For the past few years, Michelle Ladd has been working as a motion capture fight director for films. “Motion capture” has been used in the video game industry for years to create more realistic looking action. Now it is being used in major motion pictures along with specific artificial intelligence software, called Massive, to fill in crowd scenes and create specialty characters. It works by capturing human motion in three-dimensions into a computer file, which can then be edited and adapted as needed by motion editors and animators as they create characters, either as humans or as creatures. This motion is placed into scenes in the movie and creates CG (computer graphic) creatures with very natural motion that blend in well with the live action performers.

Most recently, Ladd has been involved in the production of Lord of the Rings: Return of the King and The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, which will be released later this year. As a motion capture fight director, her job has been to develop character movement styles and direct motion capture fight sequences for various creatures in these movies.

Ladd reports that her has been an interesting career path. “I have training as an actress, dancer, fight choreographer, and stunt performer,” she says. “This work requires knowledge and understanding of each of those disciplines to create well-rounded, believable battle creatures and simulations.” And one of the most rewarding aspects of this work, she says, is being part of a creative team (production, talent, motion editors, animators, visual effects supervisors, etc.) that pulls together to create such exciting action that looks so incredibly real in the films.

Although this career didn’t exist when Ladd attended Birmingham-Southern, she believes that the education she received from the Fine and Performing Arts Division prepared her well for this venture. “The Theatre Department’s focus on being a well-rounded student showed me how to recognize opportunities for creative growth and to take advantage of new ideas and technologies,” she explains. “I also owe traits taught to me such as focus, organization, and success via tenacity from great teachers like Michael Flowers (theatre professor) and Ruth-Ammons Henry.” But her most influential mentor, Ladd says, was Patti Manning, costumer for the Theatre Department. “She taught me the value of hard work and the pride that comes from it, and showed me how to lead others with great grace and dignity—a very important trait as a director in a studio.”

This specific job Michelle Ladd is doing is very new in the world of visual effects. But as these effects continue to play such a vital role in films, and with film action becoming more spectacular each year, she realizes that hers is a career that has great opportunity to grow, and says she feels blessed to have had the opportunity to work on such wonderful projects over the years.

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