

A View from the Trenches

by Anthony De Longis



Anthony De Longis and Zen Gasner in *Sinbad, "The Gryphon's Tale"*. Photo By Val Adamson, Courtesy Atlantis Films

BE PREPARED is not just a motto for the Boy Scouts. It is an absolute necessity if one hopes to achieve success in the murky and turbulent waters of a show business career. Every performer will eventually face the unique demands of an action scene, often one that includes weapons. Such opportunities can dynamically define character and story, providing the actor has the skills necessary to create and deliver a safe, exciting performance. I juggle two full time careers. On camera, I have been fortunate enough to play a variety of villains on series television, including *Star Trek Voyager*, *Highlander, the Series*, *Sinbad*, *Babylon 5*, *Renegade*, and *Conan, the Adventurer*. In a host of feature films I have battled Tom Cruise, Patrick Swayze, Dolph Lundgren, David Carradine, Ellen Barkin, Richard Grieco, Don Wilson, and Joe Lewis. Behind the scenes, I have been a professional weapons coordinator and choreographer for twenty-four years, training and staging action for such lumi-

naries as Michelle Pfeiffer, Anjelica Huston, Charlton Heston, Richard Chamberlain, Dolph Lundgren, Plácido Domingo, and literally hundreds of others. BE PREPARED, because one is going to need every skill one has ever cultivated to make the best of what is invariably an impossible situation.

Performers and choreographers must be story tellers and problem solvers. We transform difficulties into opportunities that articulate character and drive our story forward. Action probes the visceral realm, the deep emotions and baggage everyone carries. All that is needed to seduce an audience into actively participating in one's fantasy is one's own unique creative perspective, an intimate knowledge of camera angles and story presentation, and superb execution of superior technique. That is just for starters. Like a great novelist, choices guide the audience, enticing them to supply the details that are personal and most affecting to them. They are no longer in their heads, one is tapping well-

springs of emotions deep in their guts. And they will love it. That is the goal, that is the plan. But beware. Working in film and television is a miasma of distractions, delays, and last minute changes that must be turned to advantage.

The greatest enemy is time. Essentially, there is none. Somehow one must beg, borrow, and steal what one can, but no matter what they promise, one will always end up with far too little to do the job the way one would like. I got my start in theater choreographing action for dozens of productions at the Old Globe Theater in San Diego, the Ahmanson Theater and Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles and a variety of sites up and down the coast of California. I have kept my stage chops up by maintaining my position as fight director for the Los Angeles Music Center Opera since its inception in 1985. I have drunk the heady waters of preparation, training and rehearsal that only working on stage can offer. I have savored the luxury of carefully constructed safety

protocols and the cultivation of sensitivity to distance and timing. Granted, the schedule is always harried, but one gets to evaluate, then develop the techniques one can optimistically expect one's performers to perform on opening night. It is always a challenge, but the growth is palpable and the rewards eminently satisfying. Kiss this goodbye on any television set and most film locations.

I remember how arrogant I used to be. I could do better than the junk I saw on television and was happy to tell anyone who would listen. Then I got my first taste of life in the fast lane. Two coordinators, Ronny Rondel and Snuffy Harrison were juggling the action for a series of projects including *Fantasy Island* (As I have said, this was a long time ago). They asked me to stage the sword action for a Don Juan rapier duel. I met Ricardo Montalban and Fernando Rey at about 10 p.m. It was the end of their work day so no rehearsal was possible. I arrived on set at 7 a.m. the next morning and the first thing the director wanted to see was the actors performing the finished fight. Now I have had no chance to train or even evaluate the performers, and the director wants to shoot the finished product. Incredibly this is more often the norm than the exception. The standard quick fix is to double the actors. Never mind the added dimension and credibility an actor enjoys when the audience realizes he is really wielding the weapon himself.

Michelle Pfeiffer performed all her own whip work as Catwoman in *Batman Returns*. Our training dramatically changed the way she moved and afforded her a range of additional choices to dynamically articulate her character. Her achievements

gave her portrayal an enormous boost. I have never understood why most producers would rather pay forty crew members to stand around and wait while the director struggles to get something mediocre on

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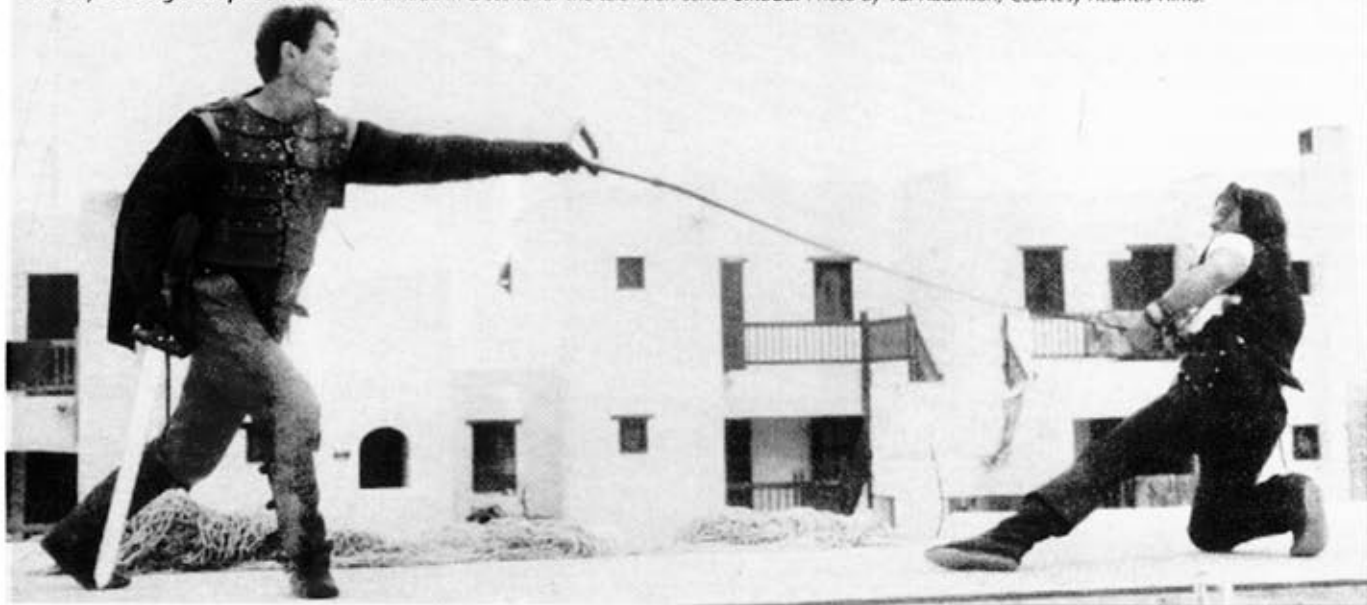
film rather than pay three people to rehearse and create a superior product that everyone is proud of. Obviously there are times when it is necessary to double an actor, but Ricardo Montalban is a consummate actor and a product of the old studio system's rigorous training regimen. He was able and anxious to do the work himself and quickly absorbed the simple routine I had planned. But, as the star of the show, he was in nearly every scene. Rehearsal was virtually nonexistent. Rey had not enjoyed the prior training afforded

Montalban and was an absolute stranger to the sword. The pressures of time were quite his undoing. He had trouble mastering the most basic combinations. I was called on to double Montalban for the fight scene master and for Rey's closeups and over the shoulder coverage. As a former collegiate sabre champion, I was confident but appalled when I was reduced to saying, "Just come at me, Fernando, try to hit me. Don't worry, I'll parry." It was the only way to get the shot. But I learned an invaluable lesson. Never again would I criticize another choreographer's work when they were doing their very best in the face of the impossible. And, if this was how the game is played, there had to be a way to give myself an edge.

I learned to never stop learning! That was my edge and my only hope. One has only the tools one possesses and can bring with him to the set that day. Do the home work. Feed the mind with research and hone the physical skills with practice. Investigate different weapons and study a variety of styles. They will change the perceptions and offer different timings and syncopated rhythms to season the work. The greater the knowledge, the more options and choices one can draw on to overcome the obstacles that will be thrown in the path. Make a plan, but be ready to abandon everything and start from scratch when that is the only way to get it done. This happens all the time. One can only wing it when one has the skills to fly.

Time will always be the enemy. I suggested a story and fighting style based on the Spanish "Mysterious Circle" to the producers of *Highlander, the Series* and was rewarded with the guest starring role

Anthony De Longis wraps Zen Gasner as Sinbad in a scene for the television series *Sinbad*. Photo By Val Adamson, Courtesy Atlantis Films.



in a episode titled "Duende," written for me and filmed in Paris. Braun McAsh, the sword master, and I evolved three rapier and dagger duels culminating in an outdoor finale to be fought on the Mysterious Circle itself. The night before, Adrian Paul had never seen the completed final routine. He called a half-hour break in filming, he is a producer so he can do that, and Braun and I showed him the final fight for the first time. The next day, we filmed in a driving rain, on a surface as slippery as ice with only the rehearsal we could manage while standing in the downpour. Braun pronounced it the most complicated one-on-one combat in his five-year history with the show. It was tough, but the rain provided million-dollar production value and the lack of rehearsal gave the fight a real edge.

Similarly, when I guest starred on *Conan, the Adventurer*, an El Niño hurricane flipped our schedule and pushed our final fight to the first day instead of the last. The sword master, Kiyoshi Yamazaki had shown me a rough version of his ideas an hour earlier. He knew my background and

welcomed my input but warned that Ralf Moeller, the star, would have no time to rehearse. So I kept my adjustments to a minimum but requested an additional phrase to enhance the story. I met Moeller when he walked onto the set in costume and Yamazaki showed us both the newly extended fight for the first time. We had five minutes to walk our way through the choreography while the whole crew watched and waited. Then the director demanded we start shooting before he got any farther behind schedule. We literally rehearsed on film, shooting a little more of the action with each take. I wielded Conan's heavy steel broadsword, the Sword of Atlantis, while Moeller was swinging a two-handed aluminum monstrosity. Within five minutes, we were shooting the entire fight, in its entirety, at an intensity that had the crew cheering. But this was forced labor. We had no time to discover a common rhythm to build our character choices around. And it required all my training and experience to constantly adapt to Moeller's energy and changing distances so we could work safely at that level of performance.

Master the basics – distance, timing, footwork, and an unbroken sensitivity to the partner's energy. These are the building blocks and they must be razor sharp and laser clean. One will almost always be working with a stranger. One must possess the skills to instantly adapt and constantly adjust both distance and technique in order to maintain safety and lift the choreography from simple survival and mechanical execution, to the highest levels of dynamic story performance. All action should be character driven and story motivated. Pay attention to detail. Einstein says, "God is in the details." The art is in the choices one makes and one's ability to execute the subtle differences each adjustment carves into the character's story.

In spite of my dire predictions, every once in awhile, it all works like it is supposed to. I had the opportunity this summer to guest star on the series *Sinbad*. It was one of the most pleasurable working experiences I have ever had. We filmed in Cape Town, South Africa, but that was just the beginning of the adventure. Here are some of the highlights from my journal.

Sinbad in Cape Town, "The Gryphon's Tale"

ACTOR'S JOURNAL EXCERPTS

by Anthony De Longis

Sunday, August 10

John Stead is the stunt coordinator of the series, *Sinbad*, and president of the Society of Canadian Fight Directors. John kindly used the video demos and resume packet I sent him to work behind the scenes to help me get the guest starring role on the *Sinbad* episode entitled, "The Gryphon's Tale." When I hit Cape Town, John and I go out for dinner and discuss his ideas for the action. He says after some thirty-three episodes, that he has "done swords to death." What excites him are the possibilities that my skills with the whip presents. For the final fight, he wants a sword in one hand and a whip in the other while dueling up stairs and across the roof tops. Sounds challenging.

Monday, August 11

At 9:30 John and I meet the director, Brenton Spencer. Turns out we worked together on

MacGyver's first season in Canada, a two parter called "Lost Love," and on the *Hawkeye* I did in Vancouver two years ago. After a quick wardrobe fitting we head to the set to meet the horse coordinator, Gavin Genoud. They've preselected an older mare with lots of experience. She responds well and accepts my working on her back with the whip. John Stead is pleased but we both wonder if she might be a little small. Gavin says he has another horse, a stallion, named Commando, with less training and experience, who's "going to be a handful." He is that; but after a few moments, we get our signals straight and he starts to respond nicely and with lots of fire. I am glad I have spent the last four years cultivating my horse skills.

I gently introduced Commando to the whip and after a few starts, he accepts the new challenge nicely. I spend about an hour working him up to multiple fancy whip cracks and even do a few body wraps on Gavin with the longer whip. As a final test, Gavin drapes himself across the horse in front of me, and we walk around. We all agree we've got a winner. Gavin said they have a lot of problems putting actors on horses who say they ride but who don't have a clue. Janet Burns, the wrangler, smiles huge and says it was nice to see someone who could really ride. It made my day.

Tuesday, August 12

A thick canopy of mist pours over the cliffs and flows through the crags to hang halfway up the mountain above the location village. It's to-die-for beautiful.

John and I start to choreograph. John is terrific. I admire his creativity and the loyalty of his considerable stunt team. Apparently

he trained everybody from scratch last season, and now he's reaping the benefits of his hard work.

The set is very well organized. We work for a couple of hours and make a good start.

I unlimber my whip and win the confidence of the star, Zen Gesner, for the upcoming action.

Wednesday, August 13

I steal another practice session with my horse. Commando starts off resistant, but but remembers the whip and relaxes before each session. His canter still has to be geared down from an all out dash. Back to the studio to work out the final fight with John Stead. We set the mounted whip action first, then attack the final combat. Gradually we hammer out some ideas that please us both.

Thursday, August 14

The location is gorgeous. A narrow dirt road snakes through a forest of tall pines and eucalyptus. I get to ride like the wind and crack my whip in a great costume while riding a very spirited horse. In one sequence, George Blaza, who plays Sinbad's companion Doubar, tries to protect some village girls with his body. I roll the whip past his back but well within range to hit him if I'm not careful. George snaps his head in perfect reaction and throws off his turban. Everyone said it looked like I'd cracked it off with the whip. Movie magic.

I dead run towards the heroes, spin Commando 360 degrees and crack the whip to all four corners. Then I charge through

the crowd and roll a final snap right into the lens. Too much fun!

I'm accompanied on these mad charges by Henchman #1, a very likable and obviously talented fellow named Adrian Galley. He's got a great voice. I feel like I'm doing dialogue with Richard Burton. I'm very familiar with the featured henchman syndrome. It's a part I've played many times myself so I use every opportunity to include Adrian in any business I'm doing. It gives me someone to react and play to, suggests a relationship, and it gives Adrian more camera time.

At lunch the powers decide to juggle the schedule and move my biggest dialogue scene, a three pager, to that afternoon. Originally scheduled to shoot three days from now, the new plan is to shoot in two hours. Obviously, I won't have to worry about over preparing.

The late afternoon sun fills the meadow with a warm and golden glow. That's why they call it magic hour in the film business. We're moving so fast, I need to stay absolutely focused to turn the unfamiliar words into some kind of a performance. Brenton, the director, threw me one more curve. He keeps Candace facing away from me most of the scene which essentially meant I didn't have the actress' performance and expressions to respond to. It's intense but feels good. Both Brenton and Larry Raskin, the producer, are very complimentary. Several people on the crew also offered their congratulations over the next couple of days. Always a good sign.

Saturday, August 16

Gravin has arranged a ride with his friend Michelle Mazurkiewicz. We ride through the fields and up a series of rolling hills resplendent with row upon row of grape vines in their dormant winter stage. On our way home I pull a long bamboo pole from the ground and practice the lance positions used during the Napoleonic period, the heyday of the Light Cavalry. I think my mate and riding partner, Colin Banggaard, and I will have to add lance work to the next performance of our cavalry sabre and bullwhip team, The Light Horsemen.

Monday, August 18

It's a day off for me but Zen wants to rehearse on his lunch break at the Rocklands Ranch location and I'm more than eager to oblige. Zen and I work through the routine for memory with Simon watching.

Wednesday, August 20

I drive to the Mikonos location. We are going into a split shifts. Days will be spent on "The Gryphon's Tale," nights will shoot the next episode, "The Beast of Bosra."



Anthony De Longis. Photo By Val Adamson, Courtesy Atlantis Films.

Brenton choreographs a flowing steadicam dance to cover my dialogue and reveal the presence of our heroes. The first half of my climactic confrontation with Zen goes great. As he tries to free the Gryphon, I snap the sword from his hand with my whip, then wrap his neck and drag him off the platform to the ground. Zen was very comfortable negotiating the six-foot drop to the ground allowing us to do all our work without doubles. As Zen dodges a lightning series of whip cracks, I suddenly reverse direction, wrap his legs and yank him off his feet. A little hand-to-hand and Zen breaks free to grab another sword. I disarm one of my own men and use the sword in my right and the whip in my left hand to drive him through the crowd. Everyone was excited with the footage. Tomorrow we'll continue the action to the rooftops where I'll finally corner Sinbad on a narrow ledge, some twenty-five feet off the ground.

I wandered over the "Beast" set and watch Zen rehearse the werewolf fight with the stunt team and George Buza. It's going to look great. I take a seat next to the producers, Gordon Marks & Larry Raskin and compliment Zen's ability. He has the enthusiasm and flair of a young Errol Flynn, and it shows in the work. It's a dark, crystal clear night and the surf booms on the rocks

Zen Gasner. Photo By Val Adamson, Courtesy Atlantis Films.



outside the marina. I look up, and there's the Southern Cross I've waited all my life to see. Orion is on summer hiatus from the northern hemisphere and I wave hello.

Thursday, August 21

The drama gods have arranged a spitty and drizzling greeting. Zen and I pick up where we left off. After a vicious sword and whip exchange, Zen kicks me backwards into a fruit stand. Brenton wanted a loss of dignity and gives me a close up to register the moment. As I sit amongst the juice, Sinbad offers my character further sword lessons and races for the rooftops, luring me away from his buddies and their battle to free the Gryphon. Being a predictable evil overlord type, I of course follow. Zen encounters a guard and trades his sword for a spear. I switch hands with the whip and sword to

envelop and yank the spear from his grip and Zen dive rolls to avoid the stinging lash.

Zen ducks a sizzling sidearm and grabs the end of my whip in mid-air. Sinbad's had enough. This puts us into the exciting *or de lise* section that John Stead had envisioned and that we evolved in our rehearsals before he left. Two enemies, bound by the tension they have to maintain on the whip. It keeps the distance close and dangerous and provides equal opportunities to envelop, confuse and pull your opponent off balance.

The impasse ends with a surprise kick from Sinbad that carries the fight across a narrow ledge spanning the balconies. The width of our fighting surface was only three feet but there were safety mats on the ground far below in case we slip. I'm decidedly right-hand oriented, but I practice to develop my weak side. Switching the whip and sword from my left to my right hand and back again really kept me on my toes. During the give and take of the action I manage to disarm Sinbad and force him to walk the plank to its very edge, high above the crowd. Another left-hand whip crack pins him to the flagpole, and I prepare my sword for the coup de grace. Brenton covered the action with three cameras; a crane, ground shot, and hand-held coverage that favored each of us on successive takes. Everyone was delighted with the sequence, and especially the fact that one could see it was Zen and me the entire time.

I had time to change and chat with Zen before he dashed off to finish the night shoot. He worked hard for his skills, training four years at the prestigious acting academy, LAMBDA in London, England where he also apprenticed to be a fight coordinator. His love for the work is very apparent and makes a huge difference in the quality of his fights and the effectiveness of the show. I tell him I thought he has the same screen vitality as Errol Flynn; and of my years of study with the great fencing master, Ralph Faulkner, who had been one of Flynn's teachers. I also relate my story of the time I filled the incomparable swashbucklers britches. I had been called in to choreograph Ricardo Montalban and Fernando Rey on Fantasy Island and to double Montalban should it prove necessary. When I went to change into the wardrobe, I looked at the name tag in the pants. The pants were probably from Captain Blood, obviously before Flynn hit it big, because the tag read, "Earl Flynn." Someone was waiting for the reviews to be in before bothering to get the spelling right. It is the sort of reminder that keeps one's ego in check.

— Fin