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"I Can't - I Have Rehearsal"

(Rehearsal Guidelines & Techniques with Fight Scene Work)



By: T. Fulton Burns

The rehearsal process often contains excitement, uncertainty, and, at times, stress for all involved. It is at this stage of the process where the culmination of skills acquired (research, character study, and embodying choreography) all come together. The following guidelines and techniques are aimed toward helping the actor address and conquer both acting and fight needs during the rehearsal process.

Partnering Skills

1. R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Whether a partner has been chosen, or assigned by a fight instructor, it is important not to overlook the actor to actor relationship. Working well with a partner is the most important requirement for a successful skills test or performance. The reasons are limitless for developing this relationship, but ultimately the main objectives are to create a less stressful environment and gain one another's respect. Consider the following guidelines when seeking to establish, and/or enhance, respectful work in the rehearsal process:

Establish a dialogue between partners for effective communication. By working together, and not against one another, the responsibilities and needs of the fight will be shared. Often actors are advised against directing one another in a scene or giving notes regarding fight techniques. These ideas apply here as well; however, a proactive way to approach this is to share ideas through effective communication with one another. One approach to effective communication involves collaborative questions. Such as the following:

What do you think about...?
Could we try...?
How do you feel about...?
When "X" occurs could we try...?

The idea of collaborative questions allows for open dialogue and avoids negativity found with comments like "I want you to..." or "You should do...", which at times may feel like an attack on a performer's work rather than a suggestion for improvement. This tool of effective and collaborative dialogue is one of the most important when working in theatre.

Establish rehearsal times and dates, and meet at those predetermined times. Time is precious and needs to be respected. Missing rehearsal or being late only reduces respect and increases stress. Even under dire circumstances, a phone call should be made in order to avoid wasting the time of a partner.

Warm-up time needs to be determined too. Physical and vocal warm-ups need to occur prior to the established rehearsal time to make the most of the rehearsal time together.

Memorized lines are also extremely important. Each partnership should decide when the lines should be memorized within the rehearsal process. Once choice is to come into the rehearsals memorized. Another option can be to work with lines while rehearsing the fight. Regardless, there should be a fixed date as to when memorization will be complete. No matter what the date, both must respect the deadline established through this verbal contract and come to the rehearsal with lines memorized upon the agreed date. Again, time is precious!

If there is one certainty, it is that one, if not both partners, may have a bad day of rehearsal. Support your partner if this happens. Pointing out the foibles of another only adds to the problem, and speaking negatively about a partner to others can cause serious problems. If it is a safety issue, then it should be brought to the attention of the fight instructor. Speaking with classmates only weakens the actor to actor relationship. Always, keep in mind that everyone is likely to develop stress in this process, so be prepared to listen and support one another when the time comes.

The largest things to remember is that everyone wishes to pass their skills test, and that the fight taking place will be a fake one. In showing one another respect from beginning to end, the best scenario has been established for achieving a strong fight scene through excellent partnership.

2. Slow Down Speed Racer

An effective speed for rehearsal is important for a number of reasons. First, let's consider safety as the number one guideline for any work in stage combat. The foreword in William Hobbs book *Fight Direction* by Lawrence Olivier (also located in *Combat Mime: A Non-Violent approach to Stage Violence* by J.D. Martinez) that details how he has endured countless injuries should be included in every

single stage combat text on the planet! An injury or scar is not a right of passage but a mark of a major mistake made during the stage combat process. Trust is an important element in any actor training, rehearsal process, or performance. Once this trust is broken it is extremely tough to rebuild, if possible at all.

The second reason for an effective speed in rehearsal is to get the moves correct. We have heard the old adage that “practice makes perfect”, but CT Lacy Altwine thinks a more appropriate quote for our work is that “practice makes permanent...not perfect.” Going slowly helps to correctly learn the choreography. The idea is similar to changing lines written by the playwright. Our job is to use and perform the choreography, not change it.

Third, the speed may be too much for an audience to handle. There are times when two combatants are so well trained that they can perform techniques at blinding speeds. The problem is that the audience doesn't get to enjoy the fight. If an actor says their words too quickly, then the words get lost and so does the story line. This issue is similar to the moments in a fight. Just as some words need more emphasis than others in the text, so do certain moves in a fight. Give every word and move its fair chance.

Finally, slowing down does not make for a poor stage combatant, but instead makes a better and smarter actor combatant.

3. Give me a Break!

Yes Virginia, it is possible to over rehearse a scene every bit as much as it is to under rehearse. During the design process there is time set aside as an incubation period; this is often placed after the research has occurred and prior to the implementation of their artistic ideas. The purpose is to allow new ideas to arise. Making sure that there is time to relax and get away from the work is a very important step in the fight rehearsal process. While the body may be willing the mind needs a vacation from time to time and vice versa. Water, food, or mental breaks may be just the cure.

Another great way to approach a break is table work. This can occur before, during and even after the rehearsal process. Sitting down to discuss the scene and character needs is always a positive move. Actors might even take a night off after having rehearsed a scene several times to give themselves their own incubation. Table work is a great time to share compliments on things that work well. Sharing ways that partners have affected each other during the fight scene will help to improve acting intentions and confidence.

The benefits of planning, and taking breaks during the rehearsal process are immeasurable. This can help the rehearsal process to stay on track, or perhaps get back on it. So take a break!

Character Needs in the Rehearsal

1. Dress the Part

Combining costume needs into a fight rehearsal is not commonly taught; but this tool can raise fight skills to a new level. Costumes can place a fight in the context of the scene and its needs. This technique is used at the Fight Director's Workshop to help in the acting training, and FM Brian Byrnes has been an advocate of costume usage for several years. In some ways this part of the process is similar to sense memory recall work.

The use of costumes makes such a positive difference in the rehearsal for any production. The best way to accomplish costuming needs is to seek out a Costume Department for advice. If they have the means to allow rentals or borrowing pieces, then go for it. If no resources are available, then the next choice is to get close to what is needed.

Many instructors of period style movement require their students to wear pieces that are close to the time period for the sake of rehearsal. Hard soled shoes feel different than sports shoes, a skirt does not move the same as a pair of athletic shorts, and a button down shirt is more restrictive than a t-shirt. Find the costume that is close to the character to strengthen the fight scene work.

2. Where's My Prop?

Our training in much of stage combat is simply training with props. Like with costumes, not all fight instructors incorporate the need for properties, beyond that of the fight world, in the rehearsal process. Unlike with costumes, excluding props may be for safety or due to the element of time. If safety and/or time are not concerning factors, then placing the right prop in a scene can make all the difference. A fight or scuffle over a letter, and who ends up with this item during the scene, let's the audience see the objective beyond the element of fisticuffs. Also, props such as chairs or tables during a single sword fight may add more depth and strength to the swash buckling effect. Consider the needs of a property in the scene and how it relates to character work.

3. Let's Make Up

Wearing make up for some is complicated, but for others it is quite simple. The visual change for partners and audience can be an effective technique with great results. Scars, tattoos, or a prosthetic nose can help to create a new world.

Still, adding something like a prosthetic piece may cause more problems than benefits. As with all the options in this section, it is best to make these decisions early in the rehearsal process to give time to adjust to the new elements.

Analysis of your Work

1. T.T.F.N. (Take the "Friggin" Note)

Criticism is a fact and necessary part of theatre life. If an instructor stops to watch a fight scene and offers a suggestion (i.e.. asks that it slow down), then the note should never be taken as a personal attack. Instead actor combatants should view this as an opportunity to better their skills. Unfortunately, some students wish to point out flaws with the instructor's notes or respond by deflecting the problem away from them. The true opportunity for the actor is to accept the challenge in their own work and seek ways to solve the problem. Remember that actors who take a note and the initiative to correct issues are the ones that are hired most often in our business.

Also, keep in mind that an instructor rarely gives notes just to be heard. They provide notes to enhance opportunities for the student's success. No greater satisfaction comes to a fight instructor than to see someone learn from their teaching and succeed in using the techniques in the form of a skills proficiency test. A student's success in their test or performance is a success of the instructor's abilities to teach those skills. Take advantage of this information because, not only are these instructor's knowledgeable in how to teach these techniques, but they know from first hand experience what it is like to participate in a skills test. Frequently, instructors are sharing their own fight scene mistakes in order to help their student's to succeed. So, take the notes they wish to share.

2. Hi MOM! Look at Me!

Performing in front of a class helps in a number of ways. First, friends and instructors can provide feedback. If certain moves are supposed to be hidden from the audience, (i.e. a punch or blade tip goes too far past a target) then this can be noted and adjusted before the final test.

Another big benefit is in preparing the body and mind for the adrenaline rush that occurs when performing in front of an audience. The more often this event takes place, the more prepared students will be when the skills test is placed in front of an adjudicator.

3. Smile - You're on Not-So Candid Camera!

Filming a fight scene will not lie. Some actors are sensitive at first with performing in front of an audience of classmates. With a video camera during a private rehearsal, the pressure can be reduced. Be certain to place the camera at the optimum location, perhaps where the Fight Master will be on the test day. Targeting lines will be revealed in the action, but this method also provides the opportunity to view and hear the scene as it will appear to the adjudicator. This technique will highlight areas in need of improvement while also showcasing the

things that work. It also provides more time to strengthen effective communication with a partner.

Please Note: Do not equate the level of speed observed on the video with what a live audience will see. Filming a fight may slow down the action, so please keep this idea in mind when you observe the tapes/dvds.

Final Thoughts

During this part of the process improvements will be made in both acting and fight skills. All of the previous work in script, character, and scene analysis will help jump start the rehearsal process, but now the rewards of all this hard work will begin to show as the work becomes stronger and more believable. The best way to ensure progress is to always work safely and respectfully while playing with a fight scene.

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