LEADING THE WAY IN STAGE COMBAT

Assistant Professor of Acting and Movement Christina Traister is one of only four female fight directors in the world certified by the Society of American Fight Directors (SAFD).
Knowing Christina Traister grew up with two stepbrothers - 11 and 13 years older than her, who both wrestled - you realize her career path was probably set in motion as a child.

“The whole tomboy thing, that was me,” Traister said. “I got my first snowmobile at 9 and a motorcycle at 11. In fact, I still own a Harley. Oh, I was a gymnast, too, and Pearl Jam was my go-to soundtrack.”

No wonder the MSU Department of Theatre Assistant Professor of Acting and Movement and Graduate Acting Program Director is now one of only four female fight directors in the world certified by the Society of American Fight Directors (SAFD). Traister also is Head Coordinator for SAFD’s National Stage Combat Workshop.

Stage combat is a broad term covering acts of conflict, danger, and/or violence performed for entertainment – from a slap to the face, to a fall down the stairs, or an epic 15-person battle with swords and axes. True stage combat uses violence to tell a story, as does dance choreography, set design, and costuming.

Traister teaches Stage Combat I and II at MSU. In Stage Combat I, the emphasis is on learning the basics of theatrical unarmed combat, which is the foundation of theory and technique for all the techniques. Stage Combat II focuses on quarterstaff, rapier, and dagger.

At the end of each course, students can take a skills proficiency test, and if they pass, they become SAFD-certified in those specific areas. Students who pass all three weapons earn actor/combatant status with the SAFD, which is a big boost to their resume.

Traister is an SAFD-certified teacher in eight weapons, including unarmed, rapier, and dagger, single sword, smallsword, broadsword, sword and shield, knife, and quarterstaff. She also holds a certification in theatrical firearms training.

In addition to her work at MSU, Traister works with stunt teams around the world, including the stunt team on the set of the History Channel’s Vikings television show.

Still, she says her “day job” remains her first love: acting and teaching for Michigan State University’s Department of Theatre.

“I absolutely love working here,” Traister said. “But, to be honest, I never thought I’d find myself in academia. Theatre, and Shakespeare in particular, was what I most enjoyed.”

However, Kirk Domer, Department of Theatre Chair and Associate Professor of Scene Design, and Rob Roznowski, Associate Professor of Acting, Artistic Director, and Head of Acting and Directing, told Traister she could teach Shakespeare, acting, and fighting.

“It wasn’t long before I realized, ‘I love this!’” Traister said. “We quickly went from zero stage combat courses in the department to curriculum that included Stage Combat I and II.”

In addition, each May, MSU hosts “The Fredricksen Intensive,” a stage combat training intensive with options of 20 hours of training in one weapon, or 10 hours of training in two separate weapons to earn hours toward SAFD skills proficiency tests.

Along the way, Traister also carved out a niche recording audiobooks, including more than 100 titles over the past five years. This led to developing an MSU course on audiobooks, providing students with professional digital demos as a class deliverable and even booking a few students for jobs.

“It gets extremely busy, between my responsibilities as an assistant professor, my research agenda, auditioning, and choreographing,” Traister said.

But whether referring to her stage combat courses, TV and movie work, or Fredericksen Intensive training exercises, Traister’s demeanor projects an air of controlled poise, confidence, and competence, prompting the question from observers and students alike:

“Where do I sign up?”