

The Sword Master's Point Of View

BY GUEST COLUMNIST ANTHONY DE LONGIS

I have just passed the thirty year mark as a working show business professional. My career includes successes as an Actor, Fight Director, Sword Master and Action Coordinator for film, television and the stage. Each medium poses different advantages and challenges to telling a believable action story.

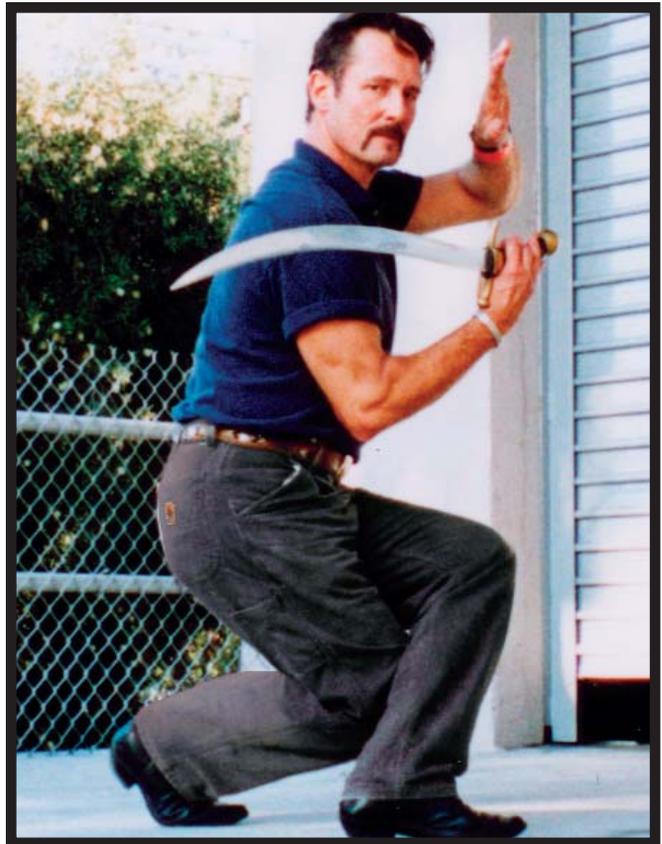
I approach action as dialogue with movement instead of words. Action is one of the most powerful story telling devices available to a performer and filmmaker. It can affect and involve the audience viscerally and emotionally, not just intellectually. Every actor and director will eventually face the unique demands of an action scene, often one that includes weaponry. Such occasions can dramatically define character and drive the story in a dynamic new direction, providing the actor commands the skills to deliver a safe, exciting performance and the director knows how to take full advantage of the storytelling possibilities inherent in these opportunities.

SWORD FIGHTING IS AN ANACHRONISM

The history of the sword is the history of mankind. The sword has existed in a wide variety of forms and shapes in every culture throughout the ancient and modern world, as both a symbol of power and a dispenser of justice. At its best the sword stands for honor, integrity and responsibility; at its worst for brutality and mayhem.

Most folks in the Sword Mastering profession have a passion for the history of the sword and the science of swordplay. It is a rich and fascinating path to knowledge and self awareness as a performer, Martial Artist and human being. However, most of our audience only knows what they have seen in the movies and that is often a contradictory and confusing conglomerate of misinformation. As a Sword Master one must educate as one entertains, and it must be done without losing the momentum of the story being told.

Choreography is a cause and effect conversation between characters in conflict. When choreographing and performing, one must discover, then believably execute the most effective, dynamic and exciting story ideas that can be imagined. An audience forms instant judgements and feelings about each character based on what they see. The Master's artistry finds voice in the specifics of the choices made and his ability to execute them clearly, dramatically and when appropriate, with a little style.



SECONDHAND LIONS

Recently, I was Sword Master for the film *Secondhand Lions* with Robert Duval, Michael Caine and Haley Joel Osment. A gem of a movie with a formidable cast. I staged all the flashback sword action with sabres, scimitars and fighting knives.

I had worked with Stunt Coordinator Walter Scott as the double swordsman "Blade" in *Masters of The Universe* and also trained and choreographed Dolph Lundgren as "He-Man." Scott tapped my whip skills on *Bad Girls* and brought me in to stage the sword duels for the television Series, *the Magnificent Seven*. Walter told me what the director wanted for *Secondhand Lions* and I went to work.

The film's Director Tim McCanlies is also the writer. His vision of his characters is so strong that he waited ten years to direct this special project just to be certain the story was told to his satisfaction. The flashback action sequences are vital to the heart of the movie and the stories, as related by Michael Caine. They are given life in the mind of his young nephew "Walter," played by Osment. For these fights of imagination, McCanlies and our distinguished Director of Photography Jack Green, wanted to recreate the excitement of the swashbuckling technicolor classics like *the Adventures of Robin Hood*, *the Mark of Zorro* and *the Prisoner of Zenda*. I was delighted.

Ideally, a hero fights for something larger than himself and should overcome tremendous adversity before ultimately triumphing. A good fight scene is a microcosm that entire drama—with the same three act structure: the setup, the complications and the resolution or payoff.

The final duel between “Hub” and the evil sheik, for the love of his life “Princess Jasmine,” pulled out all the stops. I wanted both characters to be exceptional swordsmen. The sheik fought with two curved scimitars versus Hub’s single, straight bladed *Foreign Legion* cavalry sabre. A decidedly unfair advantage for the bad guy and lots of perilous complications for the hero. The sheik was mysterious, unpredictable and slightly exotic. I gave him an elusive, fluid, circular fighting style to match the flowing curves of his twin blades. Hub was straight forward, no nonsense, the all American hero. I gave him a more linear, counter punch style. This combination gave us plenty of opportunity to buckle our swash and create an effective and dynamic battle between good and evil.

CHOOSING THE WEAPON AND MAKING IT COUNT

All swords are not created equal. Is your character’s weapon of choice designed to hack and cleave, stab and skewer or both? Is it straight or curved, long or short, single or double edged? Does it have a guard to protect the hand? The sabre, the katana, the broadsword, the rapier, the small sword; each has unique strengths as well as weaknesses and vulnerabilities. The choice of weapon and the manner with which your character wields it, can offer a strong visual metaphor for *who he is* and how the audience will perceive him.

My second guest starring appearance on *Highlander: the Series*, was an episode called *Duende*. Originally titled, *The Mysterious Circle*, it incorporated my interpretation of the uniquely Spanish system of fighting with the rapier. I wanted to combine the upright defiant postures of the matador with the staccato footwork and rapid weight changes of a flamenco dancer—coupled with the application of superior leverage through footwork and angulation. It was the first time the Spanish style had ever been filmed.

I co-choreographed the three rapier and dagger encounters with my friend F. Braun McAsh, the Sword Master for the series [and this magazine]. Our efforts produced what many consider to be the finest and most complex fight in the six year run of the show. Braun chose a *flamberge* style rapier blade for my character as the fencing master immortal “Ottavio Consone.” The flamberge was the European equivalent of the Filipino flame bladed *kris*. The double-edged way design of the blade maximizes blade contact and insures cutting power throughout the length of every stroke. It is a beautiful yet brutal weapon, instead of a neat surgical slice the flamberge blade chews the flesh and leaves ugly wounds that are hard to repair. The psychological impact to one’s opponent is almost as effective a distraction as the twin scalloped edges he has to face. This choice of weapon reveals arrogant confidence, no small sense of theatricality and a grim determination to win. Braun’s selection was the perfect compliment to my own acting and action choices.

THE SEARCH FOR INSPIRATION

As Sword Master, I always discuss story and character concerns with both the director and the actors. Action that does not progress the story and say something unique about each character is indulgent, lazy, and a disservice to both the project and the audience.

Part of the job as Sword Master is to play detective, in search of clues. I begin with the text or script; *the author’s vision*. Then I talk to the director to find out what he wants the action to accomplish, to find out what the scene is to say to the audience; *the director’s*



In character as Blade, from the *Masters of the Universe*.

vision. The actor performing the role has the same sources of text as well as the director to guide his ideas, but he or she will have his own interpretation of how the character should be played; *the artist’s vision*. I then rely on my own experience and imagination to meld all of these elements into an exciting tapestry by choosing physical elements and combinations that best tell the desired story. Most of the time, when I have good ideas, both director and actors listen.

YOU MUST BE WELL PREPARED TO BE READY TO CHANGE

As Sword Master, it is my job to take advantage of the experience my actors already possess, strengthen their weaknesses and teach them as many new skills as I can in whatever time we have together. For *Secondhand Lions*, Walter Scott gave me two weeks prior to filming to work with Christian Kane, the actor who would play Duvall’s “Hub” character in his youthful prime. The script and storyboard said that Hub had to “fight like twenty men.” Our two weeks of intensive training gave me the chance to impart a strong and varied sword vocabulary to the actor. Chris’s dialogue would all be voice-over narration by Michael Caine as he recounted “Hub’s” adventures as a young man; therefore, Chris knew he had to make every moment on screen count. Although he had no sword experience, Chris had strong athletic abilities and a broad sports background. Most importantly, he was an eager student and worked like a demon in our sessions.



Working as Sword Master for *Queen of Swords*, and in character as Maestro Juan Torres, with Tessie Santiago.

Remember: good choreography is a conversation between characters, given greater voice through action. There are three ranges of combat: long, medium and close. Each offers specific opportunities to create tension and heighten the character's story. It also can give the camera a reason to follow the action to a close-up of the actor's face. More on that later. The hardest thing to teach a beginning sword fighter is footwork. It is *essential* to be able to instantly respond to one's partner's every movement. The ability to manipulate distance is not only key to articulating character but also to maintaining safety.

One of the most challenging scenes in *Lions* called for Christian to charge into the "Oasis set" at the head of his band of horsemen, jump from his mount, cut the chains binding the captive slave girls tied to a convenient palm tree and fight ten guys simultaneously. This would be the first time we see his character in action; so, it was vital to introduce the young Hub with a lot of flair and style.

The morning of filming we shot the charge and dismount then reset to cover the fight. We were on a very tight combined day-into-night schedule and the director and DP [director of photography] wanted to cover the fight quickly with four cameras, then move the company to the next location. This was our first rehearsal on the actual location and suddenly there were tents and camels and campfires and cooking pots and dozens of extras who had never been mentioned crammed into our performance area. It was apparent to me that a quick *tweak* of the action would be necessary.

Nothing looks worse than a bunch of guys circling your hero and politely *waiting their turn* to attack. The key to dealing with multiple opponents is to never allow the action to stay in one place too long—avoid being surrounded. I taught Chris that the best way to remember choreography is to remember the story the moves are crafted to tell. Chris also kept track of his action by the direction he moved to encounter each successive group of new fighters. Now, our location elements and their new demands required Chris to stay-put and for his adversaries to come at him. The individual fight phrases were still effective, but the order needed to be changed and the angles

adjusted to better suit the placement of the multiple cameras. However, out of this necessity grew the opportunity to create a more exciting ending.

I added entrances from the tents and over the campfire and from off camera—from all directions. I changed the order of the combinations and quickly blocked the new angles to provide maximum effectiveness to all four cameras. I also added a disarm in the final three-against-one combination, so Chris would have a second sword for the new ending I had in mind. I had taught Chris chambered-hand double-sword techniques in Los Angeles, and this gave us the ideal opportunity to take advantage of his training. Since Chris was used to my energy and trusted me at any speed, I jumped in myself to perform a double scimitar versus sabre and scimitar four sword combination. The new climax accelerated in tempo and in both medium and close up camera angles, Chris was surrounded by a web of flashing steel—*flair and style!*

This all took about ten minutes to accomplish. We rehearsed our adjustments once and rolled film. We shot two full master-takes with four cameras and were done and ready to move cast and crew to the new location. The director was delighted. I learned this lesson a long time ago: You've got to be prepared but also ready and able to change at a moment's notice so you can turn the inevitable unforeseen complications into character and story-telling opportunities.

PREPARATION AND TRAINING

Staged combat is the attempt to create the illusion of reality, while maintaining safety for the actors and crew, as the character's story unfolds. You must react and respond organically to your partner's energy. That's life, that's drama, that's combat. Obviously an actor cannot give his best performance if he does not speak the language and know his lines. That is what training and rehearsals are for, to acquaint the actor with his new vocabulary of expression.

The Sword Master's imagination has two constant qualifiers. The first involves *safety*—always a prime consideration. The second is *time*. Let us begin with safety. The Sword Master must analyze



On the set of the *Magnificent Seven* television series with Anthony Starke.

the skill level of each performer and balance it with the amount of time he (or she) has to teach the choreography. If his choices are beyond the ability of the actor to execute safely and at a reasonable level of performance, then he must find simpler choices which still tell the story.

I tell my students, you only have the skills you show up with on the day. You must assume responsibility for your own training. The set is not the place to hone *your* craft. Study and train to increase your ability level *before* the job. The more skills you have developed, the greater your range of choices to tell your character's story. You can only wing it successfully, if you have got the skills to fly. That goes for both the choreographer and the performer.

After proper training, I encourage the artist to perform as much of their own action as possible. Not the extreme-risk stunts like high falls, fire and car work. Those require a team of stunt performer specialists who have devoted years to lowering their risks to an acceptable level. Most artists realize the benefits of performing their own sword action. It gives their characterization tremendous credibility when the audience can see it is really them performing the action. For that moment the artist really *is* that character.

TIME IS THE ENEMY

It is a lot easier to get rehearsal time on a feature film than episodic television. The Production Manager will still resist, but compare the tally. Pay three people to rehearse and your actors can progress beyond mechanical moves to a dynamic performance level that grabs the audience's imagination. Or, save that small invest-

ment and keep a crew of 30-50 standing around, on salary, while you struggle to get something mediocre on film. The choice seems obvious, but then again—there's no business like show business.

I was able to train Michelle Pfeiffer for six weeks prior to filming for her role as "Catwoman" in *Batman Returns*. I was also present throughout her principal photography to maintain her level of excellence and to turn the logistical problems of difficult locations like roof tops and the water soaked Penguin's Lair into opportunities. As a result, this strong, fine actress had an additional and powerful story-telling tool at her command. Michelle did all her own whip work without any doubles, including a neck wrap around Christopher Walken's throat on her first day of shooting. This gave director Tim Burton shooting options that would not have been possible with a double. It also made Michelle's portrayal as Catwoman even more powerful and effective.

The second time consideration, especially in television, is how long you get to shoot your action scene. It is a waste of time and energy to dream up action that time, budget or personnel will not allow you to record. An episodic television show gets seven days or less to film the entire program. Every day is overbooked, and unforeseen problems often steal what little time has been promised.

I was Sword Master and co-Stunt Coordinator for *the Queen of Swords*. For each of the episodes I helped to create, I showed the directors the fight and had them agree to the story of the choreography *before* I taught the moves to the actors. Even this did not set the choreography "in stone." Inevitably, when it came to actually

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film the fight, time had ticked away shooting other elements. Often we had to make last-minute adjustments to shorten the fight, hopefully without sacrificing any essential story elements. Making tough choices and getting the actors through the changes safely and effectively is an important part of the Sword Master's job.

EVOLVING THE STORY SPECIFICS OF THE FIGHT

Every action beat has four story telling opportunities: the moment before, the action, the reaction, the moment after. Each moment is vital to the illusion of combat that you and your partner are trying to create. It is very important to realize the power and story potential each element has to offer and to take full advantage of the opportunities each can provide to clarify and justify your action choices.

I always incorporate the seed of combative truth into the work. My favorite way to choreograph is to evolve the story with a partner. He or she initiates an attack. I offer a series of defensive options and offensive responses, then choose the ones that flow as a logical and dynamic reaction to the created jeopardy. My partner responds to the new peril with an answer of his own, and so on, until the crafted phrase tells the story we want. Then we play with tempo and speed to clarify and accent the character elements for camera.

THE DREADED CLOSE-UP AND THE MODERN FILM FIGHT

As Sword Master you have an obligation to the audience, the unsung and often forgotten crucial partner to every story we labor to create. Without the audience there is no one to understand and appreciate your character's dilemma. I firmly believe that Fred Astaire had the right idea. His contract stated that when dancing, he would always be shot head to toe, full figure. He wanted his whole body to tell his story.

The current mania for too close coverage robs both the performer and the audience of the actor's full power. The story must be told from the ground up, each action motivated by the feet and the hips and supported by the power of the entire body. The intelligence and dexterity, both mental and physical, of the characters is lost when all you can see are straining faces. Often an important story beat such as a clever disarm goes unnoticed. It just looks like magic or bad continuity when the hero or villain is suddenly unarmed. Your hero is lessened because an audience cannot appreciate what it did not see.

The prevailing wisdom holds that close-up contortions of an actor's face will draw the viewer deeper into the story of the action. Close-ups are a good way to hide the physical shortcomings of your actors; however, I believe it confuses and distances the audience. Many directors believe that bombarding the audience with strobe-quick flashes and partial images will dazzle the viewer into believing they have seen a good fight. I find it accomplishes precisely the opposite. If you cannot follow the story that the action is supposed



The Evil Sheik from the hit film *Second Hand Lions*.

to tell, ultimately there is no comprehension. And if an audience does not understand, how can you expect them to care about your characters or what happens to them?

There are times when this assault-to-the-senses technique is appropriate, effective and even necessary. It is pretty tough to do a long shot master when you have multiple characters fighting a fantasy that only exists in the computer. The battle with the "Cave Troll" from *the Two Towers* is an example. The director, fight choreographer and cinematographer had to shoot short, quick pieces of individual actors and then reassemble the action snippets into a final convincing tapestry through editing. A tough way to tell the story, but masterfully executed by a very talented team. Perhaps you want to show that your heroes are helpless in the tide of battle. All is carnage and confusion as wave after wave of the enemy washes over you like a tide

of human flesh and you can only see what is right in front of you at that instant. Ridley Scott and his team used their artistry to good effect in the forest battle sequence of *Gladiator*—Hell was indeed "unleashed."

But shaky-vision, wobble scope and faster-than-you-can-blink quick cuts should not be the only tool you have in your arsenal to tell a compelling action story. All that confusion is a fine condiment but as a steady diet it removes the thought process and strategy of the encounter. To be involved, you must understand and appreciate who is in danger and how they avoid the peril. Is it through skill or luck, or the over-confidence of the bad guy? These are all possible choices with strong character elements to be mined. It remains that the audience must be able to follow the narrative story of the action in order to appreciate each individual's jeopardy and identify with them as people in conflict.

NEVER STOP TRYING TO MAKE IT BETTER

Nothing makes me angrier than the attitude of "OK" is good enough. I believe you never stop trying to make it better until there is nothing more you can do. That is my idea of a professional work ethic. That is how I have always tried to conduct myself, especially on the set. Do your very best with what you have to work with. Anything less, is not worth watching.

Of course that's just one Sword Master's point of view... ☺

De Longis was Sword Master for *Second Hand Lions* and trained the whip fighters for *the Rundown*. He was Sword Master/Co-Stunt Coordinator for episodes 1-6 of *the Queen of Swords* and has held the position of Fight Director for the Los Angeles Music Center Opera since 1986. He taught stage combat in the Theatre Arts Department at UCLA from 1974-1993. His company, *Palpable Hit Productions*, produces instructional videos on the Rapier, Broadsword, the Spanish Destreza and the bullwhip.

He is a *Cowboy Mounted* and three-weapon *Cowboy Action Shooter* and is a founding member of The Light Horseman, slicing targets from his wife's fingertips with sabre, whip and lance at full gallop. [<http://www.delongis.com>]