

Marshall University

**Marshall Digital Scholar**

---

Theatre Faculty Research

Theatre

---

5-2009

## **The Games People Play: Rehearsal Games & Approaches for Fight Scenes**

T. Fulton Burns

Follow this and additional works at: [https://mds.marshall.edu/theatre\\_faculty](https://mds.marshall.edu/theatre_faculty)



Part of the [Acting Commons](#)

---

# The Games People Play

(Rehearsal Games & Approaches for Fight Scenes)



By: T. Fulton Burns

There are as many approaches to the rehearsal period as there are directors, actors and acting texts combined. Rehearsals are the time that we all look forward to because we truly get to do what we do best in theatre, which is “play.” The games and approaches in this article are intended to spice up the life of your stage combat scene and enhance the time spent in rehearsal; following the initial time period of learning choreography and discovering initial acting choices.

Many people see the rehearsal process as the time to work. I couldn’t agree more but, as stated before, our work is to play. As with most games there are rules and guidelines established to achieve the strongest clarity from all the players. Everyone must not only understand these parameters, but must also accept the restrictions necessary to play successfully.

Please note: Even with these intended safe techniques for developing fight scenes, it is important to consider safety at all times during this process and whenever possible have a CT, FD, or FM close at hand to provide further safety measures. Also, after completing these exercises, review and discuss the positives and negatives of what was discovered while playing.

---

## Fight Scene Games

### 1. Slow Motion Action Theatre

A fun trick for working with choreography involves slowing it down to the point of exaggeration. The old *Six Million Dollar Man* or *Bionic Woman* series from the 1970’s serve as great reference points for the visual involved. (Try YouTube to see how this may look for those who are unfamiliar) Please note that this is not the same as an instructor asking for the fight to slow down for safety, but instead is a fun tool for acting purposes.

Slow motion exaggeration is the key to this technique. Even slower than Tai Chi speed, work through the choreography in its intended order. Take each moment to exaggerate every move with the entire body, including both physical and vocal reactions.

The purpose is to discover the intentions aimed toward catching the other character off of his/her guard and getting the upper hand. This also means that the partner will discover win moments during the choreography, prior to the final kill or injury moment. As these “Ah-Ha” moments (Wins) are found for one actor combatant while the “Oh-Crap!” moments (Losses) are found for the other. Remember that good acting equals reacting, so finding the key places for losses will help to sell the fight that much more.

Try varying the approach to this technique by running non-stop through the choreography from start to finish. The next time through the scene stop after discovering a Win and/or a Loss and start over again to create building blocks in the acting moments. Remember to play and have fun.

### 2. Give ‘em the Finger

The finger fighting technique is one of the oldest taught by those in the fight world. Whenever a fight calls for a weapon, take the time to slowly and safely work through the choreography in an environment completely removed from the black box/rehearsal space. The only tools needed for the actor combatants will be their fingers and hands. This method allows actors to walk through fight choreography for reminder techniques. The following have been used to represent weapons:

- Both the index and middle fingers touching and extended to represent any sword
- A single index finger may be used for either a dagger or a knife
- The back of the forearm may be used to represent a shield
- Two fists may be used to represent a quarterstaff (extend an arm for long form)
- A fist may represent a buckler (for work outside of the needs of a skills test)

The key to this form of play is visualizing where the parts of the weapons exist. Determine where the true edge of the sword is in relation to the fingers. This decision will help to ensure the accuracy of specific moves and avoid potentially sloppy choices when returning to work with the weapon. One major benefit is that this all takes place in a far more relaxed atmosphere and can be practiced in a living space without risking great harm to the space or any other people. The speed for this process is generally slow as it is intended to help with recalling the choreography.

### 3. Using your Noodle

Performing choreography with foam materials is absolutely fun! Some sword distributors now market foam swords for the process of learning stage combat. An inexpensive way to do this work is to purchase a pool noodle from any discount store during the summer season.

A full length pool noodle can represent a quarter-staff  
A noodle may be cut to represent a sword  
Smaller pieces may be cut to create daggers or knives

Try the fight choreography with your new foam weapons. One approach to working with foam weapons could be taking the time to work through the choreography, much like with finger fighting. Spatial requirements can remain in tact with far less dangerous tools.

Another process could be working with the choreography at the highest speed truly desired. The benefit is that mistakes will be made. These mistakes help the actor to see where they can make improvements in their work. As these moments are found make notes. When returning to the actual weapons one or more potential problems can be removed.

### 4. There Can Be Only One

Another way to use pool noodles relates to developing and discovering fighting abilities. This game involves partners dueling with pool noodle weapons.

Find an area with a partner that is free of any obstacles. The goal is to use the chest as the target. Start with the weapons in the on guard stance and do what ever is necessary to touch the target without being touched. With the chest being the target, each partner will truly try to hit the chest of the other individual before their own chest is hit. There must be full commitment to this game, and remember that giving up during the fight is not acceptable. The idea should relate to people fighting for their lives. Consider the moves which have been taught during training to increase the knowledge of why they are used. The downside of noodles is that they are not as sturdy, but the idea is to have fun and find variances in fighting styles.

There are fun casualties that need to be considered as well. If any limbs are hit, then they are no longer allowed to be used. The following are common events during this game:

- A sword arm is hit resulting in the weapon needing to be used in the non-dominant hand to continue the fight. If this occurs, the injured arm must be placed behind the back in order to avoid the temptation to reuse it.
- A leg has been hit, which will now require the good leg to support all upright activity. Yes, it looks silly, but the goal is also to have fun.

- Both legs have been hit, restricting all movement from the legs. (Unless someone has mastered the art of levitation and if you have, then please make me aware of the next workshop you will be teaching so that I may enjoy your knowledge)
- If both arms are lost, then I have seen people place the weapon between their legs and continue to fight. I even watched a high school student win with this technique!

During this game there are no "time outs" when adjusting for any of the above listed injuries, so always stay on guard!

There is one target that is always off limits and that is the face. Even though these are pool noodles, the possibility of an eye being hit could still occur.

Finally, observe that honesty is the best policy with this game. If someone has been hit, please honor that moment in the fight. Changing, or neglecting to honor the rules of the game only frustrates others. (We all remember the kid who took their ball home because they weren't winning the game.)

For large groups, get others involved so that a *Highlander* experience may take place. Have the group form a circle for the fighting/playing space. As each winner is decided per round, keep note of who is still in the running. The winners will partner up with the next fight, but for the sake of the fun, both are now completely healed following their last matches. Continue with process until one final winner is determined.

In this group situation it is important to experiment with different fighting styles as well as watching others' techniques. This is a great opportunity to steal ideas from fellow actor combatants and discover tactics that work as well as those that fail, and why.

### 5. Making your Mark

Washable magic markers as a training tool is quickly becoming another fun way of exploring fight skills. In a knife fight anything can happen. The markers are relatively close in size to knives and can help to reveal where things can get too close. Solid white clothing or light colored clothes are the best for this exercise because the color of the markers is clearer. Each performer gets a different colored marker to determine who has what knife.

Working with full intensity through the choreography with markers can demonstrate where there is a risk of getting cut during this close-quarters style of fighting. Whenever a mark is left on an opponent, students can see where adjustments will need to be made for the fight. The other benefit will be a better handling of the weapon. Everyone should take note of the marks left on their person. The respect for these types of knife fighting issues does not just exist for how partners interact, but also addresses how students can be a danger to themselves.

## 6. Marker Mayhem

Using two different colored Machine Washable Markers, and a plain white T-shirt, partners will participate in a safe knife fight. The rules are as follows:

- There is a time limit of 60 seconds. (Set a timer as everyone will be quite busy)
- The target is to cut (mark) the opponent's chest/torso (white shirt) as many times as possible during the time limit.
- The obstacle is to avoid being cut (marked) while trying to achieve the goal.

This exercise provides a great cardio workout and also a ton of fun. I have yet to see anyone not get cut by their opponent, and in most cases I have seen people accidentally cut themselves as well. The controlled environment gives the closest demonstration of a knife fighting experience without the danger.

With large groups take turns. Watch others to learn their approaches to this game determine what works the best.

## 7. What IF...?

Performing the choreography with alternative outcomes gives strong fight intentions. This technique may be used with any of the above mentioned tools (pool noodles or markers), or some instructors allow students to practice this technique with the actual stage combat weapons.

The process requires that the actors work through the choreography at a Tai Chi Speed to ensure that safety is in place at all times. The amount of time will determine how long this exercise can be used. The premise is that the actors act out the fight with intentions while allowing blows, which are normally parried, blocked, or evaded, to actually land in a controlled fashion. This will reveal to the actors how this fight could go if the fight went as the character wished.

For instance in a traditionally set piece of blocking the action could be staged as follows:

A

B

Right hook to B's head > Duck evasion

Let's assume that several moves, or perhaps an entire phrase, have preceded this current step in the choreography. At this moment the actors could decide what may happen if the intended events were to land and even act out the actions as follows:

A

B

Right hook to B's head > Fails to evade punch and the punch lands on left side of face, Provide suitable response to injury.

The idea is to discover the intentions of the moves provided within the choreography.

If time is limited, then pick two to three places where the action will land. If there is ample of amounts of time, then try this technique with the entire fight. Actors receiving the attack will help by acting out the reaction to the blow. This may result in an early kill or an injury, but this can answer the questions for the actor and character "What if this attack landed?" or "Why do I even do this move?" The result can reveal the danger in making a wrong move at any point and time in the fight.

For fights with weapons I have seen partners replacing the traditional stage properties with pine dowels or plastic golf tubes. The speed and energy levels are keys to the success of this exercise. When making any physical contact there is the ability to continue to hold the safety in place. Pretend that damage is done to both partners. This will be better than a game of Cops and Robbers.

## 8. The Tides Have Turned

DC Wright turned me onto the idea of looking for the changes in momentum within fight choreography as a rehearsal tool. The process provides great physical cues in the choreography for finding the wins and losses while helping problem solving skills in learning the fight effectively. Within fight choreography there are a series of actions (perhaps 3-5 moves at a time or perhaps a single move) lead by one character over the other where they are "winning" the fight. At some point the momentum will change, allowing for the losing character to have a series of dominating moves. This usually is found by determining a shift in direction based on advances and retreats in action.

Take the time to find these moments of change, either by looking at the fight on paper or while working through the fight. Now work each section individually from the top of the fight. Upon completing each momentum section the actors are to shift to the next section in the fight and focus only on that portion.

Having worked through the fight in bite size bits from the beginning to the end, piece the entire fight together from the end. This does not mean fighting in complete reverse, like rewinding a movie, but rather like reading a book's chapters in reverse order. Then add each previous moment of the fight until the entire fight has been completed in its correct chronological order.

A major benefit with this tool is finding a fight's natural speed in a more comfortable fashion.

### Acting Tools for Fight Scenes

#### 1. Opposites can be Attractive

No matter what kind of piece is being performed, consider a new look by playing the polar opposite. Within comedy there is often tragedy and within tragedy there is often comedy, so a fresh point of view might be just what is needed to discover new ways to play a scene.

Some young actors find this to be a tough technique because what they are playing no longer “feels right” to them. While it is possible that the results may not work, it is more honest to say that this process is just unfamiliar to the normal approach to a scene. Still, a silly comical approach to *Richard III* may present a far more horrific character in the scene. By approaching *Fortinbras* with a dramatic or perhaps even tragic approach the performers may very well create one of the funniest environments ever discovered for this story. Step back and take a different acting approach to the overall scene and see what results may be found.

## 2. She's Not My Type & He's Not Either

Another fresh point of view can be playing opposite of the character type. A different psychological approach to a character could be as simple as changing the perspective of a weak character to one that is ultra strong. This will help in finding more highs and lows for a character.

The physical approach to the character type can also be successful. Using Laban efforts will enable an actor to alter a character through a few physical adjustments. Determine which of the following movement efforts relates to the character:

Space:	Direct or Indirect
Weight:	Strong or Light
Time:	Sudden or Sustained
Flow:	Bound or Free

Once it has been determined how the character moves, based upon the above listed options, then list the four opposites and play one, two, three or all four different physical approaches to see where this takes a character.

The point of these approaches is to provide another way to consider a character's point of view. We, as actors, can place our own myopic views on who the character is, which is our way of suiting the character to us instead of the actor to the character. Relax and walk a mile through a character's potentially new shoes.

## 3. Release Your Inner Animal

Animal Essence work gives another acting approach to a character. Consider an animal's movement pattern and apply it to the scene work. Take a look back at the character analysis to determine the key animal that best fits. A good frame of reference for this technique may be found in *Star Wars Episode 1 - The Phantom Menace*. The character Darth Maul has a great moment of a caged lion eyeing its prey.

One trick involves the level at which this animal essence is played within the scene. During the initial run, take the animal essence to fullest extent possible and make a mental note of this level being 100%. From this point on play with other levels such as 50%, 25% etc... There may be some levels that are more effective at different points throughout the scene.

A further suggestion is to locate three different types of animals to play within the scene. Two may be related to the character, but the third should be as far from this type as possible. Below are some examples.

Bear	Cockroach
Tiger	Rat
Butterfly	Dove

Run the scene three times, choosing one specific animal type to play each time. The test is to fully commit to all of these perspectives, especially the one that seems the least likely to succeed. Let the moments evolve to find new things about a character via the animal movement, and ignore the critical voice saying “I know this one won't work and I will prove how this idea is wrong.” Just experiment with all of the options. It may be that a collection of all three animal essences creates the most dynamic character.

## 4. Make It Up

After performing a scene with the dialogue, as intended by the playwright, it can be hard to see the forest for the trees. To combat this, run the fight scene without the written text, improvising the lines while keeping the basic story. Let words flow freely while performing the choreography established by the fight instructor. Here it is the words/ideas that change and not the action.

Try this at least twice with completely different lines of dialogue for each instance. The freshness will enhance the rehearsal environment and provide a great opportunity to discover unknown subtext that may be applied to the scene. This process of improvisation may give a chance to think of the scene differently and rejuvenate performances.

## Final Thoughts

Pick and choose the games that suit the fight needs best. It may be best to just pick one at random to see what could develop within the fight scene and acting work. The important thing is to remember that our work is to continue to develop our ability to play. Make sure that fun is part of the rehearsal process and look for new ways to play while working a fight scene.

If you have any additional games or techniques not listed in this article, please feel free to submit them to [t\\_fulton\\_burns@yahoo.com](mailto:t_fulton_burns@yahoo.com) with the title “Games People Play” in the subject line. These games will be compiled for a future article.

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