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Fighting Blind: Including a Legally Blind Student in Stage Combat Training.

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THE FIGHTMASTER

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ON THE COVER

Victor Gardener as the title character in the Mercury Theatre, Colchester UK, production of *Macbeth*, Directed by Craig Bacon with Fight Direction by FM Richard Ryan.

Photo by Robert Day. Composite by Nigel Delahoy.

Visit the website for The Society of American Fight Directors at www.safd.org.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Editorial and graphic content featured in *The Fight Master* is the product of contributions from SAFD members of all levels as well as from the global stage combat community. Participation is greatly encouraged and submissions are accepted on a rolling basis, with deadlines for the Fall and Spring editions occurring on June 1 and January 1 respectively. For submissions by traditional mail, please send a shipping address request by email.

ARTICLES

Submitted material will be edited for clarity and length with the assistance and approval of the author. Articles should include a short biography 150 words or less, as well as contact information. By submitting material to *The Fight Master*, it is assumed the author agrees the following:

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- Before publication, author must approve all changes beyond grammar and conventions
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Please forward submissions and questions to:
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GRAPHICS

Both digital and traditional photographs are accepted; however, resolution will play a factor in where, or if an image is used. All photos should be accompanied by the names of the performers w/ roles (if fewer than five are pictured), photographer, play, playwright, fight director, theatre company, and year of performance. Without this information, we can not give proper credit to the contributors and the picture will not be used.

- Traditional images/negatives submitted by mail should be sent in an envelope clearly labeled "Photos - Do Not Bend," with larger photos secured between cardboard or foam core. Submissions should also include a return self-addressed, stamped envelope.
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A martial artist and dancer from an early age, **Adam Noble** began choreographing stage violence in 1992, and in the years that have followed, he has designed the violence for over eighty stage, opera and film productions. Adam has taught master classes nationally and internationally in the Dynamic Presence Training, a technique for physical performance developed by he and his wife Melissa. Adam currently serves on the faculty of Indiana University, where he created the movement progression for the MFA and BA programs in the Department of Theatre & Drama. Adam is a proud member and Certified Teacher with the Society of American Fight Directors.



AC **Jay Peterson** is an actor and fight choreographer hailing from Atlanta, Georgia. Jay is a Marine Corps veteran and served as a machine gunner in both Iraq and Afghanistan.



Over his career as an educator, **Dr. Vorder Bruegge** has taught a wide variety of theatre and dance courses, including acting, directing, theatre history, dramatic literature, playwriting, script analysis, musical theatre, theatre management, voice and diction, stage combat, and early dance. His directing credits include Arnold Wesker's *Roots*, Jean Racine's *Andromache*, John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. He has directed or choreographed productions of *Oklahoma!*, *The Mikado*, *Anything Goes*, *Venus and Adonis*, *Godspell*, and *The Fantasticks*. He has choreographed stage combat for productions of *MacBeth*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Cyrano de Bergerac*. His past administrative experience includes five years as the Director of Theatre at Bellarmine College; four years as chair of the Department of Theatre, Film Studies and Dance at St. Cloud State University; and president of the Kentucky Theatre Association. He currently serves as the chair of the Department of Theatre and Dance at Winthrop University.

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BUY FROM THE EXPERTS

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At the end of the 2009-2010 academic year, Winthrop University's Department of Theatre and Dance graduated a visually impaired student, Nancy VanderBrink. While a student, Nancy participated in Kung Fu training and took courses in social dance, early dance, directing, acting, makeup, scene painting, and stagecraft, along with all her more traditional academic courses in theatre and across the curriculum. She also performed as a dancer in a Madrigal Dinner performance and designed several productions in the department. Faculty members worked with Nancy to figure out the best ways for her to engage fully in all of her courses and productions. In the spring 2010 semester, Nancy enrolled in the department's basic stage combat course that I was instructing. Based on her experience in the department over the previous three years, both Nancy and I were confident that she could participate in the stage combat course, and I was ready to make any necessary accommodations required by the Americans with Disabilities Act for her to participate.

Nancy's vision has been impaired since her birth. She has always been completely blind in her right eye, and describes her vision from the left eye as "tunnel vision," wherein she sees a kaleidoscope of muted colors and can discern objects as silhouettes against the background. She has navigated her way with the assistance of a companion dog for a number of years. The university's Services for Students with Disabilities office has provided her with an array of support services and technology, including use of digital devices that make it possible for Nancy to read text live on a classroom chalkboard. That office also provided her with a talking tape measure for her to use in her position as a teaching assistant in the department's scenic studio.

The course, THRA 321: Stage Combat, met two days per week

for seventy-five minutes each period over a fifteen week semester (for a total of thirty class sessions). The classroom was a 3000 sq ft. activity room in the university's physical fitness center that

had mirrors on one long wall and a multi-purpose Harlequin surface.

Sixteen undergraduate students were enrolled in the course—most of whom were juniors or seniors. No student in the class had any formal stage combat training prior to this course.

The course syllabus required students to learn and demonstrate skills in unarmed and broadsword stage

combat techniques. They were tested on vocabulary and proper execution of the techniques through a choreographed sequence prepared by the instructor. Additionally, students worked in pairs to create a short phrase of broadsword choreography. Grades were based on their written choreography and the execution of it in performance (both partners each performed both roles). As

an upper-division course, the syllabus also required students to complete a written research project in stage violence.

For the broadsword technique unit, the instructor supplied students with hand-made wasters carved and crafted of oak. They varied in length from about 36" to 54" long (blade length). Partners selected weapons when working on choreographed sequences. A student chose a weapon of a particular length for any number of reasons: to suit her/his individual taste, to serve the choreography, to have maximum facility

in executing the technique properly, and/or to maintain proper distance with her/his partner.

To collect detailed data for this article, Nancy agreed to meet with me over the course of the semester to discuss her specific experiences with the course. Particular emphasis in these meetings was on the challenges each technique presented to her as a visually impaired student.

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FIGHTING BLIND:
INCLUDING A
LEGALLY BLIND STUDENT

IN STAGE COMBAT TRAINING

BY DR. AMBERA WOODRUFF WOODRUFF

PHOTO BY DR. AMBERA WOODRUFF WOODRUFF



Nancy poses with her companion dog, Doc.



The chart below shows Nancy's observations on the left, and the accommodation made to assist her learning in unarmed stage combat.

<p>Nancy had difficulty in executing a spiral fall. Specifically, she could not properly place her knee on the side of the turn, because she couldn't see the instructor's demonstration to know how to execute the move correctly.</p>	<p>I gave her individual instruction, literally guided her legs, knees and torso through the motions of the fall, so that she could learn the move kinesthetically. (This was not an extraordinary circumstance. Several of the students needed individual kinesthetic instruction to execute this and other various techniques in the semester.)</p>
<p>Nancy was always uncertain about distance, because she has no depth perception.</p>	<p>Nancy depended primarily on her partner to establish and maintain proper distance. I observed that her partners quickly learned to manage this responsibility. So long as she was consistent in her advances, retreats, turns, etc., her partners could learn through practice to move in tandem with her.</p>
<p>As the victim, Nancy had difficulty timing her physical reaction and knap in response to her partner's delivery of an attack to the top of her head. She could not see the blow "landing" on her.</p>	<p>There was no real solution to this problem. Nancy understood what <i>needed</i> to happen, but she could not execute the technique successfully. I used this situation as an example to the class to show how a choreographer using such a blow in a production might position the actors to allow the attacker to execute the knap and mask the poor synchronization of the action and the response.</p>
<p>In executing chokes and blocks, Nancy said that she was grateful for her previous martial arts training.</p>	<p>She had learned specific techniques involving chokes and blocks in martial arts.</p>
<p>Generally, Nancy was confident about executing any unarmed combat techniques if she could have explicit, individual instructions where an instructor was able to move her body through the proper motions. She could learn it kinesthetically.</p>	<p>Nancy always asked me for specific assistance. I would give her individual attention to guide her through the techniques kinesthetically.</p>

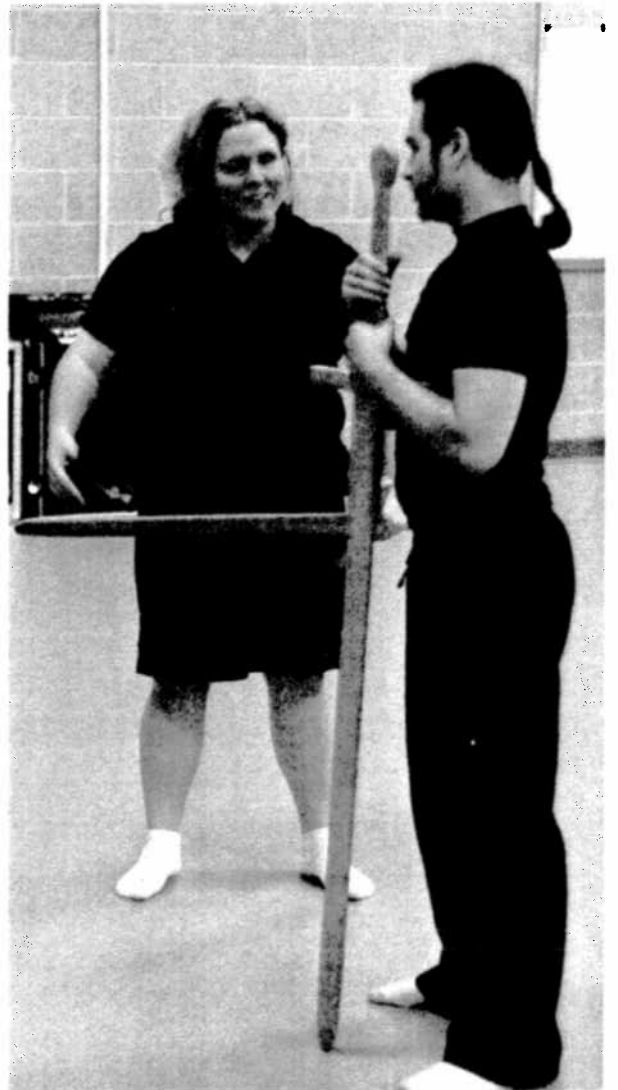


Top Left - Nancy delivers a right cross to fellow student, Roderice Gilliam-Wheeler.

Bottom Left - Nancy delivers a diagonal cut to fellow student, Zade Patterson.

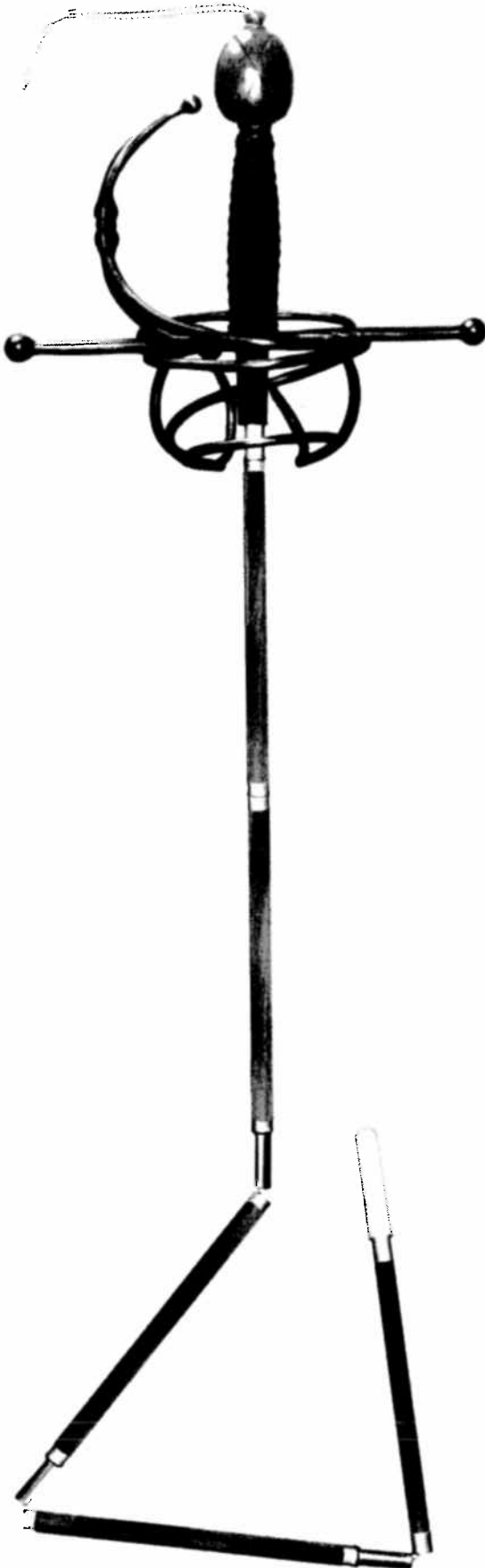
The chart below shows Nancy's observations on the left, and the accommodation made to assist her learning in basic broadsword stage combat techniques.

Throughout the broadsword training, the instructor led the students through exercises facing the mirrors, so that the students could see themselves executing the proper moves. The mirrors in the studio did not give Nancy useful visual feedback. She was not able to see her body or her weapon clearly enough.	I would give her individual attention to guide her through the techniques kinesthetically. This did not substantially divert my attention from other students in the class. Many of them needed this kind of assistance. Nancy became one of several who needed regular individual attention.
As with unarmed combat techniques, Nancy needed the instructor to guide her kinesthetically through the movements.	I would give her individual attention to guide her through the techniques kinesthetically.
When she first attempted to execute the basic diagonal cuts with the broadsword, Nancy was fearful about losing her grip on the weapon. She found herself tightened up and trying too hard to "control" the blade instead of letting it move with its own momentum.	Practice, practice, practice.
Like other students, Nancy needed to get the technique hardwired into her body in order to feel confident about her skills.	Practice, practice, practice.
As with unarmed combat, Nancy was uncertain about distance.	She depended on her partner to maintain distance through a sequence of moves.
Since Nancy is blind in one eye, she turns her head for better vision out of the left eye. This caused her entire body to torque as well, which changed distance sometimes.	As her partner or I worked with Nancy, we reminded her about proper body facing when they observed this torque occurring.
Nancy was able to see the sword blade because it was a contrasting color in relation to the background—the floor, ceiling and walls.	The wooden wasters did contrast to the color of the room, which was basically white.
When engaging an opponent, Nancy needed to move very slowly through the techniques in order to keep her anxiety level down. (See notes above concerning the tight grip on the grip and her distance problems, for example.) She never reached a "full speed" tempo for broadsword technique.	Nancy attained the best speed she was capable of achieving.
Nancy has to memorize in advance the sequences of the choreography. In class she could not constantly refer to a "cheat sheet" or notes written on a whiteboard in the room.	She relied on her partner to remind her of the next step if she blanked out.
The "cue-reaction-action-principle" (CRAP) was always difficult for Nancy to apply as the attacker in broadsword combat. She could not clearly see her partner's "reaction" before delivering a blow.	There was no effective solution to this problem. Nancy understood what <i>needed</i> to happen, but she could not execute the technique successfully. Nancy would wait until she clearly saw her opponent move the weapon into parry position before she would execute her action.
When Nancy delivered horizontal cuts, she could not be sure of proper distance.	She used the "long guard" as a ward/ stance that functioned as a surreptitious way to check distance "in character" before a horizontal cut.



Opposite top - Nancy delivers a cut to the head while fellow student, Kat Hon, avoids by ducking.

Opposite bottom - Nancy discusses choreography with partner, Zade Patterson.



In developing her original broadsword choreography with her partner, Nancy reported the following observations.

- When working with a partner to devise broadsword choreography, there were no movements they envisioned that Nancy could not do.
- It took a long time for Nancy to learn the cues when she switched roles with her partner. She had to memorize it as two different routines.
- Nancy realized that any changes made in the choreography brought changes to the character she was portraying.
- The larger, longer wasters did generate fatigue. She and her partner incorporated that element into their choreography.

Ultimately, Nancy participated successfully in all the drills, exercises, assignments, and projects in the course. The course goals were to provide students with a foundation in stage violence safety protocols and technical skills as well as to provide them with applied practice in a variety of standard stage combat forms. Nancy certainly succeeded in acquiring these foundations and had plenty of applied practice. As a result, I observed that her participation in the class did not differ greatly from the other students. Her need for individual attention did not make her stand out among her peers. Indeed, there were several students in the class whose physical self-awareness was so low that they required substantial individual attention and kinesthetically-based tutoring of the techniques as well.

This experience has led me to two important changes I will make when teaching the course in the future. First, the course will enroll a maximum of twelve students—for general safety reasons, for better classroom management, and to allow more time for individual corrections of all students. As noted above, the semester's work revealed that many of the students needed considerable individual attention to execute the techniques correctly. The course might even need to have an audition requirement added as a prerequisite. Second, I will enroll experienced students, who have already completed the course, in an independent study format to serve as teaching assistants to help with all the above teaching concerns. As our department offers a Theatre Education degree, such a teaching experience would be valuable for any advanced student in that degree program.

In the final analysis, Nancy did not pose any extra challenges to me, or her peers. We were all very accustomed to working with her in production classes, academic classes, in the scenic studio, in dance classes, and on productions. Students knew how to interact with her when they partnered with her, and she knew how and when to ask for assistance. Should an impaired student wish to enroll, that student would need to be one with a profile similar to Nancy—advanced theatre major with successful experience in other movement/activity courses. As the course instructor, I could directly evaluate such a student from previous involvement in the department and determine if he/she could learn safely.