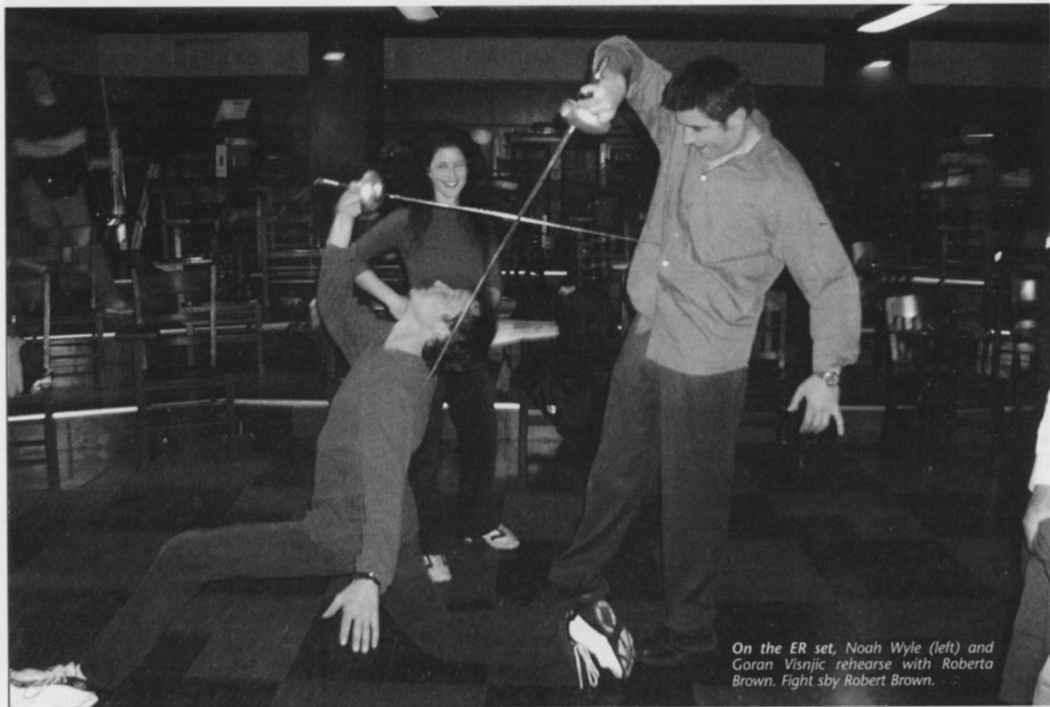


# TO THE POINT



On the *ER* set, Noah Wyle (left) and Goran Visnjic rehearse with Roberta Brown. Fight sby Robert Brown.

by J.T. Marlowe

**T**he *Fight Master* decided to return to basics and what better place to revisit one's roots than a fencing academy—The Westside Fencing Center in Los Angeles, one of the country's largest training facilities. There, *The Fight Master* met the agile and enchanting Roberta Brown.

## TRUE BEGINNINGS

Brown's roots are planted firmly in fencing. She took up the sport in college and continued her work as an actor and stage combat student in London at the Webber Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art. In addition to being on Westside's teaching staff, Brown is one of a handful of professional *swordmasters* who work between stage, screen and television as sword fight choreogra-

phers. She has worked as swordmaster, fight director, swordplay coach, and bullwhip choreographer on such film and television projects as *Charlie's Angels*, *Queen of Swords* and *ER*. She also has expertise in the Chinese Fighting Fans arena.

Teaching a beginner's class, Brown ran home the need for centering weight. She encouraged her students to check their positions in the mirror. She explained how the primary control of the foil is with thumb and forefinger—and how to determine the top of the weapon—how to grip—the subtle difference between right and left handers. She went on to show the *en garde* position and how to block a *parry*—how the *parry* clears the path for the *attack*. Brown used a common sense logic to bridge inexperience with newfound technical skill. Toward the end of this first lesson, she explained to her stu-

dents the value and meaning of the *salute*; how a warrior would kiss his sword as if it were a cross and offer it up to God. Then, to the students' delight, she gave them what they really came for: the experience of a *hit*. As she smiled and proclaimed: "I know that's why you're here!" Each student practiced a *hit* on Brown, who wore a mask and what she termed her *Barbie plate*. After the students left, she was asked why she still teaches beginners. "Because I truly enjoy introducing them to the sport! It also feeds my professional work with actors."

## EMERGENCY POINTERS

Brown worked with Noah Wyle and Goran Visnjic on a sword fight on *ER* this past season. Wyle's strength was in sport fencing while Visnjic's was in theatrical fencing. Brown used the strengths of each to choreograph the phrases of

this three-minute fight. When she works in the theatre, the allotted rehearsal time allows her to train actors to meld the text, character and arc of the dramatic action to the demands of the fight. In most of her film and television work, she is not afforded the same luxury with the technical demands of the camera, the shortened rehearsal time and the collaboration with the director who may alter a phrase at the last moment before shooting. Brown tries to have initial conversations with the director (the ultimate decision maker) and is proactive in her collaboration with the stunt or fight coordinator. With *ER* she was given a solid rehearsal time and two enthusiastic actors who wanted to *go for the gold*.

Brown's solid acting background set the foundation to communicate with the actors. Wyle was given the *why* of how one sword move leads to the next. As he proclaimed in admiration: "She's giving us *motivations!*" Brown was able to give both Wyle and Visnjic the subtextual links to the fight. Brown also used a dynamic hit from a 1964 Olympic Fencing match between Japan and France. She works the fights and then brings in the camera to adjust it. She coaches her actors on not *dropping out of frame* and how to get the most *dramatic* effect for their close-ups. With *ER*, she met with the director to understand and define his needs and what he hoped to see in her fights so that her choreography took shape and remained intact throughout. In other instances, Brown has had to use her honed instincts and improvisational skills to accomplish the task.

Photo by Lesley Bohm.



Roberta Brown

before shooting a fight sequence. Fortunately, Brown's ability to understand the tech-

Charlie's Angels include Roberta Brown as fencing double for actress Lucy Liu.



#### CHARLIE'S ANGELS

One of Brown's influences is Jackie Chan. She admires the way his fight choreography tells stories, and how he can create laughter with a single move. Such influences may have helped her to prepare for the work on the successful and adventurous film *Charlie's Angels*. Brown met and was on the same page with the stunt coordinator and even though, she tried to meet with the

director beforehand, it could not be arranged. Brown always tries to make it a priority to regularly meet and involve the director and director of photography in the process. It was not too surprising to Brown when the director requested a critical change

nical demands of the camera and the need for an exciting fight mitigated what could have proved disastrous otherwise. As always, Brown keeps the safety of the actors the highest priority. She reminds *adventurous* actors how important their faces are when they think and move ahead of their capabilities. She also feels that safety does not minimize the storytelling but is an integral element to its success. It is her solid experience, talent and smarts that allow her to thrive in an otherwise male-dominated field.

#### ON THE HORIZON

Brown continues to use her talents between stage, film and television. Upcoming projects include a book on stage combat for kids and a film for PBS on Boudica, the Celtic Queen starring Alex Kingston. She is also involved in the development of a possible film project based on a famous female pirate. And, as always, Brown can be found teaching her young initiates the fundamentals of fencing, keeping her rooted and reminding all fight directors of the great lessons of the sword.

Visit Roberta Brown's Web site: [www.robertabrown.net](http://www.robertabrown.net).

