

On the Verge

STAGE FIGHTING

July 20, 2016

London's Basic Guidelines for the Stage Fighting Actor



The Proper Way to Fight

I recently just finished a production of *Julius Caesar* with the amazing company, Classics on the Rocks. I played a track of five different characters, and was an active participant in two large fight scenes. It was a rush, and a thrill to get to wield a twelve inch dagger against another actor. (It was blunted, this was a staged fight after all.) But working with the fight choreographer, and other actors taught me a few things about stage fighting, and how to do it properly.

This by no means was my first experience with fight choreography, or fighting. I have a black belt in Taekwondo and have worked with, and been exposed to a variety of different martial arts styles. But fighting "for real" and fighting "on stage" are two very different things. The intents are in complete opposition.

Real Fighting you try to invoke pain, and harm on another person. In almost all cases, this should be done in self defense, when you feel threatened, are in fear of your safety, or the safety of your loved ones and friends. Stage Fighting looks real, but is not. You do everything you could possibly do to make it the safest moment on stage. As an actor and one of fighters, you have a responsibility, not just to yourself, but to the production. Below are some basic guidelines to follow if you ever find yourself in this previously uncharted territory.

Speak Up!

I cannot emphasize this enough. You need to be your own advocate. You cannot rely on people to read your mind. If you as a performer are in anyway uncomfortable, voice your concern. If you don't like swinging your arm that close to another person's head, speak up. If you don't feel well during rehearsal, speak up. The only way that stage fights manage to look real and good is when the actors are comfortable with the movements they're doing. If you are not comfortable with an action, and the other actor is, that does not make it ok. You need to be comfortable with how you are moving your body in relation to the other actor.

Also, speak up about your own personal physical limitations. If you are uncomfortable speaking about those in front of the entire cast, email or speak the the fight director quietly off to the side. I had the unpleasant experience of going through the process of getting two root canals while in rehearsals, and performances of *Julius Caesar*. I spoke to our fight director, and he made sure that nothing was choreographed where my face or jaw was in jeopardy of making contact with anything.

Be Aware!

You might be a small part of a larger fight scene. These take awhile to block and choreograph. This is to be expected. Do not use that time to work on your own choreography or lines. Use that time to observe the fight director and how he works with the other actors. You will be better prepared with how to speak to them. (They often speak their own weird fight language. It's normal.) Not only that, being aware of what your fellow actors are going to be doing is beneficial to spacial awareness when you get to final blocking stages, and can help with making sure you don't have to re-block an entire fight. If you are part of a large fight scene, where you are fighting one on one with one actor, there may be a whole other fight happening just to stage right, stage left, up or down. Knowing what that choreography looks like, will help you to make sure that you are aware that someone might accidentally take your head off if you step to close. Also it will behove you to be aware of the set, and where you are in relation to it. Make sure you mention, and address any issues. For instance, if a curtain needs to be paged for an entrance or exit, if a block is going to trip you up when you enter. Ideally everyone will be aware at all times, but this is not always the case because

we are human. Keep your eyes open. Be aware, and make sure you're not the reason the fight gets bloody.

Don't Dismiss Fear!

This goes right back to "speak up". It is a natural occurrence that your adrenaline gets pumping when you are handed a weapon, or are even just going through the motions of beating someone up. This is the infamous "fight or flight" survival instinct. If you or a fellow actor are actually worried about a sequence of choreography, do not dismiss it. If you're scared in the rehearsal room, you will be even more so when there is an audience and lights on you opening night, and that is when things can, and will go wrong. Fear keeps us safe as humans, do not dismiss it because it's going to make the fight "look cool". Speak up, talk to the fight director/choreographer about it. If they are worth their salt, they will figure out how to make it less fearful, or at least be able to talk you through it. If you still feel uncomfortable, let them know and ask if the fight sequence can be changed. Your fellow actors will thank you when you don't accidentally take off their head on opening night.

Respect Boundaries!

Some people are comfortable with physical activity. Some are not. Some people are comfortable with a tiny bubble of personal space, others want a three foot radius. Respect your fellow actors. Not everyone is going to be on the same level as you. Some will be more experienced, some will be less so. Do not push for more or less if your fight partner is uncomfortable with it. If someone is pushing you out of your comfort zone, tell them so, if they don't listen, talk to the fight director. This is as much about safety as it is about making sure everyone can perform the choreography.

Check In!

In one of my fight scenes in *Julius Caesar* I was responsible for doing a sweep kick that made very light contact to another actor, after the light brush she falls face first on the floor. It looked vicious and scary, which is what it was meant to do. I always made sure to check in with her after we got off stage. Even though we rehearse in fight call, and things go smoothly, checking in is being responsible. This way if something felt off to you for some reason, we could address it. If you have constant problems with a sequence, speak to the fight director about cleaning up the choreography, or making an adjustment. Again, this is more about safety.

Wrapping it up

All in all, these guidelines are more about safety for you and your fellow actors. If you're not safe it turns a night of fun, exciting theater, into a terrifying ambulance ride to a sketchy hospital with bills your insurance won't cover. I don't want that for you. Therefore Go forth, be fierce, and safe!