

Mark Guinn: Theatre With A Punch – Season 1, Episode 10

Amy: You're listening to Beyond 1894, a podcast where we hear from Louisiana Tech University scholars, innovators, and professionals on their personal journeys and the impact they are making in the world around them. I'm your host, Amy Bell, and my co-host is Teddy Allen.

Amy: Hey, Teddy, guess what?

Teddy: What, Amy?

Amy: It is our last episode of the season

Teddy: For real?

Amy: Yeah. It's, it's been, it's been fun though.

Teddy: Yeah. Yes, when will next season begin, Amy? Is that in the fall?

Amy: Hopefully, yeah. I would like to have our audience members actually email us some of their recommendations. And, and hopefully when we do start next season, we can go ahead and interview people from the recommendation list.

Teddy: That's a great idea. How should they email us?

Amy: So, people can email us at 1894@latech.edu. And, and let us know what they want to hear.

Teddy: Email us 'what I did last summer.' You can't do that yet, because it's not summertime yet, but that's just a suggestion, and then let us know what you want to hear.

Amy: Yeah.

Teddy: What are we doing today, Amy? You suppose?

Amy: So, I wanted to ask you if you like action movies.

Teddy: I do.

Amy: Do you have a favorite fight scene that you saw in the movie or in a theater production or maybe a TV show that really stuck to you?

Teddy: Dirty Harry. Any of the Dirty Harry things. Have you ever watched Clint Eastwood in Dirty Harry? He's a quite iconic character?

Amy: I have not. I have not.

Teddy: It was 100 years ago that they were filmed now that I'm thinking about. These are 40-year-old, it's a 40-year-old franchise. But uh, go back and grab you some Dirty Harry. He was just an iconic figure in American film, quite a character. And he was a San Francisco cop, and when he showed up, the party was over.

Amy: And so, did he fight a lot, is that what happened?

Teddy: He would fight a lot and sometimes he would just pull out his big 44 gun, the biggest, you know, handgun in the world and could blow your head clean off with one shot.

Amy: Yeah, I don't watch a lot of action movies, but I do like the show 'Glow.' Have you ever heard of that show?

Teddy: That does not sound like it would lend itself to a lot of fighting.

Amy: It is about, it is about women's wrestling.

Teddy: Oh, for goodness sakes, okay.

Amy: Watching them train how to fight, but in a way that's safe and fake, I guess, it's really cool. But Davy Norris interviewed Mark Guinn, the Director of the School of Performing Arts here at Louisiana Tech. He is a fight master, and Davy gives a good description of what it means to be a fight master and what stage combat is. Mark talks about the national stage combat workshop that in recent years has been hosted here at Louisiana Tech. And he talks about his journey from being a college student in theater and lighting design to becoming a fight master and teacher.

Teddy: And if you haven't met him, once we get to where we can meet people again, in real life. Go by and check Mark out; he's we're lucky to have him and he's quite an accomplished dude.

Amy: Yeah, pick a fight with him.

Teddy: Don't do that.

Amy: I hope you enjoy the interview.

Dave: Hello, everyone. I'm Dave Norris, Chief Research and Innovation Officer at Louisiana Tech University.

Dave: The Society of American Fight Directors is one of the premier internationally recognized organizations dedicated to promoting safety and fostering excellence in the art of stage combat. Along with the Society of British Fight Directors, it's one of the two original organizations of its kind in the world.

Dave: Within the Society of American fight directors there is a designation; the highest level of distinction in the industry known as fight master. A fight master is an individual who has demonstrated a supreme level of professional excellence as a fight director and as a teacher. Fight masters are elected by their peers in the industry and fight masters are the only members of the stage combat community that are endorsed to adjudicate skills proficiency tests, and to serve as master teachers.

Dave: In the studio with me today is a fight master of stage combat, Mark Guinn. Mark's the Director of the School of Theatre at Louisiana Tech. He's worked in theaters from Tokyo to Rome to Ruston as a lighting designer, a director, a fight director. Mark is a past recipient of the Society of American Fight Directors Presidents Award, the Paddy Crean Award, and the Louisiana Tech University Senate Chair Award for Excellence in Teaching. In addition to his distinction as a fight master of stage combat with the society, he has been a certified teacher with the British Academy of stage and screen combat. He has served as coordinator of the national stage combat workshops in Las Vegas, the stage combat workshop at Louisiana Tech University and was on the faculty of the first international stage combat workshop and the British national stage combat workshop. Mark, thank you for being here. And welcome.

Mark: Thanks, Dave. Glad to be here.

Dave: So, I made a reference in that introduction to something people in your industry might not be familiar with. You've been recognized by your peers and stage combat with a Paddy Crean Award. So, Patrick Crean, for those who don't recognize the name, was a British actor, theatrical fight director, who was one of the most influential figures in the art of modern stage combat. You might say he revolutionized stage combat in ways specifically with regard to swordplay and the flamboyant style of swordplay that some people might be familiar with from the Earl Flynn movies of the 1950s.

Mark: Yes.

Dave: Tell us about Paddy Crean, about that award and about what that recognition means or meant to you.

Mark: The Paddy Crean Award is probably in the society the highest award we give. It's the award that's given, well, the definition is transitioned a bit, but it's typically given to the individual that embodies the spirit of Patrick Crean, Paddy Crean. Who was, as you have so eloquently detailed, a fight director, teacher, instructor, stunt double, most notably for his work with Errol Flynn, and Master of Ballantrae, and a couple other films and Hollywood films. But he is known for his work as a fight director in Canada, and I met him in 1989 when the Society of American Fight directors brought him to the national stage combat workshop in Memphis, Tennessee.

Dave: Was he still swinging swords back then?

Mark: He was, he was a wonderful, spry gentleman at the time and did quite a few master classes. But the award is usually presented at the National Stage Combat Workshop. The award is typically a committee decision. In the early days, when I received it, it was the fight masters, and it's still the fight masters, but I believe it's also in conjunction with the workshop coordinator and other members of the staff. And it's usually, as said, someone who embodies the spirit, the spirit of generosity, of compassion, of 'swashbucklyness'.

Mark: And I think that I received the, the award then because of a significant amount of work that I was doing in helping organize the society. The years that I was the production manager for the national stage combat workshop, I worked with the college of fight masters, to pull us out of the good old boys' club and to organize us around a professional model. And was instrumental in creating additional staffing for the national stage combat workshops. And making sure that we were taking care of everyone that was coming to those workshops. And, and I think because of that work, and just you know, I care, I care about, care about the people, care about

the little guy, and wanted to make sure that we were all being taken care of. And that's where that came from. Amongst those honors I have received; it is the one I cherish the most. And it was, it was, it was handed to me by my dear friend, Drew Frazier.

Dave: A Fight Master?

Mark: Fight Master and mentor, yes.

Dave: So, a little background for some folks listening: Stage combat or fight craft or fight choreography, it's specialized techniques in the performing arts, designed to create the illusion of physical combat without causing actual harm to the performers. That's one way we could describe it.

Mark: Yep.

Dave: So, this is, for centuries, employed on the live stage, as well as an opera and ballet productions. With the advent of movies and television, then we have choreographed film sequence, filmed fight scenes, which I assume is a very different animal from live. The history of stage fighting or mock combat, we could go all the way back to antiquity. Look at the evolution of ritualized forms of mock combat and war dances or religious rituals, where, where the combat symbolized some important spiritual struggle or a historical event. And then we have these medieval night tournaments, at that time, and jousting competitions, and fencing competitions or performances, and these were mock combats in many ways. And these were huge sporting events of those times.

Mark: Yes.

Dave: And different cultures have their own histories, sort of methods of practice and weapons across different cultures.

Mark: The Society of American Fight Directors, it was, it was founded by essentially David Boushey, Erik Frederickson, Joe Martinez....

Dave: Out of East and West coast: Seattle, New York, Los Angeles or San Francisco....

Mark: Yep. And it was, it was Suddeth, not Suddeth, it was a Boushey that came over. He had gone to London and studied with the Society of British Fight Directors, and brought that information back, and so it was an oral transmission. And the oral transmission and a lot of the work was based on the sport fencing model, the parries in sport fencing—épée parries, 12345, and sabre parries—and that's where the flash came from. You know, you were talking about, in the history there, one of the things that's real interesting in, for us, is that in the English theatres, in the Elizabethan era, if you wanted to be a fight Master, you had to fight all the registered fight masters. And you would have to rent a theater and open it to all comers. And these were, as you had mentioned, huge sporting events. And you had to offer up a specific regiment of weapons and be prepared to fight...

Dave: All the other fight masters.

Mark: ... all the other fight masters. Yeah. One of the, one of the, one of the running jokes was how can you tell a fight master in London at the time? Oh, it's a guy with one eye.

Dave: So, so you've, you made reference to the national stage combat workshop. You've had this obviously close connection and influence on the Society of American Fight Directors over the years. And a major component of what that organization does is provide stage combat training.

Mark: Yes.

Dave: And they do it in part, at least, through this national stage combat workshop. You, you here at Louisiana Tech have hosted one of the first and longest, I believe, stage combat workshops in the nation here in Ruston.

Mark: Yes.

Dave: For a long time. And then as a result of your presence here, I believe, Louisiana Tech became the new host site for...

Mark: That's correct, yeah.

Dave: ...the National stage combat workshop a couple of years ago. And now again, this year.

Mark: Yes.

Dave: I mean, if we keep that schedule?

Mark: Yes. Yes, we will.

Dave: Tell us a little bit about that workshop. What happens there? Who's there? What's important about it?

Mark: The national stage combat workshop is the flagship workshop for the Society of American fighter directors. And for years and years, it was the only place to go to get the training.

Dave: Formal training, where you could actually get certified and all of that.

Mark: Before you could get certified in what, you know, oh man it used to be just five weapons that you would get certified in. There was unarmed, rapier and dagger, broadsword, court sword, which became small sword, and quarter staff. And we have since added knife, single sword, and there's eight weapons, I'm forgetting something...

Dave: There's a whip...

Mark: ...sword and shield.

Dave: ...I see a lot of the time. Is that not counted in?

Mark: No, the whip doesn't count.

Dave: That's just for fun.

Mark: That's just for fun. But that was the, that was the only place you could go. The ranks within the society back then were friend, and associate, and then fight Master. The certified teacher rank didn't appear until '87, ten years after the, the, the founding of the organization. And if you wanted the knowledge and wanted the training, that was the only place to go. Three weeks, intensive classes with fight masters. Master teachers that were working, as you'd mentioned before, from coast to coast, that were involved in the Broadway film industry in New York, involved in the film industry in Seattle, Vancouver, and the West Coast. They were, and still are, continue to be, the master teachers and working professionals in the industry.

Mark: The workshop originally started, oh, the very first one was up in Salem, Mass, and then it moved to Northern Kentucky University. And then we were in Memphis for a couple years. That's where my knowledge and participation actually began. But, from Memphis it went to Vegas, and it stayed in Vegas for years and years and years, and then moved to North Carolina School of the Arts. And then they underwent, and was there for another, perhaps, decade or so. And they started some renovations up there four years ago, and they started looking for a new home.

Mark: And because I'm a former workshop coordinator, and because our summers here aren't busy, I was able to sell Louisiana Tech as an option. And I think a large part of that is because the wonderful collaboration that I received from the folks over at the Lambright. And as a Director of the School of Theater, formerly the School of Performing Arts, I had this facility, the Howard Center, that was not sitting vacant, but we had a lot of, a lot of downtime in between major events. And it was like, if the workshop comes in at these dates, here are opportunities for us to grow. And....

Dave: So, you've hosted it two years in a row, now?

Mark: Two years in a row. It's gonna be back for a third. The coordinator of the workshop, who's rotating out after this year, has said that, if it was her choice, we'd be here till we got kicked out. Because it's great. It's, it's, given all the locations that we've been at, it is an absolutely convenient and wonderful spot, and a large part of that is the folks at the Lambright are awesome. They just, and Ruston, in particular, and everybody that has been here knows that.

Dave: Now you grew up in in Paris, Tennessee.

Mark: I did.

Dave: Which, to state the obvious, is a long way from its namesake in France geographically and otherwise. But Paris does have an Eiffel Tower as I've heard.

Mark: Oh my gosh! You have done your research, lad.

Dave: I think it's known for its support for the arts in some way. Is that right?

Mark: Yes.

Dave: Is there some support for the Arts there? But early in your career, you were a stage techie. I don't know exactly the right term for it. You can tell me. Stage technician. You work with stage crews doing lights, set design kind of stuff, on tours for some folks. People might have heard of young lady, named Madonna, who had a little success back in the 80s. And then you tried to help keep Bruce Springsteen looking young and cool on, on his tour.

Mark: Yes.

Dave: Work with the Gypsy Kings and my personal favorite, the Jewish Elvis, Neil Diamond. So, these are, these are, these are large, loud, bright, very expensive productions, and it's almost seems like the, the goal is to overwhelm people with the, the visual, and the audio, and the feeling of all of it. What's it like sitting at the light board when, when they play Sweet Caroline or Born in the USA?

Mark: My earliest jobs in the theater were as a scenic carpenter, and master carpenter, and then later on, technical director. And my work in the outdoor dramas, over 28 years in the outdoor dramas, started as that, working as a technical director. Which allowed me the opportunity to move outside of the frame of the theater. And begin to look at theater from the outside and provided me opportunity to collaborate with lighting designers, sound designers, directors, producers, managers, to begin to look at the form from the from the outside.

Mark: And so, I've always had this love of movement, space, volume, and light. And when I went back to grad school, after my undergrad and professional experience working in the theater, the chair of the program was John McFadden, who was at the cutting edge of sound design at the time.

Mark: Back when we were doing sound sampling, and you had to buy these big sound sampling units at 3000, \$4,000 for stuff that we now got an app for on our phone. And building these, these huge sound designs on reel to reel tapes. You know, one of the theater jokes was: how can you tell the sound designers? Well, they're the guys with all the band aids on their fingers, and that's because you have to roll out the reel to reel tape, put it in a splicing block, cut it with the razor blade, you tape it back up, put the leader tape in, you label....

Dave: A lot of opportunity to slice your fingers.

Mark: Yeah, yeah. So, I changed and pursued an MFA in Technical Direction with emphasis in Lighting and Sound Design. And that led me to work in Los Angeles with Obie's Lighting Company. And I was lucky enough to get in through my friend, Bert Bracegirdle, who was a big wig out there.

Mark: When they first started bringing in robotic lights, there were three companies in the United States. And if you think about rock and roll and lights that wiggle and move, the first company was Vari-Lite, and they held tight to all their materials and software. And if you did a tour, if you did a rock and roll tour, and you brought in a show and it had a Vari-Lite guy, by contract, you had to provide these cats with a black room and a security guard. And whenever they would repair their lights, they would always go into these black rooms to do repairs. So, nobody knew how the lights work, but they were gorgeous. They were the fuselage of light. And they got that from filling the arenas with smoke and shining lights in the smoke and creating these gorgeous, loud, emotion filled environments. Huge cathartic experiences.

Mark: And then the second one was Morpheus in Northern California, who didn't quite have the beautiful saturated colors that were all based on dichroic reflectors at the time, nobody could figure it out. But these cats from France created the brightest moving lights in the industry. They weren't the most colorful, they didn't have the options, but they were gorgeous, and they were called telescans. And I was one of the first US trained telescan operators, which is how I ended up on the Madonna tour. And we were working with Madonna and Springsteen, the top lighting

designers in the world at the time. Peter Morris amongst those that uh, and I don't know if Pete's still out there now, but his, his vision and ability to put together these shows was, is to this day, it's still mind numbing. I look back on those days with mixed feelings, but the work that we were doing was, yeah, the best.

Dave: So, Madonna was good. But Madonna had a lot of folks around her making that, making that performance come off much bigger. And not just Madonna, but everybody.

Mark: Yes.

Dave: It's a big show with a lot of people.

Mark: It was a big show.

Dave: So, how do you go from The Queen of Pop, The Boss, The Jewish Elvis to stage combat? Is that, is there sort of a natural progression from stage tech to stage combat?

Mark: It was all happening at the same time, strangely enough. You know, the big tour and the lights, the money, and the travel was fabulous. But it was, it was, and building the shows were really, really kind of awesome. But the rest of it, you know, because you did the same thing. The Madonna show was, was on a click track. We did the same thing every night. It was kind of soul crushing. There wasn't any variation there. There was nothing going on and there was, there was a, you know a lot of folks that worked on that that would come out and get it started, the creative artists, and then they'd leave it to their number one and they, they, they'd disappear.

Mark: And those were, you know, those were limited runs. That was like a nine month, The Blonde Ambition Tour, nine-month, ten-month contract. And then I'd come back and pick up some additional work. And I was still working in the outdoor dramas, which the more work that I was doing there, I was mentoring myself and apprenticing to Drew Frazier. And Drew Frazier, in particular, who was working as fight director, and director, and working his way through the outdoor drama circuits, and I was following his, his coattails.

Mark: So, at many of these places I would get on as a technical director, but I would also be, what was known as, the swing. At these major outdoor dramas, there would be three or four major battles where you would have 20 people fighting 20 people, and then all sorts of smaller incidents of violence in creating the spectacle of the storyline. And every night, something would happen, someone would be sick, or someone couldn't do a roll. And I would go in, and learn the choreography, and perform that choreography that night. That's what the job of the swing was.

Mark: And on route to doing that, I was taught how to do high falls. And that became part of the repertoire and learn. And I already knew about guns, I was raised in a gun culture, but learned about black powder weapons and cannons. And began to work in choreograph with that, and just work my way up through that. And that was more rewarding and soul gratifying, or satisfying to the soul, than any of the big work.

Mark: The Boss was cool.

Dave: That helps.

Mark: The boss was, was really, really cool, and his show was never ever the same you had to be on, working for, for Bruce and that was really cool. I, I miss those days. The Gypsy Kings were awesome.

Dave: So, let's talk a little bit about some of these productions or at least one of them. Looking at some of your directorial credits. *The Leaf Men and The Brave Good Bug*, so this is a play based on a book by William Joyce. William Joyce is an acclaimed American and Louisiana based writer, illustrator, filmmaker. He is an Academy Award winner, Emmy Award winner that you collaborated with on that play. You directed the world stage premiere of *Shane*.

Mark: Yes. Written by our own Dr. Robbins

Dave: So, that the people familiar with the famous Western, Alan Ladd. *Blue Jacket*, the epic outdoor drama. *Living Dead in Denmark*, a personal favorite of mine. It's a Shakespeare zombie mashup. *She Kills Monsters*, I think, was that a sequel to *Living Dead*?

Mark: Not necessarily a sequel. It's the same playwright, who's a distinguished alumni of the program, Qui Nguyen.

Dave: Yes. And then we have the national award-winning, original script, *KAB Man*.

Mark: Yeah.

Dave: Tell us about *KAB Man*.

Mark: *KAB Man*. I was, and the program, was lucky enough to have this for about almost a decade: we had a group of students that filtered through the program that just were absolutely amazing. They wanted to do more work, and more work, and more work. And I, over the course of a couple of years, created an additional class for these kids that were coming through the program that wanted movement training and wanted to explore movement expression in performance. And we would create original scripts. We'd spend a quarter working on and developing, and you know, I guess in other circles this would be device theater, but this is what we did. They would create original scripts. And then in the next quarter, we would perform the scripts. *KAB Man* was that.

Dave: Is that an acronym, *KAB Man*?

Mark: It is. It stands for Keep America Beautiful Man.

Dave: Okay.

Mark: Keep America beautiful, man. But this, this started with Keep Louisiana Beautiful and the, the state organization that keep Louisiana beautiful, and a sincere effort on our part, the students' part, and my part, to recycle and to not pollute. We started working on this project and doing research. And in doing research, we discovered, on the national Keep America beautiful site, that they had this cartoon character KAB Man—K. A. B. man. They say K. A. B., we like Kab, like keep America beautiful.

Mark: *KAB Man* never made it really, really big. But when we started this, I contacted the national organization and said, "Hey, I have a class, and where we'd like to do a play, and we want permission to use KAB Man as our central character." And they were like, "Sure. We, just

want to see what you do.” And that's how it started. And we got together, and the kids took a look at the pollutants, the number one pollutants, in the world at the time, and created characters from those number one pollutants.

Dave: So, KAB Man's a character, the pollutants have characters, and this is the adventures....

Mark: And KAB Man's sidekick was a young, a young lady called Kela Bell, which was sort for keep Louisiana beautiful, and they fought Cig Man, who was living cigarette butt and fought with cigarette butts, and Styro, who was the Styrofoam cup and hit a big giant Styrofoam cup mallet, and Plastique, who is the plastics Plastic Wizard Queen, and could magically make plastic come alive and had as a traveling companion a giant plastic dragon. Yeah....

Dave: I'm guessing there was some fighting.

Mark: A little bit.

Dave: And maybe KAB Man won?

Mark: Yeah.

Dave: Thank goodness. Now this was recognized president's higher education community service on a roll. So national recognition for, particularly for this, the contribution to supporting volunteerism, service learning, community involvement.

Mark: Yeah, we are so grateful to our community partners, Kathy Cox- Boniol, Keep Louisiana Beautiful, and the national organization of Keep America Beautiful. The year after we performed that, it was without my knowledge, it was submitted to the national organization. And we were invited to the national organization meeting that was in New Orleans. And unbeknownst to us, we were sitting at the table at the beginning of the award ceremony, and they said, “And this year we've had these new categories that we'd like to share with you...,” and then started running the fights from the show. And I'm like, what's going on?

Dave: Where did they get that?

Mark: Yes.

Dave: It's a good surprise.

Mark: It was awesome.

Dave: At any good university, there are a handful of faculty that students come to work with. They come to that university, but they come to work with that person. So, students come here, not just to Tech, or to theater, but they come here also to work with Mark Guinn. So, tell me about your perspective on working with students that come here to work with you.

Mark: Wow, that's, it's what gets me out of bed in the morning. Knowing that I get to go in, and and train, and play. That's what I'm pushing to get the students to do: is to play. It's so funny. Everybody wants to be an actor, and they'll stand over at the side of class in the morning. They'll be goofing around, and goofing around all the time when you don't want them to be goofing around. You put them on the floor, and you say, “Okay, time to play,” and people like, “Ugh....”

Dave: They lock up.

Mark: Yeah, that's exactly and, and... It's, it's introducing them to their corporeal being and going, "Look, you're a biomechanical.... You are unique and wonderful. Let's figure out how this works, and then, let's start to play." Yeah, it does. It gets me up. I get up way early in the mornings to warm up just so I can continue to play at the level that I want to be able to play at.

Dave: Mark Guinn, Fight Master of Stage Combat, Director of the School of Theater at Louisiana Tech University. Thanks for visiting with us this morning.

Mark: Thank you, Davy. It's been a pleasure.

Dave: It's been a delight.

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Amy: Beyond 1894 is produced by the Office of University Communications, with help from The Waggoner Center and The School of Music, at Louisiana Tech University. Dave Norris is the executive producer. I, Amy Bell, am the producer and chief editor, and Teddy Allen and I are cohosts. The sound engineering for this episode was done by Jensen Gates and the music featured was arranged by Kaelis Ash.