

THE CRAFT by Jean Schiffman

Arms and the Woman

Uma Thurman, Lucy Liu, Angelina Jolie, Carrie-Anne Moss, Jennifer Garner—these days films crackle with fightin' females. Not only that but actors are depending less and less on stunt doubles. Now is the time, ladies, to add a new tool to your kit: choreographed combat.

You may even get to duel onstage. Admittedly such roles for women are sparser in theatre than on film. However, New York-based Lady Cavaliers, for one, produces original plays based on real-life females who fought. Historically women were pirates (Captain Hsi Kai Ching); disguised themselves as men during the Civil War; commanded armies in 15th and 16th century Asia; were warriors in the African kingdom of Dahomey in the 1800s.... The list goes on. One Lady Cavaliers play had roles for 11 women and featured eight fights: with rapier, rapier and dagger, quarter-staff, fans, bullwhip, and *jut* (lethal hairpin). Another Cavaliers play was based on militant suffragette Edith Garrud, who, in the early 20th century, taught fellow feminists jiu-jitsu for self-protection.

Opportunities also exist through nontraditional casting, where characters such as Mercutio and Tybalt might be cast as women.

Lady Cavaliers co-founder Carrie Brewer is typical of the women stage combatants I talked with. She began as an actor, took a combat class, and fell in love with the craft, discovering she had a knack for it. At 5 foot 7 and with a normal build, she doesn't consider herself especially macho, although she, like the others, was at least somewhat athletic growing up. She quickly saw the advantages of mastering fight techniques: It's challenging, empowering, and fun; it enhances your acting; it increases your marketability; and it gives you a new awareness and self-confidence in the real world.

Fun With Weapons

"Swordplay appeals to people with active minds," asserts Los Angeles actor, teacher, fight choreographer, and stunt double Roberta Brown. "Women who take to it are very sharp women. But it may take them awhile to give themselves permission to be physically aggressive." In class, women are hesitant to hit. Yet, says Brown, there comes a moment when everything suddenly clicks. "They realize, 'I get to pretend I'm aggressive, and nobody gets hurt.'"

Still, that newly unleashed aggression can be scary. Carla Pantoja, who trained in stage combat at RADA and now teaches in the Bay Area, observes that while for some women "it's a power thing," for others it brings up past issues and can be very traumatic. "Sometimes they have to breathe, walk away, and come back," she says. They don't quit, though. Pantoja compares the experience to performing in a rape scene; stage violence and aggression can conjure past pain. She adds that she's seen men, too, break down.



Paul Sulzman and Marcia Pizzo in *The Taming of the Shrew*.

that her physical and emotional investment during stage combat could be transferred to her non-fighting acting, to great effect.

"It's like partner dancing," says Merritt. "It's about how you're working with others onstage, respecting their space, communicating with them subtly on one level while doing something else. You have to know where you are in space."

For Brewer, the lessons she's learned in combat—to be clear, safe, and fully committed—apply directly to acting in general. "It makes me make more simple and clear choices, rather than a muddy conglomeration of ideas." For LA.-based actor Bevin Kaye, who's always been a physical performer, she's found that a new sense of empowerment has allowed her to add layers to her characters. "And it forces you to be specific, and to listen to your partner," she says. When you're stage-fighting, listening to your partner is more than a matter of good acting—it's a matter of safety.

Casting Opportunities

Combat classes tend to fill up temporarily when a film such as *Pirates of the Caribbean* is about to hold auditions. But it's the women who stick with classes who find they have a casting advan-

Brewer, when teaching, sometimes gets right in women's faces and screams along with them to help them let it out. "I think women are sometimes predisposed to modesty," she says, "so when you give them permission, it's a whole new world." Men, she says, know what fighting is all about but may tend to go too far, whereas women often have more finesse and style but lack self-confidence.

There's a weapon to suit every woman, according to Brewer. The broadsword is her favorite: It's heavy, and because women have less upper-body strength than men, it forces them to connect more to their centers, which is a good thing. It makes women feel grounded. "Also, I'm Irish, so it calls up the ancient Celt in me," she says.

Brown stocks rapiers, small swords, daggers, broadswords, cutlasses, sabers, sports fencing equipment, Eastern martial arts weapons, and steel fans. When she opens the trunk of her car, people leap back, startled. Her favorite is the small sword. "I find the movement really beautiful," she says. "The technique is demanding and precise. There's so much choreographic possibility. But for dramatic effect I'd probably go for the rapier and dagger."

Erin Merritt says sword work felt natural to her right away. When Sweeney Todd was given back his razor, he said, "At last my arm is complete again." That's how Merritt felt when she first picked up a sword. Still, she had to overcome obstacles, and they weren't psychological ones. Some of her male teachers—she requested that the school not be named—were sexist, treating the girls differently. For a while she stopped pursuing the craft altogether. Other women told her they'd been sexually harassed in class. She eventually founded the Bay Area company Woman's Will, which stages all-female Shakespeare, incorporating plenty of combat choreography.

Acting With....

Brown and a male partner once brought a scene to Howard Fine's acting class that involved a sword fight followed by a love scene. "Howard said that the minute I put my sword down, my power went," she confesses. At first she didn't get it. So Fine stood behind her, laced his arms through hers, got her physically moving, and demonstrated how her body failed to give when her hand was weaponless. "It's almost like I was squeezing my performance energy through a funnel," she explains. Without the excuse of a sword in hand, she was afraid to be powerful. She soon realized

women who stick to classes with men they have a casting advantage. Brown, who trained in acting and combat in England before moving to L.A., knew she'd need a day job and didn't want to wait tables. So she continued her combat training and has been teaching the craft for 10 years. "As I've grown older, it's been harder and harder to find acting work here," she says. "But the older I get in the stage combat world, the more respect I get. Fight choreography and sword master work started finding me. I stopped pushing the actor thing awhile ago, since there's this other career that wants me." Accordingly she not only choreographs fights for films—recently the PBS series *Warrior Queen* with Alex Kingston, an episode of *E.R.*, the film *Charlie's Angels*—but she also easily gets work as a stunt double. "I don't know any other women who choreograph stage fighting in the L.A. area," she says. "And there are only about a dozen people in the world who choreograph Western European-type classic swashbuckling in film, so I'm an oddity in my little world." And a rewarding and lucrative little world it is. Even if you never get cast as a fighter, you're likely to get a victim-of-violence role. To protect yourself, and make yourself more castable—stage combat training is a plus.

Reality Check

Casting advantages and acting enhancements aside, women say knowing stage combat changes their outlook on life in general. Merritt, who's 5 foot 2, says she walks a little bigger in the world now that she can brandish a broadsword. "I notice it when I'm walking down the street and someone enters my space," she says. "I'm also aware of how a small person can win a fight if they have an instrument in their hands—and you can make anything into a weapon. That makes me see the world a little differently. If I find myself in a dangerous situation, I have some options."

Brewer says she's more feminist now. "As much as I like chivalry, now I know I can do this, and you don't need to do it for me."

"It makes you a stronger person," concludes Kaye, with all the assurance and assertiveness of a well-trained actor/swordswoman. And a final word of advice from Merritt: "In a class full of men, don't let their bravado intimidate you. You can be just as good as they are—immediately." **BSW**

Roberta Brown will hold a six-week cutlass workshop at the Beverly Hills Fencers' Club starting Sept. 12. www.robertabrown.com. Woman's Will: www.womanswill.org. Lady Cavaliers: www.ladycavaliers.com. Society of American Fight Directors: www.safd.org. Academy of the Sword: www.academyofthesword.org.

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