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11-2008

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Fighting the Elements

(Determining the Best Scenes for Skills Proficiency Tests)

By T. Fulton Burns

In the last edition of *The Cutting Edge* I provided tips for locating fight-specific scenes. Now let's narrow our search from the vast quantity of scenes to a playing field of only the best quality. For a Skills Proficiency Test (SPT), choreography comes first to ensure that the proper techniques are included within the fight. Following these lessons in technique and choreography, the scene selection process begins. In a traditional acting class, the scene selection occurs first and is followed by the explored action. So even though the cart may be before the horse, as it were, with an SPT, it doesn't mean that it won't help in actor training. In fact, a result of dealing with different kinds of training obstacles could be a great tool in providing new opportunities for growth for an actor. Still, there are frustrations that must be overcome in reversing the order. The best way to reduce this frustration is to locate strong scenes for acting. After all, we are working towards the title of *Actor/Combatant*. When choosing a fight scene for a skills test consider the following to ensure that your work will have the necessary elements to excel as both an Actor and Combatant. *Acting One* by Robert Cohen is a great starting point that provides solid baseline criteria for selecting acting scenes. In order to help with the improvement our acting techniques, keep the following in mind:

- Choose a role of your own sex and close to your own age.
- Choose a role in which you can clearly see something at stake emotionally for the character you will be playing.
- Choose a role in which something is happening in the scene itself – as opposed to a role in which characters are talking about something that already happened.
- Choose a role in which you can identify with the character's struggle or dilemma.
- Choose a role in which the characters and situation interest you personally. (Cohen 68)

This book reiterates much of what is taught by other acting instructors. Texts with similar lists are *Acting: In Person and In Style* by Crawford and *Acting: The Creative Process* by Albright & Albright; however, since there are differences in our training that go beyond what is needed for a traditional acting scene, it is also important to identify these elements. The following elements echo the ideas listed by Cohen with more specific details to help bridge the gap between the Actor and the Combatant.

1. Start to Finish & Everything in Between

A scene should possess a definitive beginning, middle, and end. Remember, this is a mini-story that you are telling. It is a slice right out of the play, and the structure of the scene should reflect as much. You want to keep the attention upon your overall performance. If you are only interesting because of the fighting, then you have failed your audience! Or worse - a prop may have upstaged you! So think in terms of the Well-Made-Play format and look at your scene. If there is no background, inciting incident, rise in action, climax, fall in action and conclusion, then chances are strong that the scene you are considering will not serve you well for the SPT. If the mini-story is clear, then chances are greater that it will work well for your needs. The piece must ultimately hook in the beginning and then deliver at the end.

2. Make Those Connections

I can still hear Mark Olsen telling me at the Celebration Barn: "in the theatre it is important to act *on* the line and not *between* them." He was (and is) right: it holds true for stage combat as well as acting because combat is a continuation of verbal conflict. A sign of a good scene is that it will allow for immediate connections between dialogue and action. For instance, a good scene choice may begin with dialogue, contain stage combat in the middle, and ultimately end with a short bit of dialogue. Another scenario could have quick dialogue with several direct links between combative phrases and verbal banter leading to a strong conclusion. So take a good look at the scene. Much like a conventional scene calls for a breakdown of beats, you can do the same thing with a scene calling for stage violence. In addition to verbs/actions and intentions, you need to place the appropriate phrases/moves for your skills test. Once this is accomplished many fight scenes fall right into place.

Try to avoid scenes without connections between dialogue and action or overlapping the two. Take for instance the scene between Cyrano and Valvert from *Cyrano De Bergerac*. This is a wonderful scene that is extremely exciting during performance, but there are no breaks between the dialogue and the violence. The two go hand in hand in front of the audience; but the dialogue and action happen simultaneously. This overlapping of words and actions presents the kind of scene that could cause problems for passing a skills test because the student has to perform the choreography while speaking. Dividing their focus during a test lays additional pressure that is otherwise unnecessary.

3. Are They Angry?!?

There should be conflict, Conflict, CONFLICT! We've heard it again and again: plays are not written about the day that nothing happened. On this particular day and time a fight is breaking out and it should be the greatest conflict that can be found. Violence occurs when words have failed. The words must lead and build to that failure, but the conflict will continue throughout the fight scene to ultimately reach its climactic conclusion. It is also important to keep in mind that the stakes are high! So high, in fact, that death may come to one or more involved in the scene. Identify the conflict the same way you would determine the super-objective for a character or a theme for the play.

4. Mano~e~Mano

Think of the classic western movie scene: It is sundown (or sunup) and two gunslingers are poised at opposite ends of the street waiting for the first one to move. But who are they? Are they two villains? Is it the town sheriff and a bandit?

The important factor here is to locate strong opposing characters in the story. The stronger the characters, the more dynamic the conflict will be; and the more dynamic the conflict, the better the story's beginning, middle and ultimate ending will be illustrated. Strong characters will have a history, even if that history is established only a few seconds before their weapons are drawn. These characters will have skill levels to take into account as well; skill levels that will be apparent from information preceding the scene, throughout the scene, and after the fight has been concluded. Finally, there are the character's ideas and viewpoints to contend with. Utilizing all these elements

These have proven to be universal issues addressed by instructors throughout the SAFD when selecting a fight scene for a skills test. Combine the ideas of both a traditional acting scene based on elements similar to Cohen's with the needs for an SPT scene and you are sure to improve your acting choices along with your combat skills. If there is ever any question, you should consult your Certified Fight Teacher and discuss the scene you have chosen. They are always there to help.

Special thanks to the following people for their contributions for this article: Lacy Altwine, Jason Armit, Matthew Ellis, Bill Lengfelder, Brian LeTraunik, Darrell Rushton, and Ted Sharon.

Cohen, Robert. *Acting One Fifth Edition*. New York. McGraw Hill Publishing, Inc. 2008

Fight Scene Selection – Q & A

Through my interaction with a number of Fight Directors and Certified Teachers for this article, there were some ideas that I felt were worth noting. Since opinions differ from test to test it's always a good idea to begin with the fight instructor preparing you for your skills test. For now these ideas are combined with a few common questions:

How long should a scene be?

It is very important to remember that the length of the entire Skills Proficiency Test should not exceed three minutes. But to keep on track for this time frame it is a good idea to "keep it short by avoiding a scene that contains a page and a half of dialogue before the fight...so get into the scene." - FD Jason Armit

CT Ted Sharon says, "the length is usually no more than one page of typed text. More than that gets too far from the point." If you are unable to achieve the length men-

tioned by Ted, then a good idea is to edit a strong scene to a workable length in order to manage the length while maintaining the core structure.

Do the weapons for my skills test matter if they are not listed in the scene?

"The feel of the scene should match the feel of the weapon being tested. Doing *Macbeth* with smallswords, while an interesting choice, may not be the best. Likewise, doing sword and shield with a Restoration comedy scene does not help to sell the intent of the weapon." - CT Brian LeTraunik

Another perspective on the issue comes from CT Darrell Rushton who says "I like to make unconventional pairings of weapons with scenes . . . the best advice I ever received for this was [from] JP Scheidler [who] advised me to do Broadsword with Neil Simon's *The Odd Couple* (the spagehetti throwing scene). I stalked onstage with two broadswords to the lines 'THIS is how I solve MY

problems' and got huge applause, then believably sold the fight with my partner."

Can I do a scene from a movie?

This is a question that continues to appear time and time again. Some instructors say absolutely not. Others don't care as long as it's well acted. But at the core of this issue is a deeper concern: most often the actor has watched the film first rather than having read the script exclusively. As CT Matthew Ellis adds, "When one actor has taken on the role, it is often hard to work past that interpretation."

CT Lacy Altwine advises against choosing iconic roles (i.e. *Batman*, *The Princess Bride*, *Star Wars*, etc.). "You've got enough to worry about with trying to overcome your entire audience's perception or memory of an already good performance. Unless you can truly bring something different to the performance and you KNOW you can blow us away, don't do it," she says.

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