

SNIPER SHOTS

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In *Little Murders*, a bullet from a sniper's gun is required to shatter a window and strike a character onstage. This is the technical problem with which I was confronted as designer several years ago at Lincoln College in Lincoln, Illinois. Specifically, I had to devise a way to create this little bit of mayhem in a safe, simple, and inexpensive manner.

A number of experiments were devised to test simulations for shattered glass. The most memorable was a series of attempts to splatter capsules of petroleum jelly against a window pane. In theory, petroleum jelly propelled with enough intensity against a glass sheet should render a very nice imitation bullet hole. Unfortunately, we were never able to perfect the technique. Globbs were lobbed at various test windows, re-

sulting only in greasy glass.

I decided that the only reasonable alternative was to actually "shoot" a window. But how to do it? Because the window wall was otherwise certain to fall victim to wobbles, it was constructed with substantial wood framing and Upsom board surface. The window itself was a specially built double-hung unit. Thin, but stiff, acrylic sheet was mounted in the frame. To facilitate changing the pane for each performance, it was held in place by thumbtacks. Because the acrylic was brittle, when "shot" it shattered into several largish-sized pieces. But, because the pieces were light in weight, they did not travel more than 5' or 6' before falling to the stage.

Our "bullet" was a medium-sized nut piated from a bolt, and painted black. The

HOW-TO

BY ROGER LIPERA

bolt rested on the offstage side of the window sill. A length of 50-lb. monofilament fishing line was tied to the bolt. The line from the bolt ran through a tiny hole drilled in the acrylic pane at the point where the bullet was to strike. It then ran down in front of the pane and back through another tiny hole immediately under the sill.

During the performance the fishing line was kept loose so that the window could be raised and lowered without disturbing the nut. Just before the shot, a stagehand slowly pulled the slack out of the line. Blocking was carefully worked out so that timing be-

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SCABBARDS AND BUCKLERS

In August 1986, Michael Kahn, the artistic director of the Shakespeare Theatre at the Folger in Washington, DC, hired David Leong to choreograph the difficult fight sequences of *Romeo and Juliet* within the tight confines of the Folger Library's tiny reproduction of the Globe Theatre. When I, as properties manager, heard this news, it relieved many of my deepest weapon fears. Working with a professional of his caliber almost made me happy to spend half of my budget on swords, though providing blades is only part of arming 10 actors. When David asked for

tween performers and crew was spot on. Immediately prior to the sniper's shot, the actress palmed a small blood capsule from an ashtray on a centerstage coffee table. She then moved to a position just off center opposite the window. This was to avoid any chance of being struck by a piece of the window. On cue, a stagehand backstage near the window fired a starter's pistol. The crewman operating the bullet yanked the fishing line very hard. The nut was pulled through the acrylic sheet. Pieces of window pane and the bullet flew towards the victim. The actress spun as if hit, and while doing so slapped the hand with the blood capsule to her head, then dropped to the floor. Meanwhile, the pieces of window were already on the carpet and the nut safely tucked

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For *Romeo and Juliet*, the Folger made scabbards with leather straps and steel rings. Bucklers were of fiberglass, with hide handles.

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racked plastic wrap directly onto the aluminum surface, and then sprayed that liberally with silicon spray, which behaved like a fiberglass release agent. Onto that, we laid five layers of medium-grade cloth fiberglass and polyester resin. After we popped the mold off, we glued a circle of 1/2" hemp along the front edge to create a rim for the curved buckler, and then applied fiberglass to the rope.

For the handles, we fiberglassed 2" x 6" strips of hide directly onto the back of bucklers, carefully refilling any air bubbles with extra resin. We then adhered thin, flexible leather with shoe leather barge around the glassed-over hemp edges, and cemented a circle of 1" split hide onto the buckler front, riveting every 3". We found that the hide accepts the continued stress of broadsword combat evenly without splitting or gouging. Finally, we glued industrial felt to the leather handles to pad the actor's hand, and lined the rest of the buckler backs with regular-grade felt to completely protect the actors from any fiberglass splinters.

Happily, the scabbards and bucklers we produced not only lasted the length of an extremely violent run of *Romeo and Juliet* without any repairs (except the nightly scrubbing of the cornhusker lotion blood off the scabbards), but are still in decent

enough condition for rental purposes. For this I have not only fiberglass and conduit to thank, but also Mr. Leong's carefully controlled choreography. □

shocking event. Best of all, it worked perfectly every time with no snags, glitches, or injuries. □

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into the shadows under the window sill.

The perceived line of action started with the gunshot offstage in the "street," continued through the window guided by the flying window parts, and finally focused on the victim. The nut registered only as another fragment of window as it traveled onstage. Because it moved very quickly, and because it had only a short distance to fly, the black nut was perceptually overpowered by the larger, slower, and more visually stimulating acrylic pieces. We knew of no audience member who detected how the effect worked. In fact, even those of us who studied the effect as it was executed, pun acknowledged, had difficulty in spotting its components.

We knew in advance that a sniper's bullet shattering a window had the possibility of being a complicated, dangerous, and possibly expensive effect. Through careful planning we were able to use common materials to create a dynamic and appropriately

HOOPSKIRT

from page 99

H can perform the same function as G but with 3/8" pegs that can slip directly into the side holes of piece C.

I is an illustration on edge of piece C. Into those holes 3/8" pegs can be placed, giving the hoop a place to rest while the costumer works with it. The 2" increments between the holes allow more versatility for hoop placement. The hardware needed for assembly includes tech screws, 1/4" stove bolts, washers, and wing nuts, and 3/8" dowel cut to the necessary lengths.

Again, the versatility of the rack allows any type of hoop skirt used in theatre or fashion to be built with much less aggravation. Additionally, since most costume shops have space problems, the entire rack collapses when not in use. □

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