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Stage set for action

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Author: Robyn Bradley Litchfield

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ASF graduate company gears up for production of 'White Devil'

The rhythm of a simulated sword fight filled the Alabama Shakespeare Festival rehearsal hall.

Clang-clang ... clink-clink-clink ... clang-clang ... clink-clink-clink.

Alabama Shakespeare Festival/University of Alabama Master of Fine Arts/Professional Actor Training student Scot J. Mann battled fellow student John Gardiner. Without a word, each anticipated and parried the other's moves.

"This is two people who speak a common language," said Mann, who is part of the Graduate Company's Class of 2001. "You set it up. Knowing the distance between the end of the sword and the next person is 6 to 8 inches, you stay within that space."

For every 10 seconds of fighting on stage, there is about 1 1/2 hours of rehearsal, he said.

And during the past few weeks, Mann, Gardiner and the other members of the Graduate Company have spent countless hours rehearsing the action in their upcoming production, John Webster's "The White Devil," which previews at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday and opens 8 p.m. Friday.

Director Drew Fracher said, "'The White Devil' is not a huge fight show -- not like 'Romeo and Juliet.' But it certainly has a huge chunk of action with little pieces of combat."

People are choked with rope, stabbed with daggers and attacked with swords in this play, set in 17th-century Italy.

All this is rather new to Gardiner, a member of the Graduate Company's Class of 2002.

"All my stage combat training has been here (at ASF)," said

Gardiner, who portrays hit man Gasparo and English Ambassador in "The White Devil." "I had done fights in plays before, but that was all very basic."

MFA actor Devin Haqq, a member of the Class of 2001, he has found his stage combat skills invaluable in classical

theater work.

"Being proficient in combat allows for a much more

immediate and dramatic effect that can make stage fighting

appear realistic rather than stylized," said Haqq, who

portrays Camillo and Hortensio in "The White Devil."

And with Fracher as director, the Graduate Company has

benefited, Haqq said. His fight expertise helps make the play more consistent throughout.

The play's action is one thing that attracted Fracher. A past

president of the Society of American Fight Directors,

Fracher now is one of the national organization's fight

masters, a group comprising senior members.

During one of Fracher's terms as president, his vice president was Colleen Kelly, director of ASF's MFA/PAT program as well as resident fight director and movement coach for the professional company.

"I invited Drew to direct this production because of what I

knew he could bring to this piece," Kelly said.

In addition, Mann and ASF actor/MFA instructor John Paul

Scheidler are involved in the society.

"It is unusual to have so many members of such a unique

organization here at one time," she said.

But fighting is nothing new to Mann, whose made fight

choreography his day job for the past decade.

"The goal is to make it appear real while making sure

everyone is safe," said Mann, who portrays Duke Brachiano

in "The White Devil."

Safety requires communication between everyone involved as well as plenty of work. The MFAs have worked through the scenes with few problems, Mann said.

However, MFA actor Chris Ensweiler left rehearsals with a few bruises. Ensweiler, who portrays Flamineo, has a scene

where he is stabbed to death with a dagger.

"They pretty much treat me like Rodney King and kick me

around," he said. "So I ended up getting a football girdle and pads to keep from bruising."

But this is nothing new to Ensweiler. In fact, during his

undergraduate studies, he had stage combat training. He also

worked with Fracher.

"More and more programs are trying to make that part of

their curriculum," Ensweiler said.

That would make Fracher's job easier, the director said.

"For my money, I want every actor in the country to have

this training," he said. "Not only does it make it easier, but it also helps to prevent accidents -- actors being out with a broken leg or recovering from a poked eye."

Kelly said safety is a priority, accidents still may happen.

"No matter how many times you rehearse, the actors are

always left out there with things like guns that don't fire. They can't control this," she said. "Or with the blood bags. An actor is stabbed but can't fall until the blood bag is broken."

That's not all, Mann said. If the blood drips into actors' eyes, they can't see. And if the blood puddles on the stage, it may leave actors slipping and sliding through their scenes.

Kelly compares stage combat and movement with driving a

car.

"Your mind starts to wander, and that's when someone in

front of you puts on their brakes," she said. "You have to pay attention at all times."

Robyn Bradley Litchfield, who covers food and arts for the

Montgomery Advertiser, can be reached by calling 240-0182 or faxing 261-1548 or e-mailing

rlitchfi@montgomeryadvertiser.com

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