoiera. On the whole the choreography reflects a fantasy of violence akin to the films that influence the storyline. The fight work is fluid, precise, and clear; most importantly, the fights serve the story being told. The choreographic palette contains elements of numerous martial arts, while the Japanese sword is essential to the characters (and a strong element of the final duel), many of the spatial relationships are defined by Capoeira. It is defining trait of that martial art/dance form to change and invert movement dynamics constantly. Much of the form is in fact performed from an inverted position. Such movements allow for a fighter to dodge a blow to the upper body while using the momentum of the drop of their torso as a counterweight that launches a kick. This takes place while the upper body is taken out of the range of the attack in an unexpected direction.

Nguyen successfully mixes these tactics freely with Asian martial arts; a Capoeira evasion/kick might be a counter to a sword attack and then followed up with an attack from another system. The characters in the promotional footage with the clearest Capoeira influence in their movement are Dewdrop and Boss2K (both of whom are also portrayed as being highly proficient with the katana). Leeroy Green appears to fight with small, precise, and measured movements, and Lady Snowflake seems to be defined by Japanese sword. The Longtooths represent a more "generic" martial arts style, while Cert's fighting shows clear Hip Hop dance influence. The actors are all trained professionals committed to their characters, and there is a sense of fun about the entire project. This sense of fun and seriousness-in-play is an unspoken trademark of the Vampire Cowboys Theater Company.

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[154] Ibid, 70-71.

Living Dead in Denmark – Performed in 2006, published in 2008

Living Dead in Denmark is a post-apocalyptic environmentalist kung fu zombie Shakespeare adaptation comedy with a lesbian romance subplot. It is an homage to zombie apocalypse movies with very strong references to Joss Wheedon's popular *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television series (1997-2003)[155] as well as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. While most of the main characters are from *Hamlet*, there are many others from *Macbeth, Romeo & Juliet, A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Tempest* that make an appearance as well.

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[155] The television series is loosely based 1992 film of the same name. The series is stylistically very different from the film. Both the film and the series follow the adventures of Buffy, who finds out while in high school that she is fated to battle vampires and other creatures, and is gifted with superhuman strength and endurance, as well as fighting abilities. One of the hallmarks of the series is "Buffy-speak," a particular style of witty, pop culture savvy dialogue. The fights in both the film and the series take much of their movement from martial arts. Sarah Michelle Gellar, who plays the title character in the series, has a martial arts background that regularly comes into play in her fights scenes, particularly in the regular use of high kicks.

The story begins with Ophelia waking up in a lab some time after both the events of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and a zombie apocalypse that has decimated most of humanity. She soon learns that she has been brought back from death by Fortinbras, the new ruler of Denmark, after which she is teamed up with Juliet and Lady Macbeth under the authority of Horatio, in order to fight the zombie hordes that threaten all of humanity. Denmark as one of the last holdouts, and this team represents a crack commando unit. The zombie hordes are under the command of the King and Queen of magic, who control the dead. The forces of magic see humanity as an evil unnatural pollutant that is destroying the earth. As it turns out, Hamlet is the King, with Titania and her fairies, as well as the weird sisters of *Macbeth* and Caliban from *The Tempest* as his allies. Juliet is in fact a double agent, whose sympathies are tested as she begins an affair with Lady Macbeth. In this scene, she attempts to bring Ophelia over to the side of magic against humanity:

> OPHELIA: I'd never join you. No Way.
>
> JULIET: Then don't do this for me. Do this for you. I got a surprise for ya, honey… The Zombie Lord… is your boyfriend.
>
> OPHELIA: You're lying.
>
> JULIET: It's Hamlet, Ophelia. And you can be with him. Again. Forever.
>
> OPHELIA: That's impossible.
>
> JULIET: So what do you say?
>
> *(OPHELIA smacks JULIET hard.)*
>
> *(JULIET feels her hurt. But instead of retaliating…)*

> JULIET: Bored now.[156]
> HEY!
>
> *(JULIET signals and another horde of masked zombies enter.)*
>
> OPHELIA: More zombies, Juliet? Come on, they're nothing.
>
> JULIET: These aren't regular zombies, O.
>
> *(The zombies all pull out martial arts weapons.)*
>
> JULIET: These are ninja zombies.
>
> OPHELIA: Zombies come in Ninja flavor?
>
> JULIET: Sorry about this, O. Don't take it personal.
> Rip her to shreds boys.
>
> *(The Zombie horde rush in and overwhelm OPHELIA. She disappears in a tidal wave of the dead. They pile over OPHELIA ripping away at her skin.)*
>
> *(JULIET waits and watches. When she sees that there's no fighting back – she exits.)*[157]

It is noteworthy that what distinguishes these zombies from the one that Ophelia might be able to easily dispatch is their capacity to fight in a martial arts style, as they are in fact "Ninja flavored." In this scene they do overwhelm Ophelia, who earlier in the play has been established as a skilled and dangerous combatant. As is clear from the context, their "ninja" quality is a popular culture reference rather than an allusion to historical Japanese assassins.

This equation of martial arts styled movement with a high level of physical agency is consistent in the script, as evidenced by the end of the encounter of Hamlet (and the

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[156] "Bored now." is a catchphrase of the character Willow in the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television series. This phrase is specific to episodes where this character (usually one of the protagonists) is evil.

[157] Nguyen, *Living Dead in Denmark*, 51-52.

Ghost/Zombie Lord) and Horatio:

> GHOST: Upon thy sword…
>
> *(The Zombie Lord falls into an elaborate kung fu fight stance.)*
>
> HORATIO: The fuck?
>
> GHOST: By heaven, I'll make a zombie of him that lets me.
>
> *(HAMLET attacks HORATIO. They fight furiously. HORATIO with all his might goes one on one with the Zombie Lord. It looks like a fair fight as the energy of the battle goes back and forth. However, the Zombie Lord begins to grow bored with the battle and allows HORATIO to stab him. Nothing. The Zombie Lord grabs HORATIO and tosses him across the stage like a rag doll.)*[158]

Martial arts are heavily equated with power in the fight scenes. It should be noted that the fight director for the Vampire Cowboys production of *Living Dead in Denmark* was not Qui Nguyen but Marius Hanford. In addition to being a fight director Hanford is a student of Kung Fu, and has been an assistant to SAFD Fight Master Mike Chin (also prominent in this study) who also practices Kung Fu.

In the Spring of 2011 two students in my stage combat course at Tufts University picked the Hamlet/Horatio fight as one of their final projects, in part because they wanted to perform a martial arts sequence.[159] One of the students had asked me earlier in the semester about plays that offered the opportunity to perform elaborate martial arts fights, and I suggested that he look up the Vampire Cowboys. As he is a fan of the source material, it was no surprise that he quickly became enamored of their work, and suggested another of their plays, *Fight Girl Battle World,* to another pair of students for their own scene. As I developed the final scenes with them we found that they were well served by a combination of short, quick sequences of connected hand movements meant to simulate Wing Chun and Kali, hip throws (occasionally interrupted halfway to the ground by exchanges of blows while in the air or reversed by “super strength”), and flashy high kicks. During the semester I had taught a workshop on simulated martial arts where we explored the rhythms and poses that signified advanced skills, and in this scene they expanded on those lessons and applied them to this play, which also included characters with impossible bodies.

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[158] Ibid, 40.

[159] The students made some adjustments to fit the scene into the context of their final, and the part of Hamlet was played by a woman. One important adjustment was that it was unarmed as opposed to a sword fight. Instead of Hamlet being stabbed she accepted a powerful kick to the head that "broke" her neck and knocked her head out of place, then with her hands "reset" her head and killed Horatio.

We learn through the course of the play that all three heroines are in fact zombies and that the evil Fortinbras has been conducting horrific experiments, including keeping the spirit of Laertes (played by a puppet) trapped in agony. Ophelia and Lady Macbeth are won over to the side of magic and goodness, and they, along with Juliet and Hamlet must face Fortinbras. This climactic fight is a drawn out, elaborate, all out brawl that begins with Hamlet and Ophelia, undergoes a dramatic reversal in which it appears that Fortinbras might overcome them, and escalates when Juliet and Lady Macbeth arrive to turn the tide once more. Taken in sections:

> FORTINBRAS: So the war between the living and the living-dead ends here.
>
> HAMLET: Actually, Fortin-fuck, This ain’t about war. This is about you hitting my girlfriend. And guess what?
>
> OPHELIA: She’s pissed.
>
> *(Hard hitting music pumps in. HAMLET, OPHELIA, and FORTINBRAS go at it in an all out kung-fu extravaganza. The fight goes back and forth, but with HAMLET and OPHELIA working as a team, they’re able to bring FORTINBRAS down.)*
>
> HAMLET: Ow.
>
> OPHELIA: Is he dead?
>
> HAMLET: Yeah, I think we totally kicked his ass.
>
> *(Suddenly, FORTINBRAS grabs HAMLET by the throat and slams his head into the ground over and over.)*
>
> FORTINBRAS: Silly zombie, death is for kids.
>
> *(FORTINBRAS turns his focus on OPHELIA. He slowly inches her way.*

She looks in trouble until-)[160]

In this first part of the fight, our protagonists fight together for the first time, a situation not unusual in Hong Kong cinema when heroes must band together to destroy a particularly powerful adversary. There is opportunity here both to display the prowess and teamwork of Hamlet and Ophelia in the initial victory, and then raise the stakes as their foe proves himself more durable than they had expected. This reversal also allows for the introduction of the second romantic couple into the fight, as well as a reunification of all the heroes (save Horatio):

> *(LADY MACBETH and JULIET rush in.)*
>
> LADY MACBETH: It looks like you could use a hand.
>
> JULIET: Lady! Jules?
>
> LADY MACBETH: Don't worry. I set her straight.
>
> JULIET: I don't think "straight" is the word.
>
> LADY MACBETH: Um, why is he smiling? Smiling isn't good.
>
> *(FORTINBRAS rips off his coat revealing what he's done to his body. His veins are aglow and he's riddled with scars. He's turned his body into something even more ghoulish than the zombies around him.)*
>
> JULIET, LADY MACHBETH & OPHELIA: Oh. Shit.
>
> FORTINBRAS: You girls have been bad.
>
> LADY MACBETH: You haven't seen bad just yet, muh-fuckah.
>
> JULIET: We're just starting.
>
> OPHELIA: It's girl-fight time.
>
> *(The three girls fall into impressive martial arts poses. They attack*

---

[160] Ibid, 68-69.

FORTINBRAS.)[161]

Here the stakes are raised even higher, as we learn that Fortinbras has by way of some foul play, increased his own level of physical agency beyond any other character in the play. It might be said that he has given himself a significantly more powerful, higher grade impossible body than any other characters, thus dramaturgically calling for far more intense choreography than would have previously taken place. Additionally, the stage directions (as well as earlier events) suggest that there is something "unclean" about his body. As the heroes are meant to be fighting on the side of nature and magic, Fortinbras is suggested as being a monstrosity forged in toxic waste.

"(And if you thought the fights earlier in this play were awesome, this throw-down makes the rest look like amateurish child's play.)"[162] This unconventional stage direction, in addition to perhaps serving as a record of the 2006 production, might be taken as a signal to a future fight director on where the playwright suggests that his priorities might lie. Also, it is worth noting that Nguyen is a professional fight director and experienced martial artist in his own right, as well as a fan of those genres that he uses as his source material. There is a certain sense of humor common among fight directors and martial artists in regards to how such scenes might be described. Nguyen at the point of his career when this was published had an established aesthetic, dedicated fan base, and supportive artistic community and pool of collaborators. He was also writing plays for his own company, and thus did not have to pay too much attention to formalities. Additionally, as the stage directions are stylistically consistent with his dialogue, as a published text they make sense in context:

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[161] Ibid, 69.
[162] Ibid.

> *(FORTINBRAS starts off strong, but is no match against OPHELIA, JULIET, and LADY MACBETH.)*
>
> *(In a final push to survive, FORTINBRAS almost gets the advantage, until OPHELIA summons the strength to take him out.)*
>
> *(Working together as a perfectly tuned fighting force, the three girls along with HAMLET defeat FORTINBRAS.)*[163]

The stage directions instruct the fight director as to the desired dramatic arc of this part of the fight, that is to say, the heroes establish physical dominance, the villain nearly reverses the situation in a moment of desperation, and then the protagonist reestablishes order and saves the day:

> *(OPHELIA grabs LADY MACBETH's battle axe and decapitates FORTINBRAS! Blood geysers out of him for exactly forty-five seconds.)*[164]

This last instruction is to end the fight with a visual spectacle that leaves no doubt as to the villain's demise, and also perhaps allows shades of parody back into the audience's consciousness.

A series of fight sequences such as this finale requires production and rehearsal values that focus on physical storytelling: That is to say, far more and far longer fight rehearsals than most contemporary plays. As the power dynamics and relationships shift during the fight it is important that the choreography supports the story, and that the actors are capable of executing it. This suggests a casting process that favors strong physical performers. To paraphrase Parker's quote, more Meyerhold, less Stanislavski. While there is an obvious lightheartedness to the stage directions, they are descriptive of a certain aesthetic within popular culture in comic books as well as action films and television. That aesthetic and the expectations it places on certain types of violence is consistent with popular portrayals of martial arts. Those portrayals imply a narrative rhythm to performed violence that is unlikely to occur in real assaults as well as a fantasy element that allows more visually appealing movements greater effectiveness.

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[163] Ibid, 69-70.

[164] Ibid, 70.

To address the fantasy element in violence, especially as it applies to the narrative construct of impossible bodies, let us return to Newtonian mechanics once more. It would fit the aesthetic logic of these plays in production for a smaller woman to strike a large man and send him sprawling across the stage. The effectiveness of a blow can be measured by the Newton's Second Law, $F=ma$ (Force equals Mass times Acceleration). Assuming for the sake of argument a one hundred pound woman and a two-hundred-and-fifty pound man playing these characters, the amount of acceleration she would need to generate to send him sprawling across space would make the blow itself nearly impossible for the untrained eye to follow, and therefore ineffective as a narrative device.[165] Should it happen at a speed that an audience could track, the male actor would in fact be simulating the effects of a blow from a significantly more massive attacker. However, by creating such a sequence of events onstage the female character, enjoying the benefits of an impossible body, can in fact strike a blow that defies the principles of classical mechanics. Television shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* have made audiences accustomed to seeing these violations of Newton's law, and so their appearance onstage is no surprise.

Living Dead In Demark has been produced by several other companies since its publication. Reviews often go into some detail on the fight sequences and the martial arts, as these are essential elements of the play. Why this is so, other than fitting in with the aesthetic of the original company, may have a lot to do with the clear Joss Whedon/*Buffy* influence referentiality and that television show's reliance on martial arts, but also because as the characters are superheroes of a sort and in possession of impossible bodies, we expect them to fight as such. Martial arts inspired movement is a clear signifier of physical agency in a way that more unmarked combat is not. Boxing and wrestling do not carry the same implications of greater physical agency. This is in part because they are not as exoticized, but also in part because as recognizable sports with a relatively high social profile the cause-and-effect relationships between their techniques and their results would make choreography based in these systems that seemingly violate classical mechanics require greater suspension of disbelief on the part of an audience. It is harder to sell a petite woman knocking out a large man with a left cross than it is to sell the same result from a "Karate chop."

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[165] This in no way implies a belief that smaller women are incapable of defending themselves from larger assailants.

Vampire Cowboys Trilogy by Qui Nyguen and Robert Ross Parker

This play was the first major collaboration between Nguyen and Parker. It was workshopped at Ohio University in 2000, and later performed in NYC in 2004 at NY Fringe Festival. The play consists of three comedies that each lampoons a different pop culture genre, along with comic interludes and an introduction. It laid the framework for their later shows, and the roots of their aesthetic are clearly laid out.

The first one act is a sendup of film noir, and not pertinent to this study. The third is set in a high school but has a quite a bit in common with the series, *Xena: Warrior*

Princess (1995-2001)[166] and suggests but does not demand martial arts.

The second one act in the trilogy, *The Adventures of Captain Justice and Liberty Lady*, is a sendup of 1960s superhero comics. It has the most bearing on this study as it contains overt demands for martial arts-influenced stage combat, for instance in the following dialogue:

> HOODED MENACE: You're such a bitch. You know, this is definitely not a fair fight. Let's even this match up, shall we? Non-Norwegian Ninjas, attack!
>
> *(Two NINJAS appear)*
>
> CAPTAIN JUSTICE and LIBERTY LADY: Ninja, please!
>
> *(LIBERTY LADY begins to fight the NINJAS, but they are clearly better fighters than she. CAP tries to help, but gets beaten down for his help.)*
>
> LIBERTY LADY: These aren't regular Norwegian Ninjas, Cap!
>
> CAPTAIN JUSTICE: No, they're not. There's only one way to stop these guys.
>
> LIBERTY LADY: The Disks of Democracy!
>
> *(CAP and LIBERTY LADY free themselves from the fight and nail the two NINJAS with their Frisbees, knocking them unconscious.)*
>
> HOODED MENACE: No!!! Damn it to fuck! You know how much money we lose every time you guys use those things?
>
> CAPTAIN JUSTICE: Will you never learn Menace?
>
> LIBERTY LADY: I guess not even Pinko Commie Ninjas can stop Justice.[167]

It should be noted that earlier in the play The Hooded Menace had Norwegian Ninjas as henchmen. Being Scandanavian, they were not proficient in martial arts and thus easily taken down by our heroes. There is also a scene earlier in the play wherein the Hooded Menace is convinced by another, more sinister villain that Norwegian Ninjas, despite having quite a ring to their names, are far less effective henchmen than “normal Japanese ones who actually knew martial arts.”[168] This creates the need for a clear choreographic distinction between the earlier ninja encounters with the Norwegians and the above encounter with the “normal” ninjas requiring a movement style that signifies a higher threat level to the heroes. It must be clear that Liberty Lady is out of her depth when engaging these ninjas in hand to hand combat, and that this new power dynamic is a surprise to that character.

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[166] *Xena: Warrior Princess* was a popular television series set in a fictionalized Ancient Greece and had many figures from Greek mythology as recurring characters.

[167] Nguyen and Parker, *Vampire Cowboys Trilogy*, 37.

The supervillain who instigated the Hooded Menace’s new strategies is known as the Spectator. This character represents a high level of threat in that he can cross planes of existence. He brings the heroes to the “real world” where their powers do not exist:

> ANNOUNCER: It seems the Hooded Menace’s plan has been foiled once again by America’s favorite fighting duo-
>
> HOODED MENACE: Guess again, American-Hole! Now, Spectator.
>
> *(The lights come up with an ominous sound revealing the audience, the ANNOUNCER, and everything.)*
>
> LIBERTY LADY: What’s all this?
>
> HOODED MENACE: My world, bitch.
>
> CAPTAIN JUSTICE: Well, your world ends now. You’re coming with us.
>
> *(CAPTAIN JUSTICE throws a disk and hits MENACE in the chest with it. It just bounces off.)*

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[168] Ibid, 35.

> LIBERTY LADY: The Disk of Democracy!
>
> HOODED MENACE: You mean this frisbee?[169]

The impossible bodies of the heroes are now subject to the laws of physics. Perhaps more devastating, their idealism is suddenly just plain silly. It is only by actually killing the Hooded Menace by grabbing him and breaking his neck with his bare hands that Captain Justice convinces the Spectator to return them to their own world. It is there where their impossible bodies come back into play and Cold War idealism makes sense once more.

Also important to this study are the Vampire Cowboy interlude portions of the trilogy (from which the play, and later the company, takes their name). In each one, two cowboys face off with the confrontation ending in a vampire bite. The interludes intensify, with the third being the most martial arts heavy:

> VAMPIRE COWBOY SEQUENCE #3
>
> *Two COWBOYS face each other in a classic showdown. Slowly and dangerously, they advance toward one another. They stare each other down, ready to draw their guns at any moment. Suddenly, both of them pull out samurai swords. They run toward each other and begin fighting an elaborate sword spectacle. But even though the blades are sharp and their skills are impressive, the fight ends when one of the cowboys bares his fangs and sinks them deep in the neck of the other.*
>
> NON-VAMPIRE COWBOY: Ohgodno![170]

What is of special interest in the interludes is that each one ends with a vampire bite, despite whatever precedes it. In this case, a long elaborate duel with katana bears little or no relation to the end of the fight, separating the movement system and the weaponry from any consequences. Applying the benign violation theory of humor to this, there is comedy here in that violence with deadly weapons, a violation, has no bearing on a character's well being, and is thus benign. Additionally, conventional logic is violated in that the cowboys (or at least one of them) is a vampire, and also that a martial arts style swordfight ends with a movement that is outside the norm.

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[169] Ibid, 37.
[170] Ibid, 39.

The Vampire Cowboys Trilogy is important in that it was the foundation on which the future collaborations of Nguyen and Parker were built. They have been working together for nearly ten years and their work has become far more elaborate and ambitious since then.

Aliens Vs. Cheerleaders by Qui Nguyen **-** Produced and published 2010

Aliens Vs Cheerleaders was performed and published in 2010, as a Playscripts.com commission with Keen Teens. It has been produced several times by schools in the United States and Great Britain since its publication as a one-act play aimed at high school theatre programs. While not a Vampire Cowboys play per se, it was first directed by Vampire Cowboys co-artistic director Robert Ross Parker. It is being included in this study as it contains many elements of a Vampire Cowboys script in a shortened (and less foul-mouthed) form. Also, as it is published by Playscripts.com, a company known for its aggressive marketing, it is a play that has already and will continue to disseminate the Vampire Cowboys aesthetic.

The storyline of this play is that hostile aliens invade a small town high school, but the cheerleading squad happens to be an elite fighting force tasked with combating this specific sort of threat. As the invasion is underway, the cheerleaders take in a new recruit, who will later save the day:

> MOLLY: What are you guys?
>
> TINA: Us? Well that's kind of hard to explain.
>
> GABBY: We're a covert military tactical strike force aimed at defending our planet from extraterrestrial invaders.
>
> TINA: Okay, maybe not that hard.
>
> MISSY: We've been trained in over twenty-seven different forms of martial arts including space kung fu, space karate, and space krumping[171].[172]

The stage directions for the final fight scene is explicit in calling for martial arts:

> *(YA-WI, G'BRILL and MIKAH attack. MOLLY and LEWIS go at it martial arts style against the three alien beasts using Kung Fu and Capoeira. It's intense. It's awesome. In the end MOLLY and LEWIS win.)*[173]

Aliens Vs Cheerleaders contains most of the elements of their longer plays, including the sense of humor tied to physically demanding performances. Also, as later noted by the playwright himself in the self-referential dialogue of *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G*, the central characters tend to be strong women who rescue comparatively weaker men, this event from earlier in the play for example:

> MOLLY: [o audience] Anyone with any true sense of style, wit, or intellect would rather suffer daily beatings from the lame and dimwitted than be caught in one of those tacky and utterly whack uniforms.
>
> *(Lights up on LEWIS, a Harry Potter-esque nerd, getting picked on by two jocks.)*
>
> HURT[174]: Yo, Harry Potter, where you rushing off to?
>
> BURNOUT: Yeah, why you rushin'?

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[171] Krumping is a Hip-Hop dance style.

[172] Nguyen, *Aliens Vs. Cheerleaders, 19.*

[173] Ibid, 26.

[174] Hurt and Burnout are also the names of two very similar thug characters that make a brief appearance in *Soul Samurai*, and suffer similar retribution for their bullying ways.

> MOLLY: However, this is high school where indeed anyone with any true sense of style, wit, or intellect suffers just that.
>
> LEWIS: My name's not Harry Potter.
>
> HURT: I think it is. I think you're a little wizard. Show us a magic trick wizard!
>
> LEWIS: Don't touch me.
>
> HURT: Or what?
>
> BURNOUT: Yeah, or what?
>
> *(MOLLY enters)*
>
> MOLLY: Or I'll have to show you lady-dogs my favorite sleight of hand.
>
> HURT: Oh yeah? And what's that?
>
> MOLLY: Tattooing your behinds with my Nike swooshes.
>
> BURNOUT: Um, I don't think that's an actual magic trick.
>
> *(HURT goes for a sucker punch. MOLLY reverses the move and slams him to the ground. BURNOUT tries to help, but MOLLY easily takes him out too. Both the bullies lie on the ground in pain.)*
>
> LEWIS: Wow, thanks Molly.[175]

As this occurs prior to Molly and Lewis being recruited by the Cheerleading squad and receiving advanced combat training, the stage directions imply a fairly effective technical response to Hurt's attack on the part of Molly, giving her a higher level of physical self determination by way of fighting skill. It is this event that leads to her being asked to join the cheerleaders, which allows her both the additional training and the initiative to dispose of the aliens, the far more dangerous bullies, at the climax of the play.

The No Refunds Theatre in Minneapolis, MN

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[175] Ibid, 11-12.

By way of comparison, in a similar vein to the Vampire Cowboys is the No Refunds Theatre in Minneapolis. They were founded in 2002 by Matt Dawson, Christopher Howie, and Gabe Llanas, and incorporated as a non profit in 2004. Their first show was *Kung Fu Hamlet*, which premiered at the Minnesota Fringe festival and has been remounted several times to critical acclaim.

Kung Fu Hamlet is a mash-up of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with 1970s Hong Kong Cinema. In this play, Hamlet studied at the Shaolin Temple rather than Wittenburg, Polonius is the head of Elsinore's security, and Claudius killed the elder Hamlet with a secret death touch[176]. The script calls for offstage voice actors to speak the dialogue while the actors onstage mouth the words out of sync, much like poorly dubbed kung fu movies. The published script also has diagrams instructing one how to perform the various secret moves of different characters. Much like the Vampire Cowboys, their work contains strong elements of Camp. There are multiple "in-jokes" inherent in parodying Hong Kong cinema of that period. Also like the Vampire Cowboys, there is a sense of appreciation for the source material. Sontag writes that "Camp taste is a kind of love…"[177] The published diagrams of the "secret moves," while being both reminiscent and parodic of manuals that appear in various martial arts films[178], also outline movements that would in fact make for clear storytelling in the context of the play.

The script calls for constant stylized fighting, even when characters are not trying to harm each other. Since the movements called for are so character specific, they serve to illustrate family ties, power, and status. This scene between Ophelia and Laertes is one example:

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[176] The death touch, or *Dim Mak* is a legend in Chinese martial arts. Allegedly a master can summon his internal energy and hit opponents at a specific point that will ensure their demise.

[177] Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 65.

[178] The 1967 Shaw Brothers film *One-Armed Swordsman* is a well-known example of a martial arts manual being a key element of a story.

> OPHELIA: So, my big brother thinks they can teach him better at Shaolin than we can teach him here. I think you deserve a few lessons before you take your leave, and I know just the girl to give them to you.
>
> *(They begin fighting)*
>
> LAERTES: Ah, sister, I see you have been training hard.
>
> OPHELIA: Thank you for noticing.
>
> *(They fight more)*
>
> LAERTES: Very good, but that's not our family's Kung Fu, where did you learn that?
>
> OPHELIA: The Prince Hamlet taught me.
>
> LAERTES: What?
>
> *(LAERTES stops fighting in surprise and OPHELIA strikes him)*
>
> OPHELIA: Are you all right, brother?
>
> LAERTES: Never mind that, you have been training with the Prince Hamlet?
>
> OPHELIA: Yes, brother, I have.
>
> LAERTES: I want you to stop that, you hear?
>
> OPHELIA: But…
>
> LAERTES: There'll be no buts about it, I'm your brother, and I say stop. Listen here, sister, their family's style is not like ours, they're dirty, I've even heard rumor of a secret fatal maneuver, passed down from generation to generation.
>
> OPHELIA: But our family has a secret fatal maneuver as well.
>
> LAERTES: Yes, but our Quick Mortal Claw delivers a fast and painless

> death. Their maneuver, I've heard gives a painful and slow death.
> Elsinore's Kung Fu is a style of pain; this is a house of pain.[179]

This passage illustrates several tropes of the Kung Fu genre: the family style, the death touch, secret techniques, and vigorous fighting as a mode of conversation, as well as conversations about the fights as they are happening.

Kung Fu Hamlet calls for highly stylized stage combat imitative of Hong Kong cinema. Interestingly enough, Hong Kong cinema makes great use of Beijing Opera movement, so this is in fact a case of theatre imitating film imitating theatre. The dialogue and plot points are imitative of cult classics such as *Five Deadly Venoms* and the films of the Shaw Brothers.

The No Refunds Theatre continues to produce popular shows in the Twin Cities. They've done adaptations of classics as well as work based on graphic novels and other popular culture genres. They are regulars at the Minnesota Fringe Festival and respected members of the Twin Cities artistic community, though thus far they have not gained national recognition.

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[179] Llanas, *Kung Fu Hamlet,* 120-122.

Conclusion

Bringing a Real Perspective to Impossible Bodies

The Realities of Violence in Light of the Fantasy of Simulacra

Martial arts hold a special place in the popular imagination. They imply a narrative of discipline, enhanced physical agency, exotic origins, and elite skills. Their place in fantasy does have distant roots in reality, but the further a society exists from day-to-day violence, the more extreme and distant from reality their fantasies regarding violence can become. Martial arts simultaneously exist as both a popular fantasy and as numerous embodied traditions practiced by devoted students. The interchanges between the simulations of combat occurring in a martial arts school and the simulacra of combat occurring in popular media are related in that students of a particular form will be drawn to its media representations (and that same form might garner new students from a popular movie) while the choreographer of said simulacra will often refer to the original form. Both of these phenomena intersect in live performance.

The illusions involved in theatrical representations of martial arts have greater transparency due to the immediacy of the audience's experience. An actor "knocked out" by a "secret death touch" requires a different suspension of disbelief than the same actor knocked out by a John Wayne punch. The strings that hold up the impossible body are clearly visible in the first case. The performer's craft makes the artifice apparent. Arguably, this self-awareness of the suspension of disbelief is part of what provides the audience pleasure. This also explains to a large extent why such sequences are so often funny. A superhuman movement providing a visible violation of classical mechanics is a benign violation with strong potential for Camp. The impossible body can provide as much humor as awe. Dewdrop's dispatching of the vampire hordes in *Soul Samurai* is not so different from Sarah's trouncing of her husband in *Company*. Both scripts offer a cast and production team ample opportunity to create physical spectacles. In both cases humor is an essential element in those spectacles. In such cases as *Shogun Macbeth* and *Throne of Blood*, where the bodies are not quite as impossible, the violence might be as spectacular, but humor is no longer an element of the experience. The problems of creating the illusion of skill still remain, but those skills are more closely aligned with the realities of the movement systems being simulated and thus remain in the realm of what the (highly trained) human body is actually capable of. In the case of *Throne of Blood*, that training is signified through advanced simulacra that bear even less resemblance to the point of origin than does conventional stage combat. It is a unique case of an impossible body standing in for a body that is highly trained and efficient, but still within the realm of possibility. In the case of *Burn This*, the reversal provided by the first manifestation of advanced fighting skills provides a measure of comic relief. The level of skill portrayed will vary from production to production, but I would venture that the more spectacular (and improbable) the throw, the greater the comedy. The comic nature of the impossible body in live performance is a mainstay of the Vampire Cowboys and of No Refunds Theatre. As a major premise of each play is a benign violation, major characters have skills and abilities that do not in fact occur in nature, thus their movements and the dialogue around them draw upon advanced simulacra which form the basis of their aesthetic.

Actors have portrayed mythological beings from the very beginnings of theatre. The difference now is that stage movement is often held to the visual standards of the screen. It is on the screen that impossible bodies have taken on a new omnipresence. Mythological beings by their nature inhabit impossible bodies. By endowing a movement practice with abilities that exist outside of the realm of physical possibility, the portrayal of martial arts has given rise to the everyday character enjoying a level of physical prowess formerly reserved for gods and heroes. The fantasy is now accessible, the impossibility is now a matter of course, and the results of these comic combats are often for relatively low stakes as well as high comedy. Previous theories of "The Body" are often too abstract to take movement and technique into account. Foucault's concept of technologies of the body is useful as a starting point to analyze movement, but the methods and aesthetics of portraying simulacra of violence that no longer have any roots in physical reality have not been given sufficient attention. We live in our bodies, how those bodies are portrayed is not without consequence.

I am writing this dissertation on fantasies of violence while very real violence (and the aftermath of such) is in the news on a daily basis. Osama Bin Laden was recently killed by US Navy SEALS[180], nearly ten years after I myself walked out of a subway turnstile at the World Trade Center in New York City one morning to a wall of screaming people running directly at me. The United States is involved in two wars overseas, my family in Israel continues to live under constant threat of terrorist attack, and popular revolutions are sweeping the Arab world. What then does this study of violence teach us about the world at large?

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[180] The elite special operations unit of the US Navy.

Violence takes place between real bodies in real space and real time. The consequences, be they physical, emotional, or legal, can last far beyond the event itself. Footage of real violence is generally difficult to follow and understand for the untrained eye. Taking a step towards socialized violence, many combat sports are only accessible to the trained eye. In the case of Olympic fencing, a sport with roots in training for life-or-death duels, there is an agreed upon conflict between two opponents with complete commitment to attack and defense. It is a sport with a long tradition, yet spectators do not flock to fencing matches. Similarly, in the early days of the UFC when it was dominated by the Gracie Jujutsu family and there where no rounds or time limits, it was possible for bouts to take over a half hour with most of it in an apparent stalemate. Not a situation conducive to creating a large following. Personal violence is not a day-to-day fact of life for the majority of the population in modern American society, therefore the violence that we as a culture are primarily exposed to is in the realm of simulacra. And those simulacra are largely populated by impossible bodies.

As discussed earlier, impossible bodies do not behave as real bodies do. The effects of adrenaline are not apparent. Injuries are not the messy affairs that populate the trauma ward of emergency rooms or field hospitals. Impossible bodies more often than not succeed in their missions with minimal complications, or only with complications that make for better storylines. They fly. They throw fireballs. They never miss. And, unlike their counterparts in reality, their actions form a clear and easy-to-follow narrative when they engage in physical conflict.

When these commonplace impossible bodies appear in popular film, comic books, and video games, their performance is flawless. The narratives they exist in grant a sense of verisimilitude to their actions, and those actions in turn reinforce the narratives. The theatre however, is seen by a live audience, sometimes in a very small theatre. When the impossible bodies of mass media appear in the very personal and direct medium of live performance, they appear with a wink. The knowing suspension of disbelief experienced watching a character take a bold leap from one vehicle to another during a simulated motorcycle chase sequence with ninjas on stage comes with the knowledge that such an event simply does not happen in the real world. The same event occurs on film realistically as a matter of course. Enough exposure to mass media representations of the impossible body leads us to expect such bodies in the news. When Navy SEALS in a high risk situation kill rather than capture a wanted terrorist, some commentators deride this as though it were a choice made under leisurely circumstances; as if they could just press the reset button on their video game console if their characters die and play the scene again for a higher score. Similar standards of impossibility in violence encounters are commonplace in commentary on the Middle East. When an Israeli soldier fearing for his life fires on a man attacking him with a crowbar, the consequences of a crowbar to the collarbone, followed by repeated strikes by that same weapon once that soldier is down and the resulting permanent damage, or even death, that would ensue, do not even enter the discourse. Of course the politics of these situations are incredibly complex and outside the scope of this study, but how the events themselves are presented to the public reflects a certain blurring of lines between impossible bodies and the realities of violence.

The stage shows the impossible body to be exactly that, impossible. Audiences are far more aware of their suspension of disbelief in the theatre. No matter how skilled the performers and how sophisticated the choreography, the elements of fantasy are impossible to ignore. The myths of impossible bodies effortlessly engaging in heroic feats have deep roots. Those myths have been articulated and rearticulated in mass media, and in the constructed "histories" of many schools of martial arts for quite some time, and have formed a dominant narrative of what the human body can do in violent conflict. That narrative is the basis for some wonderful entertainment, but since as a society we have lost sight of the original body, we have begun to accept an embellished map of a nonexistent territory.[181] Perhaps by clarifying the fantasy of the simulacra of impossible bodies in motion, skilled fight directors of these sequences can sharpen our view of reality as well.

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[181] There is a great deal of research being done concerning body image and personal expectations. This is outside the realm of this dissertation, but it is arguable that the media ideal that people strive for is an impossible body.

APPENDIX A

Additional Mainstream Plays and Musicals Containing Martial Arts

***The Revenge of the SPACE PANDAS or Binky Rudich and the Two-Speed Clock* by David Mamet (1976)**

This rarely performed children's play is a science fiction adventure in which a group of children and their talking stuffed sheep, Bob, travel to the planet Crestview through the use of a two-speed clock. There they encounter a planet inhabited by militant space pandas, whose leader attempts to kidnap the sheep and have the children executed by having a giant pumpkin dropped on them. The title character eventually fixes the two-speed clock (his own invention) and manages to return home with his friends.

Martial arts make an appearance in two stage directions, "VIVIAN defends BOB's rear through karate as the escape is attempted" [182], and, "VIVIAN is holding off the hordes of attacking SPACE PANDAS with karate."[183] Both of these stage directions suggest that the inclusion of martial arts into the world of the play is a continuation of the playfulness of the entirety of the script. Martial arts violence in the context of this play does not carry excessive consequences and adds to the spirit of science fiction adventure. The fact that it is the female tomboy character who does the fighting is also an interesting element of the play.

Having fight-directed an undergraduate workshop production of this play at Brandeis University in 2003 under the supervision of Arthur Holmberg, I can relate that our production played these scenes for theatricality and comedy. We had cast members with Tae Kwon Do and gymnastics backgrounds, which came into play for the creation of spectacle driven, action movie inspired fights.

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[182] Mamet, *Revenge of the Space Pandas*, 32.
[183] Ibid, 57.

***Mr. Marmalade* by Noah Haidle (2004)**

Mr. Marmalade is a dark comedy about a young girl, Lucy (age 4), her abusive, neglectful and cocaine addicted adult imaginary friend, Mr. Marmalade, his personal assistant, Bradley, and her friend and neighbor, Larry (age 5), as well as Lucy and Larry's respective family members. The play traces Lucy's relationships with the other characters, including her growing friendship with Larry. This is a play in which children are played by adult actors.

What follows is a scene in which Mr. Marmalade assaults Lucy, which leads to his having a physical confrontation with Larry:

> Lucy: I'm sorry, Mr. Marmalade.
>
> Mr. Marmalade: You fucking cunt.
>
> Lucy: You're high. You don't mean what you're saying.
>
> Mr. Marmalade: News flash! I've been high since the beginning, okay?
>
> Lucy: I never meant to hurt you. *(He hits her in the face. She falls to the ground. Her lip bleeds.)*
>
> Mr. Marmalade: You never meant to hurt me? *(He spits on her. Larry appears.)* Who the fuck is this? *(She won't tell.)* Answer me, bitch. Who the fuck is this?
>
> Larry: I'm Larry.
>
> Lucy: Larry?

Larry: I’ll handle this, Lucy.

Mr. Marmalade: You’re Larry. This is fucking Larry!!!

Larry: Shut up, dude.

Mr. Marmalade: Fuck you, Larry. This is private.

Larry: You’re leaving.

Mr. Marmalade: I’m not leaving.

Larry: Yes you are.

Mr. Marmalade: Who’s gonna make me?

Larry: I am.

Mr. Marmalade: You and what army?

Larry: Just me.

Mr. Marmalade: Fuck you, Larry. *(Mr. Marmalade takes a swing at Larry, but Larry dodges it, and quickly puts Mr. Marmalade into a very painful submission hold.)*

Larry: I’m a green belt in Brazilian Jujitsu.

Mr Marmalade: Easy, Larry.

Larry: I can break your arm in five places.

Mr. Marmalade: Let’s not do anything we’re gonna regret, Larry.

Larry: You think I’ll regret kicking your ass?

Mr. Marmalade: There will be legal ramifications. That’s all I’m saying, okay?

Larry: You’re leaving.

Mr. Marmalade: Owwwww. Fine. I’m leaving.

Larry: And you're not allowed to come back. Do we understand each other, dude?

Mr. Marmalade: Loud and clear, Larry. Just let go of my arm.

Larry: You're not going to bother Lucy anymore. Right?

Mr. Marmalade: Owwwww. Right. Right. *(Larry lets go. Mr. Marmalade gathers all of his magazines and dildos and puts them in his briefcase.)* You better hope there's no nerve damage, you little shit. Expect to hear from my lawyer in due course. *(He disappears.)*

Larry: Are you okay? Are you bleeding?

Lucy: Maybe a little bit.

Larry: Here, let me. *(He dabs at the blood with a bandage from his wrist.)* Who was that guy?

Lucy: He used to be my friend. His name's Mr. Marmalade.[184]

In this scene a five-year-old boy subdues a violent adult male through the application of a martial arts technique from the beginner to intermediate curriculum of Brazilian Jujitsu[185]. In most ranking systems a green belt is an early rank achievable in under a year of training. This sequence follows the trend in suggesting that martial arts endow those who study them with an extraordinary capacity to triumph in violent encounters despite the physical odds. Once Mr. Marmalade attacks Larry he remains in a pain compliance or submission hold[186] until Larry extracts a promise to leave Lucy alone. This requires choreography wherein Larry's physical dominance is clear and where the performers can articulate to the audience that Larry might be applying additional pressure to Mr. Marmalade's skeletal structure in order to coerce agreement to his stated terms.

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[184] Haidle, *Mr. Marmalade,* 28-29.

[185] Brazilian Jujitsu is an offshoot of Judo developed in Brazil that focuses heavily on groundwork and has a reputation for particularly aggressive training methods. It has become popularized worldwide with the advent of the UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship) Mixed Martial Arts (or MMA) competition in the early 1990s. The UFC was restructured in 2001 (in part to increase safety and decrease liability) and soon after enjoyed a significant growth in popularity.

It is an obvious statement that the idea of a five-year-old defeating an adult with the use of such techniques is far from realistic. It is part of the comedy of this scene, especially the statement about holding green belt rank. This is the only time in the play that Larry makes any mention of martial arts. The sudden appearance of these skills and their application serve as a comic reversal of power. That Larry studies Brazilian Jujitsu is in part a joke in and of itself as that discipline has a reputation for harsh training methods. And, it is in part a reflection of current popular trends in martial arts as Brazilian Jujitsu plays a key role in Mixed Martial Arts competitions such as the UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship), which at the time of the play's writing were immensely popular.

***Shakesploitation!* By Andy Grigg (2005)**

Shakesploitation! is a parody that has had successful productions in various venues in Philadelphia and Chicago. It consists of three parts, *Grand Theft Othello: Venice City* (based on the popular *Grand Theft Auto* video game franchise)*, Romeo and*

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[186] Submission holds are similar to pain compliance holds, though the context is competition wherein one competitor is applying pressure to a joint, requiring his or her opponent to "tap out" or admit defeat. The phrase "tap, snap, or nap" refers to either tapping out or having a bone or joint snapped, or passing out from oxygen deprivation in the case of a chokehold.

Juliet II: Apocalypse (in which the titular characters return as zombies), and *Ninja Hamlet: Burning Fist of Denmark*. There was a sequel some years later entitled *Shakesploitation II: Iambic Boogalo*. For the purposes of this study I am concerned with *Ninja Hamlet: Burning Fist of Denmark* as it is a send-up of both *Hamlet* and martial arts cinema. In this play, Hamlet must seek out Phat Ho, Master of the Burning Fist technique, in order to avenge his father. The characters speak in the style of overdubbed Hong Kong martial arts movies of the 1960s and 70s, complete with grunts. A note in the manuscript reads,

> The characters in this play, unless otherwise noted, use accents in keeping with Kung Fu movies of the late 60s and 70s. Chiefly, accents should be from those movies where Australian actors provide the voice-over for American versions. Hamlet himself, should have a similar accent, but one that is easily sustained and can portray Hamlet quick pace, but as a somewhat dim-witted character.[187]

It includes many other of the tropes of the genre, including of course the quest to find a master teacher so as to learn a secret technique. Though it contains many elements of martial arts cinema, the script does not call for the elaborate choreography necessary to produce such plays as *Living Dead in Denmark* or *Kung Fu Hamlet* but instead the dialogue and stage directions dictate that the combat itself be parodic. There is great potential for humor here as virtually every moment in the play is a benign violation of expectations set by Hong Kong cinema. The "Burning Fist Technique" itself is a parody of secret unstoppable techniques, as we learn when Hamlet encounters the Ghost,

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[187] Grigg, *Shakesploitation!*, 32.

Hamlet *(astonished):* Who – who are you?

Ghost: I am the Ghost of your father.

Hamlet: You are a fool! My father is dead, he died mysteriously, it is sad. *(Pause.)* I don't know who you are, but I will kill you for degrading my father's memory because I loved him, understand, you sonofabitch?

Hamlet screams and runs at the Ghost, who punches him once using the Burning Fist technique (this technique is composed as a single simple punch, little more than a straight punch to the face. Whenever a character uses the Burning Fist technique, it should be uniform and followed by a dramatic sound effect). Hamlet, stunned, falls to the ground.

Hamlet *(Standing)*: Can it be? The Burning Fist technique, but – Listen here, you, I don't know just who you are, but you won't get away with that again.

Hamlet runs at the Ghost, who punches him again with the Burning Fist technique. Hamlet falls to the ground again.

Hamlet *(Wearily, standing)*: That was – just another lucky punch, but this time –

Ghost sighs. He slaps Hamlet.

Hamlet *(in reaction to the slap)*: Father!

Ghost: That's right! Now listen to me! I was murdered, understand?[188]

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[188] Ibid, 35-36.

The combat required for this play is more of a parody of martial arts than a simulation. The crisp rhythms of the fight scenes in the films being parodied might in fact distract from the humor of the piece as too close a similarity might make a production appear to be too much in earnest. Though the characters all have impossible bodies, their impossibilities are exaggerated by the disproportionate response to their pedestrian actions rather than by simulating an impossible virtuosity. The script calls for no elaborate fight scenes, even Laertes' poisoning of Hamlet is reduced to a gag,

> Laertes: Huh! So you think you can just apologize and everything will be fine? Well think again, and think better this time! I will destroy you, do you understand? I have travelled many places and learned a great deal of kung fu! Like… here!
>
> *Laertes crosses slowly over to Hamlet, touches him very softly on the shoulder.*
>
> Hamlet: What was that?
>
> Laertes: That was the Poison Flying Dragon Touch! You'll be dead in ten minutes![189]

Here, as in the rest of the play, movement that parodies martial arts is called for, as opposed to movement which simulates it. As so much of the humor relies on familiarity with the genre being parodied, the play appears to call for physicality that is the direct opposite of the source material. Despite this, the characters still have impossible bodies due to the enhanced physical agency granted by their martial arts expertise.

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[189] Ibid, 57.

boom by Peter Sinn Nachtrieb (2008)

boom is a post-apocalyptic comedy in which a marine biologist lures a young woman into his lab (which is located in a bomb shelter) because he has predicted the arrival of a comet that will strike the earth. He intends to couple with her and repopulate the planet. The only other advanced organisms in the lab are some fish in a tank. The man and woman are incompatible, in part because he is a homosexual. The comet strikes, and the world outside the shelter is destroyed. The main story is a play within a play as the major action takes place in an animated museum diorama operated by a woman named "Barbara." We learn that the outside play is set in the distant future and that Barbara is the curator of this particular exhibit about a significant event in the "past." At the end of the play we learn that the purpose of the leading characters in the mythology of the play was to keep the fish in the tank alive, as the spawn of those fish will evolve into the new civilization that contains the museum, while there are no longer any descendents of humanity.

The woman, Jo, has the physical power in the play because she knows karate. There are "karate chops" written into the stage directions in which she strikes the scientist in a debilitating way at various points (numerous times in act one). In the first instance, the stage direction reads, "With a yell, Jo karate-chops Jules. He falls to the ground, and Jo grabs the keys from Jules' pocket."[190] The disparity in physical agency is made even clearer in a later scene (Act II in the Boston Premiere) which takes place several months later and begins with the scientist sporting a broken leg which we later learn was the handiwork of Jo. Because one character has recourse to violence that the other has no real defense against, the power dynamic is shifted. Violence serves the comedy in that at no time are we concerned that Jo might be raped or physically dominated against her will.

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[190] Nachtrieb, *boom*, 25.

In an interview with Angie Jepson[191], the fight director of the Boston premiere of *boom* at New Rep Downstage, which opened on February 22, 2010, she affirmed that the director, Bridget O'Leary, stated that the character of Jo was a black belt. When asked what that meant to her as the fight director, Jepson stated that it meant "quick and efficient execution." It should be noted that Jepson, while proficient in stage combat and other forms of theatrical movement, is not a trained martial artist. She stated a belief that it is a fight director's ongoing job to continue to learn as much as possible about different fighting disciplines, and her articulation of her process supported that statement.

Jepson's process, like that of any designer, began with the script. As fight director, she focused on moments of violence. As the "karate-chops" were not the only moments of violent physicality in the play and she had a total of six hours with the actors during the entire rehearsal process, they were not her primary concern. She did research through YouTube videos, movies, and consulting with a Karate practitioner. Jepson sought "a balance between what is right and what is stageworthy." She echoed the sentiments of many fight directors when she stated "We want what is best for the production. What works best for the actor is what works best for the production." The "karate-chop" sequences were meant to make the actress playing Jo more powerful. Jepson stated that she would have preferred that the blows be clearer than they were, and that the shout of "HIYA!" during the blows was added by the actress. She further added that she never looked at the Karate moments as being comedic.

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[191] Angie Jepson is active in the Greater Boston theatre community as an actress, fight director and teacher. She is a graduate of the MFA program at Brandeis University, where she received her first SAFD certifications while training under Robert Walsh.

Her work on the New Rep Downstage production of *boom* is a useful case study of a competent early career fight director's approach to composing martial arts sequences when they themselves do not have a martial arts background. During the interview Jepson revealed that this was not the first time she had been called upon to compose martial arts sequences. In 2008 she was hired to co-fight direct a production of a new adaptation of *Orphan of Zhao* by the Theatre Arts Department at Brandeis University. That production required far more research for the elaborate sword fights for which she was responsible.

Dead Man's Cell Phone **by Sarah Ruhl (2008)**

In *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, Sarah Ruhl's comedy about death, memory, and modern communication, her unlikely heroine, Jean, picks up the cell phone of a man who dies while sitting nearby in a café. The phone rings and she answers it, and she takes it upon herself to try to create positive memories among his family and associates. In the process she finds that his business revolved around organ trafficking, and she finds herself in an airport in Johannesburg, South Africa, being confronted by a former business associate of the man, who demands the cell phone from her:

> Stranger: Hand over the phone or I will kill you.
>
> Jean: That's absurd, you can't have it.
>
> *(The stranger pulls out a gun.)*

> Stranger: You know nothing of Gordon's work, do you? It's big business. You're in over your head.
>
> Jean: No – I'm afraid you're in over *your* head.
>
> *(Jean kicks the gun out of the stranger's hand.*
>
> *Jean kicks the stranger on a special part of her leg so that she crumples to the ground.)*
>
> Jean: *(surprised at her own daring)* Whoa!
>
> *(A struggle for the gun.*
>
> *The stranger grabs it.*
>
> *She points it at Jean.)*
>
> Stranger: I didn't want to have to do this, Jean, but you are forcing my hand-
>
> *(The stranger hits Jean in the head with the gun.*
>
> *Jean falls to the ground.*
>
> *The lamp falls and breaks.*
>
> *A flash of light.)*[192]

In the "Notes for the Director" section, Ruhl says, "There might be an extended fight sequence in the airport at Johannesburg as they struggle for the gun."[193]

While the text does not explicitly state that the fight sequence is martial arts based, the act of kicking a gun from an assailant's hand followed by another kick aimed at a nerve center is evocative of the representation of martial arts in mainstream cinema. However, the composition is left very open, and not every production listed in the production history in the published version of the play lists a fight director. The text does follow the pattern established by other appearances of martial arts in that one character changes the power dynamic of a violent confrontation through the surprising use of exotic skills, in what is often also a comic moment.

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[192] Ruhl, *Dead Man's Cell Phone,* 78-79.
[193] Ibid, 103.

As the fight director of the Boston premiere of *Dead Man's Cell Phone* at the Lyric Stage Company of Boston in October of 2009, my conversation with the director, Carmel O'Reilly led to the decision that the fight would be split between "fantasy movement" and "real movement," with the fantasy sequences being composed of martial arts. The gun disarm was a traveling jumping back-spinning kick, in which the actress playing Jean approached the other actress quickly, crossed her legs, pivoted her hip as far as she could in one direction, and used that pivot to launch herself into a jumping spin, during which she extended her leg to simulate a kick to the other actresses' arm. The actress playing the stranger dropped her arm quickly to simulate impact, and released the gun to the ground (which was made of dense rubber). Jean then chambered her leg and kicked again towards the stranger's thigh. There are techniques in various martial arts including Muay Thai[194] and Karate which aim kicks at nerve clusters in the leg with the intention of disabling an opponent. We used what in stage combat technique is known as "reverse energy" in which the impact is controlled so as to be harmless. The bit with the gun was followed by an unarmed sequence in which both actresses used movements and poses evocative of martial arts cinema, including a sequence in which one actress flipped the other over her hip in slow motion. Following the flip and once both performers were on the ground, the fight went into a more realistic pattern that no longer referenced any Asian systems of combat. There was special music composed for the fight sequences that cut out once the martial arts portion had ended and the "realistic" movement had begun.

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[194] Mauy Thai, or Thai Boxing, is a form of kickboxing originating in Thailand. It is known for powerful kicks and harsh training methods. It is a common aspect of contemporary MMA training and its techniques are frequently seen in UFC matches. Mauy Thai was given a fair amount of mass media exposure in the films of Jean Claude Van Damme in the late 1980s, and more recently by Tony Jaa in films such as *Ong-Bak: The Thai Warrior* (2003) and *Ong Bak 2* (2008).

I learned later that the Lyric Stage production was more ambitious than most in its fight staging. When I wrote Sarah Ruhl asking if she meant to evoke martial arts in that sequence, her response (through an intermediary) was, "You might tell him that it was meant to be an evocation of film noir but I think there should be much much more martial arts in the theater."

***Office Space: The Musical* Book and Lyrics by Greg Edwards, Music by Zak Sandler (2008)**

Office Space: The Musical is adapted from and named after the 1999 film. It was workshopped at Yale Drama Coalition in 2008 and is currently in development for a professional production. It contains the song, "A Kung Fu Moment," which includes this verse:

> A kung fu moment, to deal with pricks:
> Extract their ribcage. It's a simple fix.
> When rivals kill your master,
> Does it suck? Well, kinda sorta.
> Still, you'll see who's laughing
> When your hand's in their aorta.

That's a kung fu moment, and someday I'll design,
A kung fu moment, that's mine.[195]

This is part of a romantic duet in which two characters express their love of Hong Kong cinema and their frustration with their lives. By referring to exaggerated tropes of the genre as bloody solutions to their own problems they reinforce the non-realistic and stylized portrayal of fighting as a system of physical signs with its own set of rules, as well as the trend that when these movements are taken out of their context, the effect is most often comic.

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[195] Excerpt from lyrics sent via personal communication.

APPENDIX B

Transcripts of Vampire Cowboy Interviews and Vampire Cowboy Manifesto

Interviews

The following are notes from interviews conducted with Vampire Cowboys co-artistic directors Qui Nguyen and Robert Ross Parker, as well as with artistic associate Bonnie Sherman. The manifesto is reproduced from the company website.

Qui Nguyen

October 16 & 27, 2010

This interview was conducted in two parts. The first was at a Vampire Cowboys Saturday Night Saloon in Brooklyn at their venue, The Battle Ranch. The second was by phone after Mr. Nguyen had received questions via email.

What do you see as the main differentiations between stage combat martial arts, actual martial arts, and "pedestrian" stage combat? Can you address this as a writer and fighter?

It is the difference between the fantasy, the reality and the nightmare.
On stage is the fantasy; in the dojo is something else.

In reality it never looks like either. Wing Chun never looks like Wing Chun [in a real fight].

The nightmare is the pedestrian: no story, no technique.

I've seen Shaolin Monks on stage; they did these magnificent demos that fell flat.

Choreographers who don't know martial arts can do better martial arts on stage than real martial artists.

Since you state in your interviews that you have dealt with violence in your youth, can you talk to me about the attraction of this type of highly fantasized violence?

The fantasy of it all.

Wish fulfillment. I remember doing really stupid things as a fighter as a kid. I was a good fighter and got into a lot of fights. I would do really stupid things like flying side kicks or some really fancy movie move and get hurt rather than stick to fundamentals cause I was still a kid.

I was dismayed by the stuff I was studying because I realized that it was all theory and it never worked in a real life situation, and I would always end up using good boxing technique and Jujutsu.

I know that I wasn't attracted to the realities of fights when I started putting shows together. It was the fights that as a kid I wished the move would really work out. I wish real fights were as easy as drills in the MA class.

What martial arts did you study?

Vovinam, Tae Kwon Do, Isshin Ryu Karate, Jeet Kune Do, Mixed Martial Arts, Capoiera Angola, Arnis[196]. All kinds of stuff.

Why the name "Vampire Cowboys?"

We named the company after our first show [*The Vampire Cowboys Trilogy*].

How does your fighting affect your writing and vice versa?

I don't know how I'd write if I wasn't a fight person. Both those things are so interconnected to me that its almost impossible to see one aspect without the other.
I look at myself as a movement choreographer. A lot of what I do is trying to physicalize my shows, creating a cinematic experience rather than two people talking about their family.

If I weren't a choreographer I would be more detailed about my choreography in my scripts.

Since I know I'm doing it I am intentionally vague. When it gets published I try to be a little more detailed, Robert [Ross Parker] knows that I will do something fully comprehended in my head – we have trust after nine years.

I studied stage combat with Mark Guinn. He helped shape me as a choreographer.

You teach funktastic classes I hear (nunchaku, katana, etc). How do they fit into an actor's work?

I can teach an actor to fight but not vice versa.

Unfortunately fight directors are seen as technicians, not as artists.

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[196] One of the blanket terms for Filipino Martial Arts, the others being Kali and Escrima. They are usually associated with stick fighting, though they also incorporate empty hands, knives, swords, and other weapons. These martial arts are often taught alongside Jeet Kune Do.

You teach combat and you always get a kid who's put together a kung fu movie with their friends and broke their friend's arm. I did that too before I knew stage combat.

Vampire Cowboys does a fights studio [Rabid Vamps] focusing on weapons you see on our stage and our type ofchoreography. We have no interest in competing with SAFD certification classes in New York. A lot of our students are professional actors, some are audience members. The curriculum includes Arnis, nunchuck, katana, Capoeira, Kung Fu, Wing Chun, etc. The people who take it a lot get to choreograph, including group fights.

Can you talk specifically about adapting Arnis?

Vampire Cowboys uses a lot of padding. (This is an influence of David Brimmer[197]) We're gonna pad you up and hit you with rubber weapons.

Vampire Cowboys uses padded weapons and pads on the actors, especially in the case of chucks[198]. Usually the use of pads is up to the actor.

What happens when other companies do Vampire Cowboys plays? How much are they specifically written for your company?

A lot of times they don't get it. They end up adding jokes and messing with the timing. Or there is something Robert Ross Parker and I take for granted that they miss completely.

How long are your fight calls?

Hour long fight calls that shrink as the show runs. By the third week it shirks down, they have gone as far down as twenty minutes though we always keep the time there

Once a katana broke and the fight had to be rechoreographed for rapier and they needed the whole time. [This was for *Soul Samurai*]

Do you write for specific actors?

Absolutely, though some shows more than others. *Soul Samurai* is one example. I could not have finished it witout meeting the actors.

I have people in mind for the lead and the comedic roles.

Are you in dialogue with No Refunds Theatre in MN at all? Or aware of other companies/plays doing action theatre?

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[197] An SAFD Fight Master (and another of my former instructors) who advocates using pads on an actor for certain types of scenes.

[198] Common slang for the nunchaku.

[He checked them out online but was not previously aware of them prior to our first interview.]

Why do you think martial arts make for great comedy?

I don't choreograph anything to be funny. I understand that with a car chase or spaceship battle no matter what I do it will be funny onstage.

With martial arts fights I don't set out to be funny. They're funny if it's a funny character doing them. The humor is in the circumstance. I don't stage funny fights but I do put variety in the fights.

For instance, what if we have someone be attacked by a chainsaw this time since we already did a katana.

Demo fights for ComicCon can be funnier because I am getting a crowd response to a non-contextual fight. For demo fights I definitely do comic fights.

People at ComicCon don't want a history lesson, they want to see a badass fight.

There have to be teeny fractal stories w no words (ComicCon)

There are people who have a revulsion to combat because they had bad experiences.

Companies who do fights without context are giving us a bad name.

No one really cares how good you are with a broadsword unless there is a story.

How did the Playscripts/KeenTeens project come about?

I was approached with a commission.

Can you talk about your relationship to new media?

Our shows have a lot of multimedia. How we are defined depends on who reviews us: Fight company, comic book company, experimental company, etc.

Many new media and experimental plays are metaphorically driven rather than narrative. They are so innovative but it never lands. We joke about taking the stuff that bores most people and making it more fun.

Then we put it on our website because a lot of people who like comics will enjoy it.

Putting it in a medium where they can test it out. People who are intimidated by theatre can try it first.

A lot of the people who come because of the website are High School and Junior High School kids.

Robert Ross Parker:

November 8, 2010

This interview was conducted by phone. Mr. Parker had received the questions in advance.

What do you see as the main differentiations between stage combat martial arts, actual martial arts, and "pedestrian" stage combat? How does this fit in with the Vampire Cowboys aesthetic?

I don't know anything about martial arts. (Unlike Qui)

We're telling a story. For me the purpose of art is to remind people that they're not alone.

Working w a fight director is like working w any other collaborator.

Once actors learn a fight they need to learn to act the fight, "you're losing there and here you're winning."

Traditionally combat on stage has been realistic.

I would say that realistic stage violence might predate the naturalist movement.

We as an audience are trained by film to know what "fights" look like.

When we started we had more realistic fights but we're moving more towards abstract and stylized form of fighting. At the beginning we used to be more "ren-fair(y)" for lack of a better word.

We like to tell a story with non-textual sequences, not always combat, but influenced by combat.

Can you describe your collaborative process with Qui Nguyen in terms of both writing and fighting?

It's always evolving and changes from project to project. Some plays we wrote together, then he wrote alone and we got another fight director so he could concentrate on writing.

Idea for portals onstage to be able to block action.

Becoming cinematic so they needed ways to transition instantly.

In *Fight Girl Battle World* they explored scenes together and then he went out to write – billed as co-creators.

Soul Samurai was a personal story for Qui. He went and wrote it and then they put it up. Written solo.

Gamut is creating on their feet together, co-writing, to traditional writer/director – they are very comfortable with each other

At the early rehearsals they are both are there and as it becomes polished it's more about Parker.

They are very supportive about each other's stuff.

Their first meeting was similar to the first meeting between Constantine Stanislavski and Nemerovich Danchenko. Parker was working on *The Seagull* at the time.

What are the procedural differences when working on a Vampire Cowboys show when the fight director is someone other than Qui Nguyen? I'm thinking specifically about Aliens Vs. Cheerleaders and Living Dead in Denmark.

Aliens Vs. Cheerleaders is not a Vampire Cowboys show but is connected to everything we do. It did not get the care and feeding that we gave our full shows, though we may do it for real some day.

Back then (*Denmark*) we had realistic fights. Not sure how we would do it now. I had a pretty standard relationship with Marius.

Aliens Vs. Cheerleaders had shameless recycling of Vampire Cowboys stuff, we sort of ripped ourselves off with that show.

If we were restaging there would be some "this is what we did in the original"

Back in the *Denmark* days when things were upfront we did normal fights, now it's more about abstract movement.

More and more we're feeling the limitations of doing awesome realistic fighting on stage. That's more about film. We're using the tools of theatre to do the same things.

Where do you see yourself in relation to popular culture? Obviously it influences you, to what extent do you see yourself influencing back? Especially considering the growing popularity of your work.

We're hugely influenced by it obviously. Not sure how much we're influencing it back.

You as a company are very influenced by comic books. What are some of your favorites?

Watchmen is my favorite comic book. Longtime Allan Moore fan. Reading *ExMachina* recently. *Queen&Country* I adored.

What happens when other companies do Vampire Cowboy plays? How much are they specifically written for your company?

A group of High School kids did the trilogy in Upstate New York. It was hilarious. The further away you get from your work the harder it is to look at it.

And watching a bunch of sixteen year olds doing a bunch of dick jokes while sitting next to their parents was a little uncomfortable.

Hasn't seen very many professional companies – *Denmark* seems to get done a lot.

Sort of second hand from Qui – the scripts can throw people for a loop. The fundamental things we take for granted they do not. Sometimes Parker writes a little film that is not in the final script. A production in Chicago bought Parker's video and redubbed it with their actors.

Men Of Steel has a character had was Forrest Gump meets Superman, the script does not explicitly say that he is Slow, so they did not get it.

Martial arts on the stage are often comedic. Do you have any thoughts on why this is so?

I can see why that would be. It's so hard to look badass onstage. In film you have a lot more control of what the audience sees.

Theatre is no longer a popular medium really – it's pretty narrowly defined what theatre is allowed to be. We take exception to that and break from that.

Shakespeare was pop entertainment as well as art. We aspire to that. I hope.

Martial arts being funny is just bound to happen. It's hard to create a badass karate moment.

Can you tell me about your relationship to new media? I'm interested in hearing about it both onstage and as a PR tool.

Onstage – We like projecting pieces of story. We like making little films. The first was made on PowerPoint. We use them as intermission pieces.

Pre-show announcement has become a film.[199]

We don't do an intense amount of new media.
We do a lot of old fashioned stage magic.

Publicity: Because we have a very unusual audience. People think we have this awesome magic social network but we don't. ComicCon has been important.

People think we are these uber-techno geeks who have all this magic and we aren't.

Abby [Abby Marcus, their producer, also Qui's wife] got them to ComicCon, which helped define them.

Agrees that they are people who put comic books onstage.

Movies and TV are important too, we spend a lot of time on that.

Comic books have been the defining thing for lack of anything better. TV onstage is a horrifying thing, comics onstage is not.

What's the relationship between your work with the Vampire Cowboys and your other directing?

Vampire Cowboys is the most important and influential and also my best work.
You take lessons back and forth.

When you describe what we do people think that is it campy and silly. In actuality, we are trying to deliver it seriously, which is where much of the humor is coming from. Parody but also Tribute.

Fight Girl Battle World is not about how stupid SciFi is, it is about how awesome it is.

That said, they are not without irony. Though the more seriously we take it, the harder the audience laughs. If it's only silly then it's hard to sustain it.

The way the fights are changing is important. We love it and think it's awesome as much as we think it's goofy and silly.

Bonnie Sherman

The following comments are from Bonnie Sherman, an actress who has worked on several Vampire Coyboy shows, notably as Lady Snowflake/Sally December in *Soul*

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[199] The pre-show film for *The Inexplicable Redemption of Agent G* was *Lady Shaolin Boxer*. It was written by Nguyen, directed by Parker, and fight directed by Adam Mazer. The titular character had a special vendetta against cellular phones.

Samurai. She was interviewed in person following the Saturday Night Saloon on October 16th 2010. She has recently been named an Artistic Associate.

How did you become involved with the Vampire Cowboys?

I saw *Living Dead in Denmark* and decided that I needed to work with them.

What is your background in movement, specifically stage combat?

Trained dancer. First stage combat class in high school. Studied at Rutgers.

How is performing martial arts based stage combat different?

More full body. It requires really good intention. Precision.

I'm always breathing heavier after a martial arts stage fight. Always get to the place where my mind is much faster in it.

My dance background is more useful in martial arts fights than my rapier & dagger [SAFD] training is.

The character is central in martial arts.

Tell me a little about working with Qui.

He's amazing. It's like being back in the playground again.

THE VAMPIRE COWBOYS MANIFESTO (From http://www.vampirecowboys.com/manifesto.htm)

1. Vampire Cowboys shows must entertain. No message, truth, or idea can be conveyed to an audience that is not engaged. If we fail at this, we fail at everything.
2. Anything goes in a Vampire Cowboys creation. Thusly, consistency is obsolete. Style and genre can and will change on a dime. There is no time in the post-post-post to deal with "setups" for form.
3. There are no taboos in Vampire Cowboys. Any and all subjects, no matter what size, can be explored with as much reverence or flippancy as we see fit.
4. All artists in Vampire Cowboys are creative whether they be a director, playwright, actor, designer, stage manager, choreographer, or producer. The lines between all professions must and will be blurred.
5. Music, Violence, and Sex are the background for all Vampire Cowboys work. We live in a world fueled by raw aggression, not civility. Thusly all work will and should be flavored in the musical, the physical, and the sexual.
6. Vampire Cowboys plays must not conduct "lessons". "Lessons" and "Morals" are for propaganda plays that wish to manipulate the society to mindlessness and obedience. The job of the Vampire Cowboys artist is to ask questions and, above all, entertain.
7. All Vampire Cowboys shows by nature are experimental, but all experiments must impact and entertain the audience. If the experiment only serves the artist and proves to be confusing to our spectators, then that experiment must be cut out of the show.
8. Vampire Cowboys will not produce "classical plays". Classical plays suck.

9. Vampire Cowboys shows must be sexy. Art by nature is a reflection of the culture of "today". If this is true, then Vampire Cowboys shows must also be as sexy, stylish, and equally as "pop-culture" as anything seen on television or film.
10. Vampire Cowboys shows must never ever be boring.
11. Vampire Cowboys would like to clarify its stance on classical plays. They don't all suck. Just most of them. We're sure if you're producing a classical play at the moment, you must have found the one that doesn't suck. And Vampire Cowboys is equally sure that your take on that classical play is mondo original. Because of this, Vampire Cowboys thinks you're awesome.
12. But worry not, Vampire Cowboys still will not produce classical plays. We still think they blow.
13. Vampire Cowboys plays will always include multimedia. ALWAYS! Unless it doesn't make sense, then we won't.
14. Vampire Cowboys never perform matinees. Matinees are for old people.
15. Vampire Cowboys just wants to make sure that no one was actually offended by our comment about classical plays. We keep getting emails about it. Mainly from our professors in university who thought we'd end up doing something more traditional with our degrees than folding them into paper airplanes and flailing them at one another.
16. Vampire Cowboys used the word "university" in the last statement because we thought it would make us sound more British. And people take Brits more seriously when they talk about theatre.
17. Vampire Cowboys probably shouldn't be drinking while they write manifestos.
18. If you're still reading this, Vampire Cowboys would like to french kiss you on the mouth.
19. Anywhere else, it will cost you extra.
20. Vampire Cowboys finds prostitute humor quite funny.
21. Vampire Cowboys shows always have Vampire Cowboys in them. Except for most of them which didn't.
22. Vampire Cowboys artists aren't actual vampires or cowboys. Seriously, it's just a name. Stop asking us to bite you.
23. People who come to see Vampire Cowboys shows are far better people than people who don't come to see Vampire Cowboys shows. Vamp Fans rule all.
24. Repeat. Vamp Fans rule all.
25. Vampire Cowboys hearts you. Forever. BFF.

Appendix C

Notes from Advanced Stage Combat Workshop: Miming the Martial Arts

The following are notes from a lesson I originally taught in 2006 during a semester-long course on stage combat at Tufts University. It has since been re-taught for stage combat courses at both Tufts and New York Film Academy's Summer Institute at Harvard, and also adapted as an advanced stage combat workshop which was taught at the Region I: Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival in 2008 and 2009.

The class was assigned to read an article about Yuen Wo Ping and his choreography and methodologies[200] beforehand. We began with a discussion of his choreography and what made it compelling to watch (most were familiar with his work in *The Matrix* and *Crouching Tiger/Hidden Dragon,* some with his other films). The discussion concerned form, rhythm, style, and physical storytelling. Once we had established an idea of the aesthetic we would be working towards, we began physical work.

After a warm-up that included characterization work, the students were given the assignment to create what I have come to call "Fake Fu" sequences in which both characters were highly skilled martial artists with very distinct styles. The opening guideline was that there should be three non-contact blows, one contact blow, and "one really fancy thing[201]" in any combination. This was later extended to be able to include more options, but those guidelines provided an effective starting point.

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[200] In later years, the assignment was to watch a documentary about martial arts films.
[201] It was here that many students tended to choreograph impossible bodies.

It should be noted that the first time I taught this lesson, only one of the students had had any martial arts training at all, though some had dance training.

Since there had been an in-depth discussion about what made theatrical martial arts work and how adjusting timing, angles, and physical characterization could give the illusion of exotic skills, they used those principles to create very distinct working fights. We came to call elaborate eye-catching sequences "Flash & Trash."

Once those fights were created and rehearsed, they presented them to the class. After each presentation, I would ask the class to raise their hands if they believed 60% of the moves they saw, and keep their hands up as I raised the percentages to whatever degree they still "believed." As this was late in the semester and they had assimilated many concepts of staging violence, all the scenes went up to 85-90%. Then we isolated the part that worked the least within each scene (usually the most technically difficult part), figured out what made it fail, and worked on that until they were able to sell it well and had achieved precision in that bit of movement.

Following that, in the last part of the class I had them go off again, and create a scenario using just the modified and corrected set of movements. But with an important modification: They were to change the movement quality by taking out all the "Flash & Trash" and completely remove any "Fake-Fu" stylization, yet keep the same sequence of events and have it be just as precise from the performer's point of view. This then was to be applied to a much more pedestrian setting and appear as a fight between naturalistic characters. This modified scene was then presented to the class. Since this new scene consisted of only the former problem moves, the longest sequence was perhaps fight moves.

Each new scene had to pass the requisite believability test for the violence, but also had to have clear characters with a definite dramatic conflict and a reason to take it to a physical level. It led to some of the best character work I had seen from that class to that point.

Students learned through this process how to communicate characters with advanced fighting skills without themselves necessarily possessing such skills. Within "Fake Fu" as a choreography style they created character-driven, realistic violence that would be both clear to the audience and safe and easily reproducible for performers.

Biographical Note

Meron Langsner has fight directed over one hundred theatrical productions, tours, and short films in professional and academic venues in New England and New York City. These include: Merrimack Repertory Theatre, New Repertory Theatre, Lyric Stage Company of Boston, Opera Boston, Ensemble Studio Theatre, Chamber Theatre Company, Boston Conservatory, Boston University, Brandeis University, Tufts University and numerous others, with several productions winning various regional awards. He has taught stage combat courses at Tufts University (where he received an award for Outstanding Contributions to Undergraduate Education), Boston University Opera Institute, and New York Film Academy Summer Institute at Harvard. He has also taught various stage combat workshops for ATHE, the Last Frontier Theatre Conference (as a featured artist), New England Region Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, Massachusetts Educational Theatre Guild, and several other educational organizations. Meron has been a member of the Society of American Fight Directors since 2001.

His martial arts background includes a black belt in Okinawan Matsubayashi-Ryu Karate and experience teaching same, and training in Filipino Kali, Jeet Kune Do, Judo, Qigong, competitive fencing (sabre, foil, and epee) and wresting, as well as briefer exposure to a multitude of other forms. He has also had basic firearms training at the Smith & Wesson Academy in Springfield, MA.

Meron has spent five years as a self-defense instructor with IMPACT Boston, a non-profit violence and abuse prevention organization specializing in scenario-based adrenal-stress conditioning, where he has worked with trauma survivors, schools, and the general public. Through IMPACT, Meron has also co-presented workshops on self-defense at various conferences concerned with health, wellness, and violence prevention.

Meron has also actively trained in numerous theatrical performance systems including dance, Biomechanics, Grotowski, and fire poi.

In addition to his movement work, Meron was one of three writers in the United States to be selected for the pilot year of the National New Play Network Emerging Playwright Residencies, fulfilling his residency at the New Repertory Theatre. He remains professionally active as a playwright, director, and dramaturg alongside his fight directing and scholarship.

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