

With a lengthy career both in front and behind the camera as an actor/fight director and weapons specialist, Anthony DeLongis has worked with some of the biggest names in the entertainment business on the big screen, the small screen and the stage. He has delivered memorable performances onscreen in such projects as *The Silent Flute/Circle Of Iron*, *Jaguar Lives*, *Highlander: The Series* and more recently *Fearless* which saw him clashing swords against Jet Li. His credits behind the camera include training performers such as Michelle Pfeiffer to use the bullwhip so effectively on *Batman Returns*, the swordplay for *Secondhand Lions* and so much more. *Impact's* Eastern Editor Mike Leeder delivers the second part of an indepth interview with a true renaissance man of action cinema...

ANTHONY DELONGIS: SWORDMASTER

Impact: You wore multiple hats on Cannon's *Masters of the Universe* adaptation starring Dolph Lundgren as He-Man and Frank Langella as Skeletor. You played the role of 'Blade', acted as sword fight choreographer and doubled Skeletor for much of the fight work. How did you find working with Dolph on the film?

Anthony DeLongis: Dolph was really good to work with, I trained swords with him for about a month before we started shooting. I kept asking the stunt co-ordinator Walter Scott when we'd be able to see the location for the fights so we could work out the story for each fight and he assured me that we'd have plenty of time once we moved to the main location as we'd be there for six weeks of night shoots. Of course the first thing we shot upon getting there was the fight scenes and we had to put them together in about an hour total. Fortunately Dolph is a terrific athlete and martial artist, and he rose to the occasion, but it's not my favourite way to work.

You've also worked on a lot of weekly TV shows including *The Master*, the original *Battlestar Galactica*, *Renegade*, *Kung Fu the Legend Continues* and, of course, *Queen of Swords* and *Highlander*, which we'll discuss in a moment. What would you say is the biggest difference between working on film and TV especially when it comes down to shooting a fight scene?

Your greatest enemy is time, especially in television. You never have as much as you need, you must beg, borrow and steal what you can, but no matter what they promise, you'll always end up with far too little to do the job the way you'd like. It's a lot easier to get rehearsal time on a feature film than episodic television. The Production Manager will still resist but compare the tally; pay two people to rehearse and let your actors progress beyond mechanical moves to a dynamic performance level. Or, save that small investment and keep a crew of 30-50 standing around, on salary, while you struggle to get something mediocre on film. It seems obvious to me, but there's no business like show business.

Stage is usually a different story. I got my start in theatre choreographing action for dozens of productions at the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego, the Ahmanson and

Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles and a variety of venues up and down the coast of California. I've drunk of the heady waters of preparation, training and rehearsal that only stage work can offer. I've savoured the luxury of carefully constructed safety protocols and the cultivation of sensitivity to distance and timing. Granted, the schedule is always harried, but you get to evaluate, then develop the techniques you can optimistically expect your actors to 'perform' on opening night. It's always a challenge, but the growth is palpable and the rewards eminently satisfying. Kiss this goodbye on any television set and most film locations.

'Be prepared' is not just a motto for the Boy Scouts. It is a necessity if you hope to achieve success in show business. I tell my students, 'You can't wing it unless you have the skills to fly.' You have the skills you show up with on the day, the set is not the place to learn your craft. Take responsibility for your own training. 'Be prepared', because you're going to need every skill you've ever cultivated to make the best of what is invariably a nearly impossible situation.

Master your basics - distance, timing, footwork and an unbroken sensitivity to your partner's energy. These are your building blocks and they must be razor sharp and laser clean. You will almost always be working with a stranger. You must possess the skills to instantly adapt and constantly adjust both distance and technique in order to maintain safety and lift your 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'. Your 'art' is in the choices you make and your ability to execute the subtle differences each adjustment carves into your character's story. In spite of my dire predictions, every once in awhile, it all works like it's supposed to, almost...

Take playing Sir Lancelot on the television series *MythQuest* opposite Braun McAsh, the sword master from *Highlander: The Series* - we were cast as antagonists and we worked together to evolve the choreography before we left for location. We even filmed the work and sent it to the director so he and his DP (director of

photography) could see the story and get a jump on how they wanted to shoot the action. Everyone was pleased. We had six days to shoot the entire episode and as usual, were way over booked for the amount of time we had. We'd saved the climactic fight scene for last and most of the day had been set aside to shoot the action except for a few other shots. These few shots take almost the entire day. The sun is setting, the light is failing. We're in trouble, but this is not a total disaster. Shafts of golden 'magic hour' light blasting through the trees. Stunningly beautiful, but only for about another hour if we're lucky. We'll never have time 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 you lose one f-stop of light every five minutes. There is talk of cutting the fight. Nooooo!

Braun and I come from backgrounds in stage and we understand how to use camera angles to tell the story. The camera becomes another character in the scene along with the combatants and the environment. '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.' And they did. Steve and Rick assigned each of their three camera operators to a different task. We started from the top, rehearsing each phrase once for cameras, then shooting it. Covering the fight one section at a time, we moved on as soon as we got a clean take. Our intensity



always accelerated at the end of each phrase, climaxing in a freeze as we broke apart to regroup and search for a new opening.

Next phase. Rehearse and shoot. On 'Action,' we repeated the final blow of the previous attack before breaking apart. Then we'd stalk each other, slowly pivoting 180 degrees before exploding into action once again. We built in story beats, such as when Braun pinned me against a tree while trying to press both blades into my face, that allowed the cameras to push in for a tight two shot or close up. As we alternated positions, camera one and two would change who they were covering, or more precisely, we'd change and they'd 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. We got all five phases, with full coverage in 1 hour 38 minutes. It was fast and dirty, but it got the job done and we were rewarded for our efforts. Shafts of light slanted through the trees to form long shadows that battled in support of our struggling figures. Sunlight glinted off our furiously slashing blades at just the right moment. We couldn't have planned it nearly so well. Even the setting sun framed itself perfectly between us when Braun pinned me to the tree. God is a great Art Director, and I think he rewards those who come to the party prepared. That's why you rehearse, that's why you train. When you're ready for anything, magic happens.

How did you get involved with training Michelle Pfeiffer for *Batman Returns*, and what was she like to work with?

I received a call asking if I wanted to teach Michelle Pfeiffer how to use a whip. What a silly question. I arrived at Warner Brothers and was told they were going to use a 'cat-of-nine-tails.' I suggested an alternative because of both its limitations and its baggage as an instrument of punishment and sadism. I showed the coordinator Max Klewin what I could do with a bullwhip and he immediately took me to meet Tim Burton and Michelle and I repeated my demonstrations. I started training her almost immediately. I wanted to create a style for Michelle that would reflect the complexity of her character; alluring, hypnotic and sensual, combining feline sensuality with the awesome striking power of a jungle cat. I wanted to extend and prolong the roll so the audience could see and appreciate the beauty and elegance of



the whip as well as the skill of the practitioner. Yanking the whip across frame just to produce a big noise no longer satisfied me. The Catwoman character helped to create and refine my signature rolling style with the whip. I was able to train Michelle Pfeiffer for six weeks prior to filming for her role as Catwoman in *Batman Returns*. I was also present throughout her principal photography to maintain her level of excellence and to turn the logistical problems of difficult locations like rooftops and the water soaked Penguin's Lair into opportunities. As a result, this strong, fine actress had an additional and powerful story-telling tool at her command. Michelle did all her own whip work without any doubles, including a neck wrap around Christopher Walken's throat on her first day of shooting. We even created the entire Ice Princess segment on the spot, rehearsed it once and shot it. This gave director Tim Burton shooting options that wouldn't have been possible with a double and Michelle's portrayal as Catwoman even more powerful and effective.

Michelle was and is, in a word, wonderful! I was very proud of her. Our training dramatically changed the way she moved and afforded her a range of additional choices to dynamically articulate her character. It's always great when the audience sees the actor performing their own action as it adds tremendous credibility to the character. It also gives the performer enormous confidence and courage to push their performance, because they can.

You made two very memorable appearances on the *Highlander* TV series in the episodes *Blackmail*, and then later on *Duende*. What can you tell us about working on the series and especially the evolution of *Duende*?

I suggested a story and fighting style based on the Spanish 'Mysterious Circle' to the producers and was rewarded with the guest starring role in the episode titled *Duende*, written for me and filmed in Paris. Braun McAsh and I evolved three rapier and dagger duels culminating in an outdoor finale to be fought within

the 'Mysterious Circle' itself. Adrian Paul had never seen the completed final routine. He called a half hour break in filming (he's 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 a bitch, but the rain provided million-dollar production values and the lack of rehearsal gave the fight a real edge and no small amount of danger.

I'd been researching an old Spanish training style called 'The Mysterious Circle' and I had also been pestering David Abramowitz, the head writer on the series, about coming back after my success in season three with *Blackmail*. I knew Braun had been pushing for me behind the scenes and I found out, when I was doing *Duende*, that Adrian had called the producers from the set on *Blackmail* and asked, 'Do we really have to kill this guy, he's pretty good.' Unfortunately, the script said that he must die, or perhaps history would have been a little bit different. But I had such a wonderful time, I wanted to come back and work on the show, again. So I asked, 'How do I get back on the show, David?' He was kind enough to see me and he said, 'Well, look, you were such a distinctive character, we couldn't possibly have you back.' I said, 'David, I'm an actor, I can be different.' And he said, 'Well, if you can come up with a story that we haven't done...' and this was after they'd hit the 100-episode mark. So I went home and I thought about it and what great opportunity it would be to use this Mysterious Circle stylization that I had come up with, because I thought it was extremely theatrical, fluid yet intricate and very filmic since it's fought razor's edge close. The proximity is almost stifling because you are at sword's point all the time.

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Previous pages: Main image from *Masters of the Universe* and (inset) *MythQuest*.

Facing page: *Highlander* - Duende, Duncan gets the point and (cutout) *The New Adventures Of Sinbad*.

This page, main: Teaching Michelle Pfeiffer the fine points of whip-work.

Below: 'The Mystical Circle' - close quarter combat in *Highlander: The Series*.



in a duel, but is saved by a woman who loves him. David loved that because MacLeod carries this terrible burden that a woman sacrificed herself for him. He took it to his wonderful team of writers and they created *Duende* and the role of Otavio Consone for me. David called me up just as I was about to leave for *Sinbad* in Jordan and asked if I'd like to go to Paris. That was an offer I couldn't refuse. I had sent along my notes and my research in hopes that it would inspire the writers and apparently it did because they came up with some wonderful stuff. Originally titled, *The Mysterious Circle*, the episode incorporated my interpretation of the uniquely Spanish system of fighting with the rapier. I wanted to combine the upright defiant postures of the matador with the staccato footwork and rapid weight changes of a flamenco dancer. Coupled with the application of superior leverage through footwork and angulation, it was the first time the Spanish style had ever been filmed.

Braun and I collaborated to evolve the choreography. Braun is a very, very talented man who is also very secure in his own abilities and he invited me to contribute. He said he had thoughts and questions in his mind and he knew that I would have responses. All choices change the story. Anytime you come to a crossroads, and the crossroads are crossed blades in this case, you could go one way and the story starts to tell this, or you go another way and the story starts to tell that. It's all a reflection of the character. A fight has to drive the story forward and it has to articulate the character or else it's just a lot of sword waving... Neither Adrian, Braun or myself would ever settle for anything like that.

Here's more food for thought. All swords are not created equal. Is your character's weapon of choice designed to hack and cleave, stab and skewer or both? Is it straight or curved, long or short, single or double edged? Does it have a guard to protect the hand? The sabre, the katana, the broadsword,

the rapier, the small sword; each has unique strengths as well as weaknesses and vulnerabilities. The choice of weapon and the manner in which your character wields it can offer a strong visual metaphor for who he is and how the audience will perceive and feel about him.

Braun chose a flamberge style rapier blade for my character as the fencing master immortal, Otavio Consone. The flamberge was the European equivalent of the Filipino flame bladed Kris. The double-edged wavy design of the blade maximizes blade contact and insures cutting power throughout the length of every stroke. Instead of a neatly surgical slice the flamberge blade chews the flesh and leaves ugly wounds that are hard to repair. The psychological impact to your opponent is almost as effective a distraction as the twin scalloped edges he has to face. This choice of weapon reveals arrogant confidence, no small sense of theatricality and a grim determination to win. Braun's selection was the perfect complement to my own acting and action choices. Braun and I created the choreography with Adrian's input. Adrian was off doing dance lessons and shooting all the time, so he would check in, see what we'd done, comment, rush back to the set, come back out again and see what we'd evolved.

I enjoyed the opportunity to work with Adrian again. We push each other in the best sense of the word and it's fun to work at that level. I had been charting the progress of the series and was very pleased and impressed with how the show had found itself during the course of the first season. By season three the characters were really fleshed out, Adrian's skills were genuinely impressive and I was enjoying the rising level of swordplay in the show. I've always had a theory that the sword is a symbol for justice and for nobility in all of us, it demands that you take a stand. Anybody who utilizes a sword has come there to put it all on the line. That he or she has

found something they consider worth fighting for. In the case of Duncan, it's never for personal gain, it's to defend someone else, or himself, usually righting some injustice... and for me, that's what the sword is a symbol for... knightly valour and virtue. When you fight with a sword it is not done from a distance, it's very personal, you are looking the other person in the eyes. You are risking it all because it only takes three inches of steel to end things and it's very, very fast. You are very aware of your own mortality, even when it's 'let's pretend.' In *Duende*, our mutual efforts produced what many consider to be one of the best episodes and the finest and most complex fight in the six-year run of the series.

Anthony Delongis' interview continues next issue as we discuss his swashbuckling work on such projects as *Queen Of Swords*, *Second Hand Lions* and his most recent work opposite Jet Li in *Fearless*. For information on Anthony Delongis and his projects including his production journals and information regarding training opportunities, log on to: www.delongis.com

MIKE LEEDER

