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...And Scene (A Guide to Locating Fight Scenes)

By T. Fulton Burns

It is one of the most daunting tasks: trying to find a strong fight scene for a Skills Proficiency Test or even a class project. The truth of the matter is that your main focus is to pass your skills test while hopefully leaving an impression on your peers (especially the adjudicator!). Passing, and hopefully receiving an Examiner's Award for Excellence, is the best result; or if you are at a National Stage Combat Workshop, you could possibly receive a Certificate for Best Actress or Actor. At the very heart of the issue, you need a scene that will work for both acting and fighting.

Not only actors feel this issue. Even now my friends who teach skills tests express similar problems that I have encountered while teaching in a college setting. Students flock to our offices asking, "Where/How do I find a fight scene?" The common result, which can be a problem, is that many student actors locate scenes that have a heightened conflict, but often do not call for stage violence.

When Kyna Hamill's *They Fight* was first published our immediate troubles were allayed, thanks to its excellent list of fight-specific scenes. Unfortunately, our need for more scenes is constantly growing. Until newer editions of this text are published, the repeated suggestion of this book will limit one's options. So when my own students came to me saying, "There should be an online source like there is for monologues," I felt it was time to look for better ways to find scenes. My goal was to help my students, but also my colleagues in the SAFD as well.

I began to compile a list of fight scenes, with the help of others, which could be used by any number of students – male and female, as well as mass battles. While I was searching for these scenes I was always being asked by different Certified Fight Teachers, "What are you doing to get these scenes and how can I get copies?" What I learned is that it is important not only to share the findings, but perhaps more importantly the actual process itself.

With this article I am sharing my findings, which for me are the best tools for creating a library of fight scenes. By following these steps, I have collected over 300 fight scenes in just a matter of months. The benefit of these tips actually goes well beyond just acquiring fight scenes. Your resource library of books and DVDs will grow as will your knowledge of stage violence and acting. Also, you will possess direct connections and contacts with Fight Directors who know these plays, in case you need a reference for your own work as a fight choreographer.

These tips have helped in discovering a large number of plays and fight scenes that prior to my search neither I, nor many of my students had ever seen. There are still several plays that I have yet to read and research because the list is ever growing with newer plays constantly emerging.

The sooner you begin to use these tools and build your own library, the better off you will be the next time someone asks you if you can recommend a fight scene. In fact, you can smile knowing how simple it is to find these scenes and share this process to help make someone's day a little easier.

Tip # 1 – Hit the books!

One of the best ways to locate fight scenes is to head to the library; but rather than reading the entire collection of plays ever written in the history of theatre, start with the following fight skills resource books:

- *Fight Directing for the Theatre* by J. Allen Suddeth
- *Fight Direction for Stage & Screen* by William Hobbs
- *Weapons in the Theatre* by Arthur Wise
- *Brawl ridiculous: Swordfighting in Shakespeare's Plays* by Charles Edelman
- *The Swords of Shakespeare* by J.D. Martinez
- *The Fight Arranger's Companion* by Dale Anthony Girard

Any other similar resources available through online vendors or inter-library loan can also be a great place to start. These texts reference several great plays that call for stage combat. Just check the index and you can begin to expand your list in no time, while also building new training resources for you and your students.

**Tip # 2 –
Get to know your SAFD friends**

Yes, you can call people and ask them for advice on scenes or plays! In fact, it is bound to be one of your favorite conversations. Still, it takes time that Fight Masters or others may not have with their busy schedules. Instead, hit the website, www.safd.org, and follow the links to the Directory. Take some time to peruse the bios provided there. Some, such as David Wooley and Richard Raether, include links that provide a full résumé of fight plays. This is probably the easiest way to build a list of plays without ever leaving the comfort of your computer. Perhaps the best thing about the résumés is that they are constantly being updated to reflect current work. As individuals choreograph the latest plays, your own files will begin to reflect the latest work as well.

Tip # 3 – Take a trip down the Amazon

Another great computer adventure involves your favorite swashbuckling or other types of films. Amazon.com is a preferred shopping source and another great resource for expanding your library of fight scenes. Go to the “Search” section and enter a title like *Zorro*, *Scaramouche*, or *Prisoner of Zenda*, and when your selection has been made you will find along with your results a section called “Listmania”. Very often lovers of fight movies, books, and other media provide their own lists there.

While it is important to remember that acting and fighting for film are much different in this day and time than in theatre, I typically find that the more classic the film, the closer it will be to theatrical needs for combat.

After compiling this list you can take a look on your favorite search engine to purchase a copy, acquire it from a library, or in some cases download a copy of the script or screenplay. In one instance a couple of students wished to recreate the famous fight scene between Inigo Montoya and the Man in Black from *The Princess Bride*. All they had to do was simply download the screenplay from the Internet.

Tip # 4 – The Classic Quick Scene Fix

Perhaps Shakespeare said it best when he wrote the words “They Fight”. He did this whenever the need for stage violence was to occur in the script. This is one of the absolute best (and easiest) ways to cut a scene. Dale Girard’s *The Fight Arranger’s Companion*, a.k.a. “The Lexicon,” includes one of the best lists of classic plays available. Like Shakespeare, playwrights such as Christopher Marlowe, Ben Johnson, Thomas Kyd, and others include the “They Fight” cue in their texts.

Once you have a list of classic pieces, many of which are public domain and free online, head to Google.com, or your preferred search engine, and enter the title of your play: i.e., “*Hamlet*” along with the words “They Fight”. As you view the choices a copy of the complete script will often emerge. In the best cases, a direct link to the scenes that call for stage combat can be found.

Tip # 5 – Watch it!

Some of my favorite fight scenes have come from my days at the workshops. Whenever you attend an ACW, IACW, AACW, Actor Training, or Fight Director Workshop, always purchase a copy of the DVDs. Not only will you be able to review your fights, but you’ll also be able locate fight scenes for future SPTs. It is important to know that while there are many great scenes at the ACW you may have to sift through them first; not all scenes used for SPTs originally call for violence, but luckily for us many do. Almost every summer someone shows up with new plays that have great previously unknown fight scenes. Years ago I brought a copy of Pat Cook’s *Three Musketeers – All Swash and No Buckle* and for at least a year afterwards I was e-mailed by classmates wishing to know where they could find that script. (The answer was Eldridge Publishing)

So buy the DVDs, watch all of the scenes, and make a list of the plays performed by your classmates. Not only will you build your own list, but you will also be able to see the fights, actors, and scenes that ended up winning awards. Remember that these actor combatants set the bar for which we should all strive to reach in our acting and instruction.

(Fulton Burns is an Advanced Actor Combatant as well as a Faculty Member at the University of South Alabama Drama Department.)