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## **Random Acts of Violence: Bringing John Cage's Chance Techniques to Fight Choreography and Stage Combatant Acting**

T. Fulton Burns

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# Random Acts of Violence

Bringing John Cage's Chance Techniques to Fight Choreography and Stage Combatant Acting.

By T. Fulton Burns

Photos by Nigel Delahoy

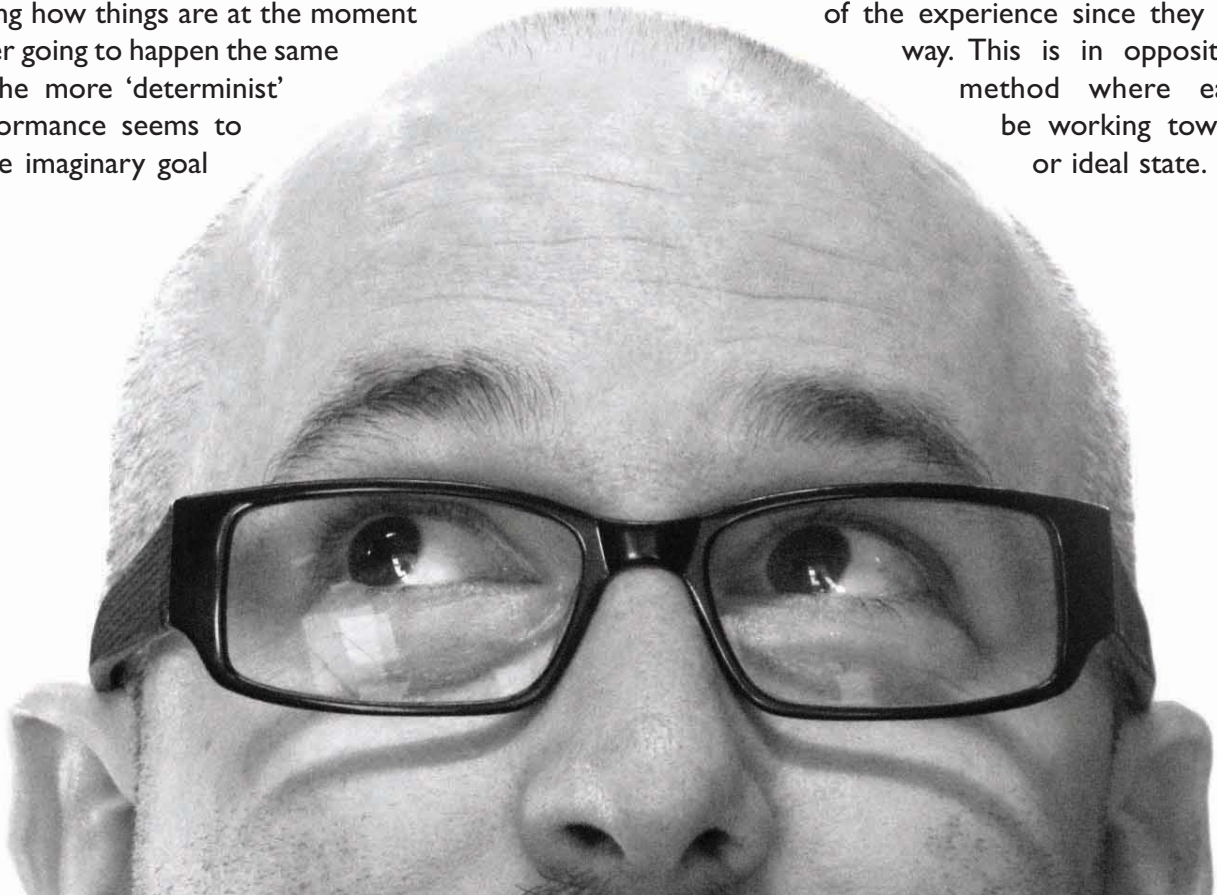
The concept of chance utilized by John Cage is a frightening, exciting, and liberating process for any artist. It was so effective that other musical artists such as Morton Feldman, Earle Brown and Christian Wolff used it. In the world of theatre these concepts are constantly used today by the Neo-Futurists in Chicago and New York in their production of *Too Much Light Makes The Baby Go Blind* and by Improv Troupes throughout the country.

John Cage is identified, by University of Massachusetts - Amherst Music Theory PhD. candidate Melissa King as being:

A 'sonic innovator' with his inclusion of sounds not typically considered musical, for his explorations with electronic technology, for his development of the prepared piano in which objects are added to and between piano strings for new effects, and for his methodology of chance processes that continue to structure even his most modern compositions. It has been proposed that he is the single leading figure in art, poetry, and aesthetics during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is also said to have had more impact on music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than any other American composer.

Taking influence from Zen philosophies and the idea of less composer involvement, using chance methods for determining aspects of his compositions seems a logical progression in his compositional development. The *I-Ching*, a Chinese oracle text in which images are selected at random from a set of 64 by means of tossing yarrow sticks or coins is probably the most notable source from which Cage derived his chance methodology. Besides all but removing the composer from the compositional process, chance also allows one to break any typical processes of thinking and thus produces something that the artist might never have thought of on their own. Utilizing chance or indeterminate methods, the goal is to focus on seeing how things are at the moment never going to happen the same to the more 'determinist' performance seems to some imaginary goal

of the experience since they are never going to happen the same way. This is in opposition to the more 'determinist' method where each performance seems to be working toward some imaginary goal or ideal state.



Just as Cage influenced many other musicians his ideas also influenced my own work as an instructor. In fact, during a recent semester I had the privilege of instructing intermediate acting students in techniques and master classes, inspired by my experiences at regional workshops, all of which built towards creating fight choreography. This class provided me, as it would any instructor, with ample amounts of challenges in stage violence.

One challenge in particular that was worth noting was the actors in the class requested a mixed weapons class. I had first been exposed to a mixed weapons process at the 2000 National Stage Combat Workshop in Las Vegas, but the techniques resurfaced over the years at regional

workshops throughout the U.S. Finally, I was privileged to utilize these techniques in assisting Denise Hurd at the Winter Wonderland Workshop in 2006. These previous classes served as the basis from which I was to teach my own mixed weapons class; but, as with all growing teachers and ideas in pedagogy, I was searching to put my own spin on this technique and help advance the world of stage combat.

Rather than looking for guidance from other fight instructors I chose to take a page out of the world of dance; specifically, the time I trained with Sandra Neels, former company member with Merce Cunningham and collaborator with John Cage. Cage would create, with Cunningham, pieces that truly possessed the essence of live theatre. Together they capitalized on the idea of using dice, clocks, and other objects of chance prior

to a performance to determine the music/sounds and choreography for the evening. The die would determine not only choices in pitch material, rhythmic duration, and instrumentation but also the duration of time. The goal was that a performance was intended as a singular event and would never be explored the same way.

The creative result I found was the creation of a Chance-Mixed Weapons class that was the combination of fight work and Cage's chance process for bringing together strong acting choices while creating new choreography. The basis for this approach was the same as Cage's music, which "varied from piece to piece but typically involved choosing the gamut of elements to be included, planning how they were to be selected, and then using chance operations

to do the selection." (Grout 932) This article contains one variation of a strategy for you to discover the use of Chance-Mixed Weapons for yourself and your students.

Please Note: The information provided within this article should always involve the safety standards consistently taught throughout the Society of American Fight Directors; Maintain safe distance, check in with your partner through eye contact and positive communication, as well as observe a safe speed while effectively controlling both body and weaponry.

Also, whenever possible please have a SAFD qualified stage combat instructor or choreographer available to provide a safe outside eye. Most importantly, remember to take a chapter from FM J. Allen Suddeth: Safety First – Safety Last – Safety Always.



Justin Legel (left) and Julianne Allen (center) share a well earned laugh while developing their choreography in Fulton Burns' (right) Cage Mixed Weapons class at the 2010 Winter Wonderland Workshop.

**The Elements** - "[The] use of random procedures in the generation of fixed compositions." (Sadie 237)

The first step in the process is selecting and preparing the fixed compositions much in the same way that Cage formulated a common language to convey his needs to musical artists. He devised charts of possible sounds; and, making use of bodily quadrants such as high, low, inside, and outside lines, we can use our common language for creating chance choreography.

**Step 1:** Place various weapons for the class in which no partners will have the same opposing weapons in a fight. (Another option could be the use of found weapons.)

**Step 2:** Use three small boxes, bags, hats, etc. and label them one, two and three

**Step 3:** Print off two copies of the following list on plain white paper:

Quantity	Quadrant
5	High Outside
5	High Inside
5	Low Outside
5	Low Inside

One set of directional targeting should have the letter “A” printed on them and the other should be labeled with the letter “B”.

**Step 4:** Cut, fold and place the “A’s” inside of the first box. Repeat the process with the “B’s”, placing them inside the second box.

**Step 5:** Print off two copies of the following list on plain white paper:

Quantity	Quadrant
3	High Center Head
3	High Center Chest
3	Low Center Stomach
3	Low Center Crotch

One set of directional targeting should have the letter “A” printed on them and the other should be labeled with the letter “B”.

**Step 6:** Cut, fold and place both sets inside of the third box.

**Selection process** - “[Methods] of notation, which reduce the composer’s control over the sounds in a composition.” (Sadie 238)

Much of the idea of chance was adopted from Zen Buddhism and the ancient book of prophecy known as *I-Ching (Book of Changes)*. Methods that were used by Cage included coin tossing and die rolling to determine “dynamics, durations, and tempos...filling in a formal structure based on units of time.” (Grout 932-933)

**Step 1:** Actors choose a weapon and then pair up with another actor with a different type of weapon. (If possible, try pairing single weapons such as Broadswords or Quarter Staffs with a partner holding two weapons such as Case Rapiers, Rapier & Dagger, or Double Sticks. If you are so inclined you could even devise a way to randomly select the weapons.)

**Step 2:** Each actor is assigned either “A” or “B” to identify which attacks apply to them. (A coin could be tossed to decide this selection process as well.)

**Step 3:** Each actor will select four slips of paper from their appropriate box, totaling eight slips per pair.

**Step 4:** Partners will take turns selecting five slips from the third box.

**Step 5:** The 13 slips must be placed face down and scattered much in the same way that scrabble or domino pieces would be.

**Step 6:** Selecting one at a

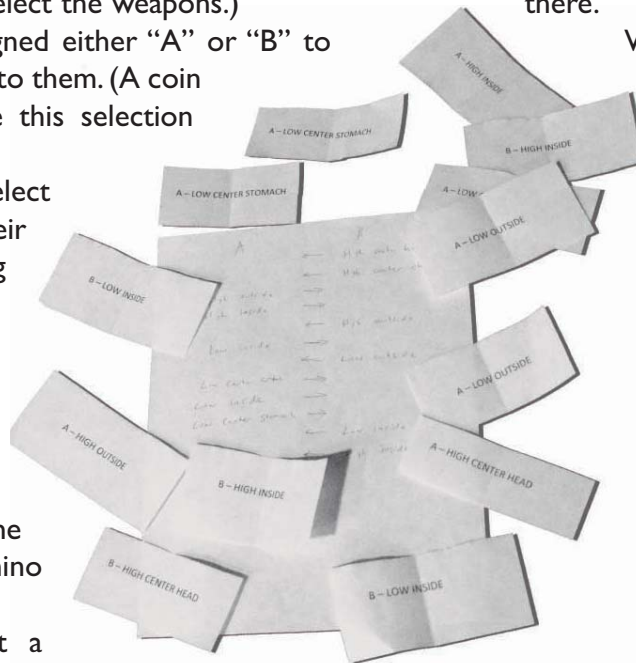
time and keeping them face down, take the 13 slips and create a line either from left to right or top to bottom.

**Step 7:** Once the 13 slips are in place flip them over to reveal the order and targets for the mixed weapon choreography.

This random map for choreography impressed Erin Cote’, a theatre graduate from The University of Montana, who felt that “[the] process we used was like having training wheels - it was perfect for first time choreographers because it gave us a railing to hold on to and places to get to, yet we were able to be as creative as we wanted when trying to get there.”

Whether using Erin’s idea of a railing or Cage’s concept of a map, an example list of Chance-Mixed Weapons may read as follows:

1. A – High Center Head
2. A – Low Inside
3. B – High Center Chest
4. A – Low Inside
5. A – High Inside
6. B – Low Outside
7. A – High Center Head
8. A – Low Center Stomach
9. B – Low Outside
10. B – Low Outside
11. B – High Outside
12. A – Low Inside
13. A – High Center Chest



Wherever an “A” exists the actor who represents this letter will attack “B’s” target area and vice versa. For example: For number 13 “A” is to attack “B’s” High Center Chest target area.

Temptation may exist for the students to place their cards in a preference order, which is why it is important to stress that the purpose of the exercise is to work with the order established by chance. Aaron Bartz, an actor in New York and participant from the Chance-Mixed Weapons class, states “[inherent] to the style of Chance-Mixed Weapons, the immediate

problem all of us faced was ‘how do I attack and parry with a different weapon than my opponent?’ The answer was found in our ability to understand how to safely try different combinations of moves while maintaining communication with our partner.” This action has the potential to free actors to make creative discoveries; and, as “chance is a way to determine certain aspects of the music without imposing the composer’s intention”; we also can create choreography without imposing a fight director’s (internal or external) ideas. (Grout 933)

**Using Chance Operations** - “[The] allowance of choice to the performer(s) among formal options stipulated by the composer.” (Sadie 237)

Implementation may begin in a variety of ways. I recommend that students write down the order, determined by chance, and keep it close as they begin to work with attacks and parries. In all likelihood, students will initially rely upon the weapons for the bulk of the choreography; however, the beauty of this exercise is that it provides a different technique for creating choreography and activates the fighter/actor’s creativity. “The mind, though stripped of its right to control, is still present” and it is this presence that will allow the actor to truly take off and create. (Cage 22-23)

If the choreography works out completely, then have the actors go back through to look for stronger and more dynamic options. Still, as strange as this may seem, I do hope for the students that some brick walls will occur and they will not be able to free the weapons for the next move. These blocks will cause the actors to dig deep and find creative ways to continue the choreography. Remember that in a true fight anything and everything serves as a weapon and any target counts too. Now we have rules for safety in the Society of American Fight Directors, which should not be ignored, but we can still learn from our current choreographic problems and these brick walls are exactly what we want for actor training because now creativity begins.

Encourage the actors to look at other weapons at their disposal. Much like Cage made use of ambient sounds that existed in the space, students have the opportunity to use what they have as well. Targets may be limited but not the actor’s options. Erin Cote’ acknowledges that the “limitations are freeing.” Hopefully they will soon realize they have their hands, feet and other unarmed options. This is a great start to the next stage in the creative process. As they become comfortable with the process, ask them what else is available to them and their work?

I have seen students accomplish many other ways to use their weapons, such as pummel attacks or unconventional parries. At one point I saw a student take the weapon from their partner to create a new dynamic move because the chance process forced them to live in the moment. These moments of discovery are what occur in a real fight, and must be found in both the attacks and reactions. We cannot plan out moves or ask our attacker to wait while we make better decisions. By living in these moments the action cannot be contrived since it is coming from an organic place.

Aaron Bartz adds that the “[understanding] of this structure is important because it was this limitation which freed our creativity. It was essentially a list of 13



Raquel Rangel (left) and David González (right) review the choreography map for the broadsword vs spear and shield fight they created as Matt Wilson (center) supervises at the 2010 Winter Wonderland Workshop.

problems which we had to work together to answer, instead of looking at each other, wondering how to start the fight or where to attack. Throughout the remainder of the class, we discovered things that were choreographically unique. For example, the physical anatomy of the Chance-Mixed Weapons allowed for different types of attacks and parries. Knowing I had to go from parrying an attack on my low inside line to attacking my opponent's high center provided me with just the amount of basic direction to make a really fun, artistic choice as to how I would connect those dots. The mixed weapons also allowed for new types of disarms and binds, new ways of changing levels, as well as the option of trading weapons mid-fight, which is something both audiences and combatants enjoy! Also, the fact that we were fighting with combinations of weapons audiences hadn't necessarily seen before nullified any chance the audience had of predicting the fight."

With the excitement of Aaron's testament it is important, as a teacher, not to choreograph for the students because the possibilities are limitless and an observer may even learn new moves. Let's consider

that for move #3 (B attacking A's High Center Chest area) any of the possible options may be as follows:

1. "B" Thrusts at "A's" Chest
2. "B" Cuts at "A's" Chest
3. "B" Pommel Strikes "A's" Chest
4. "B" Punches "A's" Chest with a Fist instead of the weapon
5. "B" Attempts an Elbow to "A's" Chest
6. "B" Kicks "A's" Chest

Now the possibilities for A's reactions (#4 - A attacks B's Low Inside) could be any of the following options in relation to B's attack:

1. "A" may Parry "B's" attack
2. "A" may Beat Parry "B's" attack
3. "A" may Jump Back Evade "B's" attack
4. "A" may Duck Evade "B's" attack
5. "A" may Duck Evade "B's" attack while almost immediately returning the attack
6. "A" may Parry "B's" attack while also attacking to "B's" Low Inside line (Think Talhoffer Techniques where the defensive moves are also attacking moves)
7. "A" may receive the wound or blow



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Even with these options there are still several we cannot foresee, and the ideas for choices are almost limitless. The importance of Chance-Mixed Weapons is that no one can predict what kind, or type, of creativity will be found within this process. When a choreographer approaches the process with a standard routine, one they have tried time and time again, there is an eventual state of stasis. Chance techniques break us from our monotonous choices and force us to be creative by way of necessity.

As a teacher in this class the role is similar to that of the composer “involved with the composition of experimental music, [finding] ways and means to remove themselves from the activities of the sounds they make. Some employ chance operations, derived from sources as ancient as the Chinese *Book of Changes*, or as modern as the tables of random numbers used by physicists in research. Or, analogous to the Rorschach tests of psychology, the interpretation of imperfections in the paper upon which one is writing may provide a music free from one’s memory and imagination. Geometrical means employing spatial superimpositions at variance with the ultimate performance in time may be used. The total field of possibilities may be roughly divided and the actual sounds within these divisions may be indicated as to number but left to the performer or to the splicer to choose. In this latter case, the composer resembles the maker of a camera who allows someone else to take the picture.” (10-11 Cage)



This empowering of the students is the final key to the success of this process. They will eventually find levels and the elements we often stress in choreography, including varying rhythmic patterns. Still, if any of these elements have not yet been found, then feel free to side coach, or remind, the students of these options for the actor improvements. This reminder is not the same as choreographing the work for them, but hopefully opening their eyes to the new possibilities. What is important is that the performers are making choices that the instructor/choreographer/composer has not predetermined or imposed upon the work.

**A Final Thought on the Process**

With good reason a person may be concerned about using a technique like this with just any class. This is intended for more advanced students. Once you have the right group with whom you can work, try this technique and see what ideas may be found and developed. What the students will experience will take place this one and only time. Perhaps the best part is how this process will inspire your students or your

own future work. •.....  
 (Complete Works Cited on page 49)

Fulton Burns is an Advanced Actor Combatant and the Director of Acting & Performance at the University of South Alabama’s Department of Dramatic Arts.  
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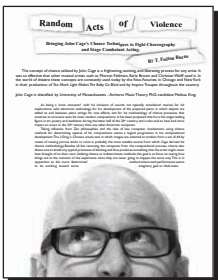
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