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Just Before Dawn

(Pre-Test Rituals and Preparation for Test Day)

By:
T. Fulton Burns



In Asian martial arts films there are usually beautiful moments that reveal the fighters in deep meditation before they are to meet on the field of battle. The process appears to center and calm the individual while preparing them for the final moments of their lives. The day of a skills proficiency test (SPT) can feel the same way.

The day of the test can be frustrating for the testers as well as those around them. Nerves can run high during this stressful time. I can still recall the excitement and nerves of my first test day at the 2000 National Stage Combat Workshop in Las Vegas like it was yesterday. It was from this first experience that I created habits and rituals to help me succeed in my objectives regarding stage combat training and testing.

During my years with the Society of American Fights Directors I have learned a great deal from the Fight Masters, Fight Directors, and Certified Teachers. As a professor of theatre I have come to realize that students learn as much from their fellow classmates as they do from their instructors, if not more. Here are some thoughts and ideas for approaching the 24 hours that lead up to a SPT from a few fellow Actor Combatants.

Good Night Sweet Prince (or Princess)

As a child, my parents always made sure that I went to bed early before my first day of school. The rationale was that a well-rested student is a good student. Similarly, coaches often make sure that their teams have curfews to ensure a strong performance on game day. Getting a great night of rest before a SPT is equally important for what we do.

Alaric Toy reiterates this sentiment while adding the importance of “a good dinner and get plenty of rest. [On] the day of the test make sure [to] have a good breakfast beforehand.” Rest and nutrition are keys to providing a relaxed and engaged body and mind on the day of the test. The amount of time needed for the best night of rest will vary based on the individual. I have found that eight hours can be too little on some occasions while too much on others. Do what fits the needs of the body and mind at the time.

Gotta Get To The Church On Time

Providing time before the test is every bit as important as the test itself. Zack Meyer makes sure that he “[wakes] up with more than enough time to get ready and get down to the place about an hour early.” A little extra time allows the actor/ combatant to acclimate to the performance environment. This will also allow them to double check weapons and prepare for the day. Make sure that plenty of time is available to breathe, both physically and mentally, prior to the test. The extra time will reduce feeling rushed; and, if any issues do arise, then there will be extra time to make corrections prior to the test.

Tying up Loose Ends

Jason Armit once suggested to a group of us on the day of a SPT that we consider double tying/knotting our shoes. This moment reminded me of the importance of good clothes and making sure that your equipment is in good shape. A person should check their weapons the day before they test and set aside the clothes they will be wearing for the test later that night.

Some people have lucky charms regarding attire like Charlie Cascino. “I have a pair of lucky boots. I have had them for ten years. They are my fighting boots. They are black leather and they lace all the way up to the knee. They have these amazing rubber soles that grip any surface. They are perfect for fighting.” Through her own process Charlie has found a very successful part of her SPT process in safe shoes. Take a look at what will be worn and consider the best possibilities for the test.

You’re Getting Warmer

As a former dancer I can recall times when, in preparation for a performance, the entire company would gather for a complete dance class, which was our warm-up for the show. Our bodies are our tools. Barbara Seifert makes sure that she gets a good “actor warm-up”. That’s always key for success. “If I don’t warm-up, I usually fret and stress that I’m going to miss a line or a move. And then worrying about it makes me forget. So warm-ups are an essential pre-test ritual that I do.” It is also important to make sure that the actor warm-up includes a strong vocal portion to accompany the physical.

Remember that warming-up is an individual act that can take time to create. Dan Granke has found over time that he does his best if he works out really hard before a SPT. "I like to shadowbox...or do some other vigorous warm up." While slow and steady may work for some, it may be better for others to warm up fast and furious; so, suit the warm-up to the actor.

Another important fact to remember is that the test day it is not a good time to reinvent the wheel. Charlie Cascino feels that doing the same warm-up routine that has been done during the rehearsal period is very important. She advises not to do anything new or special for the performance day. "I have seen people strain muscles by doing an 'extra warm' warm-up for the performance, [so] I keep to my routine." This is great advice because injuries can occur at anytime. Suit the warm-up to the individual's needs and know that a routine warm-up makes good physical and vocal sense.

Hi! My name is...

A confident introduction can set the tone for a confident test. Part of the test day process requires that the actor/ combatants introduce themselves, their weapon, and the scene for the SPT. For Glen Wall, rehearsal and relaxation are key elements to confidence. "I...speak my intro out loud to make sure I don't flub it, and after that I just try to chill."

As part of the pre-test routine it is important to consider and rehearse the introduction. This can help establish the confidence needed to begin a solid SPT. Usually the instructor will have a student go through this part of the process before the Fight Adjudicator arrives, but I have seen some people choose not to take this seriously. From personal experience, I can attest that having this part well rehearsed can provide great peace of mind. Recently, when preparing for a video taped SPR, I found myself focusing only on the fighting and the acting. When it came time to introduce the fights I couldn't get through the process. Finally, I took a step back and thought about what I was saying. This breath allowed me to calm my nerves and prepare for the performance that was to follow. So, remember to consider the introduction as another important part of the dialogue to be rehearsed.

Still Going

A great way to prepare for the SPT is to walk through and run the choreography. In fact, this is a tried and true classic. Mike Speck bases his process on the immortal approach of Alfred Lunt: "Remember your choreography and don't run into things." "I run the choreography as often as my partner wants, and then I relax." For Mike, and many other people, taking the time to run their fights is the chosen way to prepare.

Matt McKay takes it a step further with some added detail about how he chooses to run a fight on the day of a SPT. "First I meet with my scene partner and walk thru the fight (with weapons preferably, but without works too). We go in super slow motion with exaggerated gesture and story, like taking forever to say, 'Oooooooooohhhhhh Nnnnoooooooo!' [We make] big facial gestures along with paying close attention to our targeting and body shifting. After that we run through it [at] half speed and then walk away from it for at least 5-10 minutes." The key element to take away from this is taking the time to connect with each other. The choreography, proper usage of the weapon, and targeting are all important, but focusing on partner connections will elevate a fight toward the recommended level while increasing the confidence of both partners.

A Little Time for Yourself

While our work will include our partner, and we must focus on that relationship for the sake of the performance, it is also appropriate to take a little time for the individual. This isn't selfish (unless you completely disregard your partner), but should be viewed as part of the pre-test ritual. Andrea Robertson views this as a simple, but effective way to relax. "Sometimes it's just in my head, thinking the moves. I find while I'm getting ready for bed is a great time to go over lines and moves mentally."

On the test day Claire Yearman finds her solitude as well. "I try to have a quiet moment to focus and relax before I go on stage; a little moment of zen if you will." This moment of gathering oneself before the test is required for some. The result will ensure that one's head will be in the right frame of mind leading to the performance.

Personal time can also be part of the warm-up process. Paul E. Hope makes sure to "take a moment to breathe before going in [and] use some Alexander Technique to align." With others it could be yoga that allows them to best prepare for a SPT. Regardless of the personal needs, take some time and internalize.

Another note, for those observing or partnering, is to try and respect the time and space these individuals need. They will do the same in return; yet another example of excellent partnering on a basic level.

Check – Check – 1, 2 – 1, 2

Take a moment with the character before stepping out on-stage. It is important to recall that this scene will be part of the play. In most cases, much has occurred prior to this part of story and it is important to refresh these things in one's mind. This is a large part of Cara Rawlings pre-test ritual. "Just before the scene begins; I take a moment to focus on my given circumstances and my character's initial goal in the scene." Remember that the fight and/or characters do not begin on stage, but actually off stage. The old idea of walking the way a character would about five feet in the wings before entering the space applies to this scenario. Taking time for a mental reminder of the character will be the five psychological feet needed to place the character into the right time and place for the performance.

Conclusion

Determining your pre-test rituals is an ever evolving process. Look at the day of the test in comparison with preparation for a performance. For some people the above listed ideas are common-place while for others these ideas are new. Still, the best thing is to determine the process that works well for the individual. Try any of the above listed ideas to alleviate stress, improve preparation, partner connections, and a great stage combat performance.

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Barbara Seifert, Mike Speck,
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Claire Yearman

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The advertisement features a blue background with the SAFD logo at the top center, which includes the text "SAFD" in a large serif font and "THE SOCIETY OF AMERICAN FIGHT DIRECTORS" in a smaller sans-serif font below it. To the right of the logo is a circular emblem with a sword and the text "THE SOCIETY OF AMERICAN FIGHT DIRECTORS". Below the logo, the text "MERCHANDISE AVAILABLE ON-LINE!" is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font. On the left side, there is a framed image of a black t-shirt with a white graphic. In the center, a dashed-line box contains a list of merchandise items in green text: "T-shirts", "Hoodies", "Swordbags", "Sweatpants", "Ladies-wear", and "& more!". On the right side, there is a framed image of a pair of black pants with a white graphic. At the bottom, a green banner contains the website address "www.companycasuals.com/SAFD" in white text.