

Eastern Editor Mike Leeder, he was in an international casting search to find the best fighters for a new Jet Li project filming in Shanghai. One of the roles called for an actor who could portray a Spanish sword expert who was also highly skilled with a whip for two featured fights in the film's final tournament sequences. I'd previously played a Spanish sword master in the *Duende* episode of *Highlander*, an episode written for me. It offered a fantastic character to play and also gave me the chance to co-choreograph the action with my old friend F. Braun McAsh - introducing the uniquely Spanish style of rapier and dagger fighting to the screen for the very first time... I'd also created a new rolling style of whip manipulation for Michelle Pfeiffer's Catwoman in the film *Batman Returns*. I've continued to explore and evolve new theatrical and combative applications for man's first supersonic weapon, Mike explained that he'd first thought of me when he heard of the character and that all his subsequent casting inquiries kept leading him back to me.

Mike's searches had taken
him to Thailand
and

Search for the Masters documentary, oppressively claustrophobic. I suggested that Rancho Indalo, just north of Los Angeles, would be a perfect place to shoot some auditions. We live three miles up a winding dirt road that climbs steadily to the top of a 2500-foot mountain with a 360-degree view of the surrounding hills and a 'high ground' defensive position that commands the valley below and the entire approach to our hilltoperie. In addition to the heart pounding climb with its precarious drop offs, the location provides endless cross country horseback riding opportunities from challenging to extreme as well as an inspirational training spot for the variety of martial disciplines I teach... I've been a professional actor, fight director and sword and weapons specialist for over thirty years, but this was the first time a casting director ever came to audition me in my home. How cool is that? We put on a hell of a show in my arena for Mike and his film crew with a variety of bladed weapons and fighting styles. My wife, Dr. Mary De Longis and I performed our synchronized bullwhip tango to show off the finesse of the whip. My friend Joe Ordaz, a talented stuntman, dressed in protective armour, so I could illustrate the explosive power and surgical precision of the whip. Ever the showman, Mike let me cut targets from his fingers with the whip from the back of my galloping horse, another first for a casting director. We finished with interviews in my living room to round

When Mike first called and asked if I'd be willing to travel halfway round the world to battle Jet Li, my first thought was that I've been training my whole life for this opportunity and I'm ready to give it my best. After a couple of months of negotiations and filming delays, the foreign fighters had dwindled from twelve to only four, but I found myself on a plane en route to Shanghai with the promise of a featured fight with Jet and the chance to work with the legendary king of film fight action, Master Yuen Woo-ping.

TELLING THE STORY IN THE FIGHT

Originally I was slated to have two fights, one with the bullwhip against the character of Jet's best friend, and the second a combat with swords against Jet himself. Of course there were also supposed to be elimination rounds between a dozen fighters from many nations. By the time they got to filming the climactic tournament sequence, the fights had been trimmed to just four, with only three Western fighters and a final combat against a Japanese champion. JC Leuyer played the British bare-knuckle boxer and Brandon Rhea portrayed the German lancer. I was to bring to life the style of a Spanish sabre fighter facing Jet and his Chinese gim or scholar's sword.

There are three ranges of combat; long, medium and up-close and personal. Each offers specific opportunities to create tension and heighten your character's story. It can also give the camera a logic and a reason to follow the action to a close up of the actor's face. The current mania for too close coverage robs both the performer and the audience of the actor's full power. The character's story must

ANTHONY DELONGIS FEARLESS SWORDSMAN

For the final part of our extended coverage of the Sword Master Anthony DeLongis he recounts his experiences working on Ronny Yu's *Fearless*, starring Jet Li with action choreography by Yuen Woo-ping.



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be told from the ground up, each action motivated by the feet and the hips and supported by the power of the entire body. Close ups are a good way to hide the physical shortcomings of your actors but I believe it confuses and distances the audience. Many directors believe that bombarding the audience with strobe quick flashes and extreme close up partial images will dazzle the viewer into believing they've seen a good fight. I find it accomplishes precisely the opposite. If the audience can't follow the logic and story of the action, there is no comprehension and no empathy for your peril and ultimate triumph. Thankfully, I knew Jet and Woo Ping don't subscribe to this flawed notion of film action. I'd get the chance to use my whole body to tell my story.

CHOOSING THE WEAPON

Some swords are predominantly thrusting weapons such as the small sword. Some are best at thrusting but can also cut, such as the rapier. The military sabre is predominantly a cutting weapon that is also capable of effective and incisive thrusting attacks. One of its great advantages is a sturdy and substantial hand guard and the ability to inflict damage from a distance with both the edge and the point. The nature of any bladed weapon dictates how it should be utilized to its full fighting potential, each weapon has strengths and weaknesses. I'd been asked to offer suggestions for sword designs and with the help of my long time friend and weapons maker extraordinaire, Dave Baker we created a perfect fighting weapon. For my character, we settled on a weapon inspired by the 1904 Austrian military sabre. Although I was a Spanish officer, this design was almost the universal standard for European military sabres and offered a workable filmic compromise. Using the model from my own collection, Dave crafted a beautifully balanced weapon from scratch, with a gently curving aluminum blade for surgically precise cuts as well as effective thrusts protected behind its wrap around perforated hand guard. It looked great and was so easy to work with, I commissioned a second sabre to be sure we'd have two camera-ready swords when I arrived in China. After filming, I kept one and presented the other to Jet.

I prefer working with aluminum bladed weapons and not steel, even when the steel blades are dulled. Using sharpened swords is a foolish and absolutely unnecessary risk and has no business in creating the illusion of combat that is the heart of good film and stage action. I've had to resort to steel on several projects, due to time, money or limited location manufacturing capabilities, but aluminum is always my first choice. It has less weight, while retaining the substance and blade profile

of steel. It's still metal, and therefore hazardous, but it's easier to manage and control. But the Chinese team had their own preferences. The first decision Woo-ping made was to change our curved 1904 cavalry sabre to a straight bladed 1911 model Patton sabre. This would match Jet's straight bladed double edged Chinese scholar's sword with a similar straight bladed European counterpart, my only advantage being the sturdy hand guard. This caused a flurry of activity in the props department as they laboured virtually overnight to create perfect bamboo bladed replicas of the Patton sabre I had also brought with me. Long a tradition in Chinese and Japanese action films, this was my first opportunity to utilize bamboo blades in a film fight. Covered in shiny metallic mylar skin, each weapon was crafted to resemble perfectly its sharp steel counterpart. Being much lighter, they are easier to wield but they require full body support for each action in order to create the illusion of a weighted steel blade. While it's unlikely that you'll break any limbs if an accident occurs, the way a steel or even aluminum blade can produce, bamboo blades are not without risk. At the speeds Jet and I performed, a rap to the face or the back of the hands would shatter small bones and the sharp points could easily pierce eyes, throats or other exposed flesh.

As the Sword Master or Fight Director, I always incorporate the seeds of combative truth to provide an accurate foundation for the story. When there is sufficient time and rehearsal, my favourite way to choreograph is to evolve the story until it flows smoothly and logically from moment to moment to tell the story of these specific characters in conflict. This provides the audience and the camera with a clear and dynamic narrative



Left: Anthony in action.

Top right: The Western fighters; Jean Claude Leuyer, Anthony DeLongis and Brandon Rhea.

Below: Anthony with Jet Li and Yuen Woo-ping.

Bottom right: Anthony as the Spanish Sword Master.



up offensive response, then choose the ones that best tell the desired story. I like to clarify the changing moments of jeopardy by working to create the precise environment for the chosen technique to be the best response to thwart that specific attack and create an opening in my opponent's defenses. My partner responds to this new peril with an answer of their own, until the crafted phrase tells the exciting, and visually dynamic story we desire. Then we play with tempo and rhythm to accent and clarify the emotional elements for the audience and camera. This is how I like to work. But this isn't my party. I'm a guest in Woo-ping and Jet Li's house. I wondered how they like to make their magic...

THEY WORK A LITTLE DIFFERENTLY IN CHINA

After a week of waiting and training to stay at the peak of readiness, the day arrived for me to go to experience first hand the Chinese creative process. I was really looking forward to working at this high level, to step into Jet's arena and provide the motivation and reactions to help him tell his character's story. I knew the fights would be good. They always are when Jet and Woo-ping and his team are involved. But not everyone works the same way to arrive at effective and dynamic story action and I was curious to discover what they had in store for me. I met Jet for the first time when I climbed the stairs to the raised tournament platform and shook his hand. We immediately set to work. Under the supervision of both Jet and Woo-ping, two of the team created each phrase. I was a little concerned when their first moves for me consisted of three retracting arm pumping point pokes at Jet's face. This is not a technique I would ever use, especially in the opening salvos of an encounter. A good swordsman never retracts his arm to deliver an attack. I realized, to my dismay that they thought Western swordplay consisted of the techniques they had seen in Hollywood movies, which with few exceptions, is a poorly executed miasma of misinformation. This did not bode well but I resisted the urge for legitimate protest and walked through their ideas with one of the other members of the fight team. I tried to offer a couple of minor suggestions to improve the look and effectiveness of my attacks, but they were insistent on their selections for this first phrase

and I realized I had a choice. The action was my only acting opportunity to tell my character's story. I couldn't service the project or myself by looking inept and performing badly, but if I was difficult and



made a fuss, I'd probably get myself doubled by someone of their fight team. Or I could step back and focus on the big picture. This is Jet's film and my job is to be a strong and challenging adversary who believably motivates the extremely cool moves the team was choreographing for him to execute. I realized that I'd have to bring my Spanish character's Western style of fighting to life utilizing their choreography and I'd have to do it instinctually and intuitively while performing the action. There wouldn't be a lot of rehearsal or time to try things and they certainly weren't going to slow their creative process to accommodate me so I'd have to do it on the fly. To play in this league, I'd have to work by their rules of engagement. Fortunately I've been training for over three decades with the sword and this was a doable accommodation.

THE PROCESS

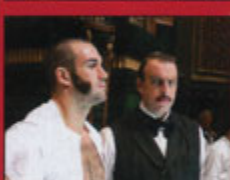
I continued to walk through their ideas indicating to Jet precisely where on his body I planned to target each cut and thrust. This area of basic safety was one the team had neglected in their rush to make up the five days they were behind in their shooting schedule. If we'd had the opportunity to train together as originally planned, this would have been addressed, I'm sure. I would also have had the chance to feel the rhythm and pace the Chinese team used to execute their choreography as well as explore the dynamics of their footwork and distance, both critical to creating a safe and exciting combative illusion. This missed opportunity is the only regret I have for my entire adventure in Shanghai. Safety for Jet was the one place I refused to compromise. Without making it a separate issue and having the process grind to a halt, I verbalized to Jet where precisely I would be cutting and thrusting for each of the attacks the team had created while we walked the moves. I always build in several layers of safety whenever I'm performing. Absolute control of the weapon is accomplished by the use of a pivoting grip that makes the blade an accurate extension of the hand and arm, driven by the torso and supported by the legs. The second layer of safety is targeting to specific places on the body for every attack. A cut to the shoulder, a slash across the belly or a thrust to the face must be precise and exact and delivered with the same accuracy and commitment every time, or someone is going to get hurt. Exact targeting also clarifies the jeopardy and clearly illustrates each specific danger to the audience. Parries that really work allow the partner to commit fully to

technique and the partner. Thankfully Jet understood immediately my concerns and was very appreciative. He said that I was very skilled and I obviously had a lot of experience making films and handling weapons. He said, "I can see you're very interested in my safety." I assured him that I was, not wanting to be remembered as the guy who hit Jet in the face with a sword. "So am I," he said, and gave me one of his beaming smiles. With our safety net in place, we were free to go all out and that's just what we did. Partnering Jet took my very best efforts at every moment and I joyfully embraced this challenge.

ZERO TO SIXTY MILES PER HOUR

As soon as the fight team had created an exchange Jet and Woo-ping liked, Jet stepped in and he and I walked through the choreography only two or three times before they rolled three cameras to capture the action from multiple angles. Jet immediately exploded into a full speed blur of motion, and Jet at full speed is really something. It was like dodging and dancing with a formula one-race car capable of zero to sixty from a standing stop. After we'd shot our first phrase I said to Jet, "You're like fighting a Ferrari." He laughed and said I was pretty good too and compared me to a Porsche or BMW. Coming from Jet Li, that's a compliment I can live with! After the first phrase the fight team saw that I could work at Jet's pace, remember long sequences of choreography and execute whatever they came up with. There was no longer any worry about my being doubled and we kept creating and filming at a blistering pace. The team assembled a sequence, Jet and I walked it a couple of times adjusting to each other's responses and then we shot it. Woo-ping watched the monitors and requested specific tweaks in speed or internal blade positioning to get the exact visual story he wanted. We usually shot two takes but rarely more than three before winning Woo-ping's approving. "Good," and moving on to spontaneously create the next entirely new sequence. As the fight team came to trust my skills and knowledge, it became increasingly easier to offer the occasional suggestion when a move was awkward or didn't flow logically for me. After the first two sequences they allowed me to rework their combinations for variety and to best suit my character's style of body and blade movement as long as I arrived at the exact time and place necessary to motivate Jet's





We were both in full performance mode and all of my senses were at their peak, including my peripheral vision and awareness. I felt alive in the way you can only feel when you are working at your peak potential and everything is meshing perfectly. It was a challenging and totally exhilarating experience; everything I'd hoped for when I imagined getting this opportunity.



responses to the attacks they had designed. Mike Leeder, who was not only acting in the film as the referee, but also assisting with translating amongst other duties, told me that early on one of the fight team had joked, "Who's choreographing this, us or the gweilo?" and Woo-ping replied, "This gweilo knows what he's doing." That gave my confidence a welcome boost.

Every action beat has four story telling opportunities; the moment before, the action, the reaction, the moment after. I often like to extend a moment to articulate the acting beat, but Jet and Woo-ping achieve the same result through unrelenting speed and syncopation of rhythms to create their visual dynamic. At least that's how they'd chosen to tell the story of this sword encounter. Trained fighters respond to the energy they perceive, sometimes intuitively. Good choreography should strive to create the specific combative environment for the chosen choreographic technique to be the logical and correct one to successfully thwart the opponent's attack. This creates a more realistic story and invites the audience to truly participate in the fight because they can follow the logic and perceive the shifting vulnerability and danger for each individual as the encounter progresses. None of this was a conscious or intellectual process while we actually performing. Everything was an organic, in-the-moment cause and effect response to Jet's energy and execution of each attack and defense and his responses to mine. In combat you must commit totally to each attack, yet when creating the theatrical illusion of combat you must always control the power and penetration of each cut and thrust to avoid injuring your partner if anything at all goes wrong. Commit to the moment but always be ready for anything if your partner has a lapse in memory or slips or stumbles or simply changes their reaction organically due to the lack of rehearsals. We were both in full performance mode and all of my senses were at their peak, including my peripheral vision and awareness. I felt alive in the way you can only feel when you are working at your peak potential and everything is meshing perfectly. It was a challenging and totally exhilarating experience; everything I'd hoped for when I imagined getting this opportunity.

THE QUEST FOR THE SECOND WEAPON

I've spent the last twenty years developing and performing my own distinctive methods for using the whip for film, television and in my martial studies. I'm currently creating a multi-range combative protocol for the whip and I'd polished a couple unique techniques in the hopes of using them in Jet's film. Remember, the original plan was to have me utilize a whip in one of my fights. Although this encounter was eliminated when the number of fighters was trimmed, I'd never given up hope of introducing something new on film. I couldn't think of a better place to apply my creative efforts than as the second weapon my character pulled when the going got tough. I'd been lobbying for this ever since it was suggested that the Spaniard would ultimately produce a companion weapon to try to give myself an advantage. Typical bad guy stuff but I wanted something totally unique and not just a second

sword or hidden dagger. By the second day of filming, I could feel the momentum of the fight was nearing its climax. If there was to be a second weapon, it was now or never. In a quiet moment between shots I talked to Jet about pulling the whip from a place of concealment as my second weapon. Jet said, "You're a good guy now. We're going to exchange swords out of respect. Didn't anyone tell you?" Well no. No one had mentioned this on the spot impromptu promotion from bad guy to respected adversary. An unexpected reward for my efforts. Although it's not in Ronny Yu's final cut of the film, Woo-ping shot this surprising and touching moment. I hope it makes it into the DVD extras.

LOOKING FORWARD AND LOOKING BACK

Fearless opened in Hong Kong and China last January, a mere five months after principal photography, to much deserved acclaim. I've only had the chance to see a Chinese version of the film and the action of the Western fighters opens the film's tournament sequence. I got the chance to see my own work with Jet, as well as the rest of the film's considerable action. All of the fights are wonderful, of course, and visually stunning. How could they be anything less with the skills of Jet Li, Woo-ping and director Ronny Yu and their talented team of performers? Each fight sequence takes full advantage of Ronny Yu's excellent direction, Jet's incredible skills as well as that of his partners and the creativity of Woo-ping and the entire fight team to push the story opportunities of each location to the fullest. The fights incorporate the gold standard in top level wire work, superb gymnastics and the occasional visual assists that post production tweaks can add to the visual impact to tell their story in grand and glorious fashion. The fight with Jet and the Spanish swordsman has almost no close-ups and only essential insert shots. Only those that advance the specifics of the moment are included. The rest of the story is told with our entire bodies moving all out, with the action covered in full figure master sequences rather than shot and assembled in bits. There is a purity to watching two performers bring their characters to life and tell an exciting action story with only the give and take between experienced and skilled performers, without any tricks or high tech assists. I'm very proud of our work together and very pleased to make my contribution to the success of this project.

Before I close, let me tell you a bit about Mike Leeder, who is nothing short of a Renaissance man. A superb writer and editor, Mike's contribution to the success of the renowned *Impact* magazine, can be seen in his knowing and witty articles that grace each issue. His considerable sense of humour and attention to detail makes working with him a genuine pleasure. I came to know him quite well during both the audition process and the subsequent contract negotiations and conversations on my behalf with the producers, director Ronny Yu, Jet Li himself, as well as the action coordinator, Yuen Woo-ping. Throughout the entire process, Mike championed my cause and I'm sure the other performers he recommended received the same exemplary treatment and attention. Over a period of several months before I got on the plane, we exchanged lengthy e-mails and telephone calls keeping me informed. His untiring efforts assured clear and speedy resolutions to each of their requests. Along with his partner, Ean Tang, Mike made my working experience in China pleasant and uncomplicated. Their help allowed me and the other Western fighters to do their best work by always keeping us informed and by handling the details of communication every step of the way, including acting as translators on the set. This was invaluable as you will later see. Their untiring diligence on my behalf left me free to focus on my performance. Without Mike's efforts, I wouldn't have had the chance to make my contribution to *Fearless*, and I will always be grateful. Mike is also an actor and transformed himself into the referee during the tournament sequences at the director's request, so look out for his efforts on screen as well as off.

Would I do it all again? In a heartbeat!

ANTHONY DELONGIS

For further information on Anthony Delongis, his personal journals and photographs from various projects as well as training opportunities, log onto www.delongis.com and tell them Impact sent you!