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# When the Smoke from the Battle Has Cleared



By:  
T. Fulton Burns

I can recall the time that followed my first national workshop. All of the excitement of new friends and new skills still went through me like a child on Christmas morning considering all of the possibilities of fun with my new toys. I thoroughly enjoyed having my college friends ask me to show them what I had learned. Eventually I was approached by a former professor to choreograph the fights for a production of *Hamlet* at my undergraduate program. With excitement and great pride I happily accepted.

As I began to process the choreographic needs for this show I started to realize both what I had learned and, perhaps more importantly, what I had not learned. Only a handful of theatre artists and instructors have ever expressed to me the importance of looking back at my work in order to improve. The best example for me was Professor Blair Beasley, who was a professor and director with his MFA in directing. Blair always said, "If you look back at your work and can't find anything you would change, then this may not be the field for you." While I first felt this applied to my work as a director I now know that this wisdom applies to my entire theatre life.

It is a rare but important tool to learn how to assess one's self and grow. This introspective tool can prove to be a gem for any theatre artist. The following information is intended to help acting students look at their work in stage combat as it follows training and testing.

## It Is Written

"What you remember today will eventually be forgotten tomorrow." Self Assessment begins with taking and keeping notes. Don't be fooled by the amount of knowledge that can be stored in our minds, or the lack of retention.

During my first workshop Maestro Dale Girard supplied several hand outs to the class regarding unarmed techniques as they related to what he was teaching. The mistake I made, along with many others in my class, was in thinking that everything that I would need was listed on the sheets. While these sheets are still in a file in my office, and I do reference them often, I also realized that they were not written specifically for me.

I now make it a point to keep a bound journal with me during any class I take. The reason for it being a bound journal, rather than a spiral notebook, is that it holds more value. The more important the investment in the material the less likely I am to lose it. Within this journal the information is always recorded in my own words which I can understand easily. Anything supplied by an instructor supports my training, but with a journal I can keep up with skills and information supplied throughout the class.

Another good idea is to separate the skills acquired from notes received during the process within the same journal. Perhaps a star could represent skills and a check mark for notes but self create a method where all of the information will not blur when you return to it sometime later.

## Getting Master Results

The most common way to assess our work involves learning the results of the tests; however, a mistake made by many people is to take the Pass, Not Pass, or Recommended Pass as the only information needed. In fact, only looking at the grade is common in many college students because they only want to know the end result of their work rather than concern themselves with the means for the testing outcome. I truly understand that we want to know the outcome for our work, but it is also important to remember that the results of the test are merely a barometer and not the elements that bring about this reading.

Take advantage of the time when you are sitting down with the adjudicator and find out what they observe. These notes are intended to be objective and are to help the actor combatant grow. Before the post test discussion begins grab your journal and have it ready for any information to be received. Also, when something is unclear, respectfully ask more questions in order to understand how improvements may be made. Remember that many years of experience sits in front of the class regarding professional stage combat, so take advantage of it.

## Drop the Apple

The instructor of the class has been there throughout the entire process. It is a great idea to keep up with notes provided by the fight teacher during the training; however, if there is time that follows the training, sit with the instructor and pick their brains. When the test is done the teacher can often provide insight regarding notes given by the

adjudicator. Also, things may come to light during the test that may not have been apparent during the training process. Sit with the teacher, your journal, and an open mind to find out where the training can go from this point.

### **Hey Buddy!**

While some partner relationships are better than others it can be very helpful to receive feedback from a fight partner following the skills test. Try to find a time where thoughts can be expressed between partners regarding the process. Constructive criticism is very important at this meeting. An actor will have a good sense of the level respect held within the partner relationship during rehearsals and tests. If the relationship is strong and respectful, then set time aside and meet.

Still, if the relationship has been problematic, then another assessment may be needed. Take the time to self-assess the process rather than meet with the partner to see where things did not work as well as they could have. Remember that both partners were involved and, while it may seem like the other person was at the helm of many rehearsal problems (and they may have been), still look at how to avoid possible problems in order to create better work environments for the future.

In either case this may help to create a better process for choosing scene partners in the future.

### **Take a Good Look in the Mirror**

At some point take the time to look at the entire process and ask yourself questions regarding all stage combat and scene needs. Consider ideas for the following issues:

- At what level was I able to learn the skills?
- At what pace and understanding did I learn the skills?
- At what pace and understanding was I able to learn the choreography and combine acting techniques?
- Was the chosen scene the best for the skills test at that point and time?
- What can I do to improve scene selection for the future?
- How strong was my understanding of the character and my scene work within the entire context of the story?
- Where could the connection, between the scene and choreography, be improved?
- In what ways could the rehearsal process be better utilized?

Consider any other ideas that may be added to a personal list of self assessing questions. In order to remain positive, when answering these questions, always consider how they can be better as opposed to solely focusing upon the things that went wrong. While everything may not turn out roses we can always improve and continue to strive for greatness.

### **See the Future**

Finally, take time for yourself and process all that has been said and recorded. No matter what the test results, there is room for growth and positive improvement in training and performance. Once the information is gathered take the time and set new goals for your work.

The primary question to answer is - What do I wish to accomplish the next time that I train? The best part about this question is that while the question may remain constant the answer will usually change.

### **Final Thoughts**

As we train we can and should continue to grow and better our art form. While it may seem tough, a Not Pass does not mean that one should stop training but instead be aware that they will need to adjust their process with serious levels of change. For one that has received Recommended Passes it is equally important to remember that this was one test of many and that each performance will be different. Growth is always important since lightning rarely strikes the same place twice. Use the ideas in this piece as you continue to build better and stronger goals in your stage combat training process.

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