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Throwing Down the Gauntlet: Finding the Best Partnership for Fight Scene Work

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Throwing Down the Gauntlet(Finding the Best Partnership for Fight Scene Work)

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T. Fulton Burns

Over the past few years I have written my perspective on the Skills Proficiency Test process. Earlier this year I thought that my process was complete but then an issue continued to creep up in my mind over and over again. It was that I had not addressed how best to find a partner for one's scene work.

The reason for finding a good partner relates to my first workshop in stage combat. Discovering with whom to partner and with whom not to partner for scene work was the most valuable lesson I learned. Rather than focusing upon the ones with whom we should not partner (as the list is without limits), we will take a look at what works for a strong partnership. Some acting teachers will choose a partner for you. If, however, you are left to your own devices, here are some points to consider in picking a great fight scene partner.

Part I - Basic Approaches to Partnering

Do You Like Me?

When choosing a partner it is a great idea to go with one's gut (or intuition). Observe how well students get along with others in your class. Since it is not uncommon for personal relationships to develop during classes, workshops, and productions it is also a great idea to understand why they develop. In fact, Robert Barton acknowledges that, "Your understanding of acting principles can help you choose better who you want to play with, to make informed selections regarding friends and lovers. You should be better able to recognize playful performance versus destructive self-deception, and to distinguish between nurturing comfort and mere predictability. The more you know about acting, the more you know how much you want it in your relationships." (306 Barton)

With that in mind, consider some of the following introspective questions when looking for partners:

What common interests do we share?

Do we have similar goals in mind for our skills test?

Do we respect one another?

Can we trust one another?

Has this student been reliable and safe in class thus far?

And what further approaches to a beginning relationship/friendship can that help this process?

As you find what will work best for your own training you may find what works best in your own life as a professional and

artist.

Can We Dance? - Can we Play?

In the training process look at how well you move with others in the class. Be mindful that we want to pass the tests and find a partner that will help us to succeed while in turn, helping them succeed as well.

Most teachers remind us to change from fellow student to fellow student while training. This provides unique opportunities to our training but also allows us to train with those with whom we may work best. Take note of those students that make a great fit in movement in your style in class and a great partner may reveal itself. The ability to work with choreography is just as important as working with a great dance partner.

The ability to "play well with others" is of great import as well. Take notice of the creative spirit that may be shared with another actor. The more creative choices that can be made as a team, the stronger the scene work will develop for an SPT.

As one considers making a list of the people with whom they can work well in class look at how you succeeded in your day-to-day exercises and drills. As you observe the movement and ability to play together goes well in class, then chances for success will profoundly improve for test day.

A Challenge!

It is also a great idea to let someone know that you enjoy training with them as well. We are all training in this area because we wish to be strong at it. It promotes a sense of confidence to know that we have done a good job and others notice it. I am not suggesting false praise, but if you truly have a positive experience with someone, let them know. Perhaps this will create a strong possibility for partnering with this individual later.

When training in Vegas for the first time I was able to take a short Master Class in Pilipino Fighting Sticks. As is common with switching partners, I ran into a partner that challenged me greatly in my work. In working with the new weapons style he and I synched up with one another's rhythms and speed almost instantly. Shortly after we began working, multiple teachers in the room commented that we looked great fighting together. While there is a lesson to be learned in listening to the teachers in the room as to who might make a great partner and it is also important to see who will be a personal teacher as well in your training.

Consider the concept in this way- when a person wishes to get better at a sport or competitive action it is always best to play an opponent with skills better than our own. Setting the bar as higher often pushes us to reach the higher level in our development. In the best cases the actor combatants are able to learn from one another during the rehearsal and performance process.

Part II - Advanced Approaches and Thoughts to Partnering

Opposites Attract

As you become or continue as an Advanced Actor Combatant learn to be mindful of the habits you possess or have developed. Consider opposition to your work in a new introspective way. The approach and discoveries are different for each person. This does not necessarily mean that the previous choices have been incorrect, but instead by becoming aware of common choices can allow you to discover all new options and can open the door to greater opportunities for

working professionally.

Take into account that as we are cast for a show it is extremely uncommon (if not unheard of) for a person to choose the cast with whom they work. The challenge is to find the techniques to make sure we are able to work well with others in the field.

Include the following ideas as you advance your work in stage combat with partners:

Consider someone with whom you work that is taller or shorter than yourself.

Is there a chance for weight differences that can be considered when training?

With what gender partner do you normally work?

Is there an age bracket that is common for your work?

What level of training do your typical partners obtain?

What side dominant (left-handed or right-handed) is your partner normally?

This assessment is intended to help you grow beyond just the basics of our work. Also, if you have the goal to become a teaching assistant, then you can place yourself in a situation to improve your partnering skills. On more than one occasion I was called upon to partner with someone in class while I assisted in graduate school. The result was a constant evolution in my stage combat training and it was always for the better.

Part III - One Particular Word of Caution when Partnering

Don't Beat Up Your Friends

As stated earlier, in an acting class we develop professional relationships with each other that can often last for our lifetimes. These individuals are very helpful in our work as much as those that provide us challenges. Also, if an artistic/professional relationship exists, then a combatant might find this to be a great scene partner.

It is important to know when this relationship is more personal than professional. I hear some teachers caution against this pairing as it is possible to mix the personal with professional life. Others are not affected in the least. There is no solid rule which must remain in place other than be respectful with those you work.

Final Thoughts

Remember that you and your partner wish to put the best possible foot forward. Consider the listed ideas as you begin or further your stage combat training. Also keep in mind that finding a great partner gives you the responsibility of being a great partner yourself. Only then will you be able to approach all partnerships with the greatest possibility for success.

Special thanks to Melissa King and Rebecca Britton for their contributions to this article.

Barton, Robert. Acting: Onstage and Off (Third Edition). Belmont, CA. Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2003.

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