

WOMEN IN STAGE COMBAT: A STUDY ON BABES WITH BLADES THEATRE  
COMPANY

Macaela Carder Whitaker

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green  
State University in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2015

Committee:

Lesa Lockford, Advisor

Radhika Gajjala  
Graduate Faculty Representative

Michael Ellison

Ronald Shields

UMI Number: 3710437

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI 3710437

Published by ProQuest LLC (2015). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

© 2015

Macaela Carder Whitaker

All Rights Reserved

## ABSTRACT

Lesa Lockford, Advisor

In my dissertation, “Women in Stage Combat: A Study on Babes With Blades Theatre Company,” I explore the practice of stage combat as performed by the all-female stage combat company, Babes With Blades Theatre Company. I interviewed eight members of the all-female stage combat company Babes With Blades Theatre Company. I co-constituted the narratives over the course of seven months using ethnographic research methods; these methods included conducting qualitative interviews, participant observations of one stage combat workshop, three fight calls, and two theatrical productions produced by Babes With Blades, and through field notes. As I am trained in stage combat, I also bring my experiences into consideration through personal reflections throughout the dissertation. In order to analyze my experience in the field and with the interviews, I engage phenomenology, feminist theory, performativity, and cultural studies in sports.

I begin my analysis by situating the Babes With Blades Theatre Company within the larger context of stage combat, a traditionally male dominated field. In chapter two I establish Babes With Blades Theatre Company as a troupe worthy of study by situating the company’s history in the larger history of stage combat. In chapter three I examine how the study participants understand and perform gender and femininity as well as how the company presents women in two productions from the 2010-2011 season. In chapter four I explore how these women experience power and agency through their engagement of stage combat. My overarching claim is that while these women’s understandings of gender and femininity are influenced by traditional social constructions of gender and femininity, their participation in stage combat and

their lived experience as female stage combatants create performances of gender and femininity that nevertheless defy traditional social norms for feminine gender performance, thus, they present strong female images that challenge audiences to reassess their potentially taken-for-granted assumptions of women as combatants – as strong, athletic, and powerful people. Moreover, I also argue that insofar as *Babes With Blades* creates more opportunities for women stage combatants in a theatrical world that is predominated by male stage combatants, it is a company worthy of scholarly exploration.

This work is dedicated to

My parents, Denise Reisdorph and Dale Carder

My grandparents, Clinton Anderson, SaVera Anderson,

Howard Carder, and Alice Alberta Carder

My furry children, Ares, Luna, and Nigella

And my husband, Scott Whitaker

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not be possible without the guidance of my dissertation advisor, Dr. Lesa Lockford. I want to thank Dr. Lockford for her unwavering support, patience, and encouragement during this process, which turned out to be longer than anyone planned. Dr. Lockford was my sounding board when I got lost in my research, reminding me to “stop overthinking” and just write. With her mentorship, my academic voice is stronger and my writing is clearer. I must also thank her for a wonderful gift, our cat Luna, she is a joy and has been my mascot during this process. Words cannot express how grateful I am for all that she has done for me and my family.

I want to take the time and thank my dissertation committee: Dr. Michael Ellison, Dr. Radhika Gajjala, and Dr. Ronald Shields. Each of you provided valuable insight and guidance during the conceptual stage. I want to thank Dr. Ronald Shields for staying on my committee after leaving BGSU. The faculty and staff of the Theatre and Film Department at BGSU provided much support and guidance during my decade at the university. I want to especially thank Dr. Jonathan Chambers for his assistance in my revalidation process.

I also want to thank the participants of this study some of the Babes of Babes With Blades Theatre Company: Amy E. Harmon, Kathrynne Wolf, Libby Beyreis, Jennifer Mickelson, Morgan Manasa, Liz MacDougald, Delia Ford, and Arielle Augustyn, and the Artistic Director, Leigh Barrett. Thank you for sharing your stories, your enthusiasm, your laughter and your company with me. I appreciate the time you gave me both in person and via email and Facebook. As I revisited the transcripts of our conversations I was brought back to the passion and commitment to stage combat that each of you shared with me. This dissertation would not be possible without you. Jennifer, thank you for answering my questions on *The Last Daughter of Oedipus*, a wonderful script with strong female characters that I enjoy revisiting time and time

again. Amy, thank you for putting me in contact with all of these wonderful Babes. I hope to come and play with you all soon!

I would be remiss if I did not thank the faculty and staff of my undergraduate and master alma mater, the University of Central Missouri Department of Theatre and Dance. The years I spent with you prepared me for my future, I cannot thank you enough. A special thank you to Dr. Julie Rae Mollenkamp, Dr. Richard Herman, and Dr. Ed See for encouraging me to pursue my doctorate and for fostering my love for higher education.

The last year of school would not have been possible without the financial support of the donations I received from the Finishing my PhD in Theatre website hosted on Gofundme.com. Many thanks to Christin Schuster and Danica Dralus and the many donors who chose to remain anonymous (although I would love to shout your names for your support). I am so very grateful.

I have a wonderful cast of family and friends who have supported me through school and numerous productions. I must give a large thank you to my Facebook cheering section, The Future Dr. Mac Support Group. This wonderful group of people (you know who you are) provided endless support during this process. You provided virtual tissues when I shed tears and shared smiles and memes when I overcame so many obstacles. You kept me accountable to my schedule and when I started to run out of energy you gave me that extra push. I thank each of you! A special thanks to Cheryl Willoughby for acting as my editor, you helped me see the forest through the trees! To the members of the Bitchbarn, thank you for your friendship and support and I see an orange juice shot put contest in our future. There are four close friends who supported me through various stages, a special thanks to David Sollish, Dawn Schluetz, Maggie Shartzer, and Diane Rust. You provided perspective, feedback and friendship and for that and so much more I thank you. My father-in-law, Wayne Whitaker, I thank you for the gas money and for keeping me grounded during this process. I am lucky to have four parents, a special thank you



to my father-by-marriage, Ron Reisdorph, and my mother-by-marriage, Barb Carder. Thank you for loving my parents and welcoming me into your families. Mommy and Daddy, I cannot thank you enough for supporting my life choices both emotionally and financially. At sixteen when I informed you I was going to pursue a career in the theatre, you didn't blink you just accepted my choices and encouraged me to be happy. And last, but certainly not least, I want to thank my husband Scott, without your love, care, goading, patience, and goofy dances, I would be lost. This is for you!

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   | Page |
|---|------|
| CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION.....                                    | 1    |
| Literature Review.....  | 5    |
| Methodology and Theoretical Framework.....                      | 8    |
| Overview and Limitations of the Study and My Positionality..... | 16   |
| Chapter Breakdown.....  | 19   |
| CHAPTER II. STAGE COMBAT AND BABES WITH BLADES.....             | 21   |
| A Brief History of Stage Combat.....                            | 21   |
| A Brief History of Babes With Blades Theatre Company .....      | 30   |
| Introduction to the Babes of the Study.....                     | 37   |
| Kathrynne Wolf .....  | 38   |
| Amy E. Harmon.....  | 40   |
| Libby Beyreis.....  | 42   |
| Delia Ford .....  | 43   |
| Morgan Manasa .....   | 44   |
| Jennifer L. Mickelson .....                                     | 46   |
| Arielle Augustyn.....   | 47   |
| Elizabeth MacDougald.....                                       | 49   |
| Conclusion.....   | 50   |
| CHAPTER III. BABES WITH BLADES: FEMININITY AND GENDER           |      |
| PERFORMANCE.....  | 52   |
| “The F Word:” Performing Femininity and Gender.....             | 54   |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Portraying Strong Women: BWBTC Productions.....                    | 71  |
| <i>The Last Daughter of Oedipus</i> .....                          | 71  |
| <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> .....                                      | 79  |
| Conclusion.....  | 86  |
| CHAPTER IV. POWER AND AGENCY: PLAYING                              |     |
| AGGRESSOR/VICTIM/PARTNER.....                                      | 89  |
| The Great Boob Escape of 2006.....                                 | 89  |
| “That’s not going to work”: The Functional Body.....               | 92  |
| “Oh, there it is”: The Habitual Body.....                          | 95  |
| “Get your extension, woman”: The Engaged Body.....                 | 101 |
| “Found the ceiling fan”: The Praxic Body.....                      | 104 |
| Lived Bodies and Character Bodies.....                             | 106 |
| Instrument and Agency .....  | 109 |
| Creating Shared Power – Partnership and Trust.....                 | 115 |
| Creating Perceived Power – The Illusion of Violence.....           | 123 |
| Conclusion.....  | 127 |
| CHAPTER V. CONCLUSION.....   | 129 |
| Chapter Summaries.....   | 130 |
| Understanding BWBTC.....   | 134 |
| Limitations of My Study and Opportunities for Future Research..... | 137 |
| Future for Women in Stage Combat.....                              | 139 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY.....  | 141 |
| APPENDIX A. HSRB APPROVAL .....                                    | 148 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| APPENDIX B. INFORMED CONSENT LETTER..... | 154 |
| APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS .....    | 156 |
| APPENDIX D. PHOTOGRAPHIC CONSENT.....    | 159 |
| APPENDIX E. FACTS ABOUT BWBTC.....       | 160 |

## LIST OF FIGURES

| Figure |   | Page |
|--------|---|------|
| 1      | Kimberly Logan as Ismene in <i>The Last Daughter of Oedipus</i> , courtesy of Babes With Blades Theatre Company, photograph by Johnny Knight .....                                | 77   |
| 2      | Gillian N. Humiston (left) as Romeo and Ashley Fox (right) as Juliet in <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> , courtesy of Babes With Blades Theatre Company, photograph by Johnny Knight..... | 82   |
| 3      | Delia Ford (left) as Tybalt and Amy E. Harmon (right) as Mercutio in <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> , courtesy of Babes With Blades Theatre Company, photograph by Johnny Knight.....    | 83   |
| 4      | Gillian N. Humiston (left) as Romeo and Delia Ford (right) as Tybalt in <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> , courtesy of Babes With Blades Theatre Company, photograph by Johnny Knight..... | 107  |

## CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

*The young woman wipes the sweat from her face just in time to see her opponent charge. She steps to the side and knees him in the gut, and sends him to the ground with a back hit. But he is quick, and swipes her leg out from under her, with a sickening thud she lands on her back. She gets up onto her hands and knees only to be kicked in the gut. With another cry of pain she collapses again. Her attacker waits anxiously for the woman to sit up on her knees; he kicks her in the chin. But before she can recover he hits her with a pile driver (a punch delivered downward to a crouched opponent's head) and she falls to her side with one final grunt and stays down.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*I wipe the sweat from my face and make eye contact with my partner. He returns the eye contact and starts to run toward me. I make my step to the side and place my hands on his shoulders. My right leg comes up and makes light contact with his abs; he makes a forced vocal (a planned vocalization that simulates the involuntary exhalation of breath caused by a physical blow). I place my hand on his back, so he is aware that the next move is coming. I lift my hands above my head in a fist and bring it down only to mask my left hand as it cups his upper shoulder muscle as I verbalize. He takes himself to the ground on another forced vocal. My partner places his hand on my right ankle, and waits for me to make a seat drop fall (a controlled backward fall completed by using the large muscle grouping of the legs and the torso as a counterweight to safely lower the combatant to the ground), I lower myself to the ground and make a knap (a sound created to mimic the sound of a body blow) on the stage floor. My partner walks upstage of me. I get up to my hands and knees, he vocally cues me. The top of his foot makes a controlled*

*snap kick (a fast kick from a chambered leg position) to my abs; and I make a forced vocal and lower myself to the ground. I sit back up on my knees facing my partner upstage and make eye contact and make a cage with my hands. He performs a snap kick to the cage, and I add a forced vocal to sell the hit while I perform a controlled head snap. We make eye contact again, and I bring my hands in front of my chest. My partner delivers the pile driver parallel to my face; my head turns as if from the impact as I make a body knap. I lower myself to my side and roll onto my stomach and expand out with one last cry (Carder – Stage Combat Journal – NSCW Las Vegas, 2000).*

\* \* \* \* \*

These two accounts describe the same event, a choreographed routine. The first is how an audience might witness it; the second is from the view of the actor. These observations come from my journal; the first watching the routine by the fight choreographers, the second comes from my experiences after learning and rehearsing the routine with my partner. Stage combat is the art of creating the illusion of violence on stage. There are no opponents in stage combat, only collaborators who work in tandem to create the illusion. The actor combatants work as a team to keep each other safe while performing an intricately timed set of movements and vocalizations in order to create a believable stage combat sequence. Similar to their counterparts in dance and athletics, actor combatants train their bodies and minds to hone their craft and make difficult movements appear spontaneous.

The contemporary practice of stage combat became systemized in the late twentieth century. At first this area of the theatre was populated mostly by men, but in the past twenty years more women are training in stage combat. According to H. Russ Brown, the current

coordinator of the Society of American Fight Director's (SAFD) National Stage Combat Workshop (NSCW), from 2000 to 2006 women were thirty to thirty-five percent of the student population, since 2006 the number has steadily risen to make up around forty-four percent of the attendance (Brown Email 2015). The performance opportunities for women in the field of stage combat are relatively small compared to the growing popularity of women interested in stage combat.<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that two stage combat companies focus on women in stage combat, The Lady Cavaliers Theatre Company based in New York City and Babes With Blades Theatre Company (BWBTC) based in Chicago.<sup>2</sup> Both companies promote a strong female image for women on stage through the use of stage combat. The Lady Cavaliers focus on raising the awareness of "historical women warriors through original productions and educational workshops that center on the art of theatrical combat" (Lady Cavaliers' website).<sup>3</sup> BWBTC also celebrates "the historical role of the woman warrior" through producing theatre "that showcases the strength, vitality, and proficiency of women in the art of stage combat" (Babes With Blades website). BWBTC differs from the Lady Cavaliers by articulating the emphasis for social change in their mission statement,<sup>4</sup> specifically challenging the concept of traditional femininity and gender stereotypes:

The women of Babes With Blades work together to push our own limits as well as those of the general public. We defy society's limitations of women's roles,

---

<sup>1</sup> According to Richard Lane, author of *Swashbuckling: A Step-by-Step Guide to the Art of Stage Combat*, in his experience as a fight choreographer many workshops contained as many female actor combatants as male actor combatants, however performance opportunities for women stage combatants are relatively small in comparison.

<sup>2</sup> To clarify, the title of the company is Babes With Blades Theatre Company, the w is capitalized on purpose. I was corrected on this matter in one of my first email communications with a company member, Amy Harmon. I discuss the title of the company in chapter two.

<sup>3</sup> The Lady Cavalier Theatre Company is currently on hiatus from productions and their website is no longer active.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note since beginning this dissertation, BWBTC has updated their mission statement. I address this change in chapter three.



including the preconception that strength and power are inappropriate in women. We challenge the traditional definition of femininity and shatter divisive stereotypes, thereby encouraging theatre that is not necessarily a gender-specific experience, but a human experience. We maintain an emphasis on working cooperatively rather than competitively in a safe and supportive environment, and we embrace both the discipline and the joy of our craft. (Babes With Blades Mission Statement 2003-2011)<sup>5</sup>

Given the interest in stage combat by women and relative dearth of scholarship on stage combatants and female stage combatants in particular, the purpose of my study is to explore the practice of stage combat as performed by the all-female stage combat company, Babes With Blades Theatre Company. Among the questions I explore are the following: how do these women perform gender and femininity? How do their understandings of gender and femininity translate to production choices both through choice of script and production aspects? What does BWBTC bring to the stage combat community as well as the greater theatre community that cannot be found elsewhere? How do these women experience agency and power through the practice of stage combat? To answer these questions and others that emerged, I conducted a study on BWBTC that employed ethnographic and field methods.

I believe my study will have significance to gender and performance studies not only because it highlights an area where women have been under-represented but also because it specifically engages in further analysis of a performance site that cultivates a violent and strong representation of women, a non-traditional representation.

---

<sup>5</sup> BWBTC's mission statement as it appeared from 2003-2011 is no longer available on the company's website so I provided an extended citation to delineate the difference between the two mission statements.

## Literature Review

A majority of publications currently available on stage combat focus on stage combat training, fighting styles in historical eras and how they appear in literature from that era, and the history of weapons. Other scholars focus on the theatre and violence and what that entails culturally and historically. As may be expected, all this literature either implicitly or explicitly features male actor combatants. Less is written on the all-female stage combat companies with the exception of reviews of their productions. Babes With Blades Theatre Company, which has been operating in Chicago since 1997, has had little exposure outside the stage combat community, despite the opportunities they provide for female actors and the promotion of a strong female image. What is lacking in the literature is a discussion about women in stage combat. My study engages that conversation in critical and scholarly ways by addressing the gap in scholarship about women stage combatants and thereby establishing BWBTC as a company worthy of study.

A majority of the scholarship concerning stage combat consists of stage combat manuals as well as articles on trends in stage combat, and specific stage combat techniques. Stage combat articles appear in a variety of journals and magazines, everything from *Theatre Crafts Magazine*, and *The Fight Master: Journal of the Society of American Fight Directors* to the *Journal of Sports History* and *The Philological Quarterly*. One resource is the annotated book of stage combat resources, *Stage Combat Resource Materials: A Selected and Annotated Bibliography*, by Michael Kirkland that is avowedly “useful to the fight director in the creation of aesthetically pleasing and safe combat for the stage and screen” (Kirkland xi). Kirkland’s bibliography provides a quick reference guide for the fight choreographer who hopes to find inspiration for staging fights. Each entry contains a brief summary of the contents of the book or article, and is

then followed by a notation designating which weapons, historical period or fighting style is covered in the publication.

There are a myriad of stage combat resources available and many I refer to in chapter two to provide a brief discussion of stage combat history. However, four on stage combat that I continued to consult throughout this dissertation are *The Fight Arranger's Companion* and *Actors On Guard: A Practical Guide for the Use of Rapier and Dagger for Stage and Screen* by Dale Anthony Girard, *Fight Directing for the Theatre* by J. Allen Suddeth, and *Swashbuckling: A Step-by-Step Guide to the Art of Stage Combat and Theatrical Swordplay* by Richard Lane. Girard's *The Fight Arranger's Companion* is a complex lexicon of stage combat that provides definitions and references for terms used in stage combat including contemporary weapons, historical weapons, armed stage combat techniques, and unarmed stage combat techniques. In *Actors On Guard*, Girard provides practical exercises and guidelines for the use of the rapier and dagger. Suddeth's *Fight Directing for the Theatre* provides practical information for fight choreographers and places significant emphasis on the importance of safety. Suddeth's discussion includes physical motivations for a fight sequence, safety checklists for a fight director as well as a practical checklist for fight choreographers. Lane's text provides detailed information on various sword fighting techniques used in the theatre as well as basic information on footwork, stance and offensive and defensive sword movements.

Websites on stage combat vary as much as any other type of website in terms of credibility and sustained relevance.<sup>6</sup> *The Society of American Fight Directors* (SAFD) website is a credible and reliable source for the recent events in the stage combat community. This website

---

<sup>6</sup> There are some stage combat websites that are not updated on a regular basis.

provides contact information for SAFD certified teachers and other SAFD members, workshop information and resources. SAFD provides training and certification in stage combat methods through workshops, classes and ongoing training. Some discussion of SAFD is included in my second chapter due to the society's prominence in the stage combat community and the fact that a number of the members of BWBTC have either trained in SAFD workshops or have been trained by SAFD certified teachers and fight masters, so there is a common vocabulary when it comes to discussing stage combat moves. I utilize and clarify these stage combat terms throughout my dissertation.

Stage combat has a number of similarities with sports. Specifically, how the actor combatants and the athletes train their bodies to perform is a shared interest. Similar to athletes, stage combatants train their bodies to complete complicated tasks on demand in order to achieve a specific goal. For athletes, their aim is to perform at the top of their physical capabilities in their sport; for actor combatants it is to perform at the top of their capabilities to tell a story for an audience. And similar to female athletes at the advent of Title IX, female stage combatants are carving out a niche in the stage combat arena. Thus, insights from some works that examine violence, sports, and athleticism augment my research. In "Embodiment of Masculinity," Michael A. Messner examines the socialization of violence in sports. He examines how men are encouraged to instrumentalize their bodies in controlled violent situations such as a game. Similar to Messner, Roger Melin examines the cultural influences that encourage instrumentalization in the use of the athlete's body in his article "Instrumentalization of the Body in Sports." Messner's essay and Melin's article helped me explore similar phenomena in order to discern how women in stage combat potentially instrumentalize their bodies. I asked, what does this habituation of the body as an instrument do to their sense of agency? I considered the

similarities between sports and stage combat and discerned how women stage combatants put their bodies into their work.

In their article, “Femininity, Sports, and Feminism: Developing a Theory of Physical Liberation” authors Amanda Roth and Susan A. Basow argue that women’s displays of physical power in sports are discouraged and destabilized by social norms of femininity even for female athletes. Moreover, they state that despite the health benefits that come with being physically fit and having physical power, feminism has not always promoted physical power in women. The authors’ critical stance to feminism was useful as I shaped my interview questions that deal with femininity and physical power, such as to what extent stage combat is an experience that is implicated by gender. The authors’ discussion on suitable displays of physical power in women (which are acceptable when the female athlete complies with established social norms of femininity) informed my discussion of the BWBTC productions and representations of femininity in chapter three.

### Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The ethnographic and field method study on Babes With Blades Theatre Company I conducted occurred over a seven-month period. During this time period I observed a BWBTC sponsored workshop and fight calls before two BWBTC productions in the 2010-2011 season: a production of an original script, *The Last Daughter of Oedipus*, and an all-female production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Along with the field notes of my observations, I conducted interviews with eight members of Babes With Blades. All eight of these women are stage combatants and I had the opportunity to observe six of the eight women during one workshop, three fight calls and three performances. These eight women are at different stages in their careers as actors and as

stage combatants, some are managing directors of the company while some are newly admitted Babes. Seven of the eight interviews were conducted in person (the remaining-interview was conducted completely by e-mail), while follow up conversations with all the participants happened through e-mail.

As I prepared for this project I consulted a number of books on qualitative research, but it is the work of the following individuals that ultimately structured my process. Herbert J. and Irene S. Rubin's second edition of *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, provided me with a comprehensive guide to qualitative interviewing. Their work helped me develop my process for interviewing: how I chose my topics, how I structured my interviews, how I developed the questions I would ask, and finally how I analyzed my interviews and field notes. Moreover, their work clarified the importance of building working relationships with interviewees rather than treating them as subjects in a study. The book provided me with insights for recognizing themes and concepts that helped me customize follow-up questions. Given that this book is essentially a "how to" guide, it provided me with examples from which I shaped my own interviewing and research processes.

The essay, "For Whom? Qualitative Research, Representations, and Social Responsibilities," by Michelle Fine, Lois Weis, Susan Weseen and Loonmun Wong was significant to the development of my process in this dissertation. The authors discuss the ethics concerning the decisions made in the representation of people in their work. Moreover, this essay provides "ethical invitations" for researchers; it urges researchers to examine their own agendas, biases and interpretations (Fine et al., 198). This text reminded me to re-examine what I brought to the field and to consider how my experiences informed my representation of BWBTC while it also provided me with guidelines for interviews as well as for analyzing data.

Max van Manen's book *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Active Sensitive Pedagogy* was significant to my research and writing process. Van Manen connects qualitative research to a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective in his book and provides examples of qualitative research methods (such as interviews and thematic analysis) that focus on the interpretation of lived experiences (Van Manen 4). Throughout the text, Van Manen reiterates the importance of research being an act of caring. Van Manen trains the researcher to listen to the cultural members' narratives as narratives first before examining them critically. For me, this precaution was key as it consistently reminded me to be present in the moment of the interviews and observations and to use all of my senses to understand the world I was inhabiting with these women. This book served as a guide as I considered how I positioned myself with my research co-participants and it helped me examine my research findings. In particular, this book helped me consider how I use my personal experience as a female stage combatant as a starting point to examine other individuals' lived experiences and yet to not rest with my understandings, but rather to be open to alternate perspectives (54). In chapters three and four I employ my personal experiences to help me find my way into to understanding the experiences of my participants.

Dwight Conquergood, Virginia L. Olesen, and Harry F. Wolcott provide guidelines for conducting responsible ethnographic research in their respective scholarship that I found valuable in the research and writing process. Ethical positioning for a researcher is vital to conducting a study such as mine. In "Feminisms and Qualitative Research at and into the Millennium," Virginia L. Olesen outlines the trends in feminist qualitative research and discusses the complexities and concerns that have grown from these trends. Specifically Olesen's discussion on the "researcher attributes" was useful to my research for it reminded me to account

for my viewpoint (such as acknowledging my own stage combat experiences and how that influences my perceptions) and to account for the context of the interview as well as my participants' experiences and viewpoints (Olesen 350). Olesen explains that feminist qualitative research understands that "women in specific contexts are best suited to help develop presentations of their lives and that contexts are located in specific structures and historical and material moments" (365). This understanding guided me as I interpreted my findings by reminding me to examine how these women's lives have been framed and contextualized and how such contextualization circumscribes, conditions, and helps constitute their gendered existence. Also, this essay guided me as I sorted and interpreted the findings, such as recognizing similarities in participants' stories (the importance of stage combat in their lives) as well as areas that need to be discussed with the participants in greater detail, such as further exploring their understandings of femininity.

In "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance" Dwight Conquergood discusses the pitfalls of performance ethnography. To do so, he situates the stances within what he calls a "moral map" with dialogical performance as the moral center. Conquergood defines the four pitfalls as "The Custodian's Rip-Off," "The Skeptic's Cop-Out," "The Curator's Exhibitionism" and "The Enthusiast's Infatuation." The author systematically describes each problem area and offers examples of consequences of committing such pitfalls. Conquergood describes what he calls "dialogical performance" as "a way of having intimate conversation with other people and cultures" and "instead of speaking about them, one speaks to and with them" (Conquergood 10). As I was reminded during the course of the interviews, dialogue is not always easy and as Conquergood points out, sometimes one has to grapple through the differences between self and other. While his specific focus is on taking insights



from the field into performance, his typology was useful when I considered how I positioned myself in relation to my interview subjects during field work and when I wrote up my findings. Thus Dwight Conquergood's article served as a moral compass for me while I conducted my interviews and ultimately as I interpreted the interviews. Through Conquergood's moral map, I endeavored to remain dialogical as my understanding of stage combat necessarily grappled with the viewpoints of my participants. Through reflexive self-examination guided by Conquergood's moral map, I hoped to maintain an ethical stance on how I represented their points of view.

Dwight Conquergood's article "Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics," also proved beneficial as I engaged in my field work with BWBTC. In the article, Conquergood explores four themes: The Return of the Body, Boundaries and Borderlands, The Rise of Performance, and Rhetorical Reflexivity (Conquergood, *Rethinking Ethnography* 180). He focuses on the importance of the body as a "site of knowing;" he notes that it is through the body that the ethnographer engages in fieldwork and by the felt sensing that comes through physical gestures and vulnerability of both the ethnographer and the ethnographic population, knowledge is produced. Furthermore he calls for the importance of reflexivity in ethnographic practice. This essay reminded me that the practice of stage combat starts with the body, that it is the "site of knowing," and that my body-in-situation experience of the events I (workshops, fight calls, and productions) proved as important as the interviews I conducted. The act of the interview is an embodied practice and that sitting with my informants provided me knowledge in addition to the conversations I had with each woman. It was important for me to recognize the somatic knowledge, not only in the stage combatants but in my participation as well, and I allowed that knowledge to help guide my understandings. The descriptions of the participants'

interactions (both during workshops and productions) throughout my dissertation are a direct result of the guidance I received from Conquergood's article.

From Harry F. Wolcott's book *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing* I was reminded of the importance of flexibility in the research process. Wolcott acknowledges that ethnography begins with method but that it is also "a way of conceptualizing as well as a way of looking," and that I must be flexible while conducting interviews and interpreting these interviews (Wolcott 17). While Wolcott's book provided me with a history of ethnography and the varying methods it encompasses, what was most helpful to my project was his focus on the flexibility in data collection and organization and that it is important to stay open to possibilities and suggestions from the people in our research culture. Wolcott's book guided me when I analyzed the interviews. It reminded me to consistently evaluate my position as both stage combatant and researcher and how that positionality affects the culture and thus the ethnographic process and insights I proffer.

Judith Butler's work informs my examination on the performance of gender by the women of BWBTC. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, helped me as I examined my interviewees' perception and understandings of gender through the language they used. Butler exposes some problems in feminist theory, namely, essentialism as well as the social assumption that gender is an abiding innate state. Here she posits that gender is to be viewed as reiterated acts rather than an abiding state. Moreover, she posits gender as a performance that is played across a continuum rather than as a stable ontological locus on either side of a biological binary of male/female. Butler argues that gender is culturally constructed and the meaning of gender thus reflects the power structure in which it was created. It also assisted me as I analyzed

how I came to understand the participants' individual performances of gender through their actions and dress.

Two other works of Butler's proved invaluable as I examined the performance of gender in the BWBTC productions as well as their individual performances of gender. In the essay, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," Butler argues that "gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" and because it is performative, the status of gender can be contested (271). As such it is a concise argument of her phenomenological exploration of gender constitution that provided me with the framework to acknowledge my own performance of gender and femininity. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler further examines the performance of gender as it relates to personhood, specifically she explores the heteronormative power of gender on a person's perception of self. This source helped me to explore how the BWBTC challenges heteronormative concepts of femininity and gender and aided me as I interpreted my interview findings in chapter three. Together these sources helped me focus on how the participants engaged routine everyday gender behaviors in ways that reify their gender and where their productions potentially subverted gender norms.

I begin chapter four with a section entitled "The Great Boob Escape of 2006," which is an account of how a stage combat move went horribly wrong. Iris Marion Young's article "Breasted Experience: The Look and Feeling," helped me to examine this experience and as a result it helped me create interview questions. In this essay, Young employs phenomenology to explore and deconstruct what it means to have breasts in a patriarchal society and to discern how such meanings affect interaction within society and in the constitution of self-identity. While I do not employ this article in my dissertation, I felt it was important to mention it because it helped me to shape interview questions. In particular I gave consideration to how the participants of my

study are aware of their own individual bodies during fight sequences and how that awareness influences their performances. Also in chapter four, I use Young's term "body-in-situation," as I began the discussion on the lived body of the actor combatant (16). This term comes from Young's article, "Lived Body vs. Gender: Reflections on Social Structure and Subjectivity." This term provided me with another way of further elucidating Merleau-Ponty's concept of the lived body.

I employed Maurice Merleau-Ponty's germinal work, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, in chapter four. Merleau-Ponty stresses that it is by being in the world and experiencing the world through our physical body and what that all entails, such as our five senses and how we process those experiences, is how we have knowledge and consciousness (Merleau-Ponty 167). The author's discussion on habit and memory proved most beneficial as I transcribed my field notes on the workshops and rehearsals. It gave me a vocabulary with which to describe the stage combatants' actions; essentially it helped me to break down stage combat routines and explain them so that an individual who is not familiar with stage combat may better understand. Moreover, and more significantly, Merleau-Ponty and these other phenomenological sources helped me articulate the cultural and performative importance of BWBTC doing stage combat.

I turned to Mary Frances HopKins' article "The Performance Turn—and Toss," to discuss the aggressor/victim/partner dynamic in stage combat. HopKins questions how the use of the word "performance" is deployed in the area of rhetorical criticism as well as in various other disciplinary discourses. The author gives special attention to the performer's relation to his/her body and agency and subsequent relation to the performance space. HopKins discusses performance as a continuous negotiation and renegotiation of agency "between performer and role, between performer and audience" taking place on and in the body (233). I extend HopKins

discussion to examine the importance of the aggressor/victim/partner dynamic in stage combat in chapter four. This article also aided me in shaping interview questions about the stage combatant's relation to her body and the agency of the body in various stages of stage combat routines such as successful performances and learning new fight choreography.

Christopher M. Aanstoos's article, "Embodiment as Ecstatic Intertwining," provided an access point for my exploration and analysis of the female stage combatant's embodied experience in chapter four. Aanstoos explains that we are not always aware of "our thereness," the awareness of being present in our bodies; therefore we do not always think of how we experience the world through our bodies. Aanstoos discusses this concept using six expressions of "ecstatic intertwining of bodyhood – worldhood" (97). Three of Aanstoos's expressions proved beneficial as I examined how women stage combatants experience "thereness" during stage combat routines: "the habitual body's disclosure of its own form" (the actor combatant's ability to perform stage combat moves without conscious effort), the engaged body's disclosure of things," (the actor combatant's ability to extend her bodily awareness into her weapon) and "the praxic body's disclosure of space" (the actor combatant's engagement of the physical world) (97). In the spirit of Aanstoos's expressions, I create a fourth category, the functional body's disclosure of its physical abilities in order to explore how the actor combatant's understanding of her body is essential in maintaining a safe stage combat environment.

### Overview and Limitations of the Study and My Positionality

As I have already noted, in this study I have interviewed eight members of BWBTC as well as spent twenty-five hours at their locations observing their workshops, fight calls,<sup>7</sup> and

---

<sup>7</sup> A fight call is when the actor combatants run all staged violence during warm ups before a performance. These fight calls sometimes have the actor combatants running the fight sequences at half speed and then up to

productions. These interviews and time spent in the field fund my exploration of stage combat as practiced by these women of BWBTC. My personal knowledge as a female actor combatant as well as information from secondary sources on stage combat (manuals, websites, articles, etc.) augment my exploration. Additionally, my experience as a stage combatant and fight choreographer fund my exploration of this culture.

My ambitions for this study were first fomented when I was drawn to stage combat by participating in the Society of American Fight Directors National Stage Combat Workshop in Las Vegas, Nevada in July of 2000. It was at this workshop that I learned the importance of stage combat and the act of creating a safe and choreographed routine in order to simulate violence. Prior to this I had worked with individuals who felt it was necessary to put themselves (or the actors they were working with) in physically dangerous situations in order to create the desired stage effect. After this three-week intensive workshop my understandings of the craft were deepened and I developed a sound appreciation for the amount of time and dedication that goes into creating a stage combat routine.

This experience also made me more aware of my body as an actor than I had been previously. More specifically it made me aware of being a female actor. I realized early that some stage combat moves appeared easier for the male stage combatants than the female stage combatants, for example, front sliding falls (a fall that requires the stage combatant to expand her body from a kneeling position). From my observations I noticed that my fellow female stage combatants and I had to adjust the move to fit our bodies, specifically when the chest came into contact with the floor, while the male stage combatants were able to complete the move as

---

performance speed. A fight call provides the actor combatants the opportunity to rehearse the fight sequences, incorporating any notes from previous performances as well as checking in with partners verbally in order to maintain a safe environment for actors, stage crew, and audience.

demonstrated by the male instructor. This brought me to consider how I learned the moves, how I transcribed the instructor's moves to my body, and how these actions changed when I was partnered with different combatants.

The experience also made me aware of the perceived power struggle that a stage combatant embodies. A number of factors affect the audience's reception of a stage combat routine, such as the gender of the actors (two male stage combatants, two female stage combatants, or one male and one female stage combatant), the level of perceived violence (comic food fight or a fight to the death), the race of the stage combatants and lastly the role of the stage combatants whether the team is portraying a clear aggressor/victim relationship or if it is a shared aggressor relationship with a victor/loser, or a draw in the fight. I realized early that partnering with a male stage combatant for a domestic violence scene felt different than partnering with a female stage combatant for that same scene. I realized that playing the victim in both scenarios felt different than playing the aggressor in both scenarios. I also realized that the audience perception of the scene would be read differently depending on the race and gender of the stage combatants.

If it was not for this experience and subsequent observations I have made, how I approached this study would have been different than how I have engaged this study. I recognize that my experience has brought me to this study and that my identification as a female stage combatant affects how I engage and analyze the culture of female stage combatants. Throughout this dissertation, I endeavor to account for my own positionality and prior knowledge as I engaged with the women of BWBTC. My experience as a female actor combatant necessarily informs my work and augments my findings with the women of BWBTC.

Once again, the purpose of my study is to explore the practice of stage combat as performed by the all-female stage combat company, Babes With Blades Theatre Company. I explore the culture of female stage combatants in order to examine critically the performance of gender and power on the physically active bodies of women stage combatants. Thus, as I have already stated, I conducted a study that employed ethnographic and field method study on the members of Babes With Blades Theatre Company. I limited my study to BWBTC because they are one of only two all-women stage combat companies. I recognize that the generalizability of my observations may not go beyond BWBTC, however, I believe my results provide the opportunity for future research in examining some of the issues present for women stage combatants. Also, I should note that there are a number of men who work with BWBTC; however they are not considered members of the company and I did not engage them in the conduct of this study. Since I am interested in examining how female stage combatants perform stage combat I limited my interviews to the women of Babes With Blades, however, I did ask the women about their interactions with male stage combatants as a part of my examination of femininity and power.

### Chapter Breakdown

In chapter two, “Stage Combat and Babes With Blades,” I set the stage for the significance of the BWBTC as a troupe worthy of study. I provide a brief history of stage combat as a discipline. I introduce the Babes With Blades Theatre Company and explore the company’s history while establishing the importance of an all-female stage combat company to the larger theatre discipline. I introduce my eight study participants, who are members of BWBTC. I provide a basic biographical sketch of each woman that includes her background in stage combat as well as provide descriptions of physical attributes and personality.



In chapter three, “Babes With Blades: Femininity and Gender Performance,” I explore how my study participants perform gender and femininity. Since BWBTC focuses on telling women’s stories with stage combat it was important to examine how the women’s individual performances of gender and femininity inform the company’s production choices. I conclude the chapter by examining two production from the 2010-2011 BWBTC season: *The Last Daughter of Oedipus* and the all-female production of *Romeo and Juliet*. I analyzed BWBTC’s production choices on these two shows in order to examine how BWBTC performs gender and how those production choices provided audiences with representations of women on stage that challenge and subvert the socially prescribed script for women.

In chapter four, “Power and Agency: Playing Aggressor/Victim/Partner” I examine how my study participants experience agency and power from stage combat. I employ the works of Christopher M. Aanstoos, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and various stage combat texts to examine the actor combatant’s lived body. I delve into the world of cultural sports studies with the works of Roger Melin and Michael Messner to examine how the women instrumentalize their bodies and examine how this instrumentalization is a source of power and agency. Utilizing Mary Frances HopKins, I conclude this chapter by explaining how actor combatants create shared power (working with a partner to establish trust and safety) and perceived power (creating the illusion of violence in order to tell a story) and how this Aggressor/Victim/Partner dynamic is also a source of agency and power for these women stage combatants.

In the last chapter, I summarize my findings from chapters two through four. I explored how I understand what BWBTC does for women in stage combat the place the company occupies in the greater discipline of theatre. I also reflect upon the limitations of my study and provide a discussion on future research possibilities that may stem from this study.

## CHAPTER II. STAGE COMBAT AND BABES WITH BLADES

The purpose of this chapter is threefold: to provide a brief history of stage combat as a discipline from its complicated origins to contemporary practices, to examine the Babes With Blades Theatre Company from its origins to its current place in Chicago's theatre community to thereby establish the importance of an all-female stage combat company to the discipline of theatre, and to introduce the eight members (referred to as Babes) I interviewed for this case study. My overarching aim in this chapter, therefore, is to set the stage for the significance of the Babes With Blades Theatre Company as a troupe worthy of study.

### A Brief History of Stage Combat

The contemporary practice of stage combat became systemized in the late twentieth century under entities such as the British Academy of Dramatic Combat and the Society of American Fight Directors. However, staged violence in plays has been an essential tool for playwrights for centuries. J.D. Martinez provides a brief history of staged violence in his article, "The Fallacy of Contextual Analysis as a Means of Evaluating Dramatized Violence." Martinez reminds the reader although ancient Greek tragedies placed violent acts offstage; a death tableau was frequently presented to the audience (77). The Romans moved many of these representations of violence onstage while saving the real blood sports such as gladiatorial events for the amphitheatres (77). Oscar Brockett and Franklin Hildy discuss the many special effects used in theatre productions of the Middle Ages in their book *History of the Theatre*. Violence, then as now, was often crucial to the story. Many medieval plays called for scenes of torture wherein they replaced actors with effigies complete with entrails and animal blood for the full theatrical effect (Brockett and Hildy 93).

In his book, *Stage Combat: "The Action to the Word,"* William Hobbs, a fight choreographer for stage and film notes "The further back one goes in history, the less is known about actual methods of fighting and how these were transferred into theatrical requirements" (9). It is important to note that there is a lack of original documentation on the techniques used to create staged violence. The contemporary equivalent of a stage combat handbook does not exist. However, in research for shows, fight choreographers, historical weapons experts, and theatre scholars can theorize some possibilities of stage combat techniques from extant plays and writings from the era, namely the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe and England. Hugh K. Long, a stage combatant and Assistant Professor at Athens State University, suggests "the lack of primary accounts supports the belief that performed violence was common and typically without incident" (13). During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in both Madrid and London, any dueling or physical harm done to individuals was investigated. An accident in an onstage duel resulting in the injury of an actor or audience member would more than likely be written about, especially by those individuals who believed the theatre was evil and who pushed for the closure of all theatres (Long 13). As Hugh K. Long suggested, "What better way to decry the evils of the theatre than to point out a case of accidental manslaughter or maiming?" (13).

Fight directors and stage combat historians theorize that swordplay and violence on stage were commonplace and popular forms of entertainment since ancient Greek theatre (Martinez 76). As Colleen Kelly points out in her article, "Figuring the Fight: Recovering Shakespeare's Theatrical Swordplay,"

Shakespeare's use of the sword as text is evidence that Shakespeare, as well as his actors and his audience, understood not only swordplay's mechanics but also its complex intertext of behavior known as the *code duello* (rules governing the

reasons for fighting and the manner in which duels were arranged)...Because knowing the language of the sword was not only common but necessary in Elizabethan society, it is reasonable to assume that Shakespeare and members of his company knew something of sword fighting. (97-98)

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, swords were common attire for most men who could afford them, and they typically wore them on a daily basis, a fact noted by Craig Turner and Tony Soper in their book, *Methods and Practices of Elizabethan Swordplay* (xvii-xviii). Dale Anthony Girard, a Fight Master with the Society of American Fight Directors, posits that part of the reason why the rapier became popular during this era, it was much lighter to carry than the hack and slash type weapon such as the military swords of the time (Girard, *Actors on Guard: A Practical Guide for the Use of Rapier and Dagger for Stage and Screen* 11). This familiarity with weapons by audiences could support the theory that staged fights had to be well choreographed to appease the crowds. A badly performed duel would no doubt attract the jeers of the groundlings at The Globe in London and/or the rowdy audiences in the theatres in Spain (Long 14). Kelly argues that “for practical as well as textual reasons Shakespeare’s fights must have been fully or at least partially choreographed” if for no other reason but we know his “company members did not die as a result of sword fighting in the plays in which they performed” (98).

Renaissance scripts are peppered with stage directions such as “They fight” or “They draw and fight.” Shakespeare’s texts give hints as to what type of weapon and style of combat were to be used by the character. Fight director J. Allen Suddeth notes that Shakespeare has given, “specific clues as to the type of sword techniques he envisioned....Many clues to the style, length, and nature of a fight are hidden within the text” (47). *Romeo and Juliet* is a popular text

for fight choreographers to analyze; it provides specific clues in the text for sword movement.<sup>8</sup> A strong example of these clues comes in Act II, scene 3 where Mercutio discusses Tybalt's proficiency with a sword. Hugh K. Long uses this example. To illustrate the language Mercutio uses that gives hints as to the type of weapon and style of fencing used by Tybalt, I have underlined those words in this passage:

Mercutio: More than Prince of Cats. O, he's the courageous captain of compliment. He fights as you sing pricksong: keeps time, distance, and proportion. He rests his minim rests: one, two, and the third in your bosom; the very butcher of a silk button. A duellist, a duellist; a gentleman of the very first house of the first and second cause. Ah the immortal passado, the punto reverso and the hai. (*R&J* 2.3.18-24)

In this brief speech, the fight choreographer learns that Tybalt is a “duellist,” a skilled swordsman, proficient in the Italian fencing style (Long 16). The *passado* is a forward thrust with a rapier is accompanied with a pass in footwork (Girard, *The Fight Arranger's Companion* 167). The *punto reverso* is a thrust from the left with the hand in supination, and the *hai* is a finishing move, or kill move (Girard 181). The Italian style of fencing was in fashion with the nobility in the late sixteenth century (Martinez, *The Swords of Shakespeare* 12). And as Long notes, “Mercutio's description also acknowledges Tybalt's dexterity as he ‘keeps time, distance, and proportion’ with rhythmic ‘rests.’ Shakespeare's dialogue begins to indicate physical action with terms reminiscent of dance choreography,” also terms used by fencing masters of the era (16).

---

<sup>8</sup> William Hobbs, Colleen Kelly, Hugh K. Long, J.D. Martinez, and J. Allen Suddeth all use *Romeo and Juliet* as an example of analyzing the text for fight clues in their various texts.

In Elizabethan London, there was a commercial connection between the fencing schools and the theatre. Fencing schools would rent theatres for fencing competitions (Martinez 21). The theatres provided the students with room for testing as well as providing a large space for the audience (Martinez 21). The Masters of Defence coached students to use a variety of weapons; by the early 1560s the rapier and dagger was included in their public challenges because of its growing popularity (Martinez 25). The rapier is a thrust and cut weapon, and the dagger used for defensive moves and in order to disarm one's opponent. Footwork was taught as an essential part of the attack and defense moves. There is documentation that Elizabethan actors trained with the Masters of Defence. Richard Tarleton, a well-known Elizabethan actor, was known to be a London Master of Defence, a title that required many years of formal training with the popular weapons of the day (Martinez 1).

While it is possible to infer some aspects of the stage fights from extant texts of Renaissance scripts, it is difficult to know exactly how the stage fights were performed safely. By studying the sword fighting techniques, and given the general lack of reports of terrible calamities during a production, it is, as I noted earlier, a reasonable inference that the actors were somewhat trained and possibly relied on a set of stock moves to create the staged violence (Long 14). Unlike the Renaissance, and even the eighteenth century, more documentation on staged violence exists from the nineteenth century. In discussing the nineteenth century, William Hobbs notes,

A number of well-known routines were often used...these were often referred to by the profession of that time as "The Square Eights," "The Round Eights," "The Glasgow Tens" (known in England as "The Long Elevens"), and even one called "The Drunken Combat." All these routines were made up from a series of

cuts...rather whacks at the opponent's blade. These could be repeated as often as required all over the stage – rather in the fashion that children play at sword-fighting with sticks. (9)

Fencing masters and teachers were often called upon to choreograph the basic fights actors were required to complete, however, little attention was paid to story-telling aspect of the fights (Hobbs 9). By the early twentieth century, it was common for acting companies to have stock fight sequences, while not particularly creative or original theatre, the fight sequences provided spectacle that was popular in melodrama (Hobbs 11).

Acting texts began to include information on fight sequences around the 1920s. One example, *Manners and Movements in Costume Plays* by Isabel Chisman and Hester Emilie Raven-Hart published in 1934 provides a manual on manners and movement in period pieces including a section on “Weapons.” Here the authors point to the care with which weapons must be used:

Fights and the management of weapons generally present great difficulties to amateur producers. When possible, call in a military friend to help with all guards, sentries or escorts...As regards to actual fights, “discretion is the better part of valour.” If you are unused to weapons yourself and there is no fencer or swordsman in your district, or if your actors are unskilled, avoid plays in which a duel plays a prominent part. (69)

The authors encourage the reader to proceed with care, noting that “although it is really impossible to teach fencing on paper these written instructions carefully followed should be sufficient, supposing you are unable to obtain practical help” (69-70). Chisman and Raven-Hart

provide a step-by-step explanation of a wrestling sequence complete with stick figure illustrations. The authors warn that “On no account must the actors in a bout of this sort *really* try their strength against one another...only exert enough force to help one another with the feeling of opposition” (87). In these instructions it is clear to see the beginning of contemporary stage combat techniques that encourage safety.

Contemporary practice of stage combat became more organized in the late twentieth century with the creation of international stage combat societies. One of the first societies is the British Academy of Dramatic Combat (BADC) founded in 1969. Originally called the Society of British Fight Directors, the BADC strives to advance “the art of dramatic combat in all forms of performance media...raise the standards of dramatic combat safety, performance and teaching within the industry” (BADC website). The BADC train actor combatants by holding workshops and provide advanced training for teachers.

David Boushey, the founder of the Society of American Fight Directors (SAFD), began his training with the BADC. Once returning stateside, Boushey recruited other individuals known for stage combat choreography such as Joseph Martinez, Eric Frederickson, Byron Jennings, and Rod Colbin to create a similar society in the United States. The society formed in 1977 as a collective of fight directors, but by 1978 they expanded to include students and friends (this final delineation being a category for actors not in university). SAFD provides testing in various weapons and holds national workshops. The first workshop was held in 1980. My first introduction to stage combat was through the National Stage Combat Workshop in Las Vegas in July of 2000. In each three-week intensive workshop, actors train in various weapon styles (rapier and dagger, knife, smallsword, quarterstaff, unarmed, broadsword, single sword, and sword and shield), and at the end of the workshop actors test in three weapon styles. In order to



obtain actor/combatant status, a Fight Master must pass the actor in all three skills tests. Only Certified Stage Combat Instructors may teach the Stage Combat Skills Proficiency class, and the SAFD Fight Masters may judge the exams. SAFD certified teachers and Fight Masters teach workshops and courses in stage combat in various universities, colleges and private schools throughout the United States.

Many nationally-based organizations provide training similar to SAFD, such as the British Academy of Stage and Screen Combat, Irish Dramatic Combat Academy, New Zealand Stage Combat Society, Fight Directors Canada, Nordic Stage Fight Society, and Society of Australian Fight Directors. As with SAFD and BADC, the primary focus of these groups is to provide safe training in stage combat for actors, directors, and teachers. While it is not necessary to be certified with SAFD (or other national organizations) in order to stage fights for a production or teach workshops, it is certainly beneficial.

While safe training is a large part of stage combat, another integral part is using stage combat to tell the story. Stage combat, like its other movement training counterparts such as dance, circus arts, and mime, is just one of many tools actors have at their disposal. As Richard Lane points out in his book, *Swashbuckling: A Step-by-Step Guide to The Art of Stage Combat and Theatrical Swordplay*, until the late twentieth century, “stage combat was viewed as a separate skill, like stunt work, that had little to do with acting and much more to do with keeping an audience amused until the *real* drama – the dialogue – could continue” (2). Just as an actor in a musical has to communicate her actions and feelings through song, so too does the actor combatant. Stage combat, when done well in a production, is not violence for violence sake, but rather a storytelling tool. J. Allen Suddeth discusses the purpose of physical violence staged in plays in his book *Fight Directing for the Theatre*:

If conflict is the essence of theater, then physical confrontation is a natural outgrowth of that conflict. Certain characters can no longer resolve their differences with words – and swords, fists, or furniture throwing is their only solution...the question of why people, or characters, fight is central to the performer, director, and fight director. If we look at a sampling of characters who fight, male and female, modern and historic, we will immediately see that the emotions we are dealing with are strong, consuming and volatile....While it is always wrong to substitute complicated fight choreography for good acting and staging, the cathartic quality of violence is central to the character's, and the audience's, experience of the text....Our world is filled with images of violence, some justified and some senseless. The job of fight directors and performers is to reflect that violence on the stage – neither romanticizing it nor belittling it – as part of the human condition. (xvii-xix)

The opportunities for women performing stage combat are relatively small compared to the popularity of women interested in stage combat. Richard Lane notes that in his experience as a fight director his workshops that women make up forty-five percent of the attendants (Lane Email 2015). Lane also noted that, “Productions are the most difficult places to find ‘stage-combat roles’ for women...There are a lot of times, in productions, where I have worked with women on less extensive action; a slap, a fall, etc., and while those types of items do require a Fight Director, rarely are they noticed like Macbeth [or] Macduff” (Lane Email 2015). Given the paucity of opportunities for women stage combatants to actually take on stage combat roles, a company such as Babes With Blades Theatre Company (BWBTC), which is avowedly concerned with producing those opportunities, is significant and worthy of study. Understanding

how and what they do to create those opportunities offers a look at the challenges to rebalancing the disparity of opportunity between women and men stage combatants. BWBTC is a Chicago-based theatre company that focuses on providing opportunities for women in stage combat in original productions, and in all-female casts of Shakespearean classics, and in workshops and training.

### A Brief History of Babes With Blades Theatre Company

I first encountered BWBTC at The Winter Wonderland workshop in January 2006 in Chicago. An annual regional workshop held in the winter, Winter Wonderland attracts a myriad of stage combatants from around the world. The three-day event hosts classes and round table discussions for all levels of actor combatants; the workshop also provides SAFD certified actor/combatants the opportunity to recertify in different weapons. The session I attended was a round table discussion about women in stage combat hosted by Angela Bonacasa, a Certified Teacher with SAFD, and someone I trained under when I attended the NSCW in Las Vegas in July of 2000. In this group of twenty women, we discussed the opportunities available for training and production and the few instances of discrimination some female stage combatants encountered. This session was the first time I met a large group of women trained in stage combat and I was very excited to be in the session. In the summer of that same year I attended the Association for Theatre in Higher Education's annual conference, this time located in Chicago. One session I attended was hosted by BWBTC and I had the opportunity to hear the founder of BWBTC discuss the creation of the company. When I returned home, I began researching and made the mistake so many people make – using .com instead of .org. The website I erroneously encountered was anything but a company centered on women in stage combat! Yes, the site is centered on women and swords but it is “fantasy pin-up art...with an

edge.”<sup>9</sup> I realized my error and tried .org instead and was brought to the Babes With Blades website.<sup>10</sup> Given the rather racy quality of their company name, one of the first questions I asked Amy Harmon, Managing Director,<sup>11</sup> was how the company came up with it. The company name was the brainchild of the founder, Dawn “Sam” Alden. According the Harmon,

Sammie had wanted for forever to put together a showcase of women who could fight and as part of that wanting was doing a ton of research on women warriors in history. And, as she read the descriptions she was noticing the common theme that “Oh, they were very powerful” and “they were very wise” and “they were very strong” and “they were very beautiful.” Very beautiful. Every woman who could fight...had to reassure you that this woman was also very beautiful. So as this is percolating through her mind, and she’s thinking “a showcase,” and she’s thinking you know women who fight, women with blades she said “what, we all have to be beautiful?” So it was kind of tongue in cheek in the end, she said then “clearly, we are Babes with Blades” and so shall it be. (Harmon Personal Interview)

In some of my first communications with Amy I used “Babes with Blades” for the title of the company, and Amy quickly corrected me that the company name is Babes With Blades. When I asked about the distinction Amy explained that it was a way for people to remember the company. “So many people were like ‘Oh you’re Babes in Blades’ or ‘You’re Babes on Blades’

---

<sup>9</sup> The Babes with Blades.com website provides a direct link to Babes With Blades.org on their “Favorite Links” page.

<sup>10</sup> During the announcements preceding the productions, BWBTC reminds the audience to use .org instead of .com.

<sup>11</sup> Amy Harmon is an Associate Member as of 1 January 2015. She stepped down from Managing Director in order to pursue more acting opportunities.

or ‘You’re Babes at Blades’ and Sam’s like maybe if I make it Babes With Blades people will get it” (Harmon Personal Interview).

The company members refer to themselves as Babes. BWBTC consider women for membership after they have worked with the company, in any production capacity at least twice. A new member can be added when seventy-five percent of the existing membership agrees. Members usually begin at the Associate Artist level, this level is less involved than a full company member, meaning they are not required to attend ensemble meetings (but they are encouraged), this level has the most retention rates because it allows the individual to be involved but also pursue other interests. The Active member level is a much more involved level requiring the Babe to be at ten out of the twelve meetings each year. Active company members handle house management for BWBTC productions, manage fundraising activities, as well as assist in all aspects of managing the playwriting competitions. Full company members do not have to attend the first round of auditions for the BWBTC productions, they are automatically included in callbacks. Regional Babes are company members that have since left the Chicago area and might (in theory) begin a branch of BWBTC in their new locations. Emeritus Babes are company members that have left to pursue other theatrical endeavors, however many still audition and perform with the BWBTC. Currently there are nine Active members, twelve Associate Artists, and thirty-two Regional and Emeritus Babes.<sup>12</sup>

The first BWBTC showcase occurred when a group of female stage combatants decided to join forces and create their own opportunities to display their stage combat talents for the Chicago theatre community. In 1997, Dawn “Sam” Alden planned a four-day showcase, she

---

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix E for more facts about BWBTC.

explains the purpose of the showcase in an interview with Justin Hayford in *American Theatre*: “I invited all the artistic directors and casting agents I could get my hands on... We were out to prove a point. ‘Here are all these women with all this incredible training. For crying out loud, use them.’” The show sold out almost immediately. And ran for 10 weeks (22-23).

From this initial showcase, company-authored and choreographed vignettes and shows were subsequently planned and produced. Then, from 2003 to 2005, the company took a production hiatus in order to redefine the company and establish goals according to their not-for-profit status and create the company’s first mission statement. It was the company’s first mission statement that hooked me, and somewhat fed my academic interest in them; based upon their mission statement, I knew I had to spend time with this group. In this mission statement, the Babes articulate the importance of creating a company dedicated to providing women stage combatants a myriad of opportunities to use their skills:

The women of Babes With Blades work together to push our own limits as well as those of the general public. We defy society’s limitations of women’s roles, including the preconception that strength and power are inappropriate in women. We challenge the traditional definition of femininity and shatter divisive stereotypes, thereby encouraging theatre that is not necessarily a gender-specific experience, but a human experience. We maintain an emphasis on working cooperatively rather than competitively in a safe and supportive environment, and we embrace both the discipline and the joy of our craft. (Babes With Blades Theatre Company Mission Statement, 2003-2011)

In 2005, Babes With Blades, in conjunction with SAFD Fight Master, David Woolley, began the Joining Sword and Pen (JS&P) international playwriting competition in order to create original scripts where women are in “most/all of the primary roles” and are “featured in most/all of the combat” and the combat must “serve the story and the characters” (BWBTC website). The theme for the first production was inspired by Emile Bayard’s painting, *An Affair of Honor*. The submission guidelines required the playwrights to “incorporate the moment depicted in the print: a duel between two women on a secluded country road” (BWBTC website). Two one-act scripts were selected as the first winners of JS&P in 2006, *Mrs. Dire’s House of Crumpets and Solutions* by Byron Hatfield and *Satisfaction* by Tony Wolf. In April of 2006, both one-acts were performed under the title *An Affair of Honor* at the Viaduct Theatre. The winning script (or scripts) of the JS&P is selected in a blind process by company members; the readers do not know the names of the playwrights and the winning script is produced in the spring of the following year. In 2010, BWBTC began another competition connected to JS&P, Inspiring Sword & Pen. The competition guidelines ask artists to submit visual art that depicts women in physical conflict. The selected art piece is then used to inspire the JS&P competition for the following season.

The third program BWBTC sponsors is the Fighting Words competition. Playwrights are encouraged to submit workable scripts that include fights that showcase women. As the website details, “We see fights in our shows as similar to songs in a GOOD musical: words fail, so musical characters burst into song. Words fail, so our characters resort to violence” (BWBTC website). This aim resonates with Suddeth’s point about the impetus for stage violence that I noted above. The Fighting Words competition also includes a workshop for the winning playwright to receive further development on his or her play; the playwright selected for the

program receives a set of three readings to assist in the development of their script. The winning script is assigned a director who assists in the development process and all readings are moderated and recorded to aid the playwright in rewrites. The selected script receives three readings, the first reading is for company members and the director, the second reading is advertised to the public, the final reading is again advertised to the public as a public reading with one choreographed fight scene. Many of the Fighting Words winning scripts have resulted in full productions with the Babes With Blades Theatre Company, such as Jennifer L. Mickelson's *The Last Daughter of Oedipus*, which I discuss in chapter three when I analyze BWBTC's performance of gender.

BWBTC began producing all-female Shakespeare productions in 2009 with a production of *Macbeth*. When I asked Amy why the company elected to produce an all-female cast of a Shakespeare play, she explained the necessity to have a break from script development once in a while as well as to provide women stage combatants the opportunity to play iconic roles. She explains,

Shakespeare's parts are some of the richest and fullest emotionally in the canon [of plays with stage combat]. I mean you can love the man or hate the man, and love his work or hate his work, but those characters are iconic, and all over the world people know who they are and all over the world their journey from A to B and the tragedies and the romances is studied and documented. And one of the things we are trying to do as we write plays and develop plays and work with new scripts is find that kind of role for women. Where the entire emotional journey is out there and understood; and the entire range of emotions and what you feel is out there and understood...getting an audience used to seeing that a woman can



step into those iconic roles and fill them and play them believably. (Harmon Personal Interview)

Traditionally, stage combat was a theatrical skill possessed by men; after all, the great roles written by Shakespeare were male characters that wielded the swords and shields. Fewer female roles were written that required swashbuckling training; instead, typically, many stage combat roles for women required the actress to play the victim of violence or play a supernumerary in a mass battle scene. While it is good practice for an actress to take stage combat training in order safely to play the victim in a rape scene or a domestic abuse scene, those scenes and roles limit women to playing the victim rather than provide them with roles with more agency. In addition to their focus on providing more roles for women, BWBTC also provide training and outreach in the forms of workshops and panel discussions; the company also has a weapon rental program. Through all their programs, what is clear is that the BWBTC creates opportunities for female stage combatants to be a part of productions that showcase physically strong female characters to audiences that typically see women in less physical and proactively violent roles. In 2011, the BWBTC changed their mission statement. The current mission statement is a shorter statement that highlights the company's purpose, programming choices and overall goal for the theatre community. I discuss this change in mission statements in chapter three.

BWBTC is a company worthy of study because it provides opportunities for women actor combatants in a male dominated field. BWBTC refigures the way women are represented on stage – instead of rescuees they are rescuers a more proactive role. Such representations have effects upon the theatre going community in that they help to alter social expectations for what women's roles in the theatre and in society can inhabit. The work BWBTC does changes how

society understands iconic Shakespearian roles as well as providing more acting opportunities for women actor combatants.

In order to begin the research for my project, I contacted Amy Harmon and she introduced me to seven other members interested in participating in some interviews. In the next section, I introduce each of these eight Babes and discuss how they came to be members of Babes With Blades Theatre Company.

### Introduction to the Babes of this Study

Since my study is qualitative and my Human Subjects protocol requires it, I offered my participants the opportunity to remain confidential in the study by creating pseudonyms and hiding other identifiers. All were surprised by such an offer. Consequently, all of the women in this study elected to be identified by their own name and personal identifiers. Since I refer to each woman by her first name or preferred nickname throughout the dissertation, it is important that I briefly introduce each of the participants before pursuing the discussion that funds the majority of this study, that is, a consideration of their varied perceptions, performances, combat style and training, and their understandings of gender and performance. I believe it is also important to note that all of the women I interviewed identify as Caucasian and middle-class. The company members refer to themselves as Babes, so I will frequently use this term throughout this study.

*Kathrynne Wolf*

I first met Kathrynne, 36,<sup>13</sup> on the day she invited me to her Chicago home for our interview. I was met at the door by a brunette in a messy pony-tail, black tank, and camo pants, I felt overdressed in my jeans and blazer. Kathrynne immediately put me at ease with her smile and in a few minutes I felt as if I had known her for years. She talks a mile a minute and uses her entire body to emphasize her meaning. At one point she demonstrated a roundhouse kick in her kitchen with a dish scrubber in one hand and a glass in the other hand. Kathrynne's style is casual and accentuates her average height and strong build.

Kathrynne attended DePaul University and Columbia College in Chicago where she earned her Bachelor's degree in acting. As with many actors, she has worked numerous jobs, often spending time as an office manager or an executive administrative assistant. She says of her office employment, "it keeps us in our cute little apartment." Kathrynne works with many theatre companies throughout the Chicago area including The Redtwist Theatre Company, Second City Children's Theatre, About Face Theatre Company, Footsteps Theatre Company, and Lookingglass Theatre Company. Her movement training includes Tai Chi, Feldenkrais Method, and Alexander Technique in addition to stage combat. Kathrynne also has experience in circus arts, fencing, yoga and some martial arts. She is very comfortable in her own body and this comes across in how she walks and when she demonstrates different stage combat moves. Her yoga training also shows when she sinks to the deck on her back porch in one fluid movement and proceeds to fold herself into the Lotus position.

---

<sup>13</sup> Kathrynne was 36 at the time of our interview in 2010. In the following sections the ages of the Babes are the age they were at the time of the interview.

Kathrynne's formal training in stage combat began at Columbia College with SAFD Fight Master David Woolley in the early 1990s. Besides the stage combat training she received in college, Kathrynne continues to attend numerous workshops and classes such as the Winter Wonderland Workshop hosted by SAFD every January in Chicago. At these workshops and classes, she trains with numerous stage combat choreographers, teachers and fight masters. Stage combat also introduced her to Tony Wolf, her husband, a stage combat instructor from New Zealand. "He did a workshop with us [BWBTC]...and then he came back a year later and taught another workshop for us and I kidnapped him...and uhm now we're married" (Wolf Personal Interview).

At the time of the interview, Kathrynne, served as the Marketing Coordinator and webmistress for BWBTC website. Kathrynne was introduced to Dawn Alden, the founder of BWBTC, through a mutual acquaintance in the summer of 1997. I asked Kathrynne why BWBTC is important to the stage combat community and the Chicago theatre community, to which she replied:

It provides women the opportunity to play roles they wouldn't otherwise get the chance to play, and it cultivates stories that allow audiences to see women engaging in more of the full spectrum of human expression than most plays furnish. The overall level of "women don't fight" response may have lessened a bit over the past 16 years, while BWBTC has been doing its thing, but women as participants in violent encounters in media still leans WAY to the "chick getting attacked/beat up" side. It's heartening to see more kick-ass women in media these days, but it's still the exception, and they're still usually just one lone woman,

surrounded by kick-ass men (whether as teammates or as enemies). (Wolf Email 2015)

Stage combat provides Kathrynne with something that was missing in previous training: “Stage combat, to me, basically was like this whole missing vocabulary from what I had been given socially growing up and uhm, in my training in school...So it clicked in that – and it was something I could do” (Wolf Personal Interview). Since taking Babe Emeritus status in 2011, Kathrynne performed in two BWBTC produced shows *The Double* and *L’Imbecile* and continues to work with other area companies such as Mammals, Redtwist, and Strawdog. Kathrynne continues to work in Chicago theatre including teaching stage combat workshops for kids at an Evanston summer camp and workshops at Oak Park River Forest High School. Outside of theatre, Kathrynne works on two webseries that utilize her stage combat skills, *The Scarlet Line* and *Dark Age*.

*Amy E. Harmon*

I first met Amy at the fight call for the Babes’ production of *The Last Daughter of Oedipus*.<sup>14</sup> Amy, 36, was also my first contact with BWBTC and over the course of my three trips to Chicago, emails and Facebook conversations; I had more time to get to know this quirky, feisty woman. Amy is a self-described “short and skinny” woman, her voice is larger than her stature and she commands attention when she enters a room. Amy has long blond wavy hair that she wears down which makes her appear taller than she is. Amy is very comfortable with her body; this comes through in her constant movement. She has so much energy it seems that her small body can barely contain it. Amy’s facial expressions and melodic voice combine with her

---

<sup>14</sup> *The Last Daughter of Oedipus* was produced in September 2010.

constant humorous one-liners and intelligent banter keeps me laughing so hard I can barely breathe. One seldom sees Amy without her ubiquitous Big Gulp and if one does, it is because she had to settle for a Polar Pop instead. I met her for our interview before the Babes all-female production of *Romeo and Juliet*, in April, 2011, at a Thai restaurant not far from the theatre.

Amy graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Theatre from Northwestern University in 1996. Amy's introduction to stage combat came by her love of fencing. In college, Amy fenced varsity épée her junior and senior years. Once she graduated, fencing was an expensive hobby to maintain so Amy started with stage combat training as a substitute in 1998 and took her first formal class in 1999. "I knew a lot of folks who'd taken stage combat in college or picked some up here and there...and in order to play with them, I had to acquire their skill set [stage combat] – or else I got stuck being the rescuee every time, and who wants that?" (Harmon Email 2010). Since being introduced to stage combat, Amy has trained mostly with SAFD fight directors and fight masters such as Angela Bonacasa, Chuck Coyle, and David Woolley. For Amy, stage combat gives her the chance to push the limits of her physicality and explore strengths she did not realize she possessed (Harmon Email 2010).

Amy heard of BWBTC through a fellow actor, Stephanie Repin, a fight choreographer and member of BWBTC. Stephanie invited Amy to work with the group in 2001 and so Amy began attending workouts and occasionally subbing for other stage combatants. In 2003, Amy became a member of BWBTC. Amy served as the Managing Director for the company until the beginning of 2015 when she became an Associate Member in order to pursue more acting opportunities. Amy's current project is BWBTC's all-female production of *Titus Andronicus* playing Titus.

*Libby Beyreis*

I observed Libby during the BWBTC workshop before I had the opportunity to meet with her. Libby has long light brown hair that she wears in a braid or a low pony-tail. At times she wears her wire-rimmed glasses, black workout pants and an old t-shirt. When I met her for our interview at a local Starbucks, she was sporting a fedora and a purple scarf. Libby dislikes describing herself; but from talking with her and watching her in action, I would describe Libby as a thoughtful and determined woman. Libby, 38, is a fierce warrior – she is calculating, precise and enthusiastic. Once she has the moves in her body, she automatically speeds up. When she successfully completes a sequence her face breaks into a huge grin.

After getting our over-priced coffee drinks, we retired to the sitting room of my hotel to talk. Libby's degree is in economics and international studies from Northwestern and during the day she works for a financial software company. Libby was not involved with stage combat until after college, "Um, I mean I've always had sort of a hobby of theatre you know...but I've never made any kind of scholarly study of theatre" (Beyreis Personal Interview). Her introduction to stage combat came through a Renaissance fair, which lead to more fight workshops and study with Neil Massey, David Boushey, and R&D Choreography. She later married one of the founders of R&D Choreography,<sup>15</sup> Richard Gilbert. Besides stage combat training, Libby trains in Western martial arts as well as historic sword training with the Chicago Sword Play Guild, a group that focuses on the principles of combat as they were taught in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

---

<sup>15</sup> R&D is short for rapier and dagger. R&D Choreography is a Chicago-based theatre company dedicated to training actors in effective and safe stage combat techniques, founded and run by David Gregory and Richard Gilbert.

Libby joined BWBTC in 2002 after meeting Stephanie Repin at the Combat Chess fundraiser that was a part of R&D Choreography's Fightshop, a stage combat workshop. She was cast in the 2003 *Babes With Blades: The Music Videos*. Libby considers herself a fighter and not an actor, "I only acted for a brief period of time because it gave me an excuse to fight" (Beyreis Personal Interview). Libby spends most of her time serving as the violence designer (fight choreographer) for BWBTC shows as well as other shows in the Chicago area. When I asked Libby what she likes best about stage combat she replied, "I like to fight. With the Babes I get to do a lot of that. And, you know, it's a group of like-minded women and I like being in a group of like-minded women" (Beyreis Personal Interview).

#### *Delia Ford*

I was first introduced to Delia Ford after seeing BWBTC's production of *The Last Daughter of Oedipus*. Delia, 44, describes herself as "earthy and practical." After watching Delia during a workshop and in the Babes production of *Romeo and Juliet* where she played both roles of Tybalt and Paris, I would also add she is fierce and focused – she is grounded in her stance and precise with her blade. Delia has straight brown hair that she often wears pulled back in a twist, grayish blue eyes framed by dark eyebrows and laugh lines, and a smile that lights up her entire face. Delia is physically fit; she spends some of her time as a Pilates instructor. Physical activity is an important part of Delia's life. As a child she was a pairs figure skater and in high school she trained in gymnastics.

Delia first came to stage combat through her college courses at Washington and Lee University in the late 1980s. When I asked Delia what attracted her to stage combat, she replied: "Aside from the obvious romance of the sword, the physical partnership appeals to me...the high



that comes from physical synchronicity with another person, another performer” (Ford Email 2011). Delia’s stage combat training began with Joseph Martinez, an emeritus SAFD Fight Master, who suggested she attend the National Stage Combat Workshop (NSCW). Her list of stage combat instructors is most of the roster of Fight Masters and Fight Directors of SAFD.

When Delia and her family moved back to Chicago in 2006, she looked for people with whom she had worked the first time she lived in Chicago in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Delia met David Woolley at a Babes’ event and was reintroduced to Stephanie Repin, whom she had known from her time at the NSCW in Las Vegas. She began attending BWBTC productions, fundraisers and workshops including the Swords for Rusty Broads workshops (a BWBTC brush-up workshop for stage combatants who have been out of practice). Delia’s first BWBTC was *Macbeth* in the spring of 2009. Delia went into the audition just expecting to get to do some fight choreography at the fight portion of the audition; she had not used her skills except for weekend workshops for almost a decade. Delia was cast as Duncan in the production, “And, so, I did my first play since becoming pregnant with my son a decade ago” (Ford Email 2011). Shortly after the production, Delia became a company member. When I asked Delia where she was in her career she replied, “My career is with the Babes. That which kept me out of theatre for a decade keeps me from pursuing it beyond the confines of the company at this time. But, as the Babes will have me...I am delighted, even hungry to give them what I can” (Ford Email 2011).

### *Morgan Manasa*

I first met Morgan, 30, at a stage combat workshop the Babes sponsored in October of 2010. I had missed the deadline to participate, but Amy Harmon fixed it so I could observe the workshop. Morgan came up first and introduced herself.

Morgan: You must be Macaela.

Macaela: What gave it away?

Morgan: The laptop! <laugh>

Morgan is a tall brunette with a very friendly smile. When you get her on a subject she is passionate about she talks quickly and tells the story through her eyebrows and hands. She is witty and creative; she has a bit of a retro pin-up vibe in her style and loves to laugh. Morgan is a founding member and Managing Director of Focal Point Theatre in Chicago and owner of the Etsy store MammaSassDesigns.

Originally from the Detroit Metro area, Morgan attended the Henry Ford Community College in Dearborn, Michigan. In 2001 she moved to Chicago and began working on her Bachelor's degree in Acting from Chicago College of Performing Arts and Theatre Conservatory at Roosevelt University (CCPA). Morgan studied the Meisner acting technique while at the CCPA as well as movement training such as yoga, dance, movement to music, and stage combat.

When I asked Morgan what attracted her to stage combat, she replied that she was intrigued by the comedy that can come from stage combat. "I'd seen friends of mine rehearse scenes for class and couldn't believe how creative and funny they were... There was such an excitement about it that, honestly, I just wanted to be in on the fun" (Manasa Email 2010). Morgan took her first stage combat class while at Henry Ford Community College, but her training continued at the CCPA with SAFD Fight Master, Chuck Coyle and Certified Stage Combat Instructor, Angela Bonacasa. Since graduating in 2005, Morgan has continued her training with regional workshops.

Morgan's first auditioned for Babes With Blades in 2006 for the first JS&P production *An Affair of Honor*. "I wasn't cast, but they remembered me and liked me enough to ask me to come do a staged reading for them that summer. I really enjoyed being around them and they asked if I was going to audition for their fall show [*Choose Your Adventure*] and the rest is history" (Manasa Email 2010). Morgan became a company member shortly before the production of *The Girl in the Iron Mask* in the spring of 2007.

*Jennifer L. Mickelson*

I first met Jennifer, 27, at the Babes sponsored stage combat workshop in October of 2010. In September of 2010, I attended the Babes' production of her play, *The Last Daughter of Oedipus*, I was impressed with the writing and was happy to finally meet the playwright. Jennifer is a little on the short side with an average build and shoulder-length, straight, blonde hair. She was sporting a BWB pink t-shirt and grey sweats. She introduced herself and then immediately got down to business, setting the agenda for dinner at a Thai restaurant with Morgan Manasa and Elizabeth MacDougald. Jennifer has a dry voice that matches her wit; she is articulate, and thoughtful to the point of philosophic.

Jennifer's first exposure to stage combat as a discipline was during her undergraduate training at Illinois State University in the early 2000s. She observed a broadsword class taught by her movement teacher, Paul Dennhardt, and thought it looked like fun. Jennifer graduated with her Bachelor's degree in Theatre in 2005 and moved to Chicago. After six months in Chicago, she decided to expand her training and took a rapier and dagger class from Angela Bonacasa. When I asked Jennifer to describe her first stage combat experience she replied, "As I recall, I had pretty much the same reaction everyone has when they pick up a sword for the first time:

THIS IS FREAKIN’ AWESOME! My second reaction: Holy shit, this thing is HEAVY!”

(Mickelson Email 2010).

Since the first class with Angela Bonacasa, Jennifer has attended the SAFD Winter Wonderland Workshop where she had the opportunity to learn from many SAFD certified teachers, fight directors and fight masters. Jennifer has also trained with Tony Wolf, Neil Massey, and Stephanie Repin. Jennifer came to Babes With Blades through the open auditions in the fall of 2006. Her first production was *The Girl in the Iron Mask* in the spring of 2007. “I had so much fun doing that show that I wrote them a play and entered it in the 2007 Joining Sword & Pen playwriting competition” (Mickelson Email 2010). That play, *The Last Daughter of Oedipus* placed in the top five and was subsequently chosen for the New Plays Development Program and was produced by BWBTC in the fall of 2010.

When I asked Jennifer what she gets out of practicing stage combat she replied, “Being a word oriented person, I tend to get stuck in my head a lot. Stage combat provides an immediate, visceral way to work that forces me to balance brain and body...It forces me to come out of my naturally-introverted shell, challenges my mind, and excites my imagination (Mickelson Email 2010).

*Arielle Augustyn*

Arielle met me at Argo Tea Shop in a bright green raincoat, a smile and a hug on a misty morning. I was immediately struck by Arielle’s outgoing personality and welcoming manner, within five minutes I felt like I was catching up with an old friend. Arielle, 28, is of average weight and height with short light-red hair. Her voice is strong and confident and could easily be

heard over the loud cappuccino machine whirring in the background. Arielle talks with her hands and her eyebrows emphasize her points.

At the time of our interview, Arielle was completing her Master of Business Administration in non-profit administration at North Park University, as well as serving as the Marketing Coordinator<sup>16</sup> for BWBTC and the Outreach Coordinator at ShawChicago Theatre Company.<sup>17</sup> Arielle first trained in stage combat while pursuing her Bachelor's degree in Theatre Performance at Chicago College of Performing Arts and Theatre Conservatory at Roosevelt University (CCPA). Chuck Coyle and Angela Bonacasa were Arielle's first instructors in stage combat. Chuck Coyle's classes introduced Arielle to the fluidity of movement and learning how to stay safe while doing stage combat moves. "And, that was just eye-opening 'cause I thought 'I can fall without hurting myself?' Genius!" (Augustyn Personal Interview). Angela Bonacasa taught Arielle the basic sword techniques and footwork. Since college, Arielle has attended workshops hosted by Babes With Blades as well as various workshops hosted by R&D Choreography. Arielle's movement training includes various dance forms as well as circus arts. "There is something extraordinarily powerful about movement...you can entertain people and bring beauty and art through movement, I think there's a lot of validity in that" (Augustyn Personal Interview).

Arielle's introduction to BWBTC is similar to others Babes; it was a matter of networking and classes:

---

<sup>16</sup> Arielle is now a Babe Emeritus.

<sup>17</sup> ShawChicago Theatre Company is a non-for-profit theatre company that focuses on the works of George Bernard Shaw and his contemporaries by producing staged readings, productions and conducting outreach programs.

I'd been hanging around and it was one of those scenarios where I had met the Babes 'cause Katherine [Coyle] had been auditioning for them, and then Kathrynne told Morgan [Manasa] and then Morgan told me...and we had all been in class together with Angela Bonacasa...So we all kind of snuck in through the door and Morgan was cast and I was a costume designer. (Augustyn Personal Interview)

The show Arielle was referring to was *Choose Your Adventure*. Arielle continued to costume design for *The Girl in the Iron Mask* and *Horror Academy*. Arielle first acted with the Babes in their production *Los Desaparecidos (The Vanished)*. When I asked Arielle what she loved most about stage combat she said she loved the flashiness and control of it:

It's about the speed, it's about the control. I love that you're being duped!...I love that there is no reason for you [the audience] not to think that we are not in complete combat mode with each other...and the people. I found a really strong sense of unity among people who enjoy these arts as well. (Augustyn Personal Interview)

### *Elizabeth MacDougald*

At the workshop in October of 2010, an energetic woman ran over to me to introduce herself and that is how I met Elizabeth MacDougald, also known as Liz. By this point in the workshop, Liz's long red hair was coming out of its braid and she had shed her long-sleeve shirt that was giving her trouble during a fight sequence, as I observed she got the pommel of her rapier stuck in the sleeve. Liz, 30, is of average height, but her personality makes her appear

much taller. The first thing I noticed about Liz is her hair, then her voice, she is bubbly, enthusiastic and loud. Her laugh is one that is easily picked out of a crowd.

Liz's stage combat experience began in high school at a summer theatre camp where they did an unarmed routine based on different roles from the *James Bond* movies. While in college at Loyola University she studied movement, dance and stage combat as part of her Bachelor of Arts degree in Theatre. Liz graduated in 2003 and since has been training with R&D Choreography, Neil Massey, Greg Poljacik and various other teachers at the Winter Wonderland Workshops as well as BWBTC.

Liz has been a company member since the spring of 2009. When I asked her how she had become involved with BWBTC, she said, "I had heard of them around Chicago and I had a friend who was already involved with the company. When she told me that they needed house crew for one of their shows [*Macbeth*], I volunteered ...for a lot of days...and showed up at strike...and the rest is history" (MacDougald Email 2010). When I asked Liz what attracted her to stage combat she replied that it was the focus and trust in partnership that is required in order to create the illusion of violence and tell a story.

### Conclusion

My aim in this chapter has been to provide the reader with background information on stage combat more generally and on the Babes With Blades more specifically in order to set up my analysis of BWB which will follow in the subsequent chapters. Thus, in this chapter I provided a brief history of stage combat from its undocumented origins to contemporary practices. I then provided an overview of the Babes With Blades Theatre Company's history and current production practices as well as the importance of BWBTC to the larger theatre discipline.

I then introduced the eight Babes participating this study and provided a brief biographical sketch on each woman as well as her physical attributes and personality so as to acquaint the reader with the women whose physical skill, experiences, and personalities fund this study. I discussed how each woman came to become a Babe and how each Babe discovered stage combat. Through production opportunities, education, and outreach, BWBTC delivers a unique opportunity for the Chicago theatre community (artists and audience) to discover more opportunities for women in the theatre and stage combat communities as well as provide productions featuring strong, physically proactive female characters. Insofar as BWBTC is just one of two companies in the country who are an all-female stage combat company, their presence stands as an isolated intervention in traditional theatrical representations of women and women in combat. In subsequent chapters I aim to articulate the challenges they face and the successes they have in staging women in combat and to thereby clarify what their work does to open more opportunities for women stage combatants and how those representations challenge taken-for-granted gender norms. In chapter three, I examine how the Babes who participated in my study understand femininity and feminism and how such understandings translate to their productions. In particular, I will explore their productions of *The Last Daughter of Oedipus* and *Romeo and Juliet*.



### CHAPTER III. BABES WITH BLADES: FEMININITY AND GENDER PERFORMANCE

When I first encountered Babes With Blades Theatre Company, their mission statement very specifically challenged traditional roles of femininity. Although I quoted it in chapters one and two, it bears repeating here again in full:

The women of Babes With Blades work together to push our own limits as well as those of the general public. We defy society's limitations of women's roles, including the preconception that strength and power are inappropriate in women. We challenge the traditional definition of femininity and shatter divisive stereotypes, thereby encouraging theatre that is not necessarily a gender-specific experience, but a human experience. We maintain an emphasis on working cooperatively rather than competitively in a safe and supportive environment, and we embrace both the discipline and the joy of our craft. (Babes With Blades Theatre Company Mission Statement 2003-2011)

Certainly, in accordance with this mission statement and as is evidenced by what I came to learn in my study, the performances by BWBTC challenge traditional femininity by showcasing female characters that are strong and powerful. They also defy traditional femininity by providing the opportunity for female stage combatants to use their stage combat skills in playing other roles than what are traditionally the female's, that of a victim. In essence, BWBTC set out to produce theatre that challenges the social norms in regards to gender roles, a feminist endeavor in deed if not in name. In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler wrote, "Feminism is about the social transformation of gender relations" (204). The company's aim is to speak to a larger human experience, to do so they subvert social norms by presenting strong women on stage in

roles that are often seen as less suitable from women. By the end of May 2011, I noticed on the website that the mission statement had changed:

Babes With Blades Theatre Company uses stage combat to place women and their stories center stage. Through performance, script development, training, and outreach, our ensemble creates theatre that explores the wide range of the human experience, and cultivates broader perspectives in the arts community and in society as a whole. (Babes With Blades Mission Statement 2011-Current)

When I asked Amy Harmon about the change to the mission statement she immediately explained its necessity. As the mission statement was communicated, particularly in grant writing, they received feedback that it was too vague and never stated that they were a theatre company. As the years passed it became accepted practice to add or remove words and phrases to explain the purpose of the company. In late 2010, the company began evaluating the mission statement for its continued relevance to what they actually do and synthesizing it down to a one-paragraph statement that would declare they are a theatre company, summarize their programming, and reflect their impact. “Overall, I’d call it less of a change and more of a re-evaluation and clarification based on feedback from the outside as well as a growing internal awareness of our organization’s specific strengths” (Harmon Personal Interview). While focusing on using “stage combat to place *women* and *their* stories center stage,” the emphasis for the audience is to experience theatre that “explores the wide range of *human* experience” (emphasis added). This change in the mission statement reflects a less activist standpoint, or possibly a less overtly activist standpoint. It is also possible the change in mission statement was also a marketing strategy, a less feminist/activist statement appeals to a larger audience demographic. While BWBTC may not be avowedly feminist, they are, nevertheless promoting a

de facto feminist agenda through the work they do since it does seek to change social expectations for women.

Whatever the reasons for the change in mission statement, given that BWBTC are an all-female theatre company that focuses on telling women's stories with stage combat and providing women actor combatants performance opportunities, they nevertheless invite consideration of how they perform gender and how they do so in ways that make those stories part of the human experience. Since BWBTC focuses on telling women's stories with stage combat, how these Babes perform gender and femininity and how those performances inform the company's production choices is important to explore and is the focus of this chapter. In addition to a consideration of how the Babes discuss gender and femininity during the interviews, I also examine how they represent gender and femininity in two productions from the 2010-2011 BWBTC season: *The Last Daughter of Oedipus* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Furthermore, I analyze their production choices in order to examine how BWBTC's representations of women on stage potentially challenge and/or subvert audience's social expectations for women's performance.

#### "The F Word": Performing Femininity and Gender

*As I complete the interviews, a song from my childhood continues playing in my head. It's from a Disney movie called Summer Magic starring Haley Mills. I can't recall the plot of the movie, but I distinctly remember the scene with the song "Femininity." The daughter of the house and her cousin are getting a third girl ready for a dance. And so, being a Disney movie, they must sing and dance about it. I remembered a majority of the lyrics but decided it was best to find them and to my surprise and chagrin, it was on a Disney music CD I own.*

*You must walk feminine*

*Talk feminine*

*Smile and beguile feminine.*

*Utilize your femininity*

*That's what every girl should know.*

*If she wants to catch a beau*

*Dance feminine*

*Glance feminine*

*Act shy and sigh feminine*

*Compliment his masculinity*

*That's what every girl should know.*

*If she wants to catch a beau*

*Let him do the talking*

*Men adore good listeners*

*Laugh, but not loudly (ha ha)*

*If he should choose to tell a joke*

*Be radiant*

*But delicate*

*Memorize the rules of etiquette*

*Be demure, sweet and pure*

*Hide the real you*

*You must look feminine*

*Dress feminine*

*You're at your best feminine*

*Emphasize your femininity*

*That's what every girl should know.*

*Femininity*

*Femininity*

*That's the way to catch a beau.*

Given how this song's implied definition of femininity seems problematic to, I would aver, many of us today and given the reactions the word had on my interview subjects, it is perhaps not surprising that in my reflections after the interviews, I wrote the following: *femininity is a bad word! When I asked the question, "What does femininity mean to you?" some of the women avoided answering the question, some seemed puzzled by the question and I think I might have offended one woman by even asking the question! Maybe that is why this song continues to play in my head as I consider the Babes' responses to the question. The song itself promotes a traditional (read patriarchal and heteronormative) performance of femininity complete with "hiding the real you" in order to attract the "proper" attention. – (Carder – Reflections on Field Notes, 2 May 2011)*

\* \* \* \* \*

I perform various femininities in my life – and at times (as much as I hate to admit it) I have performed femininity as it is presented in the song noted above by the same name. The song

“Femininity” describes what is essentially a set of rules intended to dictate behavior and appearance. The femininity I perform as a teacher varies from the femininity I perform as a daughter at her father’s sixtieth birthday party. I perform femininity differently as an over-weight woman than I do as an average-weight woman, differently than I do as a fight choreographer and differently than I do as a wife. I adapt my performance of self in each of these situations because I understand the perceived societal expectations of me as a female, as a woman, and as a person who is nestled within a variety of social expectations and relationships. And, of course, this context-based notion of performativity is true for all of us.

These performances of femininity now come naturally to me; they are a part of my identity, although, as Butler suggests, “natural” identity is actually a “constructed identity, a performative accomplishment” (*Performative Acts* 271). As a young girl I played with Barbies and Cabbage Patch Kids but spent equal time with He-Man and my Transformers too. I liked wearing the frilly skirts – when poodle skirts made a comeback in the 1980s I had three of them – I also loved wearing my dad’s old army fatigues and playing special ops with the neighborhood kids. As a teenager I spent hours on my hair, clothing and makeup and would race from dance class to track practice where I held a spot on the varsity weight team (also known as the “Fatman Team”). My favorite outfit is jeans and my *Doctor Who* t-shirt. I enjoy wearing heels and dresses – I love to match my nail polish with my earrings. So, throughout my life I have conformed and subverted the prescribed script for women. These are the various ways I perform gender through a “stylized repetition of acts” that vary in time and situation (*Performative Acts* 270). I understand that there are many different performances of femininity and gender and many people performing different femininities – but when I hear the word “femininity” my mind still goes

back to that song and the stereotypical performance of femininity – that repetition of acts that construct a heteronormative version of gender and femininity.

Keeping my own performances of femininity in mind, it was important for me to ask the Babes I interviewed to explain what femininity means to each of them.

When I asked Libby what femininity meant to her she was abrupt with her answer:

Libby: I have no freakin' idea.

Macaela: Okay.

Libby: I have never thought of myself as particularly feminine. I mean I, I. A couple of years ago a friend took me out for some remedial girly-girl classes that I could at least pretend to be feminine...Um, but I don't really – I have always thought of myself as a boy, and identified – I mean my husband would disagree, but you know <laughs> But, but I don't. Femininity has never really been a concern of mine. (Beyreis Personal Interview)

Libby's response suggests and resonates with Butler's notion that femininity is not inherent but rather it is a set of actions and behaviors that must be learned, an act she performs for other people. Libby's enrollment in "remedial girly-girl classes" in order to (re)learn how to appear to be feminine reflects upon the idea that femininity entails the performative accomplishment of a specific set of rule and these classes offer Libby the opportunity to rehearse being feminine, and as such, it is a way (just as any gender performance is) of becoming her performance through repetition. It is interesting that Libby's friend thought she needed girly-girl classes because she was not performing femininity appropriately simply because Libby performs herself outside of

the gender norms and does so without letting the social norms govern her in a conscious way. On the surface Libby's taken for granted view of femininity might reflect the idea of a binary gender system where masculine/male and feminine/female are on opposite sides of the divide, however it is more likely that Libby performs across the gender spectrum. For example, when I met with Libby she was wearing a fedora and a purple scarf, donning a fedora is a female appropriation of a masculine article of clothing, while a purple scarf reads as a feminine accessory, thus Libby displays a willingness to play across a range of gender expectations for clothing. Unless it is brought to Libby's attention, femininity is a non-issue, it is something she does not concern herself with unless somehow a context renders that performance necessary. The taken-for-granted character of social norms is common to most of us, so it is unsurprising that Libby orients to femininity in this way. However, given that BWBTC avers an interest in rebalancing women's opportunities in the theatre, and given that she sees herself as "a boy," at first I found it somewhat surprising that she appears unconcerned that the social norms governing women's performance of femininity may have a hold on her performance of self. Reflecting on Libby's reaction leads me to another alternative, more likely Libby is unconcerned to let social norms stop her from playing across the spectrum of gender, as a boy, as a female, as someone who can incorporate many performances of self. Libby's abrupt answer to my inquiry, "What does femininity mean to you?" might have been read as an attempt to pigeonhole her into a specific performance, into either feminine or masculine, while she sees herself as both masculine and feminine or neither masculine and feminine.

Amy appeared reluctant to articulate her thoughts on femininity. Since I spoke with Amy on a number of occasions I had more opportunities to ask her the question, "What does femininity mean to you?" When I first asked Amy to explain her definition of femininity, she



replied in an e-mail, “I don’t think I have one” (Harmon Email 2010). A few months later when we sat down to talk I asked the question again:

Amy: I’m just, just so bad at stuff like that, because I kind of just see myself as a person. I don’t mean to give you an answer that’s not helpful.

Macaela: No that’s helpful.

Amy: But I don’t, I do what I do because I want to do it or have to do it or need to do it or it feels good or it feels bad or it’s for a certain benefit, and I don’t think in any way that I layer an expectation or analysis of femininity onto that. I don’t know.

Macaela: That’s okay.

Amy: I don’t really have a good answer for that. (Harmon Personal Interview)

Amy said she sees herself as a person; which implies a type of gender neutrality, like Libby, femininity is not a concept that Amy strives for in her life. Amy’s response suggests that labeling the acts she participates in as feminine would somehow devalue the acts. For Amy, a gender-neutral approach is preferable to one that acknowledges femininity. Amy’s refusal and/or difficulty to respond to my question is a de facto feminist response, to refuse/hesitate to take a position (provide a definition) may be viewed as a refusal to be rendered in the abject way that traditional social expectations for the everyday performance of femininity does for women. She dresses for comfort, layers for warmth, pairing tight clothing with loose clothing, such as a peasant blouse with leggings (Harmon Email February 2015). However her grooming choices read somewhat feminine such as her “weakness for nail polishes” and maintenance for her long,

blond, curly locks (Harmon Email February 2015). It appears that Amy both conforms to and subverts the socially prescribed script for women's performativity. She appears to perform instead a sort of gender fluidity, which is an agency filled position, while she refuses to adhere to social dictates for femininity, which is a limiting position.

Delia's response to the question was succinct, "I never really think about it." Delia's attire and behavior reflect that statement. Delia's style is low maintenance and casual, when she dresses up she keeps it simple and wears her hair up, applies eyeliner, and one dramatic accessory, such as a pendant necklace (Ford Email 2015). Libby and Delia both take the social norms for gender performativity for granted or at least eschew that they have any bearing on their individual performances of self; while Amy struggles to explain her avoidance of gender performativity, Delia's dismissal of my question points to her ability to navigate gender fluidity.

My conversation with Kathrynne yielded a more complex answer:

Macaela: What's your definition of femininity?

Kathrynne: Ooooooh....oof. What's my definition of femininity? Well, uhm...I'm kind of literal I guess, so my definition of femininity if I was going to have to define it, I'd probably like, go to the dictionary. You know, because, uhm <sigh> I don't, I'm not trying to redefine feminine. But I also don't think femininity is femaleness. You know what I mean, so a woman or a man can be feminine, whatever that means, and it doesn't make you more or less of a woman or a man to be more or less feminine. To me. You know what I mean? So my definition of femininity is uhm a quality that is important to some people in some contexts and uhm is a valuable uhm skill to have as an actor for when it's appropriate. Uhm it's

not particularly important to me, in general to be particularly feminine. It just seems, I do tend to associate feminine with stuff like <sigh> gentleness and softness, and caring about appearances, I think. I guess, not really appearances more of a vanity thing or whatever, but I just don't. I can't be bothered ... (Wolf Personal Interview)

Kathrynne recognizes that gender can be theorized as independent of sex, this reflects Judith Butler's discussion of gender construction in *Gender Trouble*, "that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one" (9). Kathrynne acknowledges that femininity (the acts that constitute femininity) is a "valuable skill" for an actor to have, indicating that femininity is a learned set of actions and one that can be useful to perform when necessary. The idea of viewing femininity as a skill that is learned also touches upon Libby's discussion about learning to be girly. Judith Butler argues that gender is a construction, and not stable, but rather that gender is "instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (191). During our conversation, Kathrynne was preparing for an evening managing the box office at *The Last Daughter of Oedipus*. In her preparations for the evening, she repeated established actions associated with femininity such as applying more make-up than she wears during the day, coloring her hair and styling it, and dressing in a knee-length black v-neck dress. She completed the ensemble with a necklace and knee-high black boots. Kathrynne combined soft choices (jewelry) with strong choices (black boots), thus demonstrating how she plays her gender across a continuum of gender fluidity. Kathrynne enacts select actions of femininity (cosmetics, hair, dress) when attending a public event such as a theatre production.

Arielle's idea of femininity is similar to Kathrynne's idea – that femininity is a strategy:

Macaela: What's your definition of femininity?

Arielle: I, the best way I can put it is that I have power and control over my own body. Nobody has control over it beyond me. And I will use, what, whatever faculties are given to this body in the female capacity. Because, if my boobs can somehow win me the fight, I'm going to use 'em.... And it's interesting because I don't, I'm not self-aware of me being a female. Until somebody makes me aware of it. That's really been my life experience. That unless I'm manipulating a situation because I'm a girl, or I'm, I'm told that I am being discriminated against good or bad, because I am a female, then I am not aware of it...I was always a tomboy growing up...My mother said "All I want to do is put strong girls on this earth, that's all I wanted to do." And she said, "I never wanted to limit you." She's like, "I don't want you to think about your gender, unless you absolutely have to."...Yeah, I'm really fortunate so I don't think in that capacity. And if anything, I hate the light that is shined on people who only think in that capacity. And I think it's a generational difference, I, I think you know, as traditional Americana roles change, and as you know, are, our society becomes a little more liberal with those kinds of things, that it's a really non-issue until somebody makes it an issue. Yeah, so that's where I come from. (Augustyn Personal Interview)

Arielle only consciously acknowledges her woman's body unless she must stage it or she is labeled a woman by another individual. Unlike Kathrynne, Arielle equates femininity with her female body, specifically her breasts, but similar to Kathrynne, Arielle sees the performance of femininity as strategic. Libby, Amy, Delia, Kathrynne and Arielle referred to femininity as

something that is a “non-issue” or something they just do not think about or cannot be “bothered with,” something that is a time consuming practice. Libby, Arielle, and to some extent Kathrynne, define femininity in the stereotypical normative sense. A possible implication inherent in Libby and Arielle’s discussion of femininity is that because they do not perform femininity in the traditional sense, they consider themselves to be masculine by default. This reaction appears to reify a normative view of gender as binary, where one must embrace either a feminine performance or a masculine performance. However, I do not think that is the case, both Libby and Arielle intimated that femininity is a confining construction and they have the ability in our contemporary society to choose not to conform to that script and thus have choices along a continuum of gender performative options.

My conversation with Jennifer, Liz, and Morgan articulated different understandings of femininity, some support views that are less normative:

Macaela: What does femininity mean to you?

Jennifer: I don’t know that I have an answer yet for myself, the more I think about it the more the answers I come up with are... you know – for the lack of a better cheeseball phrase – femininity is humanity, you know it’s being a full person and developing. It’s just being a full person and respectful of the full people around you and the more I think about it the less gender matters which is kind of a puzzle because then how do you... –

Liz: I really think it also depends on each individual woman.

Jennifer and Morgan: (overlapping Liz) Mmmhmm.

Macaela: So personally, what does femininity mean? We can define it that way.

Liz: Oh, I like dresses.

Jennifer: She does.

Morgan: And at the same time – Oh, God it’s hard to - there’s kind of like a little bit of mystery to it and that I’m interested in so many things and I like doing so many things and I like – to me being feminine is being delicate but being strong.

Liz: strong

Morgan: And being able to stand up for yourself and take care of yourself and as well as those around you and not – uhhhh, it’s kind of – it’s so hard to say –

Liz: Yeah, I uh have to agree – it’s a feeling.

Morgan: I guess for me specifically it’s also a matter of playfulness, like which is part of the reason why I think I like rapier so much, because to me it is one of the more effeminate weapons, because it is so delicate and –

Liz: So strong,

Morgan: yeah and I like the “tink”<sup>18</sup>

Jennifer: That’s interesting because I don’t see rapier as being even remotely delicate but that’s probably because I trained on schlager<sup>19</sup> blades and not musketeer<sup>20</sup> blades. <laughs>

---

<sup>18</sup> Referring to the sound the blades make when striking an opponent’s blade.

Morgan: To me it's so precise and I think that's kind of where some of it comes from, the specificity of it.

Jennifer: The question for me comes – and you know I can start making a list of what I think – but then if I throw the question to myself I think what differentiates it from masculinity – that and you see a lot of men's forums talking about the same question. You know if women are allowed to be all this how do we differentiate masculinity without being total sexist horrible pigs?

Liz: Exactly, yeah.

Jennifer: Yeah, I don't know... Personally if I'm gonna use – feminine is not a term I would apply to myself, it's not a word I would call something I aspire to. I might be a total nerd and say “womanly” instead -

For Liz, the performance of femininity, on the surface, appears to be similar to the song lyrics – “dress feminine,” Liz enjoys wearing dresses. And similar to Libby, Liz's initial definition of femininity appears to support the presumption of a gender binary. For Morgan, the construction of femininity is a balance between delicateness and strength, which for Morgan is epitomized in a rapier routine. The rapier is a sword with either an épée or schlager blade made for thrusting at an opponent (primary purpose) or cutting (secondary purpose). Since it is a lighter weapon, it allows for smaller hand and wrist movements and a wide range of techniques such as feints and deceptions which are very difficult to complete with a heavier sword, it is indeed a more playful

---

<sup>19</sup> A rapier blade that is long, flat and strong, the point of the blade is rounded. It is a slightly heavier blade than the épée blade.

<sup>20</sup> Another name for épée blades. Épée blades are triangular and fluted, lighter and more flexible than schlager blades.

weapon. Morgan's preference for the rapier mimics her performance of gender. She performs her gender across a continuum of possible gendered tropes. Morgan prefers the rapier, a weapon she considers more effeminate, but the skills required to use the rapier nevertheless point to the ability to play across the gender performativity spectrum.

For Jennifer, defining femininity proved to be problematic as well, while she agreed with Morgan and Liz that it might be thought of as a feeling she was also very logical about defining femininity. Similar to Kathrynne and Amy, femininity in the traditional definition was not something Jennifer strived for; she used the term "womanly" instead:

Jennifer: [Womanly] implies something different to me.

Macacla: What does that imply to you?

Jennifer: It implies less of the, less of the forced – to me it implies less of something...less of a construct and more of something you forge for yourself, uh and a lot of it does overlap with what Morgan was saying about being strong and being able to take care of yourself but also with a certain –

Morgan: I think it's having enough sense of yourself to know what's necessary what's not necessary, how to treat people around you and how you want people to treat you and how you take care of yourself and those around you, that's kind of what it is to me.

Jennifer: I would say one of the reasons I love stage combat is because I, sorry total cheeseball moment here – one of the times I feel sexier than anything else is



when I'm in the middle of a knife fight. But feminine is not a word I would apply to that. Womanly would be a word that I could apply to that. Womaninity?!

For these women, womaninity is rife with agency; whereas femininity is something that is put upon women. Womaninity is a choice and a choice filled with strength while femininity is something that is not chosen and entails weakness. While acknowledging some of the attributes of traditional femininity, for Jennifer, Morgan, and Liz, “womaninity” allows for actions and characteristics that are not found in a performance of traditional femininity. As I stated earlier, femininity appears to be a bad word for this group of women because it is a term that negates agency, something that is foisted upon them as an expectation and these women appear to refuse to be hobbled by it. Jennifer pointed to how femininity constrains agency while womaninity permits agency. As the conversation continued, this idea of womaninity, as Jennifer termed it, became something that encompassed not only their individual ideas on gender and femininity but also what it means to be a female stage combatant. This term provided the women an opportunity to construct a performance of gender that differs somewhat from what might be traditionally socially expected, a performance that includes an active participation in staged violence. BWBTC combines aspects of performances of traditional femininity, such as the use of cosmetics (in daily life and productions) and dress, while also embracing feminist ideals and this term, womaninity, seems to help communicate this stance. I shared this idea of womaninity with Amy to see what she thought of this concept as it pertains to Babes With Blades. In an email she articulated her thoughts:

And my thoughts on womaninity, at least as the term pertains to the ensemble...the ability and willingness to work collectively, including: changing instinctive behaviors & speaking styles...acknowledging areas of expertise, and

accepting suggestions/corrections from said experts - including folks outside the organization, of any gender. Attention paid not only to the strength of the organization, but to the growth (and emotional) needs of its members. Acceptance of all body types, and comfort with physical contact among members - both in the course of working out, and in the course of relating to each other...the capacity to embrace humor in the face of stress. (Harmon Email 2011)

There are many concepts that are woman-centered that appear in Amy's response, such as the ability to nurture and support fellow company members and guest artists both mentally and physically that support the mission statements. In Amy's discussion of womaninity, it becomes clear that BWBTC is a women-centered group. While BWBTC recognizes and embraces some traditional aspects of femininity (i.e., dresses, and make-up), the rest is rejected in favor of a more contemporary view (i.e., performance of perceived violence by women, by independent women). The Babes' performances of womaninity, in some cases means ignoring (or attempting to ignore) restrictions constituted through gender norms in order to promote what they consider to be a more gender-neutral approach, one where they believe everyone is on an equal playing field (arguably, one of feminism's ideals). I asked Amy to clarify some of her earlier statements and she provided me with a statement that encapsulates both the original and revised mission statements of BWBTC. In her email to me she wrote:

The artists of BWBTC combine our commitment to women-driven stories, our enthusiasm for the creation of new works, and our passion for stage combat to create a mission, an ensemble, and a theatrical experience unlike any other. In each element of our programming, we embrace two key concepts: 1. Women are central to the story, driving the action rather than responding to it or submitting to

it. 2. Women are capable of a full emotional and physical range, up to and including violence and its consequences. In 2013, the Disney Store released *Avenger* themed t-shirts. The ones marketed to women read, “I Need a Hero,” and “I Only Kiss Heroes.” The one marketed to boys read, “Be a Hero.”<sup>21</sup> This speaks to a larger cultural assumption that women are passive, acted-upon, waiting for rescue, while men are active, take-charge, champions. BWBTC challenges that assumption, and promotes a more gender-neutral worldview, by developing and presenting scripts focused on complex, compelling, dynamic female characters – scripts that also incorporate the art of stage combat...Our programming offers participants and patrons alike an unparalleled opportunity to – in the process of being thoroughly entertained, mind you – explore and expand their own assumptions as to women’s roles. Our women ARE heroes...and villains; they’re rescuers AND rescuees; they’re right, wrong, and everywhere in between. They’re people. It’s as simple and as subversive as that. (Harmon Email February 2015)

BWBTC focuses on promoting a human experience in their productions and to do so they must subvert the socially prescribed script for women, push the boundaries of what is suitable behavior for women and what is not suitable behavior, thus they espouse, through deed if not word, a gender fluid performance rather than one that is rigidly confined to socially constructed gender expectations. For BWBTC the human experience is one where they do not have to cast women in women’s roles; that women can portray any gender they want without having to

---

<sup>21</sup> Amy refers to the controversy over Disney’s *Avenger* t-shirts in 2013. The “I Need a Hero” shirt was pulled, but “I Only Kiss Heroes” remained in stores (Roberts, “The Rise of Sexist Fashion, from Plain Jane Homme to Disney”).

conform to gender expectations. As Amy stated, parts of society view women as “passive, acted-upon, waiting for rescue” and men as “active, take-charge champions” (Harmon Email February 2015). BWBTC subverts socially prescribed scripts for women, as Amy noted, by providing opportunities for women to participate in stage combat in productions that bring women’s stories center stage, where the female characters drive the action rather than respond to the action (Harmon Email February 2015). Thus, as I quoted earlier, “Feminism is about the social transformation of gender relations;” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 204) BWBTC adopts a feminist stance as it is socially transforming the gender relations in stage combat by providing opportunities for women stage combatants and doing so through representations of women on stage that defy the status quo.

### Portraying Strong Women: BWBTC Productions

I attended two productions during the BWBTC 2010-2011 season, *The Last Daughter of Oedipus*, and the all-female production of *Romeo and Juliet*. In the following two sections I examine the production choices made in these two shows in order to explore the ways in which the productions provide opportunities for women stage combatants and provide audiences with representations of women on stage that challenge and subvert the socially prescribed script for women.

#### *The Last Daughter of Oedipus*

The script for Jennifer Mickelson’s *The Last Daughter of Oedipus* originated in the Fighting Words playwright competition. As I discussed in chapter two, BWBTC’s Fighting Words competition invites playwrights to submit scripts that include fights that showcase female characters. *The Last Daughter of Oedipus* was the first BWBTC production I attended. Jennifer’s

play begins where Sophocles' *Antigone* ends, at the funeral of Antigone. The play follows Antigone's sister, Ismene, as she journeys to save Thebes from destruction, a destruction she believes she set in motion by failing to protect her family.

The play opens at the funerals for Antigone and Haemon. Ismene, in her grief, lays down to sleep next to her sister's body. Three ominous spirits visit Ismene in her dreams and two take on the appearances of her deceased mother, Jocasta, and her sister, Antigone. Ismene is told by these spirits that her destiny is to save Thebes from the curse that destroyed the descendants of Laius.<sup>22</sup> Daunted by the task set before her, but determined to save the city, Ismene sneaks out of the palace with her servant, Zeva, and makes her way to Athens. She seeks the guidance of the king, Theseus, who vowed to protect the children of Oedipus.<sup>23</sup> Upon arriving in Athens, the women learn that Theseus and his army are marching on Thebes, in order to rescue Antigone and Ismene from Creon. Once hearing this news, Ismene and Zeva leave Athens. When the women rest for the night, Ismene is once again visited by the three spectral women; Ismene is once again disturbed by these nightly visions. Ismene and Zeva are set upon by three Athenian women, suspicious of their appearance in Athens. Reluctantly, Ismene shares her story with the Athenians who suggest she visit the Oracle of Delphi for help in breaking the curse. The Athenian women join them in their quest to Delphi, whereupon the group is set upon by Theban soldiers looking for Ismene; they escape and continue their trek. Ismene continues to question her purpose while battling with her grief as she falls asleep. Once again the three spectral women visit her in her nightmares and false visions of her mother and sister plague her; she thrashes in

---

<sup>22</sup> Laius was Oedipus's father. The oracle of Delphi predicted that Laius's son was destined to murder him and marry his mother. They banished the baby to the hills, only he was rescued and raised in another kingdom, Oedipus was that baby. Unbeknownst to Oedipus, he does kill his father and marries his mother, Jocasta. Thus fulfilling part of the oracle's prophecy.

<sup>23</sup> In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Theseus pledged to watch out for Antigone and Ismene at Oedipus's dying request.

her sleep. In her stupor, Ismene strikes Zeva and awakens the Athenian women who now begin to doubt her sanity. At Delphi, the women distract the guards so Ismene can visit the oracle. At first the oracle cannot call down Apollo, but once Ismene makes a blood offering, he speaks through the oracle. Ismene asks about the origins of the curse and how it can be broken. Apollo replies, “Your greatest gift [to your family] will be to quit this life” (Mickelson 49). Once learning of Apollo’s dire message, the Athenian women take their leave and Ismene and Zeva begin their trek back to Thebes. When the women stop and rest for the night, two Theban soldiers come across their path, not recognizing Ismene, they warn her to stay away from Thebes; Creon has lost his mind and the city is on the verge of being sacked. Ismene drifts to sleep only to be visited again by the three spirits; Ismene realizes the true identity of these spirit women. They are the furies, vengeful spirits sent to exact revenge and seek out justice. The furies are responsible for the curse on Ismene’s family. The furies lure Ismene into a fight where she accidentally kills Zeva. As Ismene laments her actions she realizes the weight of Apollo’s words and commits suicide. The final scene of the play has Ismene in the underworld with the three furies and Pelops, the man who cursed her family for the death of his son. Ismene accepts her family’s curse but challenges the gods to release Thebes, citing she has fulfilled the curse by killing herself, she says, “blood for blood” (Mickelson 62). The furies hear her case and bring Persephone, the goddess of the underworld, to pass judgement. Ismene argues that Pelops’ revenge was too far reaching for he claimed the lives of two individuals not of the house of Laius, Creon and Jocasta. Ismene’s request for Thebes to be saved is granted in the form of a new ruler created from the dust of Thebes. With her task completed, Ismene is reunited with her family in the underworld.

The cast of characters includes nine female characters and two named male characters as well as three male guards and two male priests. The majority of the fight sequences are between the female characters with the exception of one large fight sequence involving five females (Ismene, Zeva, the three Athenian women), and two guards from Delphi. When I spoke with Jennifer about her script I asked how she justified the fight sequences in the script:

I wrote the play in [chronological] order, and where a fight might solve a character's problem, I let that be their [sic] tactic. I knew better than to put in fights for the sake of fights. I did enjoy arming the Athenian women with weapons that hide in plain sight. Swords are nice, but particularly with female characters you often have to explain how they came to have them/know how to use them. (Mickelson Email 2014)

Jennifer provided the justification for women to have the knowledge of using swords by providing a short dialogue between Ismene and her servant, Zeva where they explain how they each came to using a sword. Zeva explains that while she did not have training, she has “five quarrelsome brothers” and she knows “how to stop a fight” (Mickelson 14). Zeva points out that Ismene is skilled with a blade and Ismene replies, “I spent enough time in my brothers’ camps to understand its use. If I were forced into battle, I’d have a fair chance” (Mickelson 15). Jennifer borrows from the gender expectation (that men know how to use swords) in order to justify the female characters’ use of the swords; Jennifer keeps true to the historical truth of the era by providing an exception for these women using swords.

The play is divided into two acts, in the first act there is a total of six fight sequences, and Ismene is involved in each of them. In act two, there is a total of seven fight sequences and

Ismene is involved in all but the final small grapple. Throughout, Ismene takes up arms in order to defend herself or to escape a dangerous situation. The only time Ismene fights out of anger and plays a victim is in the first scene of Act I. Ismene argues with Creon and throws her jewels at him, he embraces her to subdue her and once he relaxes when he believes she is subdued, she slaps him. Creon then hits Ismene and she cowers on the ground. Jennifer writes the fight sequences in a way that explains the purpose for the fight and character motivation, but with enough leeway that a fight choreographer has creative input. Act I, scene 4 is a good example of the fight directions Jennifer provides. In this scene, Ismene and Zeva have just encountered the three women from Athens.

*ISMENE and ZEVA try to run, but ALCINA trips ISMENE with her staff. ZEVA rushes in to defend ISMENE and engages ALCINA. CASSIA draws a knife and fights ISMENE. AMARANTA helps her companions disable both of them.*

(Mickelson 21)

The fight sequences are only one aspect that underscores the rationale for the selection of this play by BWBTC. Another important aspect, one for which my summary does not do justice, is the agency embodied by the character Ismene. Ismene was a minor character in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, with no lines and appeared only once. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Ismene only appears to bring news of the war between her brothers Polyneices and Eteocles, to be captured and released by Creon, and to lament her father's death. In Jennifer's play, Ismene is a character with agency, actively seeking a resolution to her family's curse, she is a very different character than the Ismene from the beginning of Sophocles' *Antigone*, where Ismene pleads with Antigone to respect Creon's decree that no enemy of the state shall be buried, even if that enemy is their brother Polyneices. In that play, Ismene says, "We are only women, we cannot fight with men,



Antigone!” In *The Last Daughter of Oedipus*, it is the female characters that drive the action of the play and the male characters are delegated to minor roles, often just responding to the action of the female characters or providing information, a clear flip from Ismene’s role in Sophocles’ plays. *The Last Daughter of Oedipus* not only gives voice and agency to a character from Sophocles’ Oedipus cycle, but it also provides women stage combatants with the opportunity to drive the physical action of the play. The female characters are not all victims in the play, instead, many times they are the instigators of the action. This shift in the gender representations are reflected in Jennifer’s character descriptions, which include costume guidelines.

The guidelines Jennifer provides for Ismene in Act I, scene 1, put Ismene in the “ceremonial garb of a princess” (Mickelson 2). For the rest of the play she wears “traveling clothes” (Mickelson 11). The costumes used by BWBTC for the production consisted of earth tones, cotton fabric, and leather. In figure 1, Ismene is dressed in the costume she wears for the majority of the play, her “traveling clothes.” As the photo reveals, she is in a defensive stance, and appears to be preparing for attack.

The costume allows for ease of movement as well as safety in fighting; there are few places that she can catch a sword on her costume. However, as this photo makes clear, Ismene’s costume can, as in this stance, reveal her cleavage; although this characteristic of the costume could be the result of the photographer’s angle as I do not remember seeing cleavage during the production. Nevertheless, while it may not be designed to reveal her breasts, the bodice is low and not high collared; it thereby reveals the skin on her neck and upper chest. The costume choices in this production in some ways supports a heteronormative representation of women. Ismene’s costume is low-cut, the shoulders are revealed and for the most part the pants follow the contours of the body.



Fig. 1. Kimberly Logan as Ismene in *The Last Daughter of Oedipus*, courtesy of Babes With Blades Theatre Company, photograph by Johnny Knight.

It is obviously made for movement as well, but there is an element of sex appeal in the costume. Kimberly Logan is a woman who is of standard body size (read socially appropriate), and is a beautiful woman. Does the audience accept this representation of women (i.e., violent and physically able) because she meets a contemporary feminine ideal? Amanda Roth and Susan A. Basow discuss women's physical power in regards to femininity in their article, "Femininity, Sports and Feminism: Developing a Theory of Physical Liberation," they write: "One way to deemphasize women's physical power and capabilities is to associate female athleticism with female sex appeal" (252). One of the examples they use is the television show, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

The protagonist is a young adult named Buffy who was chosen to protect the world from evil. She is stronger than any normal man or woman and most vampires, demons, and so forth as well. Part of the humor in the show is that Buffy is the stereotypical *girly girl*. Tiny, blonde, and often scantily dressed, Buffy is the last person a demon or even an average person would fear. And although she has serious relationship problems, she has never had a lack of male admirers. On one hand, then, the show sends a positive message of female power in the face of stereotypical thinking. On the other hand, however, Buffy conforms in large part to the feminine body ideal. Her strength is acceptable, but only perhaps because she can be powerful without being masculine. (258)

Jennifer does not provide a physical description of Ismene in her script, so I cannot help but wonder if the character of Ismene was played by a female actor combatant who looked less like the feminine ideal if the audience would have been less receptive to that character's story? While the playwright provided an opportunity to push further the limits, the production choices reinforced the current feminine ideal, thus reinforcing socially constructed norms for female embodiment.

*The Last Daughter of Oedipus* is a prime example of the type of work BWBTC produces. The play places Ismene's story center stage and provides a perspective on this character that differs from Sophocles' play in that she is not weak or compliant to the dictates of her society; instead, she seeks to challenge those dictates and to be a being who enacts upon the world, rather than a being who is acted upon by it. Jennifer's script provides opportunities for women actor combatants to use their stage combat skills in an active way, playing strong women capable of handling weapons and fighting when there are no other options available. *The Last Daughter of*

*Oedipus* also provides the audience with representations of women on stage that challenge and subvert the socially prescribed script for women. Instead of reacting to the action of male characters, these female characters drive the action and display the ability to physically engage in violent actions.

*Romeo and Juliet*

In her article, “The Performance Turn – And Toss,” Mary Frances HopKins proposes “that the concept of performance allows even more recognition of the possibilities of agency” (235). She goes on to explain that agency is enacted by performing resistance, and thus static is created. She says, “this static may be subversive, may create a rupture in the center of the system by exposing the oppositions on which the system depends for existence” (235). BWBTC creates this “static” by producing plays that highlight female actor combatants in roles traditionally played by men. HopKins describes this creation of static as a “performance turn and toss”:

...a certain amount of squirming, of turning and tossing, characterizes our negotiations as we perform roles, also our actions as we occupy subject positions. We never have a perfect fit. There is always some resistance. We may remain unaware of the resistance and struggle to conform, but we may choose to perform it consciously, even with exaggerated and obvious effort. (235)

BWBTC consistently creates a performance turn and toss for both performers and audience by producing Shakespeare’s plays with an all-female cast. It hardly bears repeating that when Shakespeare was writing, women were not allowed on the stage, men played all the roles. Contemporary audiences, however, are familiar with mixed gender casts; BWBTC turns the theatrical tradition of Shakespeare’s age on its head and provides contemporary audiences with

casts of all women, performances where female stage combatants play male roles and participate in traditionally masculine activities (i.e., physical violence). Given contemporary audience expectations for mixed gender casting, their productions challenge audience preconceptions of Shakespeare's male characters by casting female actors in the roles.

BWBTC produces an all-female production of a Shakespeare play every other spring. The Shakespeare production gives female stage combatants the opportunity to play traditionally male roles and utilize their combat skills. I asked the Babes how the audience responds to these productions. As would be expected, the Babes cited moments that stood out. Kathrynne described an encounter with an audience member after a performance of *Macbeth*:

I particularly remember this one young girl who was probably in her mid to late teens who came up to me after – I was playing Macbeth – and she came up to me afterwards and she was like, “That was – I never.” You know, like she never knew – that it had never occurred to her that something – that a woman could go through all of that stuff that has been traditionally sort of male, you know male – dominion of you know rage and greed and ambition and lust and fear and madness and all this – you know the whole journey Mackey [slang for Macbeth] goes through. It just-it had like, it opened up a world to her and that's – that's why I do this and I was like, thank you for making all of it worth it. If I never again tell a good story, I know I did it for her and that's – that's why we're here, you know. (Wolf Personal Interview)

In this instance, the role of Macbeth prompted an example of a woman with power and attributes typically assigned to men, a female stage combatant playing a traditionally male role. While this

specific audience member acknowledged Macbeth as a male character in previous productions, watching a female stage combatant in the title role provided this audience member with a unique experience in understanding the character. Kathrynne story reiterates the company's commitment to gender fluidity. BWBTC's work revolutionized the way this young woman saw the world, so the gender subversion of the production altered the way this particular audience member viewed the roles of women.

*Romeo and Juliet* was the second all-female Shakespeare play produced by BWBTC and I attended the closing weekend of the show in April 2011. The costuming for the production did not hide the female bodies of the actor combatants but instead provided costume conventions to distinguish between the male and female characters. The first set of costume identifiers deals more with establishing character relationships than gender; the Capulets and those associated with the Capulets were dressed in warm tones, mostly oranges and reds, leather, feathers, and sequins were some of the materials used.

The Montagues also wore leather, but the color scheme was cooler tones, mostly blues and blacks, and studded with denim, buckles and grommets. Figure 2 depicting *Romeo and Juliet* shows an example of both the male and female costumes. The female characters in both families wore floor length dresses, similar to the dress of the late nineteenth century Liberal Period in Italy (LaDuca, *Romeo and Juliet* program).



Fig. 2. Gillian N. Humiston (left) as Romeo and Ashley Fox (right) as Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, courtesy of Babes With Blades Theatre Company, photograph by Johnny Knight.

The male characters wore knee-length skirts with a kick pleat, textured tights, boots, textured vests similar to corsets, and a head covering. Figure 3 portrays Tybalt and Mercutio mid-fight and provides a good example of the male costumes. Rather than erasing gender, this production provided specific costume identifiers for the performance of difference, difference that is based on the genders of Shakespeare's original, difference that seems to identify male and female gender. In the world of the play, the sight of someone in a knee-length skirt with a head covering carrying a rapier identifies a male character. Characters in floor-length skirts identify a female character. However, I would argue that the body types of the female actor combatants reinforced some social norms of femininity. The actors playing the male roles were all physically fit and average size to slim, while the actors playing the female roles, with the exception of Juliet, were less visibly physically fit and average to larger body size.





Fig. 3. Delia Ford (left) as Tybalt and Amy E. Harmon (right) as Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*, courtesy of Babes With Blades Theatre Company, photograph by Johnny Knight.

Another production choice was to combine Capulet and Lady Capulet in a single character (known only as “Capulet”) and combine Montague and Lady Montague (known only as “Montague”) into a single character. Each of these characters wore floor-length skirts thereby identifying them as female. The heads of the two great families of Verona, in contrast to Shakespeare’s original, were matriarchs rather than patriarchs and were, therefore, examples of strong female characters. Establishing a set of gender identifiers in the world of the play assists the audience in both recognizing and perhaps accepting the gender of the character and for ignoring the sex of the actors. The use of specific gender identifiers in the play is similar to the



social acceptability that transvestites might experience with their gender performances. As Judith Butler points out the “sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us...can compel fear, rage, even violence” (Butler *Performative Acts* 278). The world of the play allows the audience to say, “‘this is just an act,’ and de-realize the act, make acting into something quite distinct from what is real” (278). As I witnessed the show I found this ability to hold knowledge of the actors’ sex at bay while I was also kept their genders in accordance with the play to be true. I was not thinking about Romeo being a woman, I was thinking, “This is the most annoying teenage couple ever!” In this production Romeo and Juliet were played as the young teenagers Shakespeare invented, complete with angst and high-pitched voices. Thus, BWBTC eschew traditional male garb and instead seem to develop their own style to indicate gender difference. Short skirts, highlighting the legs of the performer, are used to identify male characters, also providing the performer the ability to move and fight unencumbered, a necessity of the male characters. Short skirts used to delineate the male characters from the female characters, a style usually associated with women, was used to identify male characters. Significantly, despite the all-female cast, heteronormativity was maintained.

I think it would be an injustice to the production to claim that the gender of the actor combatant is ignored or forgotten during the course of the play. The purpose of producing an all-female production of *Romeo and Juliet* not only provides women stage combatants the opportunity to use their skills, but it also underscores the negotiation of agency in the performance of gender, the performance turn and toss, unique to female stage combatants engaged in upsetting the traditional views of gender and femininity. The audience may not actively and continuously recognize the gender of the actors as female but they have to

cognitively process the performance of gender as established in the world of the play. The characters are never gender-neutral because the gestures, weapons, and costumes establish the performance of masculinity and femininity in the world of the play. What an audience must do, in order to not be kicked out by the disruptions these performances of gender potentially could produce, is to accommodate and accept the conventions that the BWB put in place. Admittedly, these conventions align with heteronormative conceptions within Shakespeare's original. However, adjusting to the world of the play is not something that occurs instantaneously; understanding the costume choices used to delineate the male and female characters was reinforced and solidified once the opening fight sequence was completed, and once the repetition of actions used to identify the male characters was established. Judith Butler discusses how the action of gender "requires a performance that is *repeated*" (*Gender Trouble* 191).

This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meaning already socially established...although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into gender modes, this "action" is a public action. There are temporal and collective dimensions to these actions, and their public character is not inconsequential; indeed, the performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame – an aim that cannot be attributed to a subject, but, rather, must be understood to found and consolidate the subject. (191)

As an audience member, initially I was engaged in this "performance turn and toss" of negotiating the expectations of the production in terms of the world of the play and in justifying them with the reality of the experience, that of female stage combatants portraying traditionally male roles. Once I accepted the performance of gender as portrayed by the characters and

established by the world of the play, I became lost in the story playing out in front of me. Even given that the production used traditional female identifiers (short skirts) to identify male characters, rather than having the effect of creating a gender-neutral production, heteronormativity, and by implication to some extent gender normativity, was maintained. Clearly the production was not inviting a homosexual interpretation. The production, thus, enacts a subversion of gender norms while it also paradoxically maintains the heteronormative status quo of Shakespeare's original and presumably the expectations of a general audience attending the production.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored how the Babes of my study understand femininity and I considered how the company's production choices reveal how they support and/or subvert social expectations for gender in their productions. While some of the Babes bristled when I used the word femininity, others recognized the concept as a useful tool in the construction of gender, specifically when the context of a situation renders the performance of femininity necessary. The Babes I interviewed embrace some concepts associated with traditional femininity but prefer to select which concepts they embrace, thus highlighting the agency and gender fluidity of the individuals. As a company, BWBTC embraces a more contemporary construction of gender performativity, as Jennifer termed it, womaninity. The term womaninity encompasses not only their individual ideas on femininity and gender but also what it means to be a female stage combatant. Womaninity focuses on embracing and acknowledging the physical and mental strength of women, a performance that entails agency and encompasses creating the illusion of violence onstage.

BWBTC selects plays that subvert the socially prescribed script for women. In original BWBTC productions the female characters take action, they drive the action of the play rather than respond to it or submit to it, and stage combat is a storytelling tool for these productions. *The Last Daughter of Oedipus* featured a passive character from Sophocles' *Oedipus* cycle plays. In Jennifer's play, Ismene became the central character and driving force of the action of the play. Thus through a revisionist historical original drama, BWBTC rewrites a passive past by creating a proactive female protagonist. Producing this play invites audiences to re-cognize the women of Sophocles' original.

As I stated previously, BWBTC adopts a feminist stance as it is socially transforming the gender relations in stage combat by providing opportunities for women stage combatants and doing so through representations of women on stage that defy the status quo. In the all-female productions of a Shakespeare's plays that they do every other spring, female actor combatants play male roles and participate in traditionally masculine activities (i.e., physical violence). The audience expectations of these classic characters are challenged by female actors in the roles, while the hegemonic norms for socially appropriate performances of gender are maintained by designating the character's gender by a specific costume. BWBTC holds an idealistic vision for women where gender will not matter. However, to reach that ideal the company promotes strong female characters and provides opportunities for women stage combatants. Yet through this focus on equalizing the balance of opportunities through attention to women's participation they nevertheless insist that what they are doing is representing a human experience. While clearly the company is feminist in action, they do not highlight that fact in their mission statements or advertising perhaps because they fear losing audience. This reluctance to articulating a feminist position might be part of the reason why they also appear to feel the need to maintain

heteronormativity in their production of *Romeo and Juliet*. The male characters were identified by an established costume, albeit one that is traditionally associated with female attire (i.e., short skirts and vests similar to corsets) that clearly separates the male characters from the female characters in the play (long dresses). While women's stories are not the focus in Shakespeare's tales, the all-female productions highlight the ability of women actor combatants to play proactive and physical roles. Women's roles in the classic theatre are typically fewer than their male counterparts and moreover, the male roles are almost always the ones who engage in stage combat. By placing women in male roles, the company ensures that women have more opportunities as actor combatants. Moreover, although they must work within traditional societal expectations for women's representations so as not to delimit their audience appeal, their efforts to bring women's stories center stage creates opportunities to shift how audiences understand women's gender performances; consequently, they thereby provide their audiences with opportunities to see strong female characters which may incrementally help shift those social norms for women's gender performance. BWBTC represent women who play their gender across the spectrum of gender fluidity, much as they do in life. Thus, through representing women whose performances of gender never rest in the binary but are constantly able to shift across the spectrum, in a sense BWBTC "rehearse" their audiences into accepting women in these gender performances that at least to some extent defy social norms. Not to mention, and this is no small thing, their audiences also get to see talented women actor combatants who provide a very engaging time in the theatre.

## CHAPTER IV. POWER AND AGENCY: PLAYING AGGRESSOR/VICTIM/PARTNER

## The Great Boob Escape of 2006

*Second day of workshop – I’m beat! Great bunch of workshops today – going to be so sore tomorrow. Majorly sore! So, I’m working on my recert<sup>24</sup> for unarmed. My partner is a little intimidating – but I’ll make do. We started learning the routine for the recert, pretty simple moves, nothing I haven’t done before – except the front fall. It comes right after a hair-pull and kick to the gut, I drop to my knees and my partner pushes me and I extend into a front fall on my stomach – a little like brushing the floor with your body using your arms to guide you. I was fine when we took it half speed...but not so much full speed. I go to expand out and I’ve got some momentum – one boob pops out of my sports bra – the other stays in. I think I have rug burn. There has to be a better way to do this move... (Winter Wonderland Workshop, January 2006, Carder workshop journal)*

*July 18, 2000*

*...So very sore, every muscle in my body aches – my big toe even hurts, but I wouldn’t trade this for the world. I have never felt more powerful than I do right now. I. Love. Stage Combat! I’m so glad I came to Vegas! I never thought I could physically do stuff like this and actually be decent. It is really cool to be able to “throw” a punch and “kick” someone in the stomach – and make it look real. I love this ability of being able to fall to the floor and not get hurt! Why didn’t I know about this during Noises Off? What the hell! I found out I’m really good at quarterstaff – using giant sticks and hacking at your opponent/partner. The broadsword is so heavy, but I’m doing well at it – it’s like an extension of me, never thought of a weapon as an extension of*

---

<sup>24</sup> Recert is slang for recertification test, a SAFD test taken to maintain certification in an area of stage combat.

*myself. Crazy! The rapier and dagger routine is coming along really well – my partner accidentally stabbed me in the leg – large bruise – but it happened because we got off beat. It reminds me of learning a new dance routine, repetition to get it into my body. I’m even doing the routine in my head while walking to class. Learning the terminology and the moves are two different things – I love it when I wasn’t consciously thinking about the moves and just focused on my intentions instead. Wow! Just, wow...(Excerpt from private journal.)*

\* \* \* \* \*

The incident described in the first journal entry served as a catalyst for my deciding upon the topic of this dissertation; thus, besides being a painful moment it was also a moment of clarity. I felt sure that there has to be a better way for my body to perform this particular move. I wondered, how do I adapt this move to *my* body? Will I be able to remember the change when I am performing the sequence during my recertification exam? How do I stay in the moment without another injury? These were some of the thoughts racing through my mind during and after what I came to jokingly call the great boob escape of 2006. The second journal entry was from my journal during the National Stage Combat Workshop held in Las Vegas in 2000. The thrill of discovering this new (to me) activity gave me a whole new tool as an actor; with it I would no longer be just a “triple threat,”<sup>25</sup> I could be a quadruple threat. This initial experience (and many years of rumination) led me to ask the Babes of BWBTC a series of questions about body awareness and agency. The Babes responses and my own experiences with the Babes led to the focus of this chapter. In this chapter I explore the ways in which these female actor

---

<sup>25</sup> A triple threat is a reference to an individual who is an actor, singer, and dancer.

combatants learn and experience stage combat as well as exploring the ways in which stage combat provides these female actor combatants agency and power.

I, as we all do, experience the world through the body. It is through my body that I interact with individuals and objects, it is through my body that I learn. My embodied experiences inform my understandings of myself and society. Merleau-Ponty, Iris Marion Young, and Christopher M. Aanstoos all discuss embodied experience (also discussed as the lived body) and phenomenology. “The lived body is a unified idea of a physical body acting and experiencing in a specific sociocultural context; it is body-in-situation” (Young 16). The language the Babes use during their interviews reflects their embodied understanding of the world. In order to demonstrate how the women of BWBTC use their bodies and are aware of their bodies during their stage combat experiences, I refer to Christopher M. Aanstoos’s article, “Embodiment as Ecstatic Intertwining.” As Aanstoos points out we are not always aware of “our thereness” the awareness of being present in our bodies; therefore we do not always think of how we experience the world through our bodies. To discuss this concept he examines what he calls six expressions of “ecstatic intertwining of bodyhood – worldhood” (97). By this phrase he is pointing to the connectedness between body and world, the “body-in-situation” as Young terms it. In order to examine how the Babes of BWBTC experience “thereness” in the following pages I adapt three of Aanstoos’s expressions, “the habitual body’s disclosure of its own form,” “the engaged body’s disclosure of things,” and “the praxic body’s disclosure of space” (97). I also include one area of my own devising, the functional body’s disclosure of its physical abilities. I seek to emphasize the interconnectivity of bodily form, engagement with things, and the manipulation of space with bodily awareness of potential to shape the lived world. The various



aspects of the typology are not discrete but overlap as I will demonstrate in the following sections.

### “That’s not going to work”: The Functional Body

Once I readjusted my boobs and voiced a string of expletives, I simply stated, “Well, that’s not going to work.” In order to be present in the moment during the recertification test and not injure myself again, I needed to learn what move worked best for *my* body. I start my discussion here with the functional body because it is more about bodily capacity then I move on to discuss Aanstoos’s typology and will thereby demonstrate how varied aspects of this typology overlap and clarify the various ways stage combatants orient to their bodies. One of the first questions I asked all the BWBTC women was if there were certain moves that worked better for a woman than a man and vice versa – and all interviewed brought it back to “it depends on the individual” (Beyreis Personal Interview) or “it depends on the body type,” (Wolf Personal Interview). In completing stage combat moves it depends on body type rather than gender of the individual. Understanding how their individual bodies function appears to be the first step to developing a body capable of precise stage combat for the women I interviewed. As a continuing learning process, stage combatants are repeatedly evaluating the best ways their bodies function. They must continuously ask, “What is my body capable of accomplishing?” “What moves am I physically comfortable completing?” As both Kathrynne and Jennifer explained, some people are comfortable as flyers and others are comfortable as bases. In a move such as a body flip or throw, one partner takes the weight of the other partner in order to complete the move. A base is a person who takes the weight, while a flyer is the person who gives the weight, and in Kathrynne’s experience some people can only be a flyer or only be a base. As Kathrynne stated,

it is important to “go slow and figure out what you are comfortable with and then push that boundary if necessary to tell the story properly” (Wolf Personal Interview).

It is important for a stage combatant to know her or his body’s limitations; body shape, injuries, exhaustion, and physical wear all play a factor. As I discovered, I am unable to do a front sliding fall the same way as my male instructor. Unlike men or small breasted women, my breasts affect how I perform stage combat. For example, it can be difficult for a partner to land a stomach punch without hitting my breasts. Consequently, my awareness of my breasts, (and I recognize such bodily awarenesses are different for each stage combatant), helped me to learn my body’s limitations, thereby affecting the choices I make, which ultimately has the effect of making me a stronger stage combatant. Stronger because this awareness has enabled me to develop a nuanced understanding of my strengths and limitations based upon my bodily particulars.

Because stage combat requires physical endurance and skill, I asked all of the women, “How long do you plan on continuing stage combat?” and they all answered in a similar manner, something analogous to, “as long as my body allows.” I mentioned this observation on the similar responses to Jennifer, Liz, and Morgan and they voiced that stage combat is similar to any other physical activity. Wear and tear on the body is common and of course makes a difference to the quality of the performance and longevity of the stage combatant. Jennifer mentioned that one Babe went emeritus status because her knees could no longer handle the strain. Liz commented that once they felt their bodies cannot take the regular strain of being a full-time company member, many actor combatants become instructors simply to stay in the field because they enjoy it so much. Morgan said, “Do it as long as you love it. I think my body will wear out before I stop loving it” (MacDougald, Manasa, and Mickelson Personal Interview).

Exhaustion, which is a key component in doing stage combat, affects how the combatant engages as a functional body. For example, at the beginning of the one BWBTC workshop I attended, the participants were sharp and coordinated; by the end of the day many participants appeared fatigued and made more mistakes. Liz observed that it became difficult to focus due to fatigue towards the end of the day; she felt like her brain had “shut off for the night” before she was done. Richard Lane reiterates the need for proper rest in his stage combat manual, *Swashbuckling: A Step-by-Step Guide to the Art of Stage Combat and Theatrical Swordplay*, pointing out that to practice or perform a fight when exhausted can lead to injuries to self, partner and possibly audience (38).

Knowing how their bodies work was a recurrent theme that appeared in my interviews with the women; once aware of their bodies, they learn to adapt the moves to fit their bodily capabilities. All of the women I interviewed have movement training other than stage combat. Arielle has a background in clown arts, Liz and Morgan have some dance background, Jennifer has yoga training, Delia comes from a gymnastics and figure skating background, Libby trained in Western martial arts, and Amy is an experienced fencer. Body awareness is something they all possess. Kathrynne made a point to explain that stage combat is not a separate set of skills, but rather a different combination of movement skills:

Put five Eastern martial arts in a row next to each other, they'll have pretty much the same move but called different names... You know chambering here and snapping out from the knee and back. You know we call that a roundhouse kick, but it's called other things in other disciplines, that doesn't mean it's a different thing... in a real fight which if you're telling a real story then you hope your fights look real – nothing ever looks perfect... you know they would learn small sword

and then pick up a quarterstaff and be like, “I know what the targets are, but I don’t know what to do with the stick in my hands” Well swing it around, you’ll figure something out, you know it’s not this exclusive body of knowledge. If you think about the way martial arts developed it’s because people had bodies and they went, “how does this body work the most effectively against another body.” Across all of the arts – I mean that’s how dance evolved – how does my body work most effectively to accomplish what I want to accomplish? (Wolf Personal Interview)

These training methods understand that morphologically typical bodies function in specific and somewhat similar ways in general. Any form of physical training is a way of developing that capacity for understanding the functional body. It may be individualized through experiences of one’s own body, but it is still inculcated through a training that presupposes certain bodily potentials although these potentials are not always realized in all bodies.

Understanding how their bodies function is important for stage combatants and acknowledging the body’s understanding of other movement practices further enhances the stage combatant’s skills. The functional body is a key aspect for stage combatants in order to create effective and safe stage combat moves. Understanding the functional body provides the actor combatant the ability to effectively create shared power and perceived power in choreographed fight sequences.

#### “Oh, there it is”: The Habitual Body

Aanstoos’s expression, “the habitual body’s disclosure of its own form,” focuses on understanding the somatic knowledge of embodiment, essentially considering how a body

performs task without conscious effort. Delia was working with her partner on a new section of the fight routine. While Delia's footwork appeared effortless, the timing of her dagger parries was causing her problems. Delia experiences where the functional body meets the habitual body, the moves are not yet habituated so the moves are still in functional awareness. Instead of hearing the ringing sound of the blades (referred to as the ping), clangs sounded from their weapons. While retreating she needed to parry with her dagger, then advance and thrust to her partner's right upper chest while her partner retreats and completes rapier parry three. With each run through of the movements, the motions appeared less forced and the blades were soon singing. After numerous repetitions of that troublesome sequence, Delia observed, "Oh, there it is." By repeating the sequence and rhythms of movement, Delia's body recognized the feeling of the move. The move became second nature to Delia, and she no longer hesitated during that sequence. Maurice Merleau-Ponty points out the significance of the mind-body connection when forming a habit. "If habit is neither a form of knowledge nor an involuntary action, what then is it? It is knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort" (166). In repeating the move and focusing on how her body feels completing the move, Delia demonstrated that habit is not involuntary. This sequence of movements became second nature through repetition. Dale Anthony Girard highlights the importance of repetition in stage combat in his book *Actors on Guard*.

To make stage combat a safe practice, it must be ingrained in the actor's muscle memory through constant repetition. By slowly repeating mechanics, a thin layer of "potential habit" is placed in one's physical and mental memory. The mind and the body begin to make the actions more natural; this is known as kinesthetic learning. Each time the mechanics of a technique are repeated the layers of

potential habit thicken. When a technique is practiced often enough, the action slowly becomes second nature. (5)

Through repetition the stage combat moves appear to be involuntary when in fact it has taken many practices to get to that point.

One question I posed to the women, was to what extent they are aware of their bodies during a routine. How long does it take a routine to become “second nature?” This question appeared to puzzle Libby and she equated stage combat to walking:

Like if you start to stumble when you’re walking you don’t think “Oh dear, I need to bend my left knee and extend my right foot forward to prevent myself from stumbling,” you just catch yourself. And so, during rehearsal you’re constantly like, all right is this to angle,<sup>26</sup> you know how should I adjust my weight to get this right, but during performance you just do the fight. And, and if something happens with your body or with your partner, if your partner stumbles or whatever, it’s like walking. You just catch yourself. You just correct and move on. And it’s not really, you’re not really aware of your individual movements. At least I’m not. (Beyreis Personal Interview)

In this response, Libby articulates the place where the functional body meets the habitual body. Libby’s explanation also illustrates Merleau-Ponty’s claims about the Habit Body. Libby desired a “certain result and the relevant tasks” were “spontaneously distributed amongst the appropriate segments” (Merleau-Ponty 172). The rational awareness of the move develops into a

---

<sup>26</sup> Libby refers to the blocking of the fight sequence in order to hide moves (such as body knaps and non-contact slaps and stabs) from the audience in order to maintain the illusion of the fight for the audience.

somatic/kinesthetic awareness by the time the fight is in a performance. Libby mentioned that a trained actor combatant recognizes the feel of the move and can adjust when something feels off without consciously being aware of correcting. Delia echoed this response in her answer: “I would say that the awareness is heightened during rehearsal while I am still investigating the posture of the character and their rhythm. But the awareness seeps away as muscle memory takes over” (Ford Email 2011).

When I posed this same question to Amy she was quick to lead her answer with her awareness of her breath. In fact breath is a common thing upon which stage combatants place their awareness; breath is a place where actor combatants access the functional body and bridge their awareness of their abilities with the kinesthetic habit they are working to create. During the workshop I observed numerous occasions where Neil Massey and Stephanie Repin shouted to the participants, “Breathe or die!” and “Tension is your enemy!” For Amy, breathing is the basis of bodily awareness:

For me personally - I'm hyper-aware of my breath, both making sure I get enough and making sure I'm using it to support the moves and keep them relaxed. I feel very rooted, like I'm connected to the earth's core. I'm often not sure what my legs are doing specifically, but they always feel very coiled and tensile, like an industrial spring. (Harmon Email 2010)

Amy focuses on her breath in order to incorporate the moves into her body, and that is common practice for actor combatants. Dale Anthony Girard writes, “Also remember to breathe during this process [stage combat routine]...your brain and muscles need oxygen to function, and by holding your breath the body tenses up and the mind starts to cloud” (7). Proper breathing,

essentially remembering to breathe, is essential in bridging the functional body and the habitual body.

In addition to creating second nature, repetition provides an important role in stage combat routines, it helps a stage combatant to adapt and get over reflexes that might prove harmful in stage combat routines, such as catching yourself in a controlled fall. Amy highlighted the importance of repetition when explaining a particular move in *The Last Daughter of Oedipus* that required her to fall backward off of a four-foot platform:

It [the fall] had to look totally uncontrolled, and I had to splat out at the end on a wood-over-concrete floor, in full view of the audience...So I spent about three hours total standing on a wood box, closing my eyes, twitching my shoulders, stepping to the ground in various ways, doing sit falls,<sup>27</sup> and spinning.<sup>28</sup> Once I found something that worked, I did it over and over again - probably 50 times? In part because I needed my body to do it automatically and fluidly, like a real fall; and in part because it involved dropping my whole body weight...onto my right quad, and I wanted to make sure it could take it - it was sore as hell at first, but it got stronger. (Harmon Email 2010)

While repetition is a large part of how the body habituates stage combat moves, another aspect is knowing how a particular move works in order to understand the character motivation for the move. Jennifer refers to this as a “brain connection”:

---

<sup>27</sup> A sit fall also referred to as a sit down back fall, is a backward fall that uses the large muscles of the leg for landing and the torso as a counter weight in order for the body to be lowered safely onto the floor.

<sup>28</sup> A type of fall that relies on the actor combatant’s ability to support her weight on one leg and spin in order to expand into a front fall rather than a sit down back fall.



It's one of my challenges as a fighter. If I don't intellectually understand what is going on in the fight I can't make my body do it...but if you have a particular routine that is full of movements that your body doesn't want to make, like with your physicality – it's going to take longer to get into your body than something that feels natural to you. That whole replacement parry thing, you know, parry with the sword and then bring up the dagger and then switch. That felt so unnatural to me it took me a while to figure out because I had to make the mental connection of how and why you would do that. And once I had a mental connection of why I would do that, I was able to do it. (MacDougald, Manasa, and Mickelson Personal Interview)

Kathrynne further extrapolated on this idea of mentally understanding the move:

Frequently when you're learning a new fight or a new skill style or whatever. The first time you do it, it's like "uhma umah – right hand? – I don't know – ahh I have no idea what I'm doing!" And we say, yeah go home and sleep on it and the next day it'll make much more sense and it does somehow your brain gets the – it moves from short term memory to long term memory or however all that happens. And you come back to it and you're like "Oh, ok this makes more sense now" and then by the time you've done it – five different days or whatever it's like, Ok my body knows where it's going. (Wolf Personal Interview)

I asked the Babes what differences they feel exist between learning unarmed stage combat versus armed stage combat. Arielle discussed the importance of learning unarmed stage combat before armed stage combat. Arielle explained that the unarmed training allows a stage combatant to

have a better awareness of her movement, and to be clear on targets on and around the body before adding a weapon. This way the partner knows “I’m not punching your face, I’m punching your shoulder, you know, there’s not, you have to have that in mind so when you put a weapon in that hand I’m not stabbing your face, I’m stabbing your shoulder.” In stage combat a punch to the face is often targeted to a partner’s shoulder, as one fight master explained, “Stay out of the eight by ten,”<sup>29</sup>— avoid the face.

For stage combatants the habitual body is one that takes shape over time. It begins with practice and repetition of movements and breathing. Once the movements become second nature the stage combatant can then focus on telling the story through the fight rather than consciously thinking about the movements. Mastering the movements and breathing to the point that it becomes second nature further provides the actor combatant a sense of agency.

The ability to transfer knowledge from unarmed stage combat to armed stage combat is a matter of habituation. Merleau-Ponty uses an example of an organist to illustrate “the body as mediator of a world” (167). He explains that an organist is able to play an unfamiliar organ with a little practice. Just as that organist takes “measure of the instrument with his body” so does the stage combatant (168). Once habituation of movements is established, the actor combatant must work on using the weapon as an extension of her or his body.

### “Get your extension, woman”: The Engaged Body

The rapier is an elegant weapon that requires skill and finesse. While observing the BWBTC workshop, I noticed some of the participants had this ability and they were able to make their swords sing rather than clang during the routine. Neil and Stephanie reminded

---

<sup>29</sup> A saying used to remind actor combatants to avoid the face, the headshot space.

everyone that a stage fight is telling a story and focusing the audience's attention to a specific mark on an opponent's body, helps to clarify the intentions in the fight in order to tell the story. Neil and Stephanie demonstrated a thrust to the right shoulder and highlighted the engagement of the entire body. The participants continue to practice the sequence again while Neil and Stephanie walked around the room giving pointers. I noticed Stephanie watching one couple going through the moves, the swords were clanking instead of pinging and their bodies were not committed to the moves. Stephanie shouted, "Get your extension, woman!" to one of the pair, after a small amount of laughter they began to correct their movements. My eyes wandered over to Morgan and Libby. Morgan completed a thrust to Libby's upper right shoulder on a lunge forward extension and created a line that followed from the tip of her rapier to the tip of her left foot extended behind her. Christopher M. Aanstoos refers to this ability to extend one's bodily awareness into an object as an extension of the body as the engaged body (99). Using a golfer as an example, Aanstoos elucidates that the club and ball are an extension of the golfer and that the lean the golfer makes with his/her body at the end of a putt "expresses the golfer's continuing embodiment of that unifying intentional arc" (100). Similarly, a stage combatant uses her weapons and body as a mode of protention to engage her environment.

There are a number of factors that are incorporated into the body and affect the efficiency of stage combat moves. Delia discussed these factors with me in an email, "Stance, posture, tempo, weight, energy direction... these things can depend on what you have in your hand, where you are situated and who you are throwing down with.<sup>30</sup> While communication, control, distance, etc. are going to play a part in any physical altercation" (Ford Email 2011). When a

---

<sup>30</sup> Throwing down with is slang term that refers to throwing down the gauntlet, a practice of medieval knights when challenging an opponent to a fight.

stage combat routine goes well, as in the case of Libby and Morgan's sequence, it is what Aanstoos calls an "embodied organizational unity of person and situation," this is the stage combatant's ability to meld the body, the weapon, and the routine in order to communicate the intention of the fight (100).

Arielle equated armed combat to having an appendage: "So, if you have broadsword, there is something, it's like having another appendage... There's a sense of awareness that has to go with it... it's another extension of your, your motivation, your movement, I think it's an energy source, if that makes sense?" (Augustyn Personal Interview). For Arielle, the engaged body inculcates as a sense of power. Merleau-Ponty uses the example of the blind man and his stick. The blind man's stick, is no longer an object but an appendage and he acclimates to the stick by feeling out his world through the stick (166). Stage combatants familiarize themselves with their weapons by incorporating "them into the bulk of our own body" (166). Understanding one's weapon is such an important aspect of stage combat that when a stage combatant begins training on a new weapon, she or he learn the different parts of the weapon, the feel of the weight of the weapon, the proper grips for the weapon, and the proper care and storage. In *Swashbuckling: A Step-by-Step Guide to the Art of Stage Combat and Theatrical Swordplay*, Richard Lane has a chapter entitled, "Getting to Know Your Sword." In this chapter, he takes the actor combatant through the process, understanding the sword using his six commandments of safe sword handling, discussing such things as "point awareness," knowing where the point of your blade is at all times, "carry the sword like a baby," keeping the sword close to one's body, and checking the condition of one's weapon before every rehearsal and performance (53-54).

The engaged body of an actor combatant is one that comes through habituation and the incorporation of weapons. Again the various aspects of the typology are not discrete but overlap,

the engaged body, the habitual body, and the functional body are a continuous interweaving throughout the stage combat process, as the actor combatant learns new weapons, new moves and new combinations of choreography. The weapon becomes an extension of the actor combatant. As the Babes discussed, learning a new weapon and becoming proficient with that weapon provides a sense of power.

### “Found the ceiling fan”: The Praxic Body

As the BWBTC workshop progressed, as is expected, the participants increased their speed as they became familiar with the sequences, as their habitual bodies began to take over. I observed one pair, however, begin to increase their speed and the moves became messy and slightly dangerous. When transitioning from a parry to a cut, the combatant’s blade hit the ceiling fan resulting in a loud clang and if my eyes did not deceive me a small spark. This result is, of course, dangerous for the pair completing the sequence and any other participants in the vicinity. The pair was reminded to be aware of their tips and to slow the movements down. The couple’s increased speed resulted in sloppy work and brought into view what Aanstoots refers to as the praxic body’s disclosure of spatiality. Aanstoots points out that, “Our embodiment’s world-disclosiveness is illuminated not only by our relation with the equipmentality of that world. The very spatiality of the situation is essentially valorized by our embodied intentionality within it” (101). His point is to elucidate how we can attune to our bodies and attune to how we engage with objects, but we can extend our consciousness into how we engage our bodies and things in the space around us. The clang of the ceiling fan and resultant spark made clear what can happen when the absence of that attunement is present. Merleau-Ponty refers to this attunement as the spatiality of situation, essentially “the body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a

body is, for a living creature, to be involved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them” (94).

In stage combat, the spatiality of the situation relates to how the actor combatant moves within the space, the specificity and economy of the movements, the rapier and dagger placement in relation to the body, the awareness of the rapier tip in relation to the partner’s body, and the ability to maintain a safe fighting distance while telling the story of the fight. It is worth noting, as Liz did, that often the space also includes audience, other combatants, and other witnesses outside of the fight space: “you become very aware. Ok where’s the teacher? Who’s watching me? Where’s the next couple? Where’s the couple behind the person that I’m fighting so if she starts to get close I can pull back” (MacDougald, Manasa, and Mickelson Personal Interview). Kathryn highlights the idea of the praxic body by realizing the necessity to remember the “regular acting stuff.” By that, as the following quote reveals, she means the awareness of the actual acting situation as well as the awareness of the given circumstances, character motivations, and fight choreography:

I think a lot of times as actors we – y’all – and I’m including myself in this – get a little lazy with the quote unquote regular acting stuff – you know when you’re in a scene with someone and your talking and you’re not necessarily doing all the physical work you could be doing – uhm but I think we probably should be – but that’s the whole thing about when you’re telling the story and you’re in the story you have to have – a part of you is aware of what’s going on around you because it’s live theatre...you’re doing this for other people and you have to make sure you’re doing the job that you’re supposed to be doing to tell the story to the audience....So uhm, I don’t know that my awareness...other than you do have to

– it’s faster. <laugh> Generally you’re moving through space faster so it’s a little more dangerous so you have to make sure you’re doing that maybe at a heightened level from normal. (Wolf Personal Interview)

The praxic body highlights the actor combatant’s ability and necessity to stay in the moment – to stay in character – while at the same time remaining engaged and remaining aware of the theatrical context, while relying on the habituation of the movements. I presented these bodies as a linear development only for organizational reasons, when in practice the functional body, the habitual body, the engaged body, and the praxic body overlap; it is this confluence of awareness where the actor combatant’s lived body creates the character’s body.

### Lived Bodies and Character Bodies

As the fight choreography becomes second nature through habituation, whatever lines there may have been between actor combatants’ lived bodies and their character bodies begin to blur. As I watched Delia during a fight call for *Romeo and Juliet*, I observed an example of why it might be difficult for the participants in my study to articulate what, if any, differences they experience between their lived bodies and their character bodies. Delia (Tybalt) and Gillian (Romeo) rehearse Tybalt’s death scene during the fight call. Delia takes her fight stance, and the women begin the fight sequence, the movements were slow as this was a warm up for the performance and they were clearly telegraphing their moves and walking through the lines as well. It was apparent that these were actor combatants marking a fight.<sup>31</sup> They began the sequence again and this time there was a subtle shift in Delia’s posture and presence, her shoulders were back, her chin was raised and her intentions were clearer. The moves became

---

<sup>31</sup> Also known as a walk through, “The process of carrying out all the moves of a fight at a slow, comfortable pace” (Girard, *The Fight Arranger’s Companion* 258).

more fluid and the accompanying dialogue made more sense. While watching the same fight in the production, it was no longer Delia and Gillian rehearsing but rather their characters, Tybalt and Romeo, who were fighting (see figure 4). Delia's voice, posture and fight stance all adjusted to create the embodiment for this male character. Gradually Delia's female body became less apparent. A part of this transformation was assisted, of course, by the addition of the costume. But the transition was not just due to superficial addition of the costume. In my observations of Delia, her comportment changed from her female body to Tybalt's, a body that appeared more male. The actor's lived body transformed or morphed into the character's lived body.



Fig. 4. Gillian N. Humiston (left) as Romeo and Delia Ford (right) as Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet*, courtesy of Babes With Blades Theatre Company, photograph by Johnny Knight.

What I witnessed in Delia's transformation is reflected in Amy's response to my question concerning character development in stage combat routines:

Macaela: How do you approach a character in a stage combat routine?



Amy: So many different ways [to approach a character]! To begin with - what are the character's given circumstances as she enters a fight? Is she eager? distraught? afraid? Is she or he experienced, or a novice? Should the audience root for this character? How is the fight supposed to end? Then - is there already set blocking for acting moments before/during/after the fight? How can that blocking be incorporated? Are there lines during the fight, and how can the combatants ensure that those lines are heard? Does the director have a specific vision for the length and style of the fight - dirty and short, elegant and sporting, etc.? Then, uh - what is the weapon, and what are my personal strengths and weakness with that weapon? How is the weapon traditionally used, and is there any reason - emotional, strategic, etc. - to deviate from that tradition? And - who is/are my fight partners, and what kind of background do they have? Will I need to come up a notch to make sure the fight looks good, and/or will I need to help them come up a notch? (Harmon Email 2010)

Delia's transformation is the result of this character creation process that Amy described.

Kathrynne's response to the same question further illustrates the combination of the stage combatant's lived body and the character's body:

It's a lot like learning lines, honestly...and I memorize lines pretty quickly too, but it's because the way I learn lines is by figuring out why the character is saying what they're saying in reaction to whatever the person has said. And a script that's written well, that's what that character would say. If that person says that to me in this circumstance this is what this person would say in response. You know, so if a fight is choreographed well, when the other character does that – this is

what that character would do...so it makes sense. So it's less a matter of learning by rote and more a matter of learning the character and learning what story you're telling. (Wolf Personal Interview)

Kathrynne highlights the similarity between the learning lines for a role and learning a fight sequence for a role, in that the body habituates the motions as character motivation and actor movements. The significance of the question "What is my character's motivation?," is one that extends beyond the lines into the actions of the character's lived body. As the performer habituates the knowledge of the character, the lines, the fight choreography, the transformation to the character's lived body takes shape.

At times in my discussions with the Babes, they would separate themselves from their bodies in general referring to them as weapons or tools needed to complete a task. In light of those conversations I considered my own experience as an actor combatant and I believe it prudent to further explore how female stage combatants view their bodies as weapons. The body becomes a weapon only because the actor combatant has that functional body awareness and the engaged body's extension of self; the actor combatant's whole person (including the weapon) becomes more powerful, more animated, and full of capacity to perform stage combat.

### Instrument and Agency

As an actor, I was consistently told by coaches that my body is my instrument, and like any good tool I must take care of it and understand how and why it works in order to perform to the best of my abilities. In the first line of *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting*, Joseph R. Roach refers to the actor's body as his instrument, "The actor's body constitutes his instrument, his medium, his chief means of creative expression – that is a commonplace on

which performers and spectators alike have readily agreed” (11). As a stage combatant, I was once again reminded that my body is a tool to tell a story, “...safe and successful stage combat requires that you use your body as a tool – to perform techniques properly, in balance, and with control over both the speed and range of motion” (Lane 63). When I first learned unarmed stage combat, Fight Master Dale Anthony Girard told my group that our bodies are weapons.

Considering one’s body as an instrument is a way to foment that bodily awareness of the functional body. In my conversation with Amy, she touched on the idea of the body as a weapon when I asked what is her most difficult stage combat experience to date:

Macduff/Macbeth in spring 2009 - not necessarily because of the moves, although both Kat [Kathryn Wolf] and I were pushing our personal envelopes, but because we came to the final fight having spent the entire play getting ramped up to insane emotional levels, and then had to try to kill each other. Safely. But viciously enough to *cathart* [Amy’s emphasis] all that emotion for the audience....During rehearsal, and before going onstage each night, I walked through every move of that final fight at least twice – and separately from formal fight call – which of course happened every night as well – slowly, methodically, and dispassionately, uh, to remind my body how I needed it to work. Then right before charging onstage, I’d take my emotions in check as well - try to see *myself as a weapon* [Amy’s emphasis] – focused, with a job to do. That combo seemed to work pretty well. (Harmon Email 2010)

Amy’s description of her body as a weapon returns me to a question upon which I ruminated during this process: “Do women stage combatants instrumentalize their bodies?” There is a clarification that needs be made between viewing the body as an instrument and

instrumentalizing the body. Cultural studies in sports have focused on athletes' treatment of their bodies, therefore I turn to some sport cultural studies articles and texts to further extrapolate this idea. Roger Melin provides an understandable distinction in his article, “Instrumentalization of the Body in Sports”:

The basic idea of something  $x$  being an instrument is that it is used as a tool for the purpose of something beyond itself  $y$ . Furthermore, an instrument is in one way or another thought to be particularly effective in reaching the purported aim...And, lastly, the value of the instrument is proportionate to how well it realizes the aim that is there to realize...The body functions as an instrument in orienting ourselves in the world. It is used as the cognitive instrument in orienting ourselves in the world...sport, being just one of those activities of a normal human life, also relies upon the body as the necessary cognitive instrument for performing in sport. (3)

Melin continues to explain that just because an athlete might view her body as an instrument, does not necessarily mean that she instrumentalizes her body, but if an athlete views her body as an instrument for the sole purpose of completing one specific task, then the athlete instrumentalizes her body. Melin provides an equation to explain:

An object  $O$  is instrumentalized if it is used, understood or conceptualized as a pure mean for the doing of  $H$  (where  $H$  is either an action, an object or some state of affairs) in the sense that  $O$ 's ultimate value is determined by  $O$ 's contribution and effectiveness of the realization of  $H$ . (4)

Instrumentalization relies on the division between mind and body and is highly destructive to an athlete as Michael Messner's explains in "The Embodiment of Masculinity." He discusses how a male athlete, in order to prove himself, develops a relationship with his body that encourages him to "see his body as an instrument" (62). Messner explains that the "ultimate extension of instrumental rationality is the alienation from one's own body – the tendency to treat one's body as a tool, a machine to be utilized...in the pursuit of particular ends" (62). Success in athletic careers is dependent upon a number of factors including the ability to train the body to perform specific tasks on command (Messner 62). Stage combatants and athletes share many similar traits, both train their bodies to perform specific tasks on command and often it is done without conscious thought once the body has habituated the movements needed. While all of the women are on some level kinesthetically aware of their bodies during workshops, rehearsals, and performances, they also discuss their bodies as instruments that are controlled in specific circumstances. While having dinner with Jennifer, Morgan and Liz I shared with them my observations of the workshop and how I noticed that the three of them were aware of their environment during the routines.

Morgan: Well, that's because we've all whacked someone before or been whacked –

Jennifer: And yet how many of us are klutz's in our normal lives. <laughter>

Morgan: True

Macaela: Really?

Liz, Jennifer and Morgan: Oh yeah. <another round of laughter>

Jennifer: Fight people are as bad as dancers.

Morgan: I often fall going up the stairs.

Liz: We look great when it's choreographed –

Jennifer: But the learning process is interesting –

Liz: The learning process and the actual getting to the theatre can be a little dangerous.

Morgan: We're more likely to hurt ourselves carrying the swords into the rehearsal room than anything else.

This conversation suggests that the women at times see their bodies as instruments that they may control in some situations, specifically stage combat rehearsals and performances, but outside of those circumstances these instruments may be uncontrollable. In some situations, these women stage combatants might instrumentalize their bodies, but to no greater extent than an actor who is not a stage combatant. The saying, “the show must go on,” hints at the idea that no matter what happens (short of the endangerment of the audience's safety) the show must continue, the story must continue to be told.

Instrumentalization of the female stage combat's body entails a sense of agency and power for the female actor combatant. Despite the large numbers of women in attendance at workshops, stage combat is still represented by men in productions. The female actor combatant has agency in a man's world, her mastery of skills is a weapon used to show audiences and fellow actor combatants, “Look, I'm a woman and I have these skills too.” The mastery of the functional body, the habitual body, the engaged body, and the praxic body shape the body and

mind of the actor combatant to provide another skill that she can use to tell the story. The ability for the female stage combatant to control her body in order to complete moves that are traditionally seen as masculine provides power and agency. Successfully accomplishing a stage combat routine, even just learning how to properly handle a stage combat weapon, provides a sense of power. Stage combat gives the Babes of BWBTC a sense of agency. When I asked Morgan why she trained in stage combat she explained,

More than anything I enjoy the collaboration that stage combat brings. I like working with a partner who [sic] I can trust, who trusts me, with whom I have a good, comfortable working relationship that is also fun and playful. Despite the fact that everything is choreographed, there really is a sense of empowerment to staging a fight. It's hard to explain. It just gives me a sense that I can do anything, which motivates me professionally to try new techniques, meet new people and [to] constantly push myself. (Manasa Email 2010)

For Morgan, she feels physically and mentally challenged by stage combat and it gives her the encouragement needed to continue to push her personal limits. Liz communicated a sentiment similar to Morgan's observation; she is attracted to the "action and power" that stage combat produces on stage (MacDougald Email 2011). Jennifer and Delia also made similar comments. Delia observed that stage combat raises her "sense of competence" and provides, "a license to behave badly" (Ford Email 2011). Jennifer commented that "there's nothing like swinging a sword to make you feel like a bad-ass!" (Mickelson Email 2010). Stage combat provides female actor combatants social license often denied to female actors – the opportunity to play the hero or the villain in a physical way. I continue to return to my initial experiences learning stage combat and one statement from my journal still stands out, "I have never felt more powerful than I do

right now.” I learned a new skill set that required me to step out of my comfort zone and take charge of a potentially deadly weapon. I was taught not to fight, I avoided physical confrontations, because fighting was wrong and especially so for girls. The ability to create the illusion of violence by working with a partner is a source of agency and power for these Babes. Stage combat is something that requires working in tight collaboration with another person, that sense of extending self into the weapon and into the body of the other person means that it is not mere instrumentalization, but instead a deep somatic attunement of self and other. Such a formula that undergirds this idea of shared power and perceived power is collaborative and therefore not just a self-oriented activity. It requires human-to-human mind and body integration. In order to create a successful piece of stage combat an actor combatant must create shared power with a partner in order to create perceived power for the audience.

#### Creating Shared Power – Partnership and Trust

Aggressor – the actor combatant who attacks another; the one executing the violent action.

Victim – the actor combatant on the receiving end of an attack

Partner – one who shares the responsibility of creating the illusion of violence with another,

Partnering – the give and take of responsibility of two or more individuals working together to safely and effectively make nonviolent actions appear dangerous and real

Selling the fight – the process of convincing the audience that a routine is real from the point of execution to its completion



C.R.A.P – cue reaction action principle – the process of giving and taking focus during a sc [stage combat] routine. No visible breaks in routine, audience should be unaware of the separate movements and perceive it as one continuous fight

Cue – the aggressor’s first action, a control point for the attack. Reaction – the victim upon reading the cue responds letting the partner/opponent know they are ready. Action – the final action where the partners complete the offensive/defensive action together (*Carder Notes - July 2000, 1<sup>st</sup> day of unarmed training with Dale Anthony Girard, NSCW Las Vegas*<sup>32</sup>).

\* \* \* \* \*

I did not realize the importance of my notes at the NSCW until after viewing the fight calls and performances for BWBTC’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Trusting one’s partner and relying on established cues results in a believable fight sequence. In the fight calls, as is the usual process for fight calls, the women would run their lines and walk through the fights first, then take them at a faster pace. Between running the sequences, the partners would remind each other to watch out for parts of the set, or inquire after the safety of the other. The same fight in performance appeared dangerous and deadly – the partners then appeared as opponents. Partnering is an integral part of stage combat routines. Two or more people work together to create an illusion of violence using non-violent actions. At the BWBTC workshop I attended, it was easy to tell the company members from the non-company members. Among the company members there was an established element of trust between them. When I observed Morgan and Libby working together, there was, of course, no introductions needed, very little talk ensued, rather there was a quick head nod before moving into the fight sequence. They knew what to do. However, when I

---

<sup>32</sup> I later discovered that Dale Anthony Girard’s lecture came from his book *The Fight Arranger’s Companion*

observed Jennifer paired with someone she just met (I will call her Sue), there was an introduction and a quick skill summary exchanged. The Babes I interviewed all spoke of the importance of establishing trust with a partner. Arielle discussed the difference between working with someone known and working with a complete stranger (which is common at workshops and auditions). When working with someone known, it takes very little time to establish a rapport; combatants are ready to begin almost immediately. Moreover, trust is already firmly established. Whereas with a stranger trust has to be established: as Arielle says, “I engage by saying, ‘Hi my name is Arielle,’ you know, ‘where’s your comfort at?’ You feel each other out” (Augustyn Personal Interview). Feeling someone out is a way of assessing one’s functional body (of self and other) as well as the praxic body (interacting with the environment and others), the habitual body (repetition of moves with another individual) and the engaged body (partners become extensions of each other in order to complete routines).

Libby voiced similar views during our interview, but she also pointed out that as an actor combatant you have to operate under the assumption “that everyone’s going to be careful and do their job and not hurt you.” Libby continued,

You can’t, you can’t go in, you know, with the sort of “all right, you have to earn my trust” attitude because, with, with some exceptions ....Um, but ah, but there is sort of a baseline trust that they, they have to . . . like, in order for you to distrust them, they have to work their way down to distrust, rather than starting out with distrust and working your way up to trust. Because, when you’re, when you’re in rehearsal you don’t have the time to build a longstanding trusting relationship.

(Beyreis Personal Interview)

When Jennifer began working with Sue, each woman provided a short introduction in order to create a working relationship. However, once some of the routine moves were established, and they began to combine the rapier routine with footwork, I observed Jennifer begin to adapt to Sue's lower skill level. Jennifer employed a kind of deep somatic attunement; she protenses herself into the abilities of her partner and makes adjustments to how she will engage. Sue stopped talking with Jennifer causing unnecessary danger to both partners. Due to the level of Sue's ability, which was obviously less advanced than Jennifer's, Sue began missing marks. Yet she increased her speed, which resulted in Jennifer tensing up each time Sue advanced. The initial trust that Libby described as being a prerequisite, unraveled with Jennifer and Sue.

Trusting one's partner assists in creating the illusion of violence, and it is the basis for selling the fight.<sup>33</sup> If partners are not in sync with each other, there is the potential of the intention of the fight being misread and the roles of the victim and aggressor do not read as intended. It also heightens the potential for someone to be injured. In her article, "The Performance Turn – And Toss," Mary Frances HopKins discusses performance as a continuous negotiation and renegotiation of agency "between performer and role, between performer and audience," and the negotiation "occurs in a site of resistance"(233). I suggest a third negotiation and renegotiation of agency for stage combat, between performer and partner, the creation of shared power. This negotiation between performer and partner relies on the training of the actor combatants (a training that is a subtle and nuanced development of the functional body, the habitual body, the engaged body, and the praxis body), the commitment to the intention of the routine, the choreography, and the trust between the actor combatants. Essentially the actor combatants' ability to move with each other not against each other creates a unity of agency. As

---

<sup>33</sup> Selling the fight is the process of convincing the audience that a routine is believable.

HopKin's points out, these performer negotiations ensue in a "site of resistance" (233). HopKins identifies the actor's body as a site of resistance explaining that actors playing a role must find "possible points of congruence between the role and the body," a conjunction of the lived body and the character body (233). For the actor combatant this site of resistance also includes incorporating the fight choreography and negotiating the physical space, the praxic body. The actor combatant's functional body is another site of resistance, different levels of abilities for each combatant and even for a single actor combatant's struggle to achieve competency. The actor combatant's engaged body is yet another site of resistance, finding that understanding of the weapon, the extension of self through the use of the weapon. When the functional body, the habitual body, the engaged body, and the praxic body are in tune, then this deep attunement of shared power in the creation of the perceived power happens. The combination of these negotiations and renegotiations in the fight sequence form the dynamic interplay of power in a successful performance. Delia talks of how rare that confluence of energy is and how important it is to a stage combatant:

The best stage combat experience is when a fight comes seamlessly together for both participants during a performance. Intent and intensity happen at the same time for everyone. It is rarer than you'd expect. Often one person will hit<sup>34</sup> everything and the other won't. Or there will be an event in the production that pulls someone out of that place where character and cohesion meet. In a few of the productions I've done, there have been one or two performances where that sweet spot is hit. (Ford Email 2011)

---

<sup>34</sup> Hit means to complete a stage combat move as designed.

The shared power dynamic – this negotiation and renegotiation between performer and partner – is important not only for a fight sequence in performance but also in rehearsal. A large part of the shared power is how each actor combatant keeps her partner safe. Kathrynne shared with me a negative experience she had with a partner during a rehearsal that led to tension during a performance. Kathrynne’s partner misjudged the amount of force to complete a body check move,<sup>35</sup> and injured her chest. The partner then proceeded to do more dangerous moves:

There was a flip where I’m supposed to flip. She was on the ground – I’m choking her with something, she pulls her hands down and I basically do a front flip – somewhere between a roll and a walkover over her, and as I was doing it she pulled my hair and pulled the thing [object used to complete the choke hold] – not deliberately, it was an accident, and she was hurt, you know not a deliberate thing. But wound up, luckily I know how to fall and I didn’t fall on my head I fell on my shoulders and feet. And I was like, mmmm? (Wolf Personal Interview)

Kathrynne proceeded to suggest they not continue with fight performance because she knew her partner was in pain, but the partner became angry at the suggestion. “I was trying to give her an out... but she was refusing to take it. And that made me really worried about fightin’ with her...She was not on her game and she was refusing to accept it....You should be, you should have enough presence of mind to say, you know what...I am not up to this” (Wolf Personal Interview). There were no further incidents in the rehearsal, and the pair did go on to do the performance, but the partner relationship was irreparably affected since the shared power dynamic was disrupted.

---

<sup>35</sup> A technique that uses the actor combatant’s entire body to stop the aggressor.

In my conversation with Libby, she described an incident that stemmed from a change in rehearsal space to performance space. The rehearsal space was much bigger than the performance space and a large fight sequence had to be adjusted down for the performance. The physical space altered the movements just enough to force a renegotiation of the shared power dynamic. As Libby explains,

Um, and so, and so we're, "this is alright, we can make this we'll just rotate the fight diagonally and we'll go diagonally across the stage." ...and at the top corner of the diagonal, there was a ladder going up to the second level, and at the bottom corner of the diagonal was, there was like a flat sort of sticking up but we figured we had enough room...for a couple of weeks we were fine...but it kept stretching out a little bit, stretching out a little bit, cause we'd spent so long drilling that long drive into our bodies, and so when it was fresh in our minds that we had to bring it in, that was fine...once we stopped concentrating on that it stretched out again and so one night I'm running backwards full speed and I see my partner's eyes widen right before I run backwards full speed into that ladder in the top corner. And it caught me under the arm. I had a bruise from my elbow to my armpit and I mean when that thing hit me I went down like a sack of bricks. And I basically pulled myself back up the ladder was able to get through the fight...so the next night in fight call we're like clearly we have to pull this thing back in. And so that night we were very careful not to go all the way upstage...and because we had shifted the whole thing to stop me from hitting the top corner, my partner hit the flat on the bottom corner, and it caught her right in a damaged nerve in her hip, and she – I mean it was like a puppet whose strings had been cut, she was just

lying on the ground gasping, and the audience was right there. And I was like, I don't, I don't, I didn't even know what to do, I mean, and I was the aggressor – she was defending herself – I was the one who was supposed to be trying to kill her...but I'm standing 5 feet from the audience, I've, this whole fight has been about me trying to kill this woman and now she is lying utterly helpless at my feet, and I was just like, get up, please get up!...we managed to finish the fight, you know, she was limping. (Beyreis Personal Interview)

The praxic body comes into view in this example, as is often the case, these taken-for-granted somatic understandings are most felt when they are breached and thus the prior somatic understandings of the sequence had to be re-habituated. A simple misjudgment of the praxic body can upset the habitual body's understanding of the movements, as well as the engaged body's connection with weapon and partner. In this instance, Libby and her partner were able to finish the performance, and since that event Libby makes sure to tape out the performance space in the rehearsal space in order to ensure the safety of all. Not only did that adjustment in space require a renegotiation of shared power between performer and partner, it also affected the audience's perception of the fight, the negotiation and renegotiation of agency between the performers and the audience.

The creation of shared power requires a constant negotiation and renegotiation of agency between performer and partner. This means each actor combatant is constantly negotiating and renegotiating her own functional body, habitual body, engaged body, and praxic body while also negotiating and renegotiating with her partner's functional body, habitual body engaged body, and praxic body. These negotiations and renegotiations help actor combatants to establish trust and work together as partners in order to successfully create the aggressor/victim dynamic. The

successful creation of the aggressor/victim dynamic creates the illusion of violence, a perceived power dynamic for the spectator.

### Creating Perceived Power – The Illusion of Violence

The successful performance of a stage combat routine depends on the shared power dynamic between the stage combatants entailing a performance, as per HopKins, of a continuous negotiation and renegotiation of their agency (HopKins 233). A successful performance of a stage combat routine is also a continuous negotiation and renegotiation of agency between “performer and audience” entailing a perceived power dynamic. In addition to working closely with a partner to sell the fight, the fight choreography plays an integral part in creating the illusion of violence. A fight choreographer, or fight director, is responsible for creating a choreographed fight that serves the script in terms of intention, serves the actor combatants in terms of movement, and serves the overall design of the production in terms of the fight genre. While BWBTC often has guest directors, a member of the company always creates the fight choreography. Libby Beyreis served as the fight choreographer for both productions I saw, *The Last Daughter of Oedipus* and *Romeo and Juliet*. When I looked at the program for *Romeo and Juliet*, instead of fight choreographer, I noticed “Violence Design: Libby Beyreis.” I had not heard this term before so in my conversation with Libby I asked her about it:

I feel like it’s a better description of what we do, than fight choreographer.

Because, it’s not just the fights, it’s all the little bits of incidental violence and it’s not just putting together a bunch of moves. It’s as I said, it’s, it’s plotting out this story that you were telling with violence and you were with this fight you were furthering the vision of the director. You were, you were telling the story that the



director is trying to tell. So, I mean, just as the lighting designer or the costume designer are using their artistic vision to design something that furthers the vision of the director, so too, is the fight choreographer telling and furthering the story with violence. (Beyreis Personal Interview)

The violence designer is responsible for assisting in the creation of perceived power. As J. Allen Suddeth states in his book, *Fight Directing for the Theatre*, the fight director “must decide how elements of the character aggression, fight techniques, and historical style blend into a fight scene” (44). Phrasing is key in creating perceived power; all fight sequences are created out of individual phrases that consider tempo, rhythm and patterns. Phrases enable the “audience to follow the action” in the fight and also assists the actor/combatants in creating smaller segments “of choreography to remember and allows for the action to build to a climax” (Suddeth 69). The most effective fight choreography uses the phrasing to match acting beats determined by the actor combatants, director, and violence designer to create a specific perceived power dynamic.

The perceived power dynamic between the stage combatants is how the audience understands the action and intention of the characters in a stage combat routine. HopKins explains that, “Audiences, consciously or unconsciously, measure the performer in the role against some idea of what the role demands” (230). With regard to stage combat routines, audience expectations potentially include the audience’s reliance on the believability of fight moves in regards to the body type and the level of skill that the actor combatants appear to possess. During my conversation with Arielle, the believability of stage combat moves was discussed:

Uhm, if I was a fight choreographer in a show, and I had a choice, let's say there was some, there was a boxing match. And I thought that I had a choice of doing it male vs. male, female vs. female, my problem is the audience's perception of what they're going to buy is different from what I think my actors are capable of. 'Cause if I, let's say I put Delia in a fight with this guy David Sklvara, who is an amazing proficient combat actor here, they would duke it out and be awesome. The problem is people would be like "oh, tssk, she's never going to take out that huge guy." It becomes a David and Goliath situation....So, if you saw a woman in a fight scene who chooses to punch, ah, let's say the guy is bigger than her, got 40 pounds on her, whatever, and he takes the hit and is like knocked out. How are you, how are you justifying that in retrospect? Has she been a boxer that has trained all of her life and looks like it? No, because often times in domestic situations like that you're going to see her slap him. And then he's going to be taken aback... but he's not going to go down, and then she's going to use a found object to come in and smash him with a toaster, and then he's maybe going to go down and trip over the chair, then konk out. So that is where I see the biggest difference is that audiences don't buy women punching men and them going down. (Augustyn Personal Interview)

The perceived power dynamic is dependent upon the believability of moves by the actor combatant, and this is often based on the genre of a production as well as the body type of the actor (and in some cases this means the genders of the actors in the fight sequence.) As Arielle commented, that despite the actors' stage combat abilities, the believability often depends upon the size of the performers. In *The Last Daughter of Oedipus*, one of the first violent moments is

when Ismene throws her jewels at Creon, and Creon lunges for her and catches her and subdues her in an embrace. The actor playing Creon, Michael Sherwin, is considerably taller and stronger than Kimberly Logan, the actor playing Ismene. Kimberly is of slight build and short stature. The resulting fight sequence was one of dominance, a tall, strong man, subduing a slight, short woman. The scene would not have been believable if Creon was played by a shorter and slighter built actor and would have destabilized the perceived power dynamic, possibly creating a comic fight sequence which would have been stylistically and generically unsuitable for a tragedy.

Another negotiation and renegotiation of agency to create the perceived power dynamic is the issue of gender. Women stage combatants, by their gender alone, create a site of resistance. However with stage combatants like the Babes, because of their skill, their ability to use their functional body, their habitual body, their engaged body, their praxic body and their deep attunement through shared power, most of the time the audience believes in the perceived power. Like all stage combatants, female stage combatants have times when they are more successful than others; but they are starting off with a big site of resistance (women as stage combatants). Nevertheless the Babes of BWBTC win the day because they are talented actor combatants, and maybe, even because of the audience's initial resistance to women combatants, when the Babes do well, the audience is even more amazed than they would be if the combatants were men. It is a conundrum. If they fail, they are succumbing to the stereotype that women cannot portray physically powerful characters. If they succeed, they do so in spite of themselves.

## Conclusion

The act of stage combat is a source of agency and power for these Babes. A successful stage combat experience is an amalgamation of a number of factors:

1. The actor combatant's embodied experience of stage combat is explained through the confluence of four typological bodies: The Functional Body – the actor combatant's understanding of her physical capabilities; The Habitual Body – the actor combatant's ability to perform stage combat moves without conscious effort; The Engaged Body – the actor combatant's ability to extend her bodily awareness into her weapon; The Praxic Body – the actor combatant's engagement of her physical world.
2. The creation of shared power between actor combatants, which is an establishment of trust, the basis for a successful partnership; one where the actor combatants keep each other safe during a stage combat routine. This creation of shared power is a constant negotiation and renegotiation of agency between the actor combatants, it is the confluence and flux of each partner's functional body, habitual body, engaged body, and praxic body.
3. The creation of perceived power between performers and audience which allows the actor combatants as characters to successfully sell the fight and tell the story to the audience. This creation of perceived power happens in sites of resistance such as body type of performers, genre of production, gender of performers, and believability of stage combat moves.

Although it is commonplace to consider the body as a weapon I aver that this commonplace understanding does not necessarily mean stage combatants are engaging in instrumentalization of

the body; in fact the sense of the body as a weapon is due to the overlay of the functional body, the habitual body, the engaged body, and the praxic body and the deep attunement that comes from shared power. These elements combine to create a sense of agency and ability. Rather than defining the body in terms of a doing an action as would be the case when the body is instrumentalized, it points to the body's potential for agency. Stage combat provides these Babes with a sense of power that manifests in a range of actions from the ability to master a new weapon to successfully telling a story through stage combat. Some Babes' sense of power stems from the social license it provides, the opportunity to step out of socially prescribed roles and play, for example, those roles not often provided them such as the physical hero or villain.

## CHAPTER V. CONCLUSION

The BWBTC workshop I attended was located in a large room of community building. It was October and a Halloween fair for children was also in progress in the building's gymnasium. The building smelled of popcorn and boiled hot dogs. The workshop attracted the attention of some of the youngsters and parents attending the fair and we soon had a small gathering at the door to our room, the door that happened to be closest to where I was observing the workshop. I kept an eye on the kids to make sure they did not venture too far into the room. One little girl, she must have been about six years old, dressed as a cat complete with whiskers and a tail, stood mesmerized by the scene unfolding before her eyes. Her mouth hung open and her eyes followed the swords as they clashed. Her father turned to me and asked, "So are the guys teaching all the girls these things?"

"Only one is co-teaching," I replied, "the rest of the men are participants just like the women." I explained about stage combat and told him about BWBTC. "Very cool," he replied. Just then, his kitty-cat daughter tugs on his jacket and says, "Daddy, I want to do that when I grow up!" As I reflect upon the little girl's observation, I pause to consider just what was it that she found attractive? Was it some sense of the skill required that attracted her? Was she somehow aware that having the level of physical attunement needed to accomplish it was powerful, that these stage combatants' bodies were doing something fun and exciting? And I note that her desire was unhindered by social expectation for what is appropriate for her to do as a female. The only hindrance she notes is that she is not yet old enough to do it. Moreover, despite the father's initial assumption that the "guys are teaching the girls," to his credit, when I gently corrected him for his gendered assumption, he allowed that it was "very cool," thereby validating that yes, women can do this sort of thing and moreover, they can be in positions of

authority while doing it. This encounter teaches me that while the norms for gender performance remain in play in society, they are nevertheless in flux. Perhaps when this little girl is grown up enough to do stage combat, her doing so will seem less like an anomaly and just something females do. Maybe the Babes resistance to my questions about femininity speaks to this destabilization of gender norms. After all, they decided to create this company so women could be the proactive aggressors and not just passive victims. In some sense, their doing so both helps make those gender norms become more in flux and by refusing to acknowledge how those norms condition their performances of self, they may already be taking it for granted that living their lives is something to be done without concern for how those norms constrain their gender performances. They may be paving the way for this little girl's future. Consequently, what this conversation reminds me of is the importance of what BWBTC does by providing opportunities for women in stage combat.

In this chapter I discuss the contributions of this study and further explore how I understand what BWBTC does for women in stage combat and the place they occupy in the greater theatre discipline. I will also reflect upon the limitations of my study and discuss future research opportunities.

### Chapter Summaries

In chapter two, I established BWBTC as a company worthy of further study because of the opportunities they provide women in stage combat. I explored a brief history of stage combat in order to provide the reader with an understanding of this rather undocumented practice. While stage combat has been practiced in some form since ancient Greek theatre, it was not until the latter half of the twentieth century that a common vocabulary and safety practices were

established. While women train in stage combat both in college classes and workshops, the repertoire for women performing in stage combat is often limited to supernumeraries in large battle scenes or playing victims of abuse requiring women actor combatants to “receive,” rather than perpetuate or vanquish the aggressors of the staged violence. In chapter two I also discussed the history and mission statement of BTBTC in order to contextualize the significance of the company and to identify the aims of the company. The company began in the late 1990s as a small troupe and quickly grew to a flourishing theatre company consistently working to bring women’s stories to the stage and use stage combat as a tool to tell those stories. BWBTC brings women’s stories center stage by producing new works both as full productions and staged readings. BWBTC also provides women actor combatants the opportunity to play iconic Shakespearean male roles in all-female productions. I discussed how I came to meet each Babe in the study and provided the reader a brief introduction to each woman. I included a discussion of their training in stage combat and acting, I gave a brief description of their personalities, I provided some of my observations of their physical attributes (both during stage combat and in conversation), and I outlined their personal history of becoming a Babe with BWBTC.

The foundation established in chapter two provided the foundation for my discussion in chapter three on the Babes’ understandings of gender and femininity. I navigated through the various ways the Babes defined femininity and examined how these discussions aligned with and/or were distanced from traditional expectations for the performance of femininity. The Babes refuse to be hobbled by a traditional view of femininity; they refuse femininity’s influence on them and I suggest instead that they perform gender fluidity; further I suggest that they do so as a way of subverting the rigid hold that traditional femininity could have on them. In my discussion with Jennifer, Morgan and Liz, the conversation led to a different way of discussing



femininity by using a different term, one that Jennifer coined, “womaninity.” Once freed from using the term femininity these three women discussed a contemporary approach to the concept of femininity that includes the active participation in perceived violence. Womaninity is a powerful position, it does not deny that being a female is good by trying to be a male, it is female and strong. A woman with womaninity can be delicate when she wants and forceful when she wants; it is a gender performance that is fluid and determined by choice, not by social constraints. And yet, the Babes have to work within social constraints when they produce theatre because audiences come with certain expectations, just as the father with the little girl that I discussed at the beginning of this chapter appeared to have initially assumed the men were the instructors and the women were the students. While providing these opportunities for women stage combatants to practice their craft with other like-minded women, the company focuses on advertising the productions as an exploration of the human experience. BWBTC works to rebalance gender expectations, they are working toward an ideal wherein when women do things like stage combat, it will be viewed just as something women do, something that all humans could do (and that girls of the future can do without it seeming extraordinary, but rather just as something humans do). What the Babes mean by the human experiences is that gender should not matter; they seem to be working toward a world where eventually gender will not matter, even while they are fully aware that it, currently, does still matter. Within the company history and practices one sees the emphasis on the female stage combatant both in productions of original works and company membership in order to provide women the equal opportunity (both in the stories they present and the opportunities they offer women stage combatants), which is a feminist practice in action. I argue that a part of what they call a gender-neutral approach in the BWBTC literature is articulated there in order to avoid the stigma attached to the label of

“feminism.” I concluded the chapter with an examination of how BWBTC does gender and femininity in their productions of *The Last Daughter of Oedipus* and *Romeo and Juliet* in the BWBTC 2010-2011 season. In *The Last Daughter of Oedipus*, Jennifer L. Mickelson created a play centered on Ismene, a passive character from Sophocles’ *Oedipus* cycle plays, and reimagined her as a proactive female protagonist. Ismene drives the action of the play and displays the ability to physically engage in violent actions. The female actor combatant cast in the role of Ismene fits many of the feminine ideals in appearance. Similar to the character Buffy in the television show, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Ismene conformed to the hegemonic notions for female sex appeal therefore her behavior (the ability to use weapons) is made socially acceptable because she does not appear masculine. In the company’s production of *Romeo and Juliet*, the audience expectations of these classic characters are challenged by female actors in the roles, while the hegemonic norms for socially appropriate performances of gender are nevertheless maintained by designating the characters’ gender by specific costume choices.

In chapter four I explored the ways in which stage combat is a source of agency and power for this group of Babes from BWBTC. I discussed the actor combatant’s embodied experience of stage combat by employing a typology of four types of bodies, three articulated by Christopher Aanstoos, and one of my own creation: The Functional Body – the actor combatant’s understanding of her physical capabilities; The Habitual Body – the actor combatant’s ability to perform stage combat moves without conscious effort; The Engaged Body – the actor combatant’s ability to extend her bodily awareness into her weapon and/or by extension into the body of her partner; The Praxic Body – the actor combatant’s engagement of her physical world. I used these typologies to further explore the partner/aggressor/victim dynamic at work in stage combat. I used Mary Frances HopKins, “Performance Turn and Toss,”

to explain the creation of shared power between actor combatants and the creation of perceived power between the actor combatants and audience. The creation of shared power is a constant negotiation and renegotiation of agency between the actor combatants – the confluence and flux of each partner’s functional body, habitual body, engaged body, and praxic body. These negotiations and renegotiations help actor combatants to establish trust and work together as partners in order to successfully create the aggressor/victim dynamic. A successful performance of a stage combat routine depends on the shared power dynamic between the actor combatants as well as a continuous negotiation and renegotiation of agency between the performers and audience. The perceived power dynamic between actor combatants is how the audience understands the actions and intentions of the characters in a fight sequence. This creation of the perceived power dynamic happens in sites of resistance such as genre of production, body type of performer, gender of performer, and believability of stage combat moves.

### Understanding BWBTC

*May 1, 2011, 8:14 pm, on train to Toledo – Reflections on Strike for Romeo and Juliet*

*While waiting for strike to begin, the ladies swap stories and catch up on news. Morgan just returned from vacation, and Liz and her husband just closed on their new home. Amy is subdued today, exhaustion from the final performance has set in. The Babes swap their rapiers and daggers for crowbars and screw-guns and I jumped in to lend a hand. Laughter ensues and no injuries were sustained; strike took three hours. It ended with a group hug, for as Amy mentioned many times, the Babes are a huggy bunch. This group of incredible women welcomed me with hugs and Thai food. They answered my questions with honesty and insight and encouraged me to share in the comradery and laughter. An experience I will not soon forget.*

I wrote the proceeding entry on the train home from Chicago. It was late and my mind was racing from the experiences of the weekend and I spent many hours processing those experiences. The entry reflects my initial attempt at articulating what is an overarching strength of this group – this theatre group is a true community – one where women stage combatants get the opportunity to use their stage combat skills in productions that require them to play something besides a victim.

I return to Max Van Manen’s comment in *Researching Lived Experience* that “research is a caring act” and my time with the Babes of BWBTC could not have been more so. When considering my approach for this final chapter, I returned to Van Manen and one quote provided an epiphany for my focus:

*In determining the universal or essential quality of a theme our concern is to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which that phenomenon could not be what it is. (107)*

I considered what makes BWBTC unique as a company and what aspects of this company do I want to highlight for my readers in this final chapter? First and foremost, this company is a community. A few of the Babes discussed how stage combat creates community, the act of stage combat itself requires a level of trust that is not always required for productions without stage combat elements. Actor combatants depend on each other to stay safe while they create the illusion of violence to tell a story. When Dawn “Sam” Alden founded BWBTC it was to bring women with stage combat skills together, to create a community unlike other theatre companies then in existence in the Chicago theatre community--or even almost everywhere--a community where women could practice their knowledge and skill of stage combat and use it in productions.

As the company finishes its seventeenth season, they continue to produce shows that showcase female characters driving the action and using stage combat as a storytelling tool. While BWBTC downplays their activism in their literature and advertising, the spirit of feminism is a driving factor in the company's mission statement and productions. BWBTC provides their audiences the opportunity to see female characters subvert the prescribed script for women, as they present strong women capable of physical strength who possess the ability to be the driving forces in the story rather than reactive characters. The company was created in the late 1990s, when television shows such as *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* were popular. Both television shows featured female warriors wielding weapons, defending the innocent and punishing the evil doers of their respective worlds. While these female characters were, "bad asses" with weapons, they still in many ways fit within the confines of normative feminine ideals. In many ways, BWBTC productions appear to reinforce the normative feminine ideal through the appearance of the female actor combatants, most are fit to slim women, considered pretty in the conventional standards, often "babes" with blades. The company name plays on these normative expectations of the feminine ideal; it works well as an advertising strategy. As audiences attend, some might be expecting hot women in scantily clad outfits swinging weapons, when instead they see strong female characters driving the action of the play while stage combat is used as a story-telling tool. They attempt to disavow same-sex readings of their all-female casts ensuring a more normatively acceptable read of their productions. They are taking the steps necessary to present strong women in physically powerful roles, one only hopes that in future productions they can push the envelope further and challenge their audiences – perhaps casting larger women in lead fight roles so as to challenge the feminine ideal as well as heteronormative expectations.

## Limitations of My Study and Opportunities for Future Research

As I continue to reflect on my study, I am disappointed that I did not have the opportunity to spend more time with BWBTC. I noted in chapter one that I spent twenty-five hours with the BWBTC during a workshop, three fight calls, and three performances of two different productions. My ideal field-work experience would be to take part in one of the BWBTC's productions so I would have more lived experience to draw upon. Despite my best intentions, at times I succumbed to two of the four ethical pitfalls Dwight Conquergood outlined in his article "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance." I hovered somewhere between "The Enthusiast's Infatuation," and "The Curator's Exhibitionism." My early drafts highlighted the Babes similarities rather than searching for the nuances of the individual women, and my initial analysis of their productions read more like glowing reviews than an analysis on the performance of gender in their productions. I believe, however, that as my engagement in the project matured, my abilities to find what Conquergood posits as the ethical center, that is, the dialogical center, began to take hold. As he points out, the dialogical center is not just an easy place to occupy; rather it is a place where commonalities are discerned and where differences are tussled out (9-11). In many ways my experience in writing this dissertation mimics my experience in learning stage combat. When I first began training in stage combat, I was timid and afraid of looking stupid. When I first began interviewing the Babes, I was timid and afraid of sounding like an idiot (which I did at times). In stage combat training, I soon learned that when I stopped caring about making mistakes and engaged physically and emotionally with my partner, our differences would make themselves apparent but as we worked, eventually a bodily dialogue ensues, a thrust is met with a parry, the clash of intentions are engaged and ultimately, self and other begin to feel into each other; in short, the intention

behind and the response to the moves became clear. In writing this dissertation, I have reached the point where I am physically and intellectually engaged, and ideas for future research endeavors are forming.

1. Creating an organizational history of BWBTC within the context of women's theatre. A study such as this would consider how BWBTC has produced sixteen world premieres plays and explore how those plays figure into the history of women theatre companies within the U.S. The BWBTC plays were created specifically for the purpose of creating roles that placed women's stories center stage and used stage combat as a storytelling tool. My research provides a starting point for such a study. While I focused on the company in regard to stage combat, there is a larger story to be told, one that focuses on how BWBTC functions within the larger context of women's theatre.
2. Examining how BWBTC creates works that employ a unique form of physical theatre. Their work participates in an ongoing creation of a genre or theatrical form that effectively celebrates and invigorates bodily performance as a theatrical event. An area of future research might including using the work I have done on shared and perceived power as well as the typological explication I deploy on how stage combatants train and engage their bodies and their partners, to fund an exploration of the genre or theatrical form of physical theatre.
3. Analyzing the processes of BWBTC in regards to script selection and production choices. Given the range of productions across their 17-year production history, consideration could productively be given to how the company chooses to do what productions they do and to consider in greater detail how gender informs their choices of show selection and representational strategies. My exploration of the their productions of *Romeo and Juliet*

and *The Last Daughter of Oedipus* goes somewhat in this direction and might prove useful for further elaboration.

4. Exploring how BWBTC reframes Shakespeare. As of April 2015, BWBTC produced four all-female Shakespeare plays, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Titus Andronicus*. A possible future direction for research would be to ask, how does BWBTC productions of Shakespeare's plays participate in an ongoing attempt in United States theatre to refashion and reframe the bard's works for a U.S. audiences? Moreover, such a project would explore how U.S audiences understand characters and plot from a U.S. perspective.

#### Future for Women in Stage Combat

I have kept in touch with the Babes I interviewed. I see their individual posts on social media and often exchange banter and observations on memes and statuses. I "liked" the BWBTC Facebook page and the company postings show up on my feed regularly. The other day I came across an article BWBTC shared from *American Theatre*, "Yale Repertory Theatre Announces Female-Driven 2015-2016 Season." In the comments section BWBTC posted "#GirlPower. Heading in the right direction...(but how many of those shows do you think involve stage combat?" This comment further highlights BWBTC commitment to socially transforming the representation of women on stage and challenging the gender relations in stage combat by providing opportunities for women stage combatants. I am reminded of Jill Dolan's book, *Utopia in Performance*, "...I believe that being passionately and profoundly stirred in performance can be a transformative experience useful in other realms of social life. Being moved at the theater allows us to realize that such feeling is possible, even desirable, elsewhere" (15). I consider the



story Kathrynne shared with me, the young woman who saw her performance of Macbeth and viewed the roles of women in a new way, one with power and agency. My thoughts also return to that little girl dressed as a kitty cat and I hope that when she takes up stage combat those social norms that constrain gender performance are gone and that she is free to explore the human experience in a true gender-neutral way.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aanstoos, Christopher M. "Embodiment as Ecstatic Intertwining." *Studies in Humanistic Psychology*. Ed. C. M. Aanstoos. Carrolton, GA: West Georgia College, 1991. 94-111. Print.
- Augustyn, Arielle. Personal Interview. 30 Apr. 2011.
- Babes With Blades*. Web. 29 Nov. 2006. <<http://www.babeswithblades.org>>.
- . Web. 16 Sept. 2013. <<http://www.babeswithblades.org>>.
- Babes With Blades – Fantasy Pin-up Art... With an Edge*. Web. 16 Sept. 2013. <<http://www.babeswithblades.com>>.
- Beyreis, Libby. Personal Interview. 30 Apr. 2011.
- The British Academy of Dramatic Combat*. Web. 22 Jan. 2015.
- Brockett, Oscar G. and Franklin J. Hildy. *History of the Theatre*. 9<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003. Print.
- Brown, H. Russ. Message to the author. 5 Mar. 2015. E-mail.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 1990. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Routledge, 1999. Print.
- . "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Ed. Sue-Ellen Case. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990. 270-82. Print.

---. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Carder, Macaela. "Reflections on Field Notes." *Carder Field Notes*. 2011. MS.

---. *Stage Combat Journal NSCW Las Vegas*. 2000. MS.

---. *Winter Wonderland Workshop Journal*. 2006. MS.

Chisman, Isabel and Hester Emilie Raven-Hart. *Manners and Movements in Costume Plays*.  
London, UK: H.F.W. Deane & Sons, 1934.

Conquergood, Dwight. "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance." *Literature in Performance* 5 (1985): 1-13. Print.

---. "Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics." *Communication Monographs* 58 (1991): 179-94. Print.

Dolan, Jill. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005. Print.

Fine, Michelle, Lois Weis, Susan Weseen and Loonmum Wong. "For Whom? Qualitative Research, Representations, and Social Responsibilities." *The Landscape of Qualitative Research*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003. 167-207. Print.

*Focal Point Theatre Company*. Web. 8 Aug. 2013. <<http://www.focalpointtheatre.com>>.

Ford, Delia. Message to the author. 5 May 2011. E-mail.

Ford, Delia. Message to the author. 29 Jan. 2015. E-mail.

Frick, John W. ed. *Theatre and Violence*. Theatre Symposium 7. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1999. Print.

Girard, Dale Anthony. *Actors on Guard: A Practical Guide for the Use of the Rapier and Dagger for Stage and Screen*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.

---. *The Fight Arranger's Companion*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Ts. 55 Arundel Avenue. Hartford: 2000. Print.

Harmon, Amy. Message to the author. 28 July 2010. E-mail.

---. Message to the author. 6 May 2011. E-mail.

---. Message to the author. 1 Feb. 2015. E-mail.

---. Message to the author 8 Apr. 2015. E-mail.

---. Personal Interview. 29 Apr. 2011.

Hayford, Justin. "Arms and the Babe." *American Theater* 16:3 (1999): 22+. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 10 Feb. 2007.

Hobbs, William. *Stage Combat: "The Action to the Word."* New York: St. Martin's P, 1980. Print.

HopKins, Mary Frances. "The Performance Turn – and Toss." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81.2 (1995): 228-36. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*. EBSCO. Web. 15 Sept. 2006.

Kelly, Colleen. "Figuring the Fight: Recovering Shakespeare's Theatrical Swordplay." *Theatre and Violence*. Ed. John W. Fick. Theatre Symposium 7. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1999. 96-108. Print.

Kirkland, Michael. *Stage Combat Resource Materials: A Selected and Annotated Bibliography*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006. Print.

LaDuca, Brian. "Director's Note." Theatre prog. *Romeo and Juliet*. N. pag. Chicago: The Raven Theatre. 20 Mar. – 30 Apr. 2011.

*The Lady Cavalier Theatre Company*. Web. 4 Apr. 2011.

Lane, Richard. Message to the author. 19 Feb. 2015. E-mail.

---. *Swashbuckling: A Step-By-Step Guide to the Art of Stage Combat and Theatrical Swordplay*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus P, 2003. Print.

*The Last Daughter of Oedipus*. By Jennifer L. Mickelson. Dir. Tara Branham. Babes With Blades Theatre Company. The Lincoln Square Theatre, Chicago. 11 Sept. 2010. Performance.

Long, Hugh K. *At a Sword's Length: Theatrical Dueling in Early Modern Spanish Drama*. Diss. Tufts U, 2010. Ann Arbor: ProQuest, UMI Dissertations P, 2010. Print.

MacDougald, Elizabeth. Message to the author. 31 Oct. 2010. E-mail.

MacDougald, Elizabeth, Morgan Manasa, and Jennifer L. Mickelson. Personal Interview. 25 Oct. 2010.

Manasa, Morgan. Message to the author. 19 Jul. 2010. E-mail.

---. Message to the author. 28 Jan. 2015. E-mail.

---. Message to the author. 29 Jan. 2015. E-mail.

Martinez, J.D. "The Fallacy of Contextual Analysis as a Means of Evaluating Dramatized Violence." *Theatre and Violence*. Ed. John W. Fick. Theatre Symposium 7. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1999. 76-85. Print.

---. *The Swords of Shakespeare: An Illustrated Guide to Stage Combat Choreography in the Plays of Shakespeare*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1996. Print.

Melin, Roger. "Instrumentalization of the Body in Sports." *Idrottsforum.org: Nordic Sport Science Forum*. Malmö högskola. 18 Nov. 2013. Web. 10 Sept. 2014.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Colin Smith. London: Routledge, 2009. Print. Trans. of *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard, 1945. Print.

Messner, Michael A. "The Embodiment of Masculinity." *Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity*. Boston: Bacon P, 1992. 61-84 Print.

Mickelson, Jennifer L. *The Last Daughter of Oedipus*. 2008. TS. Personal Collection of Jennifer L. Mickelson, Chicago.

---. Message to the author. 11 Jul. 2010. E-mail.

---. Message to the author. 2 Oct. 2014. E-mail.

---. Message to the author. 29 Jan. 2015. E-mail.

Mills, Haley. "Femininity." *Classic Disney: 60 Years of Musical Magic, Vol. IV*. The Walt Disney Company, 1997. CD.

Olesen, Virginia L. "Feminisms and Qualitative Research at and into the Millennium." *The Landscape of Qualitative Research*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003. 332-97. Print.

*R&D Choreography*. Web. 19 July 2013. <<http://www.fightshop.org>>.

Roach, Joseph R. *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting*. Ann Arbor, MI: U of MI P, 1993. Print.

Roberts, Soraya. "The Rise of Sexist Fashion, from Plain Jane Homme to Disney." *The Daily Beast*. 9 May 2013. Web. 2 Feb. 2015.

*Romeo and Juliet*. Dir. Brian LaDuca. Babes With Blades Theatre Company. The Raven Theatre, Chicago. 29 Apr. 2011 and 30 Apr. 2011. Performance.

Roth, Amanda and Susan A. Basow. "Femininity, Sports, and Feminism: Developing a Theory of Physical Liberation." *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 28.3 (2004 Aug.): 245-65. *OhioLINK Electronic Journal Center*. Web. 28 Feb. 2005.

Rubin, Herbert J. and Irene S. Rubin. *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005. Print.

Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*. Ed. John Jowett. *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor. Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 2005. 369-400. Print.

*ShawChicago Theatre Company*. Web. 10 Aug. 2013.

*The Society of American Fight Directors*. Web. 10 Jun. 2014.

- Sophocles. *Antigone*. Trans. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald. *The Oedipus Cycle: An English Version*. Ed. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald. San Diego, CA: Hartcourt Brace & Co, 1977. 186-245. Print
- Suddeth, J. Allen. *Fight Directing for the Theatre*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1996. Print.
- Turner, Craig and Tony Sopor. *Methods and Practice of Elizabethan Swordplay*. Carbondale: S Illinois UP, 1990. Print.
- Van Manen, Max. *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Active Sensitive Pedagogy*. London, ON: State U of New York P, 1990. Print.
- Wolcott, Harry F. *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira P, 1999. Print.
- Wolf, Kathrynne. Message to the author. 23 Jan. 2015. E-mail.
- . Personal Interview. 11 Sept. 2010.
- Woolley, David. Message to the author. 20 Feb. 2015. E-mail.
- Young, Iris Marion. "Breasted Experience: The Look and the Feeling." *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays*. New York: Oxford UP, 2005. 75-96. Print.
- . "Lived Body vs. Gender: Reflections on Social Structure and Subjectivity." *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays*. New York: Oxford UP, 2005. 12-26. Print.



## APPENDIX A. HSRB APPROVAL



Office of Research Compliance  
309A University Hall  
Bowling Green, OH 43403-0183  
Phone: (419) 372-7716  
Fax: (419) 372-6916  
E-mail: hsrb@bgsu.edu

#### HSRB MEMBERSHIP 2009-2010

Colleen Mandell, HSRB Chair  
Intervention Services  
372-7280  
mandell@bgsu.edu

D. Wayne Bell, M.D.  
Wood Health Corp.  
353-6225  
dwaynecbellmd@dacor.net

Cheryl Conley  
Alzheimer's Assn., NW Ohio  
419-537-1999  
conleyc@bgsu.edu

L. Fleming Fallon, Jr., M.D.  
Public & Allied Health  
372-8316  
ffallon@bgsu.edu

Rodney Gabel  
Comm. Sciences & Disorders  
372-2515  
rgabel@bgsu.edu

Mary Hare  
Psychology  
372-2526  
mlhare@bgsu.edu

Hillary Harms  
Office of Research Compliance  
372-7716  
hsrb@bgsu.edu

Montana Miller  
Popular Culture  
372-0184  
montanm@bgsu.edu

Amy Morgan  
Kinesiology  
372-0896  
amorgan@bgsu.edu

Jeanne Novak  
Intervention Services  
372-7293  
jnovak@bgsu.edu

Erin Smith  
Psychology  
372-4396  
esmith@bgsu.edu

Ruben Viramontez Anguiano  
Family & Consumer Sciences  
372-6490  
rubenv@bgsu.edu

April 21, 2010

TO: Macaela Carder  
THEA

FROM: Hillary Harms, Ph.D.  
HSRB Administrator

RE: HSRB Project No.: H10D263GE7

TITLE: *Double Edged Sword: Women in Stage Combat*

You have met the conditions for approval for your project involving human subjects. **As of April 20, 2010, your project has been granted final approval by the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB). This approval expires on March 30, 2011.** You may proceed with subject recruitment and data collection.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is attached. Consistent with federal OHRP guidance to IRBs, **the consent document(s) bearing the HSRB approval/expiration date stamp is the only valid version and you must use copies of the date-stamped document(s) in obtaining consent from research subjects.**

You are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB and to use only approved forms. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures (including increases in the number of participants), please send a request for modifications immediately to the HSRB via this office. Please notify me, in writing (fax: 372-6916 or email: hsrb@bgsu.edu) upon completion of your project.

Good luck with your work. Let me know if this office or the HSRB can be of assistance as your project proceeds.

#### Comments/ Modifications:

Stamped consent document is coming to you via campus mail.

c: Dr. Lesa Lockford

Research Category: EXPEDITED #7



Office of Research Compliance  
309A University Hall  
Bowling Green, OH 43403-0183  
Phone: (419) 372-7716  
E-mail: [hsrb@bgsu.edu](mailto:hsrb@bgsu.edu)

**HSRB MEMBERSHIP**  
2010-2011

Amy Morgan, HSRB Chair  
Kinesiology  
[amorgan@bgsu.edu](mailto:amorgan@bgsu.edu)

Mary Hare, HSRB Vice Chair  
Psychology  
[mhare@bgsu.edu](mailto:mhare@bgsu.edu)

D. Wayne Bell, M.D.  
Wood Health Corp.  
353-6225  
[speakingdoc@dacor.net](mailto:speakingdoc@dacor.net)

Cheryl Conley  
Alzheimer's Assn., NW Ohio  
[conleyc@bgsu.edu](mailto:conleyc@bgsu.edu)

L. Fleming Fallon, Jr., M.D.  
Public & Allied Health  
[lfallon@bgsu.edu](mailto:lfallon@bgsu.edu)

Rodney Gabel  
Comm. Sciences & Disorders  
[rgabel@bgsu.edu](mailto:rgabel@bgsu.edu)

Hillary Harms  
Office of Research Compliance  
[hsrb@bgsu.edu](mailto:hsrb@bgsu.edu)

Lesa Lockford  
Theatre & Film  
[lockflo@bgsu.edu](mailto:lockflo@bgsu.edu)

Montana Miller  
Popular Culture  
[montanm@bgsu.edu](mailto:montanm@bgsu.edu)

Jeanne Novak  
Intervention Services  
[jnovak@bgsu.edu](mailto:jnovak@bgsu.edu)

Erin Smith  
Psychology  
[esmith@bgsu.edu](mailto:esmith@bgsu.edu)

Ashutosh Sohoni  
Family and Consumer Sciences  
[assohoni@bgsu.edu](mailto:assohoni@bgsu.edu)

Marie Tisak  
Psychology  
[mtisak@bgsu.edu](mailto:mtisak@bgsu.edu)

March 31, 2011

**TO:** Macaela Carder  
THEA

**FROM:** Hillary Harms, Ph.D.  
HSRB Administrator

**RE:** Continuing HSRB Review for Project H10D263GE7

**TITLE:** *Double Edged Sword: Women in Stage Combat*

This is to inform you that your research study indicated above has received continuing Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) review and approval. This approval is effective March 31, 2011 for a period of 12 months and will expire on March 30, 2012. You may continue with the project.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is attached. Consistent with federal OHRP guidance to IRBs, the consent document(s) bearing the HSRB approval/expiration date stamp is the only valid version and, on March 31, 2011, supercedes all previously approved versions. You must use copies of the date-stamped document(s) in obtaining consent from research subjects.

Please communicate any proposed changes in your project procedures or activities involving human subjects, including consent form changes or increases in the number of participants, to the HSRB via this office. Please notify me, at 372-7716 or [hsrb@bgsu.edu](mailto:hsrb@bgsu.edu), upon completion of your project.

Good luck with your work. Let me know if this office or the HSRB can be of assistance as your project proceeds.

**Comments:**

C: Dr. Lesa Lockford



BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY

Office of Research Compliance

DATE: April 12, 2012

TO: Macaela Carder, PhD

FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [324786-1] Double Edged Sword: Women in Stage Combat

SUBMISSION TYPE: Continuing Review/Progress Report

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: April 11, 2012

EXPIRATION DATE: April 10, 2013

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Continuing Review/Progress Report materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on April 10, 2013. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or [hsrb@bgsu.edu](mailto:hsrb@bgsu.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.



BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY

Office of Research Compliance

DATE: April 1, 2013

TO: Macaela Carder, PhD  
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [324786-2] Double Edged Sword: Women in Stage Combat  
SUBMISSION TYPE: Continuing Review/Progress Report

ACTION: APPROVED  
APPROVAL DATE: April 11, 2013  
EXPIRATION DATE: April 10, 2014  
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Continuing Review/Progress Report materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on April 10, 2014. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or [hsrb@bgsu.edu](mailto:hsrb@bgsu.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.





BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY

Office of Research Compliance

DATE: March 20, 2014

TO: Macaela Carder, PhD

FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [324786-3] Double Edged Sword: Women in Stage Combat

SUBMISSION TYPE: Continuing Review/Progress Report

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: April 11, 2014

EXPIRATION DATE: April 10, 2015

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Continuing Review/Progress Report materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on April 10, 2015. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or [hsrb@bgsu.edu](mailto:hsrb@bgsu.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.



DATE: February 24, 2015

TO: Macaela Carder, PhD

FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [324786-4] Double Edged Sword: Women in Stage Combat

SUBMISSION TYPE: Continuing Review/Progress Report

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: February 23, 2015

EXPIRATION DATE: February 22, 2016

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Continuing Review/Progress Report materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on February 22, 2016. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or [hsrb@bgsu.edu](mailto:hsrb@bgsu.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.

## APPENDIX B. INFORMED CONSENT LETTER



BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY  
Department of Theatre and Film

## Informed Consent for Stage Combatant(s)

I am Macaela M. Carder, a graduate student in the Department of Theatre and Film at Bowling Green State University, under the advisement of Lesa L. Lockford, PhD. My dissertation is on women in stage combat. As a stage combatant the experiences you can share with me will be invaluable to my study.

The purpose of my dissertation is to explore the culture of female stage combatants in order to examine critically the performance of gender and power on the physically active bodies of women stage combatants. My study is important not only because it highlights a company (Babes With Blades) that provides opportunities for female stage combatants but also because it engages in further analysis of a non-traditional strong female; specifically I hope to explore how gender and power are embodied by the female stage combatant. It is my endeavor to discover if and how the performance of stage combat by women helps to shift prevailing norms of female embodiment, agency and gender performativity. There are no direct benefits for the individuals participating in this study (such as monetary award, raffle, etc.).

Your participation in this project will consist of a series of interviews. The interviews will be video and audio recorded. Once the initial interview takes place and the interview is transcribed further interviews will be determined. Participants will spend a maximum of 9 hours over a one month period speaking with the researcher, no more than 2 hours in one interview. The anticipated risks to you are no greater than those normally encountered in daily life.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time. You may decide to skip questions or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Deciding to participate or not will not affect your job, or your relationship with Babes with Blades. You may request a copy of the results of the study. You should retain a copy of the consent document for your records.

The data from the interviews will be stored on a password protected laptop that does not have internet access. All interview audio and video tapes will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Participants have the option to use a pseudonym to protect their identity if they so choose, otherwise participants will be identified by name in all research publications.

If you have any questions or comments about this study, you can contact me at 660-441-0056 or [mcarder@bgsu.edu](mailto:mcarder@bgsu.edu) or Lesa Lockford, my dissertation chair, at 419-372-9381 or [lockflo@bgsu.edu](mailto:lockflo@bgsu.edu). You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board at 419-372-7716 or [hsrb@bgsu.edu](mailto:hsrb@bgsu.edu), if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research. Thank you for your time.

BGSU HSRB - APPROVED FOR USE  
ID # H10D243657  
EFFECTIVE 5-21-11  
EXPIRES 3-21-12

I have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research.

---

Participant Signature

Date

\_\_\_\_\_ Please initial here if you agree to your full name being used in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_ Please initial here if you prefer to be identified through a pseudonym.

BGSU HSRB - APPROVED FOR USE  
ID # H002635E1  
EFFECTIVE 3.31.11  
EXPIRES 3.31.12



## APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Interview Questions.

#### Biographical Questions

- What is your age?
- What is your socio-economic background?
- What is your highest level of education?
- How would you describe yourself to someone who has never met you?
- How long have you been practicing stage combat and when did you first get involved with stage combat?
- What attracted you to stage combat and how did you come to be a stage combatant?
- What kinds of training have you had in regards to acting and movement?
- How long have you been working with Babes with Blades and how did you come to work with Babes with Blades?
- Describe your first experience with stage combat? How did it feel to try these moves?  
How difficult or easy did you find it?
- Who have you trained with in stage combat? Please describe the training styles.
- What was your best stage combat experience to date and why? Worst and why?
- For you, personally and professionally, what do you get out of stage combat? Please explain if possible.
- Where are you at in your career? Do you plan on continuing with stage combat in the future?

### Embodiment, Habituation, and Situation Questions

- How do you approach a character in a stage combat routine? (Ex. Character creation, blocking, fight choreography, etc.)
- If possible please describe the most difficult stage combat move you've learned to date. What did you have to do to train your body? Were there complications, difficulties, experiences you didn't anticipate?
- Are there times when you have not felt safe while performing a stage combat routine either in performance or rehearsal? If so, please elaborate.
- In what ways are you aware of your body while performing a stage combat routine?
- When does a stage combat routine become a part of your body, if ever?
- Are there differences in training for unarmed stage combat versus armed stage combat? If so, please describe these differences?

### Partners, Gender, Femininity and Stereotypes

- Is there a difference when working with a male partner versus a female partner? If so, please explain.
- Are there differences in learning a stage combat routine from a male stage combatant versus a female stage combatant? If so, please describe an event that clarifies these differences.
- What does femininity mean to you?
- How do you think you embody your definition of femininity (or not)?
- What stereotypes have you come across concerning female stage combatants? Please elaborate.
- How do you use the stereotypes of female stage combatants to your advantage?

- In your opinion, to what extent is stage combat an experience that is implicated by gender?
- Are there some forms of stage combat (or some specific moves) that in your opinion work better for females than males or vice versa?

Specific questions for the artistic director

- What are the criteria for choosing a script?
- Why did you begin the Sword and Pen Playwriting competition?
- How do you select your Babes with Blades actor combatants?
- Why choose to produce Shakespeare's plays? And why with an all-female cast?
- How do you explain stage combat to a critic/audience member/individual who views it as violence?
- Because stage combat is a representation of violence, what issues arise because your company uses only women?

## APPENDIX D. PHOTOGRAPHIC CONSENT

10/7/2014

Re: production photos - Macaela Michelle Carder Whitaker

Re: production photos

Amy E Harmon [REDACTED]

Wed 10/1/2014 1:26 PM

Inbox

To: Macaela Michelle Carder Whitaker [REDACTED]

📎 5 attachments

R&J Ford Harmon 7291 lores.jpg; R&J Ford Schemmel 7048 lores.jpg; R&J Humiston Ford 7381 lores.jpg; R&J Humiston Fox 7492 lores.jpg; R&J Humiston Fox tomb 7781 lores.jpg;

Awright, m'dear, here are some lo-res options. Let me know which you like, and I'll get you the hi-res versions. We'd just ask that you include photo credits - sound okay?

Ford = Tybalt - she had a distressing tendency to look away from cameras...  
...and R&J should be pretty obvious. ;)

Thanks,

Amy

On Mon, Sep 29, 2014 at 1:13 PM, Macaela Michelle Carder Whitaker <[REDACTED]> wrote:

Thanks so much!

Macaela Carder Whitaker  
PhD Candidate  
Department of Theatre and Film

## APPENDIX E. FACTS ABOUT BWBTC

- During BWBTC’s reorganization from 2003-2005 in which there was a 2-year production hiatus, the group focused on building a solid business foundation. This included:
  - Composing a mission statement and creating an organizational chart.
  - Applied for and received 501(c)(3) and IL tax-exempt status.
  - Began the search for board members.
  - Created and filled the Artistic Director and Managing Director positions (Harmon Email April 2015).
- As of April 2015 the Fighting Words program is now in its 11<sup>th</sup> year, Joining Sword & Pen is midway through its 6<sup>th</sup> cycle, and the Inspiring Sword & Pen just completed its 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle in the fall of 2014 (Harmon Email April 2015).
- BWBTC has produced 20 shows; 16 of these shows were world premieres of new scripts (Harmon Email April 2015).
- BWBTC has “built and maintained a Board; applied for, received, and renewed grants; successfully navigated leadership transitions; and embraced new resources in social media and technology to attract new believers in our mission” (Harmon Email April 2015).
- Based on audience feedback in 2014, “88% of attendees would see another BWBTC show” the most requested genres include swashbucklers, mystery/suspense, and comedies (Harmon Email April 2015).

- “Audience growth is of course a cyclical phenomenon; we tend to see our audiences expand during those seasons that feature an all-female Shakespeare; then contract slightly. Our overall trend, however, is one of growth:
  - Our world premieres consistently top each other in terms of audience. Right now [April 2015] the reigning champ is 2013’s *Bo Thomas and the Case of the Sky Pirates*; we look forward to toppling it by spring 2016.
  - Likewise, our Shakespeare [productions] consistently top each other – we don’t have the final numbers in from *Titus Andronicus* yet, but once the dust settles it’s on track to be our best-selling show ever.
  - As of *Titus Andronicus*, we’ve moved from 50ish seat houses to a 99-seat house” (Harmon Email April 2015).
- The BWBTC continues to grow and is considering the possibility of finding a permanent rehearsal space.