

ROBERTA BROWN

Beverly Hills actress would rather fight than switch ... careers

SHE IS

A lover of being a fighter. Brown, 31, of Beverly Hills, is an actress with an unusual day job. As a professional stage fight choreographer and fencing instructor, she spends her days steeped in the macho world of manhandling.

Splitting her time between teaching — both at Culver City's Westside Fencing Center and at the Howard Fine Acting Studio in Los Angeles — and choreographing the combat scenes of local theatrical productions (including "Fortinbras," currently at the Howard Fine Studio), Brown gets a lot of movement in. That includes teaching fencers how to parry and thrust with swords in hand and drilling students on the footwork fights require — advancing, retreating and lunging moves.

A WOMAN'S PLACE IS ... IN THE MIDDLE OF A BRAWL

As a woman, Brown is used to encountering some surprise and even skepticism about her abilities from new students, many of whom are men who need the training for their stage work. (Female performers don't come to her often: Brown could recall only one Shakespeare play that includes a fight scene with women characters.)

"Men often have a weird (reaction) to a woman doing this," she said. "I will have to win (male students) over more than a man (teacher) would."

Nevertheless, Brown, who studied stage combat and fencing at Brandeis University and in graduate school in London, said



it doesn't take long for students to see that she knows what she's doing.

And she's dead serious about the importance of proper training and safety procedures. "Stage combat is always a compromise

between safety and believability and I err on the side of safety," she said.

Which is probably why, in several years of teaching and choreographing, she has only had one injury — and it happened not

during a fight scene but during a chat session between students, when a woman pointed toward her class partner, forgetting she held a dagger in hand.

THE BACKSTAGE FUSS OVER FIGHTING

To make a stage scuffle look real, Brown teaches students to go for certain targets on the other person's body, including the hips, biceps and head, but to stop about two inches away from actual contact. This "out of distance" approach, as it is called, means that at a high speed, the audience will not be able to tell that it's not real. (A three-minute battle sequence on stage may take 10 hours to rehearse.)

But things can get closer to true confrontation on opening night, when, Brown said, it is common for actors to get wired by the crowd and get a little too into their parts. She added that she always teaches swordplay for stage actors without the use of protective gear — as that is how they will have to perform.

Brown's profession is also somewhat of a passion; she admits to having sabers, medieval broadswords and bullwhips "lying around the house." "(But) guns don't interest me at all," she added.

Although she admires the moves of such film fighters as Jackie Chan, Brown said jobs choreographing combat for Hollywood are hard to find: "It's a lot of people fighting for jobs." One hopes not literally.

— Story by Rachel Fischer, photo by Marilyn Young