

# THE FIGHT MASTER

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Fall/Winter 2008

Journal of the Society of American Fight Directors

Dynamic Gunplay

The Sounds  
of Violence

Towards A Dramaturgy  
of Stage Combat

David Boushey  
Closing Distance

Swashbuckling for  
the Silver Screen

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Kevin Inouye

Seattle, WA 98122-2602





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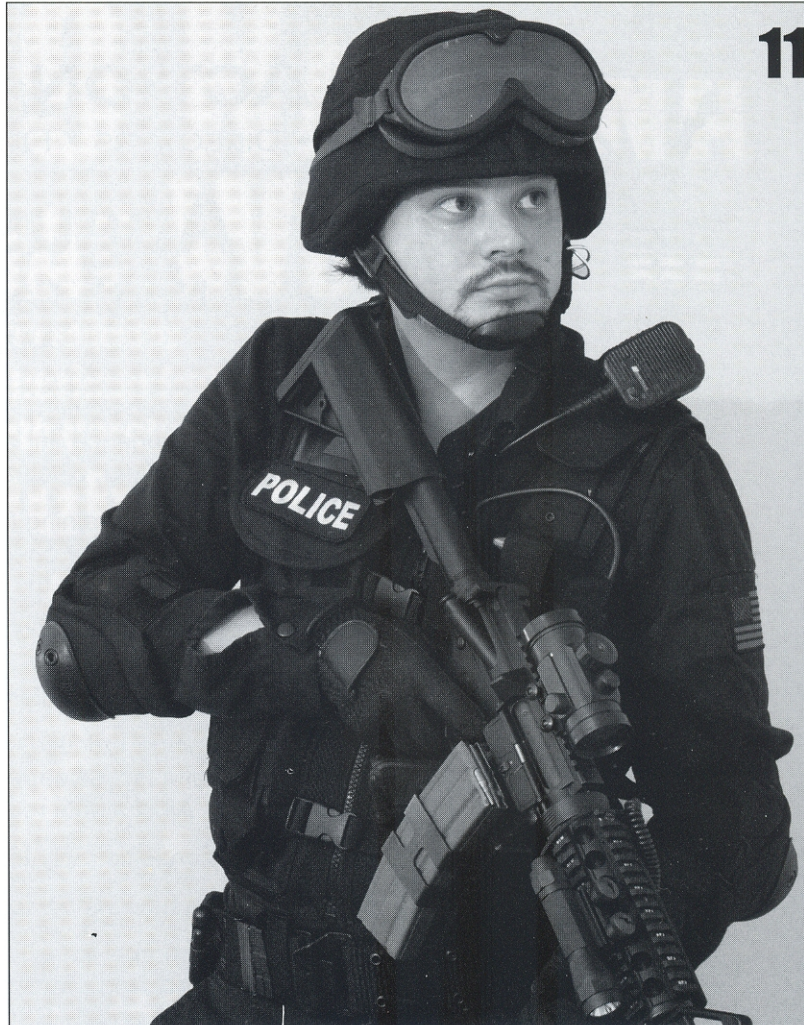
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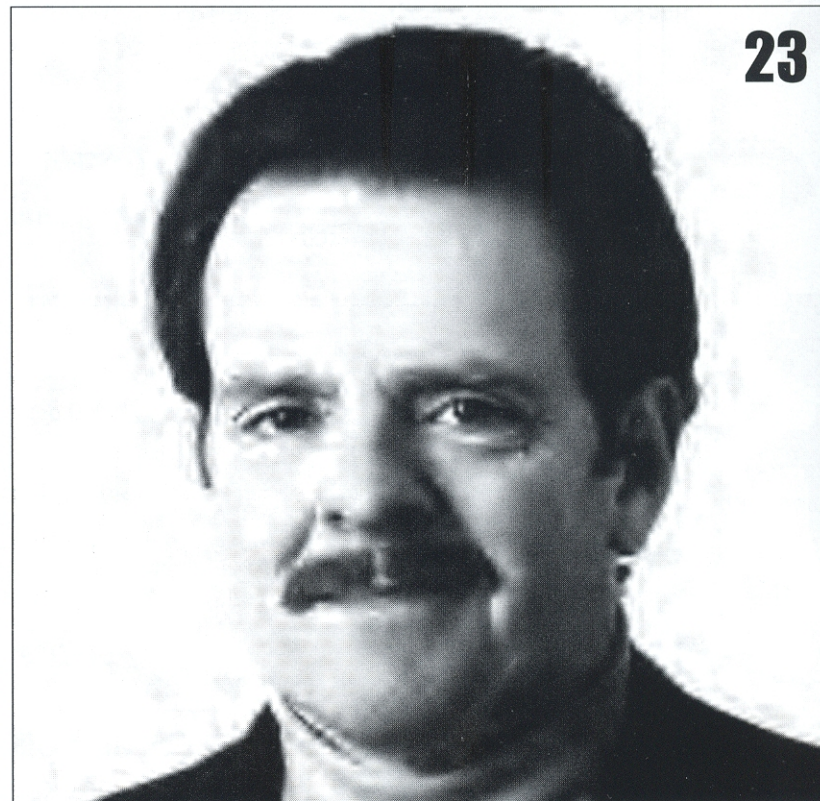
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# EDITORIALLY SPEAKING

**T**his issue explores audience reactions to various forms of staged violence for film, television and the stage.

Fight Master Dale Girard explores how one orchestrates the sounds of violence for stage, film and television, thus enhancing the viewer's response. While this material has been covered at many of his workshops, he has agreed to let *The Fight Master* publish his paper in order to share information on the impact of sound on staging violence.

Kevin Inouye began with the SAFD with a passion for swords, martial arts, armor and history. As his choreography assignments expanded into film, he found himself being asked many more questions about gunplay than the weapons he had studied for his Skills Proficiency Tests. Thus he decided to take a look at the use of guns on stage and in film and offers some guidelines for gun safety, and what works on stage in contrast to what works in film for the audience.

Last March the White Sands International Film Festival opened with a presentation on *Swashbuckling for the Silver Screen*. This involved a presentation on sword fighting along with two short films involving sword fights. Former Fight Master JR Beardsley along with Danish Stuntman and film director Claus Hulak led a discussion moderated by Don Finn of Mali Finn Casting. Ray Delgato looks at the two contrasting films which generated an intense discussion by those in attendance. With so many diverse opinions on what was actually seen and experienced, the reader may gain some insights into what needs to be considered in staging fights for the general public.

Meron Langsner offers some thoughts on the dramaturgy of stage combat. Using assignments given to his students, Langsner briefly shares how to approach the script's dramatic structure and analyze what is needed. Part of his approach is also considering how alternatives may impact the script.

And last, but hardly least, is Christopher DuVal's colorful interview with David Boushey who in founding the Society of American Fight Directors in 1977 is responsible for starting the whole interest in staged violence and the concept of a fight director in the United States. Boushey shares some of his background in getting it all started and addresses the direction the SAFD needs to take in the future.

Please note the change of address for submissions to *The Fight Master*. Articles for the Fall/Winter 2009 issue are due June 1, 2009.

Articles and letters for *The Fight Master* are accepted at any time. Articles intended for inclusion in the Spring/Summer issue must be received by November 1. Articles intended for the Fall/Winter issue must be received by June 1.

Submissions should be sent to:

*The Fight Master*

PO Box 218, Blue Diamond, NV 89004-0218

E-mail: lindamccollum@live.com

Submitted material will be edited for clarity and length. Articles should be typed, and include a short biography, 50 words or less, about the author. Please include the address, phone/fax numbers and e-mail address in the correspondence.

## CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

No  
Photo  
Available

**Raymond Delgato** is a freelance writer and instructor of voice living in Florida who has an avid interest in swordplay and culture.



**Chris DuVal** is currently employed at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival as the Associate Fight Director where he has spent the past ten seasons working as an actor and fight captain. He has also acted, fight directed and guest taught at regional theatres and universities throughout the west. He holds an MFA in Acting, is recognized as a Full Instructor with Dueling Arts International and holds a 1st degree black belt in Aikido. In August of 2009, Chris will start a tenure track position teaching Acting Shakespeare, Voice, and Stage Combat at the University of Idaho.



**Dale Anthony Girard** ([www.imdb.com/name/nm0320646/](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0320646/))

An award winning Fight Director, Stunt Coordinator and author of the stage combat manual *Actors On Guard*. His credits include productions at the Metropolitan Opera, New York City Opera, Folger Theatre, Signature Theatre, Yale Repertory Theatre, Hartford Stage, Denver Center Theatre, Florida Grand Opera, American Repertory Theatre, Opera Carolina, Long Warf Theatre, Pioneer Theatre, Studio Arena Theatre and Chautauqua Opera. Recent film credits include "Eyeborgs," "The Key Man," "Fall Down Dead" and the critically acclaimed "Junebug."



Order of the Sword and Pen since 1998.

**Kevin Inouye** is sole proprietor of Fight Designer, LLC, providing fight choreography, prop weapons rentals, gun wrangling, and related services in Seattle, Washington. He has been recognized as an Advanced Actor/Combatant through the Society of American Fight Directors and trained with both the SAFD and the International



**Meron Langsner** is currently a doctoral candidate at Tufts University writing his dissertation on the representation of martial arts on the American stage. Last season he was one of three writers in the country to receive an inaugural National New Play Network Emerging Playwright Residency. This is his second article in *The Fight Master*.



# DYNAMIC GUNPLAY

by Kevin Inouye

**G**iven their prevalence, it is surprising that firearms seem so frequently overlooked in many people's stage combat training—not just actors, but choreographers and directors as well. Many people using prop firearms in their show assumed there was nothing to firearms but pulling the trigger, and thus felt no need to bring in a professional fight choreographer as they might have for a short swordplay sequence, or knife fight. Others, on the other hand, have been so uncomfortable with the very idea of firearms that they have intentionally avoided realism of props or staging, in a way that detracts from the scene in question.

We have all seen sword fighting done on stage in which an actor clearly looked like they did not know how to handle a sword, despite portraying a trained duelist or seasoned knight. One could venture to guess that we have also all seen numerous examples of equally bad gun handling on stage and screen, but may not be informed enough to know it when we see it, and may have made the mistake of assuming nobody in the audience will either. Even when the audience does not know good habits from bad, treating a prop gun like a real one (as much as possible) will help bring that sense of danger back into the scene.

When firearms have been covered in theatrical stage combat workshops it has been couched as “firearms safety” more than firearms use. While not in the least intending to belittle the importance of safe firearm handling, that is really only the beginning. Imagine taking rapier and dagger and only learning “sword safety”; you would feel cheated, if you knew how much else was out there to learn. Furthermore, when our instruction does not include how to stage an exciting and dynamic gunfight, the desire of a director to produce a dynamic and interesting fight scene is likely to come in direct conflict with our limited repertoire. This sets up a false dichotomy of safety versus entertainment, or safety versus artistic expression, or safety versus realism. No matter who wins that fight, the production and the audience both lose. On the other hand, if we can show how safe gun handling can also be shown and performed in a way that is fun and dramatically engaging, the only conflict is between doing something well or not doing it well - a much easier question to answer.

While not claiming to know the firearms curriculum that we have long been told is coming from the SAFF, having a firearms curriculum will do wonders to help the relevance of the SAFF within the modern stage combat industry. In the meantime, I would like to share some of my own experience, tips, tricks, and rules developed over the past five or six years in dealing with prop firearms and their use. This information here is intended to address the common ground between actors and choreographers, and will not go extensively into the actual mechanics of firearms, the types of props involved, or the other technical aspects of safe and effective theatrical firearms use.

First, while they are already commonly known, here are a few basic safety rules to begin as a foundation for everything else discussed in this article.

## **Do not handle firearm props you are not required to!**

While etiquette and professionalism would suggest that you not mess with props unnecessarily anyway, this is especially important with firearm props. You cannot always tell from looking at a firearm prop whether it is inert, capable of firing blanks, or even a real firearm. You usually cannot tell from just looking at one if it has a round in the chamber. The only way that the actors, stagehands, and others involved in safely staging these scenes can know for sure that something is safe and ready for them is if it has been checked and not touched in the meantime. If you are rushing on stage with a firearm prop, you need to have the safety and peace of mind of knowing that it will do what it is supposed to if you pull the trigger and nothing more. Firearm props can be dangerous, can be fragile, can be complicated devices, and even if they may happen to be just spray-painted toys in your production, once they become theatrical props they are no longer toys, and should not be treated as such.

## **Know your props.**

You need not know the full name and history of the model of firearm your character carries, or be able to field strip and clean it. But, you should know what your prop is capable of doing—and which levers and buttons to use or avoid so you do not accidentally drop a magazine mid-scene. What parts need to be able to move for the prop to function? What parts might pinch, burn or otherwise hurt you? The most common blank firing guns in this country vent the hot gasses and powder residue out to the top or side, not straight out the barrel, so the dangerous areas may not be what you would expect.

## **Keep your finger off the trigger until you intend to fire.**

This is one of those rules that we have to adjust from real firearms safety practice. By *you*, I mean both you the actor when not performing, as well as you the character when on stage. The best place for your finger when not about to shoot is generally extended alongside the frame of the firearm, just above the trigger area, as though pointing in the direction of the muzzle. From here, it is a very quick and easy motion to pull the trigger, but you are much less liable to do so by accident.

This is not just an actor and audience issue, but a character issue. If your character is trained in firearms (police, military, so forth) then they should not be waving around a firearm with their finger on the trigger while giving their monologue. Granted, you may be portraying characters who are not supposed to have firearms training, or who are supposed to be a little dumb and unsafe, so of course in those situations it is up to the actor, choreographer, and director to decide how to handle the situation. Safe and properly-trained firearms handling should be your default, though, just as safe and intelligent sword handling should be.

## **Do not point the muzzle at anything you do not want to shoot.**

Here is one rule that is paramount in real gun handling, but needs some flexibility in theatre. There will be times when you need to point a firearm prop directly at someone, when no amount of cheating the angles will get you out of that. At these times it is vitally important to know that you have a prop that makes it safe to do this.



This rule should be a bit more concrete for any trained characters; if someone friendly passes through your field of fire, you should drop your muzzle to the ground until they are clear. The best place to have a gun pointed when not actively targeting someone is towards the ground in front of you. The cliché is of a gun held close to the head, aimed straight up; a cliché for which we can thank mostly film and TV, since directors love that tight shot that can get the gun next to an actor's face in close-up. Down at the ground is much safer though, both with real firearms and especially with something like top or side venting blank firing guns. It is standard practice for military and police gun handling. Do not forget the audience, either. Pointing guns directly at the audience is a strong choice to make them feel uncomfortable, and should not be undertaken lightly or without the best assurances of safety.

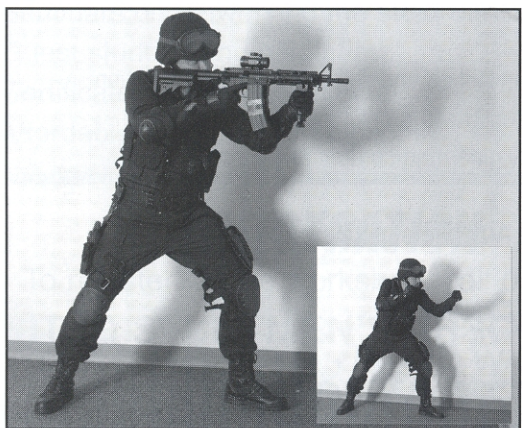
#### **Do not be afraid to use hearing protection when firing blanks.**

It is not macho to have bleeding ears and tinnitus. Especially when indoors, and/or up against a solid wall to reflect the noise, blanks can be extremely loud. I was recently working with twelve gauge shotgun blanks on a film set and had the plastic face fall off a clock on a wall some thirty feet away, just from the shockwave of the noise. Those cheap, disposable foam earplugs work well, and can be trimmed down to size so they don't stick out conspicuously.

Now on to the fun stuff!

First and foremost, remember that a gunfight is a fight. It is not a shooting range, it is not a carnival game, it is a fight, and to tell that story in a way that is believable and exciting to watch, we have to be able to see that in your body language and gun handling. If you do not carry yourself and your weapon as though there were potential for deadly harm to yourself and to others at any moment, you are not telling the audience that there is a real threat to the characters. Sure, you could perhaps just casually reach out and pull the trigger, and that is a valid character choice if made for the right reasons, but it is usually not the right choice if your character is in a real fight and not just an execution.

Take a look at the posture in the following picture, demonstrating a typical combat stance with a M4 carbine. This is a universal close-



combat firearms position, such as might be used in a police raid or by American soldiers in Iraq.

Take away the weapon and it becomes clear what the feeling of the posture is all about. This is a fighting stance,

make no mistake; wide, low base, guard up and extending from the center line with the elbows in close (one is reminded of Wing Chun and other close-fighting systems there). Modern firearms design and tactics have enabled close-quarters firearms combat to become more ergonomic, and allow more natural fighting stances comparable to those in other martial arts. Holographic sights, shorter bar-

rels, and forward grips facilitate leaving both eyes open, the head relatively upright, and the arms in a good fighting position. Look around and you will find similar stances in just about every martial art, from Chinese spear techniques to *Codex Wallerstein*, *Fiore dei Liberi*, and other longsword manuals.

The stance to the left assumes the target is being actively engaged. When sweeping a room before any shots have been fired, searching for a target, or otherwise on the suspense end of the action continuum, you probably want to be in more of a low ready stance as pictured earlier with the barrel pointing down at an angle and the weight more centered. It is worth developing a good *low ready* stance; this is your *en guard*, your ward, your *kamae*, it is the place where you ideally start the fight and end it. You should look alert, prepared, on balance, but without the tunnel vision that looking down your sights can give you. This is the position from which you are scanning the environment for threats or targets, or trying to identify friend from foe. The head is up scanning the horizon for threats. From a theatrical standpoint, it also gives you somewhere further to go when the fight begins. Putting it into sword terms; If one started smallsword fights with the sword fully extended on target before you even came into measure, it would be hard to signal to your partner and to the audience when the attack begins. We are used to being able to signal intent by extending. Same in boxing: you can throw a strong punch by just moving your body towards your opponent while your arm is already extended...but it would look silly to stay that way through the whole fight. Boxers snap back to their guard. Gunfighters should snap back to their low ready stance.

Keep in mind that what begins as a gunfight may not end as one, and vice versa. Some staged fights begin with gunplay, but then characters either ran out of ammunition or were disarmed. Often the biggest danger in close-quarters fighting involving a gun is that your gun may be taken away from you and used against you. Many police officers who are shot get shot with their own sidearm. Your stance should be geared around balance, control, ability to move well and use cover, and weapons retention. You may need stack up with your team-mates, run through doorways, shoot from behind cover, or move quickly over uneven terrain, all of which is easier with a stable but compact posture.

Also, think about recoil. The force of recoil comes from a basic physics phenomenon we are all familiar with; every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Thus it is the mass and momentum of that mass being fired out the barrel of a gun that creates recoil. This force pushes back directly opposite to the path of the projectile, which generally means it is pushing back into the shooter's grip along a line about an inch or more above their grip. This creates a lever such that the recoil is generally seen to be both a backward force (kick) and an upward movement of the barrel (muzzle flip) as it pivots around the axis of your wrist, the latter being most pronounced in higher caliber and compact handguns where high power and shorter barrels amplify the effect.

To compensate for this, most combat gun handling tries to brace against the backwards force (either through solid arm positioning on a handgun or placing the butt stock of a rifle or shotgun firmly against the shoulder prior to firing) and minimize the muzzle flip, since that takes you off target. Some people, when picking up a



heavy firearm, will tend to lean back to counterbalance the weight held out in front of them. This makes you especially susceptible to recoil, as well as otherwise off balance for fighting, and does not visually read well as a fighting stance. A more aggressive, forward leaning stance both helps control recoil and gives you a better looking, better working platform. The better you can control your muzzle flip, the faster and more accurately you can squeeze off multiple shots on target. Trained gunfighters can land a *double tap* (two quick shots in succession, usually to the center of mass) in very short time and within an inch or so of each other. Those who forget about muzzle flip do so at their own peril.

Given that our props are not launching any mass out the barrel at high velocity, why should this matter? Because that is what we are asked to convey. A good combat stance is one that will minimize recoil. If you casually hold a large-caliber firearm out in one hand and fire it without any recoil, people will know that it is fake. On the other hand, if you have got a really good and solid stance and fire the same prop with no recoil, it is much more believable, selling the reality of the prop and action as well as giving the actor a more dynamic and powerful presence on stage. It is akin to using lightweight aluminum broadswords- the safety and comfort of having lighter, duller swords is nice, but you have to more consciously sell the heft and power a bit to make the fight look right.

You could just fake recoil, but that has its own hazards. With blank firing props, this can potentially increase jams. Recoil is like an accent—if you can do it well, it can add to the overall production, but if you cannot do it well...best not to even try.

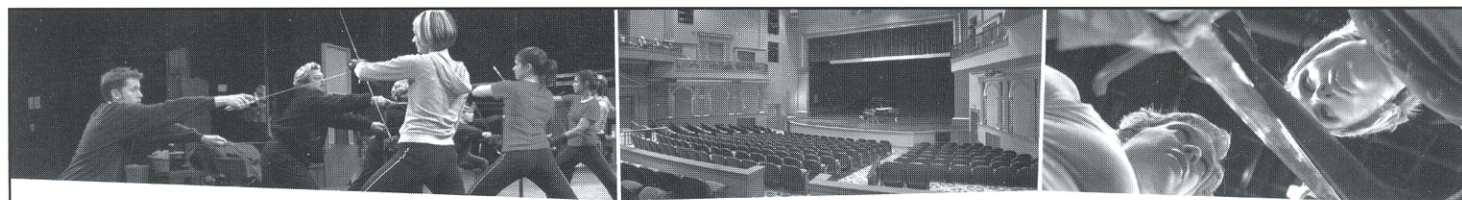
You may need to portray a character with bad gun handling prac-

tices, just as you may need to portray a bad swordsman, but even as Viola in *Twelfth Night*, you still need to preserve the illusion that the swords are dangerous and have the proper heft, and you need to maintain a basic control of the weapon. You have to separate the elements of good weapons handling that are about illusion for the audience from the parts that are about looking like you know what you are doing, making deliberate choices about which you keep and which you discard for comedic and dramatic effect. Of course, at all times you also have to maintain the elements of weapons handling that are about safety.

How a character holds their gun can speak volumes about them. Would a 1930s gumshoe, a modern SWAT team officer, a *gangsta* thug, a cowboy, and one of Napoleon's troops all hold their firearms the same? Of course not, and neither would a superhero, an alien, and a cyborg, for that matter. Most of what has been mentioned above comes from modern police, military, and security protocol, but there are plenty of other options and genres out there, as there is more to swordplay than single-sword.

There is a whole other world of martial arts and sciences out there to explore, everything from muskets and bayonets to old-west gun spinning, Special Forces tactics to laser blasters. And, as with swordplay, knowledge of real-world skills used by combatants can only help in the staging of scenes of conflict. The best results require combining that knowledge with the artistic sensibilities of a director, the character insight of an actor, and the flow and physical narrative and downright trickery of good fight choreography.

Have fun, play safe, and look good!



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