

MARTIN GOTTFRIED ON THE CLOSING OF A *CHORUS LINE*

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B.H. Barry:

Choreography That Kills

Fights, Rapes, And Pratfalls

B. H. Barry makes an art form out of onstage violence.

by Gerard Raymond

Elizabeth Taylor must slug Richard Burton in *Private Lives*, Thomas Waites must rape Farrah Fawcett in *Extremities*, Victor Garber must fall on his face in *Noises Off*.

Who you gonna call? Why, B.H. Barry, of course.

"I rape and pillage for a living," chuckles the 50-year-old fight director, taking a break during rehearsals of Kevin Kline's production of *Hamlet* at the Public Theater. At one point in the interview he has to dash out just to make sure that the Queen, the King, Laertes, and Hamlet all kill each other to his satisfaction.

But Barry didn't start out choreographing killers. While growing up in England, he wanted to be an actor, but his career never took off. Tired of being out of work, he decided to make use of the fencing skills he picked up in drama school. "I thought it was better than working in a pub. At least I could work in the theater, and I could work with actors."

Barry Halliday took the "*nom de guerre*" B.H. Barry, and his new career as a fight director flourished. Athletic as a kid—he was captain of his school rugby team—he realized that he had an aptitude for the work.

"It is one area of the play in which I have an expertise and I get all the best parts. The violence is often at the end of the play—I mean I bring the play home and that's fun to do."

B.H., as he is known in the profession, first came to America in 1971. "Whenever I tried to do anything physical in England—the *Treasure Islands* or in the Shakespeares—people would look at me and say, with this intake of breath, 'well (pause) I don't know.' When I came here I felt I had come home. People breathed out and said, 'yeah, how do you want to do it.'"

Barry returned to the States several times after that and eventually got married and settled in New York. "I work in this country because the peo-

ple here have no boundaries. They are not inhibited by absolute tradition."

When he first arrived in America, most directors brought in Phys. Ed instructors or stuntmen for fight scenes. But Barry was not interested in making a facsimile of a fight, and he moved beyond the Douglas Fairbanks tradition where actors crossed swords and ran down stairs.

"Action or violence is usually a result of some objective you are trying to pursue. If somebody is insulting you and getting, as it were, in your face, your tendency is to try and take some action which will stop the thing that offends you. If somebody insults you and walks away, you will hit him to get his attention."

When given a script, how does Barry decide on what action is needed? "The classics are tried and tested. Shakespeare never puts a fight in his plays unless there is a reason for it. Take the fight out of *Hamlet* and you don't have an ending." With modern works (he is currently working on Caryl Churchill's *Hot Fudge* at the Public), he takes the relevant scene out and then examines the play.

"If I can tell what is missing, then I know how the fight should be done. Like a song in a musical, it will say something about the character as well as something about the story. It must propel the story forward. The worst thing that could happen is for the play to stop dead. Then the fight becomes a cabaret act. The fight must weave and interlock its way through the production."

Since Barry directs the fight scene he asks that he be billed accordingly. He likens his job to that of the second unit director on a film who envisages what the director wants. In *Hamlet*, he helps Kline, the director, to realize his concept of the play as well as Kline, the actor, to accomplish what

his character wants to achieve in the fight.

Although he claims he doesn't have a morbid curiosity, Barry does have a catalogue of violence.

"Anything you can do to the human body I can probably stage as a theatrical event." He jumps up enthusiastically to give a practical demonstration of his art. In what he calls the "cage" technique, the recipient of a blow or a punch uses his hand as a shield to prevent the blow from connecting. If you are about to be kicked in the face you "cage" your face with your hands. The sound of the assailant's foot hitting your hand will make the blow seem real from the audience's perspective.

Very often you can achieve the most realistic effects on stage by simply reversing the action. To strangle someone, place your hands on your victim's neck. The victim then grabs your hands and pulls them down towards his or her throat while you try to pull your hands away. This creates the necessary tension and the audience will not be able to tell that the victim is strangling himself. In this manner, Hamlet forces Claudius, the King, to drink the poisoned cup. Instead of Hamlet forcing the cup down Claudius throat, Claudius pulls the cup to his throat while Hamlet tries to pull it away.

In order to guard against gratuitous violence, every movement in an attack must have something specific to say. In the case of William Mastrosimone's *Extremities*, Barry presented the play's notorious rape scene as a series of events that took place in a single area, rather than all over the stage.

"I found that I could create images within the rape, which in itself was very still most of the time, that the audience would remember for the rest of the play.

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exactly what he says. The objective for the person who is being raped is to try and fulfill those actions so that they won't get hurt. The big *if* is whether the rapist is satisfied with what the other person is doing. The moment the rapist is in control he then wants to control something else. It's not about penetration, it's about control. This constant violation of trust is fundamental to rape. That's what is so scary about it, that's why you can be raped in so many different ways."

Barry enjoys working on modern plays, where the scenes of violence are most realistic, but he has worked most extensively in the Shakespeare canon. During 38 *Romeo and Juliets* and 16 previous *Hamlets*, he discovered the best way to choreograph Shakespeare's fights is in the rhythm of the verse. When he did a *Romeo and Juliet* where Romeo killed Tybalt with a single blow the effect was shocking, but it was too real to be satisfying. "One word lines don't exist in Shakespeare; you need to have something with riffs on the original statement. The iambic pentameter tends to expand the moment, which is very real, to the next level. Because of its heroic nature, I always think of the fight as being in iambic pentameter as well."

In 1985, Producer Jerome Minskoff said that Barry had "almost single-handedly made American theater safe for actors." It was mainly through Barry's efforts that Equity instituted safety rules to govern stage fights. According to the rules, if there is a fight scene, the actors must have a fight warm-up ten or fifteen minutes before curtain time. Further, a fight captain who is the fight director's voice in his absence, will look after the weapons and take care of the event.

Discussing safety, Barry recalls an incident that happened to him as a child. He had a furious temper and fought a lot until, at age 13, he put

another kid into the hospital. He still fears for the safety of others.

"Anybody can do a fight and hurt actors. The real skill is being able to make it look great with nobody getting hurt. Of course actors are going to get bumps and scratches.

"The question a fight director must ask himself all the time is 'did I *plan* it right?' Because if it goes wrong it is my fault. A good fight director should be able to teach anybody, however good or bad the actor is."

"My wife hates going with me to the theater. I get so frightened sitting out there and having to keep quiet while two actors have the work entirely in their hands. After they get through it a few times I can take a deep breath, but those first few performances are as scary as hell."

Just how does Barry control the fight? What if an actor gets an adrenalin rush and loses his cool? "Those are really the questions you have to ask when you first meet the actor. A lot of my job is discovering the fear that actors have, because it is invariably a fear that stops you from doing something in the theater." There are many different fears: of getting hurt, of hurting somebody else, of looking stupid, of looking overly aggressive. "My task is to take the actor through to the other side where he can perform without fear.

"Kevin [Kline] loves to feel free from day one. He loves swashbuckling and is like a little child when he gets a sword in his hand. He is so enthusiastic. I know he won't hurt the other guy so I allow him to do that and then gradually modify it. Michael Cumpsty [who plays Laertes], on the other hand, favors a slower approach. He wants it to look better and to understand it a little more."

This is the second time that Barry has worked with Kline on *Hamlet*. Kline first played the role in 1987 in Liviu Ciulei's production at the

Public. Coincidentally, Barry also trained Diane Venora, who plays Ophelia in the current *Hamlet*, in the role of the Prince of Denmark for the New York Shakespeare Festival's production of the play in 1982.

Women are not only as effective as men when it comes to doing the fights on stage, according to Barry, but they are also quicker studies.

"The guys think it requires a lot more effort, a lot more strength, whereas the women understand the pretense better. The guys tend to want to make it real. But it only requires twenty-five percent effort for seventy five percent effect. If I can fool you with the minimum amount of effort, then I have done my job.

"Somebody asked me to write a book, but I realized I didn't want to write about what I did; my pupils are my living books."

Barry has trained seven men and one woman in the art form he pioneered. It all started when Jake Turner, his first assistant, hung out with him and forced Barry to teach him. It took Barry about six to eight years to train each of his pupils.

"It's very Eastern, very Japanese, and they pay me nothing. Our only agreement is that they won't work using my name until we both agree to it."

All eight pupils are working—one in television—carrying on the Barry tradition.

What's next?

"Directing full-length plays. I want to direct *panache* theater—larger than life theater." He has, in fact, directed a few productions of *Cyrano de Bergerac* in regional theaters and is planning a production of *Scaramouche*, to which he owns the theatrical rights.

"My challenge is when I look at something and say, 'that may be unobtainable, but I am going to give it a shot and see what happens.' I think directing is about going for the bigger world." □