

Entertainment

Ethel Simmons editor/644-1100



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Stage combat

Actor teaches special technique for fist, sword fights

By Cathie Bredendach
special writer

the real thing is a specialized theatrical skill.

John Michael Manfredi of Rochester is an actor who also stages fights for both the theater and movies. Fights have to be choreographed just like



JERRY ZOLYNSKY/staff photographer

John Michael Manfredi of Rochester (left) and Wayne David Parker of Dearborn, who have worked together on swordfighting sequences for the theater, discuss staging a fight.

dances," he said.

Manfredi worked on stage combat in plays this past season at the Actors Alliance Theatre Company in Southfield and Meadow Brook Theatre on the Oakland University campus near Rochester. He choreographed fight scenes in a movie that will premiere in Michigan this summer. Manfredi usually acts in the productions for which he creates fight sequences.

In Actors Alliance's recent athletic version of Shakespeare's "Taming of the Shrew," Manfredi played the love-struck Hortensio and assisted Wayne David Parker of Dearborn in choreographing movements. Last fall he wielded a rapier in Meadow Brook's "Cyrano de Bergerac" and worked on the dueling sequences with Parker, who is a member of the Society of American Fight Directors.

OF PARKER, with whom he's worked numerous times, Manfredi said, "Whenever people in Detroit want help with stage combat, they call David Parker, and if he can't do it, they call me." Manfredi is one of six cast members in Actors Alliance's production "El Grande de Coca Cola." He choreographed the humorous gymnastics as well as a masterful slow-motion fight in the slapstick comedy that plays through Sunday, June 16.

Choreography is essential no matter whether the fight is staged before a camera or a live audience. "And stage combat demands good body control and a certain amount of athletic ability," Manfredi said. He explained that in hand-to-hand combat on stage, the person who receives the blows does much more work than the one dishing out the violence.

"The guy getting hit is in charge of making the sounds (called knapps) by striking his hands together or hitting his thigh." The trick is hiding the action of the knapp from the audience as well as hiding the fact that the fighter didn't really hit the other guy. The technique

of camouflaging specific actions from the audience is called masking. Directors of early movies had a long way to go in perfecting their skills at masking, and the results of their inexperience were often laughable. Many of us remember ridiculing faked fights in movies and plays when masking was obviously bad and the actors' fists obviously missed the jaws of the guys with whom they were supposedly slugging it out.

When masking is good, the fight seems believable and the audience is unaware of the tricks used to sustain the illusion of reality. Those like John Manfredi, who specialize in stage combat, understand the necessity of choreographing every minute action in a fight and of drawing the audience's attention away from what's to be masked in order to make the light convincing.

THIS JULY, Manfredi's first major film, "Stryker's War," will premiere in Michigan. Manfredi planned the fights for it. He also plays one of four marines in the film, which was shot in Detroit by Action Pictures.

"You can get away with things in film that you couldn't do on stage," he said of the difference between fighting in front of a camera rather than before a live audience. Camera angles in film can mask action the audience isn't supposed to see and directors don't have to worry about synchronizing sound and action because sound is dubbed in afterwards.

For those who assume that knapp sounds in a stage battle are supplied by someone backstage, Manfredi explained that nothing looks more faked than having the sound out-of-synch with the action. The person getting hit is in charge of making the knapp sound because he's in the best position to coordinate sound with action.

Manfredi grew up in Ohio and became interested in fights when he was a kid watching the swashbuckling heroics of Errol Flynn and Gene Kelly at



JERRY ZOLYNSKY/staff photographer

A rapier thrust by Parker looks like Manfredi has been done in, but it's all play acting.

the movies. He attended Kenyon College in Ohio for three years, then spent a year at the Goodman School in Chicago, a nationally known drama school.

In 1982 he and his wife, Krista, who's from the Detroit area, settled in Rochester. They're awaiting the birth of

their first child in mid-June. Manfredi works as an actor, a stage combat specialist and as a drama teacher. This summer he will teach Voice for the Actor and assist in Stage Combat classes in the Actors Alliance Summer Training Program.

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— John Michael Manfredi

Ethnic Festival spotlights Irish

The annual Irish Ethnic Festival will be held Friday-Sunday at Hart Plaza in downtown Detroit. Festival food booths open at noon Friday for the downtown lunch crowd. Official opening ceremonies are at 6 p.m. Friday. The festival continues until midnight Friday, noon to midnight Saturday and noon to 10 p.m. Sunday. Entertainment will feature performers direct from Ireland including

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