

LEAVING NOTHING TO CHANCE

by Eileen P. Duggan, STAGE DIRECTIONS, October 1996

"There's always a way to give the illusion of violence instead of really doing it," says Michael Monsey, a St. Louis actor who choreographs fight scenes for schools, community theatre groups, and professional companies. "There's always a safe way to do it and yet make it look real."

According to Monsey, who draws on nearly 20 years of experience, the key to safe stage violence is choreography. Nothing should be left to chance.

"It's not improvised," Monsey says. "It may look like it's spontaneous, but it's all choreographed specifically."

TIPS FOR DIRECTORS

A director planning a fight scene -- a slap, for example -- must first find out the motivation, says Monsey, who was one of just 22 Americans at an international stage combat workshop in London last year sponsored by the Society of American Fight Directors and its British and Canadian equivalents.

Ask why one character is slapping the other. Why is there a conflict? Next, analyze what kind of stage will be used. Is it in the round, a proscenium, or a thrust? How the audience views the actors will determine to a great degree the type of staging you'll need to provide. Other factors to be considered are the stage surface, the set and furniture, props, lighting, and music, if the scene is to be choreographed to music.

You'll need to experiment with different ways to do the slap. The sound of the slap, called a "knap" in theatrical jargon, can be made by the slapper hitting his/her own hand, thigh, or other part of the body. Or the actor being slapped may make the sound. Sometimes a person offstage can make the knap by clapping hands or slapping two sticks together, but this must be coordinated precisely. Otherwise, "If the actors are on stage left and the person who is supposed to give the sound effect is all the way on stage right, that's comedy," Monsey says.

In some cases, such as theatre in the round, a real slap is required. For a real slap, cup your hand, look your partner in the eyes, and slap the cheek just above the jawbone with your cupped fingers. Start gently, increasing the force until you get a loud enough sound. This will smart and sting, but will not hurt like a full-palm slap.

"You are hitting them hard, but it takes the two actors working together to know how far they can go and control it. That's one of the very important elements of stage combat, controlling what you're doing."

While experimenting, the director should watch the action from all angles and distances, to make sure it looks and sounds right.

Monsey has other tips for directors:

1. Allow enough time to rehearse the violence. "If there's a lot of violence, schedule more rehearsals and your show will be that much better," Monsey says.
2. Don't take anything for granted, even if it's only one slap in a show. "If a character gets so angry at his lover that he finally erupts in a slap -- like when Cliff slaps Sally in CABARET -- that's important," Monsey says. There needs to be a clear build to the violent moment so that it's believable to the audience.
3. Preparation for onstage violence should begin as early as possible. Screen actors carefully during the casting process. An actress who was a victim of rape or domestic violence some time in her life should not be cast in such a scene unless she can handle it. Likewise, an actor who is prone to violent behavior may lose control on the stage.
4. Rehearsals should continue to the end of performances. Run through the violence before each performance, starting slowly, then a little faster, gradually working up to performance speed. That way when the actors go onstage, they'll be able to perform well and safely.
5. For melees or big brawls, choreograph the action in different sections of the stage one at a time. While somebody is breaking a chair over another character's head, four people can be lying on the floor recovering. This keeps the viewers focused on one action at a time, making sure they don't miss anything.
6. Make sure stage weapons are in working order. If an actor uses a sword onstage, be certain a standby sword is accessible to the actor onstage during performance in case a blade breaks.

TIPS FOR ACTORS

Monsey also has advice for those who will perform the violence:

1. Don't go too fast. Real violence goes very fast; it's over in a matter of seconds and you can't even see it," Monsey says. "But on the stage, we slow things down to about half or three-fourths the speed of real violence so the audience can see it. They want to see that he's getting ready to hit him, they want to see the hit, they want to see where he's hit, and they want to see the reaction of the person who's hit."
2. Put more energy into your acting instead of the punch. The intent is more important than the action itself.
3. Use eye contact to cue your fight partner.
4. Don't wear non-essential jewelry, such as rings, bracelets, or necklaces unless they are a very important part of your character's paraphernalia. Jewelry can cause injuries to you or another actor.
5. Trust your choreographer and partner; know their style and idiosyncrasies.

6. Keep proper fighting distance whether it's unarmed battle or swordfighting. "If the fighters are too far apart, they're just going to be swinging at air, but if they're too close, it's going to look very messy and someone might get hurt," Monsey says.
7. Stay in control. "One of the hardest parts of stage combat for the actor is that there's this heavy-duty conflict," Monsey says. "Your character is doing violence to this other person for a reason -- you're jealous of them or you want to kill them -- they're the other family, they're the Capulets, they're the Jets, they're the Sharks, and your adrenaline is going. As an actor, that's what's going on with you emotionally, but you always have to be in control so that you're working with your partner."

In other words, remember that violence onstage is an illusion. "It's acting. We're not really fighting, we're not really angry at someone else."

FINALLY...

Actors and directors who wish to make stage violence a specialty would benefit from studying dance, gymnastics, sport fencing, boxing, or any of the martial arts, Monsey says.

The Society of American Fight Directors gives workshops around the country, teaching the basic level of slaps, punches, kicks, and weapon work. SAFD also holds an annual three-week summer workshop in Las Vegas. The Society offers certification at several levels beginning with Actor Combatant, followed by Advance Actor Combatant, then Certified Teacher.

There are fightmasters in the society who have devoted their lives to making stage combat better in all arenas, movies, TV, stage, Broadway, outdoor theme parks, big shows in Las Vegas. Monsey says, "They're continually trying to find new moves and new techniques."