



Arthurian characters Maleagar (F. Braun McAsh, left) and Sir Lancelot (Anthony DeLongis) battle on the television show *MythQuest*. Photo provided by Anthony DeLongis

by Anthony DeLongis

Gillian Horvath is the executive story editor for a new series called *MythQuest*. The premise is the importance of myths to the modern world view and personal moral code. Horvath was associative creative consultant for *Highlander: the Series*, season two through five and played a large part in making the episode "Duende," with its close sword's point stylings of the Spanish Mysterious Circle training system so successful. Horvath polished the characters like a razor sharp blade. Sword Master Braun McAsh co-choreographed the sword encounters with Anthony De Longis, including the climactic and treacherous duel in the rain. It was a magical combination on *Highlander* and now this collective talent was assembled to give it another go on *MythQuest*.

Horvath has intimate knowledge of the difficulties of episodic television, especially trying to highlight a story with action when time is of the essence in filming. When she wrote an episode involving Arthurian Knights, and extensive sword action, she suggested casting actors with the training and experience to deliver the performance no matter what the obstacles were.

Fights are dialogue with action instead of words. An actor cannot give his best performance if he does not understand the language or know his lines. That is what training and rehearsals are for, to acquaint the actor with his new vocabulary of expression. Action can be one of the most powerful story tools in a performer's arsenal.

It is a lot easier to get rehearsal time in film than episodic television. The production manager will still resist paying for rehearsal but compare the tally. Pay three people to rehearse and the actors progress beyond mechanical moves into an effective visceral performance that grabs the audience imagination. If one does not, then a crew of 30-50 is kept standing around, on salary, while one struggles to get something mediocre on film. The

author trained Michelle Pfeiffer for six weeks for her role as Catwoman in *Batman Returns*. As a result, she did all her own whip work without any doubles. A strong actress had another powerful story-telling tool at her command, and she took full advantage of it. This made shooting her scenes far easier and her portrayal even more effective.

In television time is always the enemy. The actor must assume responsibility for his own training. The actor has the skills he shows up with on the day of the filming. He must be able to turn adversity into advantage. The set is not the place to hone one's craft. The more skills the actor has developed, the greater his range of choices to tell the character's story.

Fortunately, McAsh and De Longis have fifty-three years of experience between them, working under conditions from ideal to adversarial and were ready for the organized chaos and last minute changes that are the norm in television.

GETTING STARTED

The collaborative team of McAsh and De Longis agreed to pull out all the stops for the big fight. The unnecessary was eliminated. No special effects, no wires and no camera tricks would be used. Just an intelligent, well executed, character-driven fight.

As sword master for the episode, McAsh had many other responsibilities besides the fight, choreographing and coordinating most of the action for the episode. The collaborative team decided that the climactic fight must be finished and rehearsed before McAsh left for Calgary, knowing that locations and shooting schedule could change at a moment's notice. With the story set, the team felt confident it could adapt to whatever was thrown at it on the day of the shoot.

The fight evolved by incorporating the seed of combative truth into the work. McAsh initiated an attack and a series of

defensive options and a variety of offensive responses were offered. The team choose the ones that were the most dynamic and which flowed as a logical reaction to the immediate danger. McAsh responded to this jeopardy with an answer of his own. Then tempo and speed were played with to clarify and accent the story until a well-crafted phrase was approved.

Good choreography is a conversation between characters given greater voice through action. The actor must react and respond organically to his partner's energy. That is life, that is drama; that is combat. Staged combat is the attempt to create the illusion of reality while maintaining safety for the actors and crew as the character's story is told. The episode was called *Sir Caradoc at the Round Table*. This author played Sir Lancelot and McAsh played Maleager, a king of old Britain chafing under his oath of fealty to King Arthur. Since the story involved myth, historically accurate sword technique was not required, leaving the team to freely mix styles and weapons for the greatest effect. It was decided that Maleager start the encounter with an unfair advantage, a second weapon, say an axe. For Lancelot to accept this inequity, shows his confidence and echoes Maleager's comment when he captured Queen Guinevere, "I finally got you out in the open, away from your brave, undefeatable Lancelot." The playing field was leveled with Lancelot disarming the axe at the end of the second phrase and Maleager retrieving Caradoc's lost sword. This gave Phrase Three the double weapon complexity of sword and axe versus double swords.

From collective experience, it was decided to have a maximum of five phrases and that would be pushing it. The characters had logically accumulated four weapons, but for the climax it would be easier to divest the characters of the extra hardware.

More choreography is not really the answer since three phrases out of a possible five had already been composed.

McAsh had kept Horvath up to speed with the progress. A bit of dialogue to motivate the change of weapons was in order. McAsh suggested it should be a point of honor. Horvath pointed out that Lancelot was the hero and should be the first to discard his weapon. When Lancelot discarded his axe, Alex (played by Christopher Jocot) explained, "They're knights of the Round Table, fighting fair is more important than winning." Maleager followed Lancelot's example and tossed away his second sword. The warriors offered a salute to God and each other and squared off for the final battle.

The last two phrases featured the expertise of Maleager, reiterating his strengths by pressing Lancelot and nearly defeating him. Of course Lancelot triumphed in the final phrase. It was decided not to wound or kill, incorporating instead lots of near misses and plenty of speed and intensity. Blood and wounds call for costume doubles and changes in the middle of shooting as well as creating time consuming continuity nightmares for reversals and coverage. It was also decided not to squander time in that manner because the story did not need it.

Mary Gallien, the assistant, shot the rehearsals on both hi-8mm and digital formats for easy viewing and review. Masters were shot in profile and from above, as well as, over the shoulder coverage of each phrase favoring each performer. The digital footage was e-mailed to Horvath so she could see exactly the story being told. This resulted in a flow of ideas that improved the work and inspired additions to the script, the perfect collaboration. A compact disc (CD) was burned of the final fight and McAsh took it to show director Steve Scaini and the director of photography (DOP) Rick

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Wincenty (another *Highlander: the Series* alumnus). This gave them a jump on planning their coverage and helped insure that the fight would get to tell the story that had been prepared and rehearsed.

THE CLOSE-UP

The growing trend in film and television is to shoot everything with lots of close-ups. The prevailing *wisdom* thinks the audience will be drawn in by the contortions of the actor's face rather than the drama of the action. It is a way to hide the physical shortcomings of the leads but it distances and confuses the audience more than it pulls them into the story. To be involved, one must understand what is going on. Who is in danger? How do they



DeLongis and McAsh balance action and the close-up. Photo provided by Anthony DeLongis

avoid it? Is it through skill or luck or the over-confidence of the bad guy? These are all possible choices with character elements to be mined. But the audience must be able to follow the narrative story of the action in order to appreciate each individual's jeopardy and care about them as people in conflict.

Fred Astaire had the right idea. His contract stated that when dancing, he would always be shot head to toe, full figure. He wanted his whole body to tell his story. This mania for too close coverage robs both the performer and the audience of the actor's most powerful story tool, the body. The story is told from the ground up, each movement motivated by the feet and the hips, each action accented by the power of the entire physical unit. The intelligence and dexterity of the characters is lost when all one can see are straining faces. Often an important story beat such as a clever disarm or reversal goes unnoticed. It just looks like magic or bad continuity that the hero or villain is suddenly unarmed. The hero is lessened because one cannot appreciate what one does not see.

Accommodations were made for film, raising the low-line parries and cuts so that the action was always in the frame, even when the camera moves in close. Attacks to the legs were accented by dropping the whole body during delivery to insure the camera would follow. Story beats were choreographed into the action and accentuated by varying the tempo, and changing distances from long to medium to grappling range *corps-a-corps*. This encouraged the cameraman and editor to move fluidly into closer coverage. Facial expressions were revealed as a logical progression of the action. Tight two-shots allowed both performers to react to the dramatic moment at the same time.

ALL EQUINES ARE NOT BORN EQUAL

The script called for Lancelot to ride past a *quintain* with a lance. A *quintain* is a shield mounted on a revolving torso with a ball & chain in his other hand. Ride too slow and the ball smashes the rider in the back of the head, knocking him senseless. The horse had probably never seen a *quintain* or a lance (horses hate new things), so options were considered in case the horse did not want any part of Plan A.

The horse was a huge shire horse, used to pull wagons on *Lonesome Dove*. Since he was experienced wearing elaborate harness, it was thought this would be helpful with the decorative armor Valentine Armouries was providing. It should cut down on his panic flight mode. The wrangler set up some hay bales and the horse was trotted towards his intended task. After a few tries, he got the idea but he did not seem too promising as a jumper.

Two days later was the horse's riding test in front of McAsh, and one more effort was made with jumping training. The horse cleared one bale pretty well so two were stacked to get him to pick up his feet. He jumped once, then decided it was easier to crash through the bales. It was pretty much decided to abandon the jumping since it was not good for the horse to quit on a failed attempt. Patches of ice and snow were in the area where the wrangler set up the bales. On the last attempt the horse fought the turn, splaying his feet and yanking his head away at the last instant. It was a perfect lay down which recalled the old adage, "Unless it's on camera, a stunt is only an unfortunate accident." This horse would not be jumping comfortably by show time.

On the day the training sequence was shot, the horse handled the armor with ease, but hated the fluttering banners, was freaked by the nearby sword-wielding extras and danced away from the camera tracks laid practically under his feet. The *quintain* did not work at all but the property master had been warned to have a head of cabbage standing by. The cabbage was mounted on a pell (wooden post for sword training) and the author sliced it in two as he trotted by. Not as dramatic as one would have liked, but within the capabilities and comfort level of the horse.

When Lancelot returns from France and meets Guinevere, he is dressed in full armor with all the trimmings. An additional treat for the author was the chance to wear a full suit of well-made armor. Rob Valentine made all the armor for the show. It was made one piece at a time in the historical manner. His craftsmanship is excellent. One may visit his web site, www.valentinearmouries.com. The pieces felt great and articulated easily: quality work.



Two swords take on sword and axe on MythQuest. Photo provided by Anthony DeLongis

THE BIG DAY

Before the climactic fight could be shot, the following had to be accomplished, all on the same day because it was the last day of shooting.

1. The queen and her ladies wander through the idyllic forest picking spring flowers next to a babbling brook. Cameras had to be arranged to hide the ice and snow left from last weeks blizzard covering both banks, ice flows big enough for Simon Legree to chase Little Eva across.

2. Also shot was the capture of the queen by Maleager and his men. This included a two on one sword fight with Maleager and the queen's guard, followed by Maleager defeating Sir Gareth. The scene provided strong visual proof that Maleager was a force to be reckoned with. He also revealed his purpose. "Your ransom will release me from my oath of fealty to Arthur."

3. The critical scene at camp between Maleager and the Queen Guinevere was filmed: "Why do you want to bring war back to our land?" Maleager: "Where's glory without it?" Followed by a rather important dialogue scene between Alex and Guinevere before he slips away to bring help.

4. Lancelot arrived to challenge Maleager and his entire army: "I am the queen's champion. Who dares to face me?" Three soldiers swarmed Lancelot. He takes on two, while Alex protected his back and got his first taste of combat. This encounter gave the series star the chance to prove his mettle with the skills he had learned from the previous day's training scene.

5. In between shots, in their spare time the cast answered questions for the local paper and conducted television interviews.

6. The Second Unit borrowed one of the cameras and shot Lancelot galloping to the rescue, Arthur galloping to the rescue, Arthur's knights galloping to the rescue, all filmed on asphalt paths hidden but made extremely slippery by snow and ice.

7. Maleager held a sword to Guinevere's throat. "Drop your sword and she lives." Lancelot: "Release the queen and you live." They bargain back and forth and Maleager accepts his challenge. The final fight is almost there.

8. The first phrase of the fight is shot. Then while the cameras are facing this direction, the final phrase and disarm at the end of the fight were shot. Maleager yielded. Lancelot freed the queen. They collapsed into each other's arms. They kissed. The king arrived and caught them. It was the end of Camelot. As one might imagine, this sequence took awhile.

9. Now it is time to shoot the rest of the fight. The chosen location is next to the brook. It is at the bottom of a ravine with high walls and tall trees. The sun is setting. The light is failing. The scene is in trouble. This is not a total disaster. God is a great art director. Shafts of golden light blasted through the trees. Stunningly beautiful but only for about another hour and change, if luck holds. Time is needed to finish the fight, clear video village and all the other equipment and reposition cameras to shoot the reversals to cover the action. After sunset the cameraman loses one f-stop of light every five minutes. Steve Scaini, Rick Wincenty and producer David McAsh huddle. Talk of cutting the fight circulated.

Thanks to years of experience and an understanding of how camera angles tell the story, McAsh and De Longis come forward with an idea of using the camera as another character in the scene with the combatants. "We can give you your coverage and you won't have to cut the fight. Leave the cameras

where they are. We'll provide the reverse angles. Trust us." Director Scaini and DOP Wincenty assigned each of their three camera operators to a different task. One would follow each actor in a medium shot, racking in for close-ups where appropriate. The third camera would cover the action as a full figure master. The fight started from the top, rehearsing each phrase once for cameras, then shooting it twice, covering the fight one section at a time. The intensity always accelerated at the end of each phrase, climaxing in a stalking action as the characters broke apart to regroup and search for a new opening.

Next phrase: Rehearse and Shoot.

Here is how it worked. On "Action," the final blow of the previous attack was repeated before the fighters broke apart. Then the characters would stalk each other, slowly pivoting 180 degrees before exploding into action once again. The acting beat motivated the change. The story beats built, such as when Maleager pinned Lancelot against a tree while trying to pressure both blades into his face, that allowed the cameras to push in for a tight two shot or close-up. When Lancelot's counter-attack exploded him away from the tree, the editor had a natural story break to motivate his change of shot.

As Maleager and Lancelot alternated positions, camera one and two would change who they were covering, or more precisely, the actors change and the camera would cover in the same over-the-shoulder relationship with a new character. Camera number three recorded the action in profile as a full figure master to cut back to.

All five phrases were filmed, with full coverage in 1:38 minutes. The actors were rewarded for their efforts. Shafts of light slanted through the trees to form long shadows that battled in support of the

struggling figures. Sunlight glinted off the furiously slashing blades at just the right moment. It could not have been planned nearly so well. Even the setting sun framed itself perfectly between the struggling figures when Maleager pinned Lancelot to the tree. When one is prepared, the rewards will happen. That is why one rehearses, that is why one trains. When one is ready for anything, magic happens.

MythQuest will air in the US beginning in April on PBS.

— Fin



The sun sets on the final moments between Sir Lancelot (Anthony DeLongis, left) and Maleager (F. Braun McAsh) on *MythQuest*. Photo provided by Anthony DeLongis

MythQuest: From the Fight Director's Point of View

by F. Braun McAsh

When Gillian Horvath, the executive story editor for the television series *MythQuest* approached this author about being Fight Director on an Arthurian episode, after getting over the initial excitement of having work, he realized that this might be an interesting opportunity to create choreography that would be a metaphor for the conflicting demands of emotional needs and personal honor; of frustrated ambition, and the moral imperative to act in a chivalrous manner.

The episode, *Sir Canadoc and the Round Table*, incorporated elements of several Arthurian legends. This author was to play King Maleager, a villain of sorts, and his good friend and fellow Fight Director Anthony DeLongis would play Sir Lancelot. This was good news on several fronts. First, even though the two of them had worked twice before on *Highlander, the Series*, they had never acted or fought opposite each other and were very much looking forward to the opportunity of using virtually any move or combination with the surety that it could be done with both speed and control. Second, since it was being presented as a myth, the Fight Director did not feel constrained to stay within the boundaries of historical authenticity.

Another advantage of working with DeLongis is that, for once, the Fight Director did not have to do everything by himself. It may not be faster, but it was a lot more fun to get the weapons and just play, the one off the other. They would feed each other blows, try out different defense responses, seek openings, move

from long to mid to close range. After about a week's work the five phrases of the fight were up to reasonable speed. Each phrase of the fight was then recorded on both Hi8 video and digital formats, in wide shot, both sides, over shoulder point of view and one phrase from an overhead. The digital was loaded into the computer and burned onto a CD disk and sent to the director, Stefan Scaini, to give him a heads-up on getting together his shot list. The Director of Photography was Dick Wincenty who had been the DOP on the *Highlander* series for about two years.

When the Fight Director arrived in Calgary for his prep week, the script, with only a six day shooting schedule, called for six sword fights, one of which is a pitched battle between Maleager's men and the queen's guard. Since the local stuntmen were mostly cowboy types who were more comfortable with Colts than cleavers, there simply was not sufficient rehearsal time to stage the fights. The Fight Director suggested that the scene be rewritten as an ambush since the character of Maleager simply wanted to capture Guinevere with minimal fuss and blood-letting.

Things had to be resolved. First, a subsequent scene had the queen treating the wounded, so some injuries had to occur, otherwise two scenes would have to be rewritten. Second, since Maleager later faces Lancelot in single combat—a man acknowledged as the greatest of the Round Table Knights—there was a need to establish that Maleager might possibly be able to take him. It was suggested that Maleager bushwhack the queen's party with a company of cross-bowmen, but that some of her knights move