

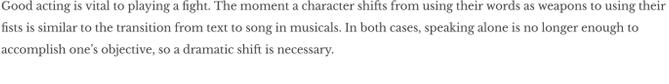
SLAPS, PUNCHES, AND KICKS

Tips for confidently acting onstage violence

Written by C. Drew Vidal

WE'RE SEATED in a dark theatre, and the tension onstage has been steadily building since the curtain rose. Finally, the moment the audience has been waiting for is upon us, the moment mere words are not enough to fuel the conflict. We've come to the moment of the slap, punch, kick, or strangle, and it is ... just alright.

Theatre audiences often expect onstage violence to match the realistic examples they see on television and in film. But fighting onstage is much more difficult. With no power to edit mistakes or use the talents of a Foley artist to add sound effects, stage fighting must get it right every time.



Most professional productions containing onstage violence hire a certified fight director to choreograph the stage combat and elect a fight captain (usually a member of the cast) to maintain its safety and integrity over the course of the run. Yet, all actors should know how to take care of themselves, especially if they are working in situations lacking artists specifically trained in stage combat.

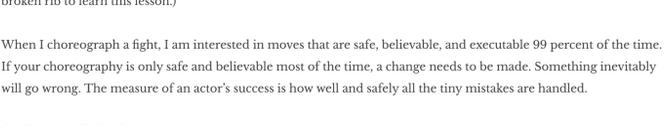
ACTING THE FIGHT

It's important to remember that few people want to fight. What they want is to win. Acting a fight requires careful investigation of all the beats leading up to the moment violence becomes a necessary tactic. Often the moments before and after a burst of violence are just as if not more important than the violence itself.

Good acting is vital to playing a fight. The moment a character shifts from using their words as weapons to using their fists is similar to the transition from text to song in musicals. In both cases, speaking alone is no longer enough to accomplish one's objective, so a dramatic shift is necessary.

Consider the following questions *before* you embark on the physical elements of a fight.

- How many times does my character try not fighting?
- What is the trigger that causes my character to fight?
- Does my character know how to fight?
- Has my character ever fought before?
- How is my character different at the end of the fight? What has been learned? What has changed?



Understanding the triggers that cause a character to fight is vital to acting the fight. Photo from a stage combat workshop at the 2014 International Thespian Festival by Susan Doremus.

SAFETY FIRST

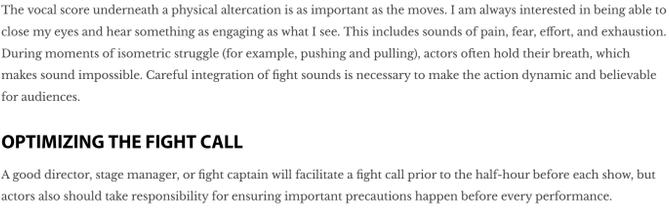
You are the first line of defense between yourself and possible injury, so if you ever feel less than safe, **SPEAK UP!** As the performer executing the fight choreography, it is your responsibility to do so. (It took me two broken noses and a broken rib to learn this lesson.)

When I choreograph a fight, I am interested in moves that are safe, believable, and executable 99 percent of the time. If your choreography is only safe and believable most of the time, a change needs to be made. Something inevitably will go wrong. The measure of an actor's success is how well and safely all the tiny mistakes are handled.

SLOW AND FLOW

My rule of thumb for good stage combat is that an hour buys you a second. One second of good, safe, repeatable stage violence requires one hour of rehearsal. While this may seem like a lot, it should remind actors how much work goes into building a fight onstage.

What often happens in rehearsal is an increase in speed during parts of the choreography that come easier for the actors involved. Speeding up or slowing down for easy or hard parts creates a mess of a fight. It is vital to rehearse all of the choreography at the same slow tempo to start (think underwater slow) so that the connective tissue and acting beats between moves can be explored and cultivated.



One second of stage violence requires one hour of rehearsal. Workshop photo from the 2017 International Thespian Festival by Corey Rourke.

MAKE NOISE

The vocal score underneath a physical altercation is as important as the moves. I am always interested in being able to close my eyes and hear something as engaging as what I see. This includes sounds of pain, fear, effort, and exhaustion. During moments of isometric struggle (for example, pushing and pulling), actors often hold their breath, which makes sound impossible. Careful integration of fight sounds is necessary to make the action dynamic and believable for audiences.

OPTIMIZING THE FIGHT CALL

A good director, stage manager, or fight captain will facilitate a fight call prior to the half-hour before each show, but actors also should take responsibility for ensuring important precautions happen before every performance.

- Warm up vocally and physically.
- Discuss with the other actors involved in the fight how the choreography went the last time you performed it, addressing anything that differed from the way the fight was rehearsed or that felt unsafe.
- Check all props and scenery involved in the fight to ensure their integrity.
- Run through the fight slowly, and with an outside eye (often the stage manager) watching.
- Run through the fight closer to, but just under, show speed, with a focus on proper breathing.

While stage combat can be intimidating for beginners, careful preparation and proper precautions will ensure you engage safely, effectively, and confidently whenever you're called to fight onstage.

If you're interested in learning more about stage combat, the Society of American Fight Directors and Dueling Arts International offer excellent resources.



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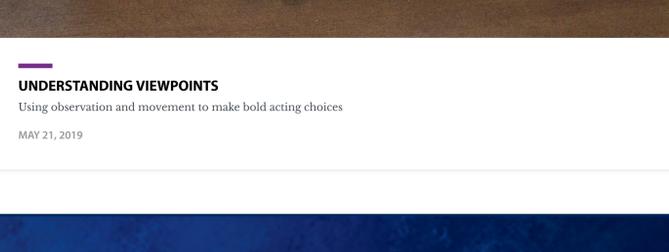
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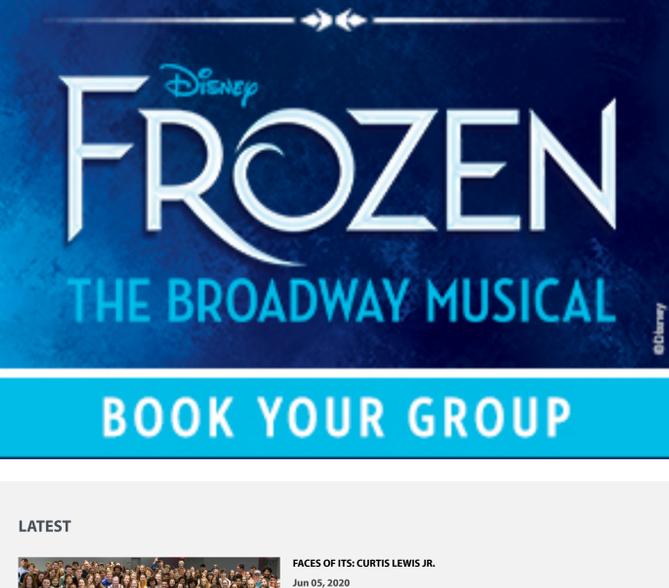
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