



UNCSA

THE ASSOCIATES

## The Art of Combat

*All eyes are fixed upon the commanding individual at the center of this space. Each of his ten associates is bearing a knife; each awaits the signal to act...*

A scene from *Julius Caesar*? Well, actually not. It's a movement class taught by UNCSA Drama professor and Director of Stage Combat, Dale Girard. All drama students at the school, as well as the occasional film or music student, pass through the classes taught by Girard, a third-degree Black Belt, one of only sixteen Fight Masters in the United States recognized by the Society of American Fight Directors, and a member of the UNCSA Drama faculty since 1997.

First year students learn stage combat with no weapons, except for *escrima*, or Philippine fighting sticks. In this second year class, knives of aluminum or blunted steel are added. Non-lethal, perhaps, but Girard emphasizes that “any knife can hurt you.” Throughout the fight curriculum there is consideration of “found weapons”- any object at hand that might be wielded with harmful intent. The bullwhip is not neglected. Third year students, at last, undertake the ancient art of *swordplay*. With a gleam in his eye, Girard says “We cover the history of sword fighting, [beginning with] the medieval broad sword.”



Between his office and the gymnasium in which class is held, a passing female student asks her teacher about a particular boxing venue. All questions pertaining to combat are fair game for the Fight Master.

“Basically, my lunch period is an open gym.” When asked if he ever gets to eat, Girard says “Sometimes.”

Before more strenuous exertions, class begins with warm-up and stretching. Though wearing dancers' tights, the students attend to their master as might be expected in a martial arts class. Girard is an energetic, burly man, born in Saskatchewan. If he may have gained a couple of pounds since his youth, he demonstrates during the warm-up session that he is still more limber than some of his students.

After about twenty minutes of limbering up and getting focused, the students select today's weapon from a large assortment in a heavy-duty metal locker. One young woman pulls the largest, nastiest-looking knife from the bin and declares with a smile “I'm feeling angry today.” Her teacher's shirt reads

Promoting tolerance, friendship, art,  
and understanding through  
*VIOLENCE.*

Do all drama students understand that combat skills are a necessary part of their professional toolkit? Girard says not always, citing a gifted actress who was a bit resistant about this class. After graduating from UNCSA she got a role in a television series that required horse riding and swordplay in every episode.

Girard stresses that “It's all about character.” Even if an acting career should never lead to a role requiring combat, this class experience explores another avenue of thinking about character. Conflict is inherent in drama. The dynamic of conflict must begin with instigation and lead to outcome, whether or not it manifests as physical violence. What happens in between is generated by the characters' personalities, capabilities, and goals.

As a teacher, Girard recognizes that each student must find their own comfort level with staged violence. The first step, he says is “accepting the fact that this is safe, even though their brain has been told that this is wrong.” An actor must modulate his or her natural level of aggression to match the role. It is important for stage combatants to be in a partnership, to agree upon and rehearse “rhythms and patterns.”

Some concerns are psychic: more than ever, in this *Me Too* era, trust must be established, and permission for specific physical contact that a scene requires. Other concerns are purely practical: a scene may require that your character get roughed up while wearing high heels, but you mustn't actually get hurt, because “you've still gotta do eight shows this week.”

In the hierarchy of responsibility for staged combat, the Actor must execute the choreography of the Fight Director who, in turn, serves the vision of the show's Director.

When asked if there is a place for improvisation, Girard is emphatic: “No, it has to all be staged. Now, they have influence, in saying 'I don't believe my character would do that' or 'based on my development, I think this' and, if it's not dangerous, I [as fight director] may be able to work with that.”



According to centuries of fighting tradition, there are nine angles of approach with a knife. In today's class pairs of students take turns standing as target and in carefully repeating the proper form for each of the nine. While polished technique is required to portray highly-skilled combatants, actors must be able to modify their technique with a weapon to reflect the “inherent truth of the character.” For example, Girard says “Let's say we're doing *West Side Story*. My characters are not trained fighters, but they have knives...”

Unlike real life, the goal in a particular scene may not be winning the fight but, rather, to lose convincingly, whether in acquiescence, resignation, or tooth-and-nail opposition. And then the toll taken during combat must be portrayed: “Yes, my class does cover the 'value' of an injury in regard to vocal and physical response, duration, and retention of pain and injury.”

Swordplay in shows needs to be brought to a reliable technical level at which “the audience needs to fear for the character,” but not for the actor. Girard says “You want the audience to take the ride of the scene.”

As the culmination of UNCSA students' training under Dale Girard “students pick a weapon style, and do fully-developed, fully-choreographed fight scenes.” While a given scene may have been used in earlier classes, each group of students executes “different choreography, because it has to fit their choices. And then we bring in an outside adjudicator from the Society of American Fight Directors to assess their work.”

Having completed Girard's rigorous training and met the standard of a top-level fight adjudicator, UNCSA Drama students can embark upon their careers confident that their Stage Combat skills will pass muster with casting directors, and with audience members.





In addition to his teaching at UNCSA, Dale Girard has served as Stunt Coordinator and personally performed stunts for a number of feature films. If you would like to see him plunge off a tall building, get bludgeoned, shot at, attacked with a sword, thrown down stairs, and set aflame, here is a link for his stunt reel. (he's ok, but says he did once break a toe)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbpkM1QFMF0>

# Your Associates Board: What Needs Doing, and Who Gets It Done

The *President* of The Associates board, *Linda Bettis*, is part of every team, offering support and helping to make decisions, as needed. The President is responsible for managing the organization's budget and, with the help of the board, represents The Associates to the school and the community. At the end of the day, the president makes sure that nothing that needs managing falls through the cracks.

The Associates Board *Secretary*, *Susan Melville*, takes minutes of the board meetings, providing a detailed, accurate record of every decision made and action taken. As the most recent *Past President*, Susan also serves a two-year term on the executive team with the President, Vice President, and Financial Liaison.

As *Vice President*, *Shelley Holden* attends executive team meetings as part of the training trajectory to succeed the current president. The Vice President also promotes membership relations and retention and arranges for UNCSA guest speakers at each month's board meeting.

The UNCSA Foundation manages all accounts, including money collected by The Associates (mainly membership dues) and disbursements. The *Financial Liaison*, *Calvin Jones*, serves as the fiscal link between The Associates and The Foundation, compiles monthly financial reports, and proposes a new budget for each fiscal year.

As the name suggests, *Behind the Scenes* give Associates a chance to observe the skills, preparation, and resources that are marshaled for a production before performers take the stage. *Anne Sessions* and *Nola Miller* arrange with UNCSA faculty and administrators to provide these opportunities.

As *Film School Liaison*, *Howard Skillington* informs The Associates membership about Film School screenings, as well as student film crews' needs for community cast members, locations, and feedback on films in-progress, as they arise.

*Diane Nations* contacts local businesses for donations of products, gift certificates, and coupons for *Gift Baskets* which are presented to welcome new UNCSA faculty members each academic year, along with information about our city to acquaint them the community.

*David Valentino* and *Judy Watson* manage *Helpmates*, in providing Associates volunteers to assist in a wide variety of UNCSA events and activities. These include helping returning and new students check-in; assisting in faculty and administrative offices; organizing, stocking, and distributing food from the Pickle Pantry to students in need; and supplying help for Associates events.

Veteran Board member *Nancy Gwyn* curates The Associates' institutional memory. As old photos, clippings, and reports materialize, she investigates, corroborates, and assimilates them into the organization's official *History* and *Photo Archive*.

*Anna Goodman* and *Amy Hubbard* manage the *Host Family* committee, which matches UNCSA residential high school students with local families for a home away from home. Host families can provide housing over breaks when the dorms are closed and the student is unable to travel home, an occasional home-cooked meal or outing off campus, and a private residence in which to have a break from the routine of school and dorm life.

*Karen Robertson* and *Amy Orser*, as the *Membership* team, keep the spreadsheet of members up to date, acknowledge receipt of new memberships and renewals, send out email notices regarding membership, the Pickle Pantry, and some Associates events, and inform Associates team leaders when new members choose their volunteer area.

As an inducement to prospective new members The Associates host two or more *Salon@Six* events each year, produced by the team of *Carolyn Bailey*, *Becky Brown*, and *Sandy Romanac Broadway*. This involves matching a Salon host space with performers from one of the UNCSA schools, and wrangling the myriad details, from the date and invitations to the guest list and refreshments.



Long-time board member *Mary Allen Martin* has worn various hats over the years. This year she is working on reestablishing a program to train and coordinate UNCSA *Tour Guides* to help visiting individuals and groups learn more about the school.

Each of us on The Associates Board encounters junctures at which the question arises “how can we...” and, at every turn, problems, snags, and impediments melt away, thanks to the efforts of our superb *Liaison* of the UNCSA Advancement Office, *Savannah Stanbery*. With unfailing cheerfulness and efficiency she enables us all in our shared mission to serve and support The University of North Carolina School of the Arts.

## **General Information—Important Links**

The Associates Website: <http://www.uncsa.edu/Associates>

At our website, you will find membership forms, a list of our Board members, and other general information.

Email Address: [uncsaassociates@gmail.com](mailto:uncsaassociates@gmail.com)

The Performance Calendar Website: <http://www.uncsa.edu/performances/>

Our Facebook page: <http://www.facebook.com/uncsaassociates>

Newsletter: [uncsaassociates.news@gmail.com](mailto:uncsaassociates.news@gmail.com)