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A Violent Character

Stage Combat Character Analysis



By T. Fulton Burns

It is so deceptively easy stating who your character is but it is overlooked more often than you may think. A good character analysis is important in the actor/character relationship and here we will look at the key elements of character research and their specific relationships to the stage combatant.

If you want a great source to consider I highly recommend Uta Hagen's *Respect for Acting* because it has one of the most concise research options available. She lists her character analysis as follows:

• Who am I?	Character
• What time is it?	Century, year, season, day, minute
• Where am I?	Country, city, neighborhood, house, room, area of room
• What surrounds?	Animate and inanimate objects
• What are the given circumstances?	Past, present, future, and the events
• What is my relationship?	Relation to total events, other characters, and to things
• What do I want?	Character, main and immediate objectives
• What's in my way?	Obstacles
• What do I do to get what I want?	The action: physical, verbal

The ideas listed above are universal for any production or character research. Still, if you wanted other choices, then I would head to the number one source being Stanislavski himself with the ABC's of acting *An Actor Prepares*, *Building a Character*, and *Creating a Role*. Since some of the things such as time and location were addressed in the last article, entitled "What a World – What a World" and identified script analysis needs, we will move forward with the needs for character analysis in the fight world. It is important to make these connections and know that from time to time you will want to reference and re-reference these issues as your fight scenes develop.

1. Who is this Guy (or Girl)?

"I try to glean what the level of martial training the character may have had previous to the fight. Is it likely she or he has received instruction in sword play or hand to hand fighting from an early age or does the fight erupt out of passion and have a feel of chaos or randomness? Maybe neither character is trained, but is one character experienced with violence and the other is a novice?" CT – Jill Matarelli Carlson

In the fight play we are often defined by our abilities and how they relate physical conflict but the actor should also look at the background of the character such as family, environment, financial levels, etc. All of these things play a role in regards to who our characters are as individuals. These issues can also relate to our abilities in violence too.

Characters in *Romeo and Juliet* have training in combative techniques and this level of expertise even reveals social status. Tybalt is a wonderful example because he prides himself on his fighting abilities. One could even argue that fighting and pride are all that he knows. The hatred he holds towards another family (Montagues) based upon principle and/or teaching, also molds him as a character. Also, how he fights is based upon the training he has received in his formative years. There is some room here for discussion as to whether the character is formed through nurture or is violence in his nature. His training is nurtured but his psychological connections may be nature. The key point is that his ideas must be justified to him in order for the audience to believe in the character. Still, no matter how these actions are carried out for Tybalt, whether they are emotional or thought based actions, they are all handled with great skill because he has been raised to be a talented combatant.

While one character may be well versed in a martial art another may possess fire and angst, but very little formal training. In Marsha Norman's *Getting Out*, Arlie has become a fighter as a result of her environment. The style of violence she exhibits is raw and to take a chapter out of FM K. Jenny Jones' book "scrappy." Here an actor must tackle a combination of aggressive and defensive fighting all at once. In Arlie's case anything will serve as a weapon and the slightest things set her actions into motion because in many ways she is always on the defense.

The following are some things to consider when looking at your character:

Take a look at the level of training the character may or may not possess

Note how the social environment molded your character

Determine those things that may or may not be instinctive to the character's actions

Justify the thoughts/emotions held by the character with their actions

2. Everything is Relative

"The best scenes establish character (who they are/what the relationship is eg. brother & brother, mortal enemies, etc.)" CT – Ted Sharon

In the film *Fight Club* a great moment of fisticuffs exists that involves only one character but this internal conflict, one that manifests effectively into an external form, is rare. As a teacher once told me, "a fight happens between two people and if one person chooses not to get involved, then it simply leaves the first person to look like a fool who is just yelling." In a story, a fight must occur between at least two characters of with opposing ideas.

In *Independence* by Lee Blessing a family, comprised entirely of women, are brought together for the needs of their mother and ultimately themselves. A scuffle takes place between two of the sisters Kess and Sherry. Both are strong willed individuals and there is much history between the two women involving, upbringing, pregnancies, and who is capable of making proper decisions in this family. This history, coupled with the current situation surrounding the mother's mental state, builds to a fight where once again words have failed. This relationship makes for a true fight of passion and anger. Their history goes beyond any fight involving two men meeting on the street for the first time simply insulting one another because these two women know many things about one another. Ultimately Kess and Sherry also know how to push each other to the edge which becomes the fight scene.

You must find the relationship between the fighters and place these into perspective. As with *Romeo and Juliet* there is much history between the Montagues and the Capulets that carries throughout Shakespeare's piece. These relationships play as much a part in the fight as do the moves that lead to the conclusions of these moments of violence.

When considering the relationship look at the following:

The background between the characters involved in the fight

- These characters may have just met but they have their own views of how the world should work
- There may be a deep history
 - families (Hatfields vs. McCoys) (Sibling Rivalries) or (Couples)
 - Gangs (Cripts vs. Bloods)
 - Schools of training (Snake vs. Drunken style)
 - Regional (North vs. South)

Discover the spark that has ignited the violence between the characters

- While the fight is at this time, previous ideas exist for them that leads to the current altercation

3. Tell me all your wants and desires

"I always hope that students use the Fight Scene to explore how the movement of stage combat can put them in touch with 'inner acting values and emotional magma' that will help them access these things to create huge volcanic acting work when the swords are no longer part of the equation."

CT - Bill Lengfelder

A character objective is the main driving force behind what they must do and accomplish within the story. The decision must be made towards what this character wishes to gain; an, although the goal may never be achieved, the character must still fight for this objective as though they will reach it with great success.

One of my favorite swashbuckling epics is 1937's *The Prisoner of Zenda* featuring Douglas Fairbanks Jr. who portrays Rupert and Ronald Coleman who plays Rassendyll. This is not the type of film where you will learn incredible stage combat skills, as with FM Richard Ryan's work in *Troy*, but the reason I love this particular fight is that the objectives for both characters are so clear. In some fights it is simple to assume that both fighters wish to kill the other, however in *Zenda* the situation is actually more complex. In the classic approach to a fight objective Rupert does wish to defeat and end his opponent Rassendyll. However, Rassendyll is not concerned with killing Rupert but instead is fighting through Rupert in order to let down the drawbridge. In this situation Fairbanks' character is actually more of an obstacle than the immediate objective. Because of the clear goals for the characters it is a wonderful piece of stage combat that should be viewed when teaching the skills of acting and stage combating.

Another great fight scene is in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. In the comical sword fight, Viola, who is currently playing her male alter ego Cesario, and Sir Andrew Aguccheek have been coached into a fight based upon the words of the servants and clowns. While each character's honor is on the line, the objective for both characters is their desire to not fight, to avoid pain and ultimately live.

When looking at a fight first consider what this person wants from this fight. The following are just a few options that a character may want:

- You want the death of the other person
- You want to survive
- You want something returned that was stolen
- You want to delay the character for a reason
- You want respect
- You want money
- You want your honor returned
- You want love

The online format is great ... nice job!
- Caryn Flanagan

4. Get out of my way!

“As an actor, however great your objective, you MUST have an equally great obstacle to overcome in pursuit of this objective to truly lend breadth, depth and scope to your character. This same framework is the heart of stage combat. If all you are working to overcome is the skill level of your opponent in the fight, all though interesting, this will plateau. Varied and multiple obstacles are taking what we do onto the next level of artistry.” CT – Lee Soroko

Obstacles create stronger characters in a story and the more obstacles a character faces while trying to achieve their goal the more exciting the character is to watch. The character has a definite objective they wish to obtain, but standing in their way is a problem they must overcome in order to get what they want. If the character could just reach out and grab what they wanted with little struggle, then the audience has little reason to watch the story unfold.

In *Hamlet*, following the production of the “Mouse Trap,” Hamlet is mentally assured that his uncle, Claudius, has indeed killed his own brother, Lord Hamlet, in order to become the new king. Hamlet has pursued Claudius in order to carry out the objective, which is to kill his uncle and avenge the death of Lord Hamlet.

Structure wise, if this event takes place now then the play would most definitely end too soon and lack a necessary dramatic build. Shakespeare himself knew this choice would disappoint his audience, so instead a brilliant obstacle is tossed in front of Young Hamlet. Hamlet sees Claudius with his back turned and our Prince begins to act but in a moment recognizes Claudius performing what appears to be a prayer. Hamlet knows that if Claudius is killed having absolved himself of his sins he will rise directly to Heaven instead of paying eternally for his sins. (Truthfully, Claudius is not praying but instead is processing what has gone wrong with his grand scheme in order to be king.) This obstacle prevents Hamlet from achieving his objective and postpones his vengeance for a more appropriate time and place.

Look for your obstacles to have a stronger fight as every new obstacle creates a new moment of discovery or problem for the character. With every new problem more drama develops for the audience to watch. Only by watching will they see if the character will overcome their current obstacle and ultimately win the fight against their opponent.

Possible options for conflicts could be:

The Character is a Pacifist

The Opponent is Family Member

The Person is trying to kill you when you are seeking your objective

The Characters may be in Love

5. And...ACTION!!!

“What am I trying to do with this move? Kill? Defend? Deflect? Distract? Humiliate? Taunt? Etc.” CT – Jill Matarelli Carlson

You can't play angry because this is a state of being, but an actor could choose to “terrorize” and the audience will interpret this as anger. I am not saying emotional connections for actors to their characters are not important but instead I wish to point out the importance for choosing a verb in order to achieve your goal. Actors must play verb/actions to achieve their objectives and overcome obstacles, and as the scene progresses so should the verb choices.

Edmund Rostad's classic *Cyrano de Bergerac* features one of my favorite duels of all time, between Cyrano and Valvert. The fight has a fantastic build of action and dialogue. One of the strengths of this piece is that the objective is clear and the scene requires the use of multiple verbs to obtain the goal.

Cyrano's ultimate objective in the scene is to kill Valvert at the end of the poem he is creating while dueling. Following the acknowledged objectives, the actions in this scene are fantastic to consider and play. One thing that Cyrano performs is return the insults that are being directed at him but in raising the stakes (an important factor in any scene or play) he has to “insult” Valvert in a far more intelligent manner. These insults lead to the decision for Cyrano to “duel” with Valvert. He raises the stakes of this duel by “declaring” to all that surround the scene that a poem will be created while dueling. This dueling performance is intended to show that Valvert lacks creativity as seen with his simple insult towards Cyrano's nose; an insult that Cyrano has heard time and time again. This “declaration” of a Ballad Extempore' provides an obstacle for Cyrano in that he must survive the duel for the entire poem and not kill Valvert before the declared time. While “dueling,” Cyrano “delivers” a grand performance of words in addition to “revealing” his superior skills as a fighter. During the course of this duel our hero has to “evade,” “attack,” and “destroy” his opponent like no one else in this kind of forum. All of these actions build to a wonderful climax that is the death of Valvert which meets the precise statement declared by Cyrano at the beginning of the scene.

The verbs should change throughout to entertain the audience and improve the scene. As the scene grows stronger so should the intensity of the verbs. For example, if a person chooses to flirt early in the scene it is appropriate that, as the scene progresses, the actions may build up to the verb seduce. Stronger verb/actions will lead to stronger moments in the scene. The actor must consider the verbs in the scene and their relations to the choreography as well as the character. Possible verb/actions that one could play are as follows:

to punch	to crush	to entertain
to romance	to lead	to deflate
to burn	to terrorize	to scorch
to embarrass	to conquer	to kill
to threaten	to confuse	to destroy

6. Let's see what we have.

"Where you are will dictate what surrounds you. After that, whatever would be naturally found in the space would be fair game." CT – Brian LeTraunik

In a skills test it is already determined as to what weapon you must use along with the required moves. Still the character can look for other options. I love the joke/story often attached to Small Sword training where you tell the person you are dueling to "watch out for the dog" behind them. Donald McBaine stories are filled with these tales. When the person is silly enough to look for the dog, then it provides the perfect opportunity for a fighter to attack his opponent when they are quite unaware. The character should always be actively thinking and if they are not, then chances are they are dead.

As an actor you should also be looking for all options available to you to keep your scene on its toes. In his play, *Extremities*, William Mastrosimone begins this shocking story with one of the most challenging fight/rape scenes ever placed on a stage. The key characters in this opening scene are Marjorie and Raul. Marjorie begins the scene in her apartment with morning actions that lead to her being stung by a wasp. In retaliation to the sting she grabs a can of bug spray and snuffs out the wasp. Soon after these events, Raul arrives to this apartment to carry out his objective which is to rape Marjorie (and ultimately her roommates too). This space is familiar to Marjorie, and not

Raul, yet she quickly becomes a victim in her own home. Raul dominates Marjorie and the space. Our heroine continues to fight and seek for options out her situation. At first she tries to escape and is blocked by our villain. Marjorie goes for the phone and the cord is ripped from the wall. Eventually Raul has her physically in his grasp, and as Marjorie continues to struggle, he discovers a pillow which he chooses to smother her and causes her to pass out during the scene. Once she has regained consciousness the violent scene continues and as the rape is about to be carried out Marjorie sees the same can of bug spray that begins our scene. Now by her taking advantage of the items in her surroundings Marjorie is able to gain the upper hand and thwart her attacker and begins the true story that will unfold before us in Mastrosimone's piece.

At times the location can serve as an unspoken character to the fight scene and should not be overlooked when considering a scene and its work. Consider the following for the surroundings in your scene:

Does this space play any part in the action?

Are there any levels, furniture, or footings that are important?

Is the space familiar to you or your opponent?

Are there things in this location that may play a part in the ultimate outcome of the scene?

Final Thoughts

Your character must be more than just a fighter or a person who delivers words. The character must be a living being in the story. By using these tools your character will possess three dimensional qualities and you will succeed in creating a more dynamic fight scene.

Special thanks to the following people for their contributions to this article: Jill Matarelli Carlson, Brian LaTraunik, Bill Lengfelder, Ted Sharon, & Lee Soroko

Hagen, Uta. *Respect for Acting*. Hoboken, New Jersey. John Wiley and Sons, Inc. 1973

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"I downloaded the [three] segments of The Cutting Edge this morning, and thought I'd mention to you that in order for me to actually download it so I can keep it (and I WANT to - it's REALLY gorgeous!) I had to go thru an extra step for each segment. Otherwise downloading didn't take all that long. It might [also] be easier to deal with the membership application if it was a separate file. Great job on bringing this online!"

- Cathy Brookshire