



Fencer Makes Good, Neighbor

As a child, Roberta Brown '87 was mesmerized by stories about knights, warriors, and other action-adventure characters. Although most stories revolved around a hero and not a heroine, she identified with them nonetheless.

While studying at Brandeis, the theater arts major wielded her first sword under the tutelage of fencing coach Bill Shipman. However, she realized her true talent when she enrolled in the first stage-combat class offered by the university.

"The theatrical application of fencing is a really exciting form of storytelling," Brown said. "In sport fencing, you have to keep movements small to protect yourself, but in the performing arts the movements can be big, bold, and juicy."

Brown, 41, is now showing off—and teaching others—those moves as the director of theatrical combat at the Beverly Hills Fencers' Club in California.

The five-foot-five fight choreographer's list of theater, television, and film credits is extensive. She has trained actors like Patricia Arquette, Bo Derek, Noah Wyle, Billy Campbell, and Goran Visnjic, and choreographed fights for the historical epic *Warrior Queen*, *Queen of Swords*, Disney's adaptation of Louis Sachar's book *Holes*, and episodes of *E.R.* and *The District*.

Brown moved to Los Angeles in 1993 with hopes of making the move from theater actress to film actress. Previously, she

studied at the Webber Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art in London, where she apprenticed under local swordmasters and became a member of the Society of British Fight Directors. She also mastered other tools like the bullwhip and the Chinese fighting fan.

In Los Angeles, she landed a "day job" teaching theatrical swordplay and fencing at the renowned Westside Fencing Center. But she soon discovered that the sword jobs outnumbered callbacks for acting jobs.

While many other fight choreographers come from a stunt background, Brown's experience as an actor has strongly influenced her style.

"People often ask me if swordplay is like dancing, and the truth is I'm just not a good dancer," said Brown. "For me it is like acting. I'm telling a story and every move is like a line in the script. Every move has meaning."

When she was hired as swordmaster for *Charlie's Angels*, she also fulfilled an adolescent fantasy—becoming an angel herself as Lucy Liu's stunt double. As the only female swordmaster in Hollywood, she would like to see more women warriors on the silver screen.

"Hollywood is a little shy of female-driven epics. It seems to be a harder formula to pin down," Brown said. "But there are so many stories of historical women that I would love to see told."

—Carrie Simmons