

STAGE COMBAT

A well-performed stage fight can be the culmination of an electrifying scene, a cathartic release for the audience, or the highlight of an entire play. On the other hand, a stage fight can also be a veritable minefield waiting patiently for the actor to take a wrong step. The results can be more than merely embarrassing; they can be painful and permanent.

Most professional theatres hire trained fight directors to handle the unique staging demands of combat scenes. In the world of high school theatre, however, directors rarely have access to professional fight directors, and so end up staging combat sequences themselves. They most likely are working with student actors who've had little or no experience with stage combat. Playing surfaces, sight lines, props, and costumes often are less than ideal. But even with these limitations, high school directors and students can execute simple combat sequences effectively and safely if they start to think like professional fight directors.

What is a fight, how is it staged, what factors directly affect it? Forewarned is forearmed, and a great many accidents occur because the inexperienced fight director failed to ask the right questions at the outset.

The fight scene is a dramatic entity within the context of the script, serving a specific dramatic purpose. Why did the author write it? Is the fight an inevitable eruption of long-smoldering hate, or is it the spontaneous result of sudden rage? What are the conditions of the combatants: drunk, sober, fearful, prepared? What are their backgrounds or social classes? Would they know how to fight credibly?

Next comes the question of weapons. Under most circumstances in the high school theatre, fights with rapiers, broadswords, and other objects of destruction should be avoided completely. Even if the director feels absolutely confident in her own armed combat skills, and the fight scene in question demands weaponry to make sense, a number of conditions must be satisfied before the heavy metal starts flying.

First, can weapons be secured that are designed for actual use? The decorative Toledo wall-hanger is designed to grace a rec room, not the final act of *LEAR*. Swords must be capable of withstanding repetitive heavy impact. Second, do the weapons suit the period or visual presentation of the production? A fight between Hal and Hotspur conducted in full armor but with modern fencing foils presents a ridiculous picture.

Most importantly, are they weapons the actors can be trained to handle in the available rehearsal time?

Stage fighting skills, especially those involving period weapons, are not common among the student actor's repertoire. The rehearsal period must include time to learn the basics and become familiar with the weapon's weight and balance. And, of course, moves must all be within the actor's physical capabilities. Swords describing flashing arcs are visually spectacular, but if the actor cannot control the weapon, you simply have set the stage for a visually spectacular disaster.

Once again, is the person choreographing the fight trained to handle the weapons in question? Don't ask the school's fencing coach to stage *HENRY V*. The object of competitive fencing is to hit and hit fast -- the very antitheses of stage combat. Also, weapons must be used in the manner in which their design predicates. Medieval swords are designed for hacking and slashing blows; rapiers use the thrust and draw-cut. Modern fencing weapons have no readily adaptable similarities, and are used in a sport in which protective equipment is worn at all times. Modern fencing weapons can't break bones through percussion, and they are too light to require two hands for control.

Once the weapon issue is settled, the fight director has other things to think about. Virtually anything that impinges on physical movement affects the execution of the stage fight and must be anticipated and accommodated.

The most obvious impediment to movement is the costume. Does it bind or restrict the actor in any way, and if so, where? Pants tight through the hips and crotch naturally limit kicks or lunges. Mobility in the shoulders and elbow will affect certain types of blows.

It is very important that a costume designer understand what movement the actor must be capable of, especially if a period is going to be stylized. Period costume doesn't necessarily restrict movement -- after all, in many periods, clothing was designed to accommodate the possibility of a man having to fight in it.

However, there are certain features of a period costume that can create a hazard if unaddressed in the choreography. Capes and cloaks, if uncontrolled, can flail around with a life of their own and impede the progress of a sword; they can wrap around arms, legs, or head or hook onto odd bits of set and furniture. What happens to a scabbard once the sword is drawn? Will the hat stay on during the fight? Is the actor wearing spurs? Jewelry such as elaborate chains should be tacked down to the costume. Gloves should fit snugly. Armor must be designed so its articulation allows for the full range of normal movement. Even wigs and beards can greatly affect a fight; actors should rehearse with them as soon as possible. Footwear, regardless of period or style, is of paramount importance. It must fit snugly without being overly tight and must provide good traction on a wide variety of surfaces.

So, now a word about the surface. The set (if the designer is treating it as a workplace for the actor and not as an additional character in the play) should be designed to accommodate the action. By that I mean that no designer should expect actors to perform fights on a raked surface or on a set where the largest open space is two square feet. The fight director should learn as soon as possible what areas of the stage (walls, stairs, balconies) can support weight and what furniture can be safely used in the action.

Rugs should be tacked down so as not to move under the actors' feet. Likewise, props such as lamps may be secured to tables if there is a danger that they might fall and break, scattering the stage with shards.

Lighting and special effects also affect the fight scene. Low light can change depth perception, as can certain types of colored light. Also, if an actor walks from an area of bright light to an area of low light, or vice versa, there must be a pause in the fight for the actor's eyes to adjust.

to the new level of ambient light. The same is true for the use of flashpots.

Now we return to the actors. If rehearsal time permits, a fight should not be choreographed until the actors have had some time with the script. A fight should reflect the actor's characterization -- something that normally hasn't jelled at the first read-through. A fight director should be careful not to impose on the actor his own interpretation of the role through the fight choreography.

In addition, an actor must have enough confidence in both his and his opponent's ability, and must be sufficiently rehearsed in the fight, that he is capable of acting during its execution. The performance of a fight can often make or break the character's credibility. It not only cheats the audience but defeats all that an actor has labored to establish if the fight scene (often built up to throughout the show) is a laughable mummery of tentative taps and halting moves.

If the director and the fight choreographer are two different people, the director must establish early on what tone or emotional quality, or special business, he wishes to establish or see in the fight scene. Some directors are very specific; others simply have no idea. The director should audit fight rehearsals regularly. The time to learn that the fight needs to be shortened, lengthened, or changed is not two days before the tech-dress.

The fight director should be allowed to set the blocking for the non-combatants in a fight scene. These performers can add tremendously to a fight by their reactions and giving of focus -- or they can become yet another hazard if they begin to get in the way of the fighters and their weapons.

Rehearsals should be conducted with costume bits and props, and all who will be on stage during the fight, as soon as possible. Always consider where a prop will go if the actor should lose his grip on it. Likewise for a sword should the tip break. The first rows of the audience will thank you for it.

The necessity is great for the fight director to study the whole script (not just the scene in which the fight occurs), to sit in on rehearsals, talks with the actors, and discuss the director's overall concept of the show. Otherwise, the fight scene can play as an afterthought, as though the day before opening it was suddenly discovered there was a fight in the script.

Having considered all of the above, the fight director can sit down with a floor plan and map out where she wishes the fight to go -- like planning a drive with an AAA map. Here, it is necessary to walk the stage to understand the sight lines and discover the best masking angles for movement. (And this means for all the audience: extreme stage right and left from both front and back of the house, and the balcony, if there is one.)

Now, and only now, can the fight director even think of starting to choose techniques and begin the choreography of a fight.

1. Keep in mind that plays are generally not about fights, but about people. The length of a fight scene should be gauged on not just the actors' ability but on dramatic effectiveness. Don't try to stage endless, under-rehearsed, meaningless free-for-all when a short, well-executed scene would serve better.
2. The fight director's job is to realize a dramatic moment in the play, not showcase how brilliant he is. A favorite move may look flashy and impressive, but if the actor cannot perform it with complete safety and consistency for an entire run, then lose it.
3. A fight director must have the ability to teach as well as choreograph. A move means nothing until an actor can perform it. The time to know that an actor is left-handed and has bronchitis and a weak left knee is day one, not after you've spent three days staging the fight.
4. Distance is crucial in a fight. Accidents usually occur when the actors get too close and must pull their blows, thus changing their target areas and trajectories, or when they get so far apart they must now over-reach and come off balance. Fight rehearsals should teach actors how to constantly gauge distance.
5. No blow with either weapon or bare hand should ever be allowed to land if the block or parry isn't present. Control resides in the actor. Never rely on safety devices such as padding or armor -- no device is a substitute for control. However padding under a costume is handy for cushioning a fall or roll. Going over the table in rehearsal is fine, but believe me, after the 120th performance, it can get mighty old.
6. Retractable daggers both look and sound ridiculous. They also have a tendency to fail when least expected. Use masking not mechanics.
7. Not every fight is a life-or-death struggle. Humor can be used even in fights with serious endings. The use of stylized movement and music is another possibility. The overall style of the production will dictate this choice.
8. No fight should proceed non-stop. Fight scenes are choreographed in phrases, each having a varying number of moves. Speed should be identical for both combatants. Wind-ups for blows help keep speed constant and allow the audience to see and anticipate what's coming.
9. A fight can be too realistic. If the audience starts fearing for the safety of the actor portraying the role instead of relating to the character, you've lost them. Theatre involves a selective reality. So must the fight.
10. Every fight must be run prior to each performance on stage.

That's quite a bit to think about, but little enough when one considers what's at stake -- no less than the safety of both the actor and the audience.