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Fight Master Magazine

The Society of American Fight Directors

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Fall 2017

## **The Fight Master, Fall 2017, Vol. 39 Issue 2**

The Society of American Fight Directors

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# The Fight Master

Fall 2017 The Journal of the Society of American Fight Directors

## Essential Functions

Evolving Applications of the ADA in the Combat Classroom

## When the Problem is Personal

Working on Naomi Iizuka's *Good Kids* as a Sexual Assault Survivor

## Helpful Hints for Beginning Choreographers

## The Lonely Actor/Combatant

## Digital Violence

Finding Stage Combat's Place in the Age of Information

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from  
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# Editorially Speaking



I don't like admitting I have carpal tunnel in my sword wrist. This is in part because it is not severe (yet), but mostly it is because I'm too proud to admit that my wrist hurts when I use just about any single-handed sword. I don't want to look weak in front of my fellow fighters, who always seem several levels more acrobatic/athletic/wrist-confident than me. I think "I don't want to make a fuss." There are so many larger issues facing fighters and stunt people out there that a pinched nerve seems too small to be worth mentioning. There might be a little gender-based fear in there as well. If I look weak, it'll be attributed to my being a woman (or because I'm "broken," which is just as dangerous a self-label). Then,

of course, something prevents me from completing a move, and all of a sudden this small issue I have kept to myself becomes something that impacts choreography, choreography that could have been adjusted to accommodate me. Suddenly, being stoic and soldiering on loses its value.

One of the themes running through this issue of *The Fight Master* is how to work with some of the difficulties that arise in our teaching and work. There are no perfect humans (except, perhaps, for Jessie Graff); we all have our shortcomings and prideful silences. These can have unintended consequences, and while it would be nice to believe our diverse set of skills should make solutions easy, problems can and do arise. The role of the choreographer is to fit the fight to the actor, no matter who is cast. Teachers might have a little more flexibility, but challenges in the classroom, be they physical or mental, require a difficult mix of empathy and pragmatism. It is my hope that the following pieces help point you to good resources should you find yourself in need.

As the SAFD continues growing, maintaining a forward-looking perspective is important. A second theme running through this issue is growth and development. Membership to the SAFD means looking for innovative ways to help our community thrive. Our Governing Body advances the official needs of the organization, but it is up to the individual members to help spread the word about who we are and what we do. This is not always an easy task, and the topics in the following pages provide insights into ways that you, the one holding this journal, can participate in the larger community.

Be well. Fight well.

**Note:** On the Cover of the Spring 2017 issue, there was what appeared to be a retractable blade being used by one of the performers. The SAFD does not officially endorse the use of retractable blades by performers, and choreographers should keep this in mind when designing fights.

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## The Fight Master

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## SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Editorial and graphic content featured in *The Fight Master* is the product of contributions from SAFD members of all levels as well as from the global stage combat community. Participation is greatly encouraged and submissions are accepted on a rolling basis, with deadlines for the Fall and Spring editions occurring on June 1 and December 1 respectively. For submissions by traditional mail, please send a shipping address request by email.

## Articles

Submitted material will be edited for clarity and length with the assistance and approval of the author. Articles should include a short biography 150 words or less, as well as contact information. By submitting material to *The Fight Master*, it is assumed the author agrees the following:

- All submissions are subject to editorial discretion
- All work submitted is assumed to be the original work of the author, and *The Fight Master* will not assume any of the author's copyright liabilities and publication rights.
- Submissions must include any and all necessary supporting documentation (bibliographies, etc.)
- Before publication, author must approve all changes beyond grammar and conventions
- Submissions must be written in a clear and professional manner
- No submissions defaming individuals by name will be published
- Authors are assumed to be working toward the betterment of the SAFD and, thus, will not be paid for submissions

Please forward submissions and questions to:

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## Graphics

Both digital and traditional photographs are accepted; however, resolution will play a factor in where, or if an image is used. All photos should be accompanied by the names of the performers w/ roles (if fewer than five are pictured), photographer, play, playwright, fight director, theatre company, and year of performance. Without this information, we can not give proper credit to the contributors and the picture will not be used.

Traditional images/negatives submitted by mail should be sent in an envelope clearly labeled "Photos—Do Not Bend," with larger photos secured between cardboard or foam core. Submissions should also include a return self-addressed, stamped envelope.

Digital images must be submitted in an uncompressed format (RAW, TIFF, PNG or TGA) on a CD or DVD if possible. Images that have been reduced in size to send by email will also be considered as long as a larger version exists that can be requested later. Please do NOT crop or alter photos. Touch-ups and color correction will be performed as needed.

Please forward submissions and questions to:

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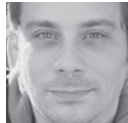
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**Charles Conwell** has taught stage combat at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia for 31 years. He has directed over 100 professional and academic fights.



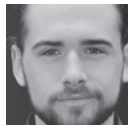
**Matthew Crider** is an assistant professor of movement and acting at Murray State University, and an Advanced Actor/Combatant with the SAFD. He has been involved with the SAFD for over a decade, and is a director, actor, and fight choreographer. Matthew has also taught clowning around the country for the last 9 years.



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## On The Cover



Red Bird Theatre's production of *Time to Burn*. Fight direction and choreography by Aaron Preusse. Pictured are Siddeeqah Shabazz, Alex Barreto Hathaway, Barbra Berlovitz, Jacob Mullan, Paul de Cordova, and Ryan Colbert. Photograph by Ozomatli Zarate.



# Essential





# Functions



A packed classroom  
at the 2017 Nationals.

JONATHAN KOLLMER.

## *Evolving Applications of the ADA in the Combat Classroom*

**By Matthew Crider, AAC**

**T**he Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has been a prominent aspect of higher education for some time, and its applications are growing. In recent years, many (myself included) have noticed an increase in requests for accommodations, particularly for mental and emotional health reasons. This article is not looking into the causes of this increase, nor making a judgment on it, but rather looking into how we, as teachers, can handle its effects.

Writing a syllabus in higher education invariably includes a non-discrimination policy statement, with a mountain of acronyms and laws: ADA, Title IX, 504, CFR, etc. It is easy to remember to put those statements in, and easier still to give it no further thought... right up until you have to. At that point, it can be hopelessly complicated and more than a little unnerving, to say the least. It can also be a rather charged issue; some see compliance as a hassle, or detrimental to the classroom. Others see it as a desperately needed (and legally required) lifeline for equal treatment.

As a performance teacher, I've wrestled with the question of how to both meet the legal and ethical requirements for accommodations, giving students the opportunities they desperately want and need, and how to balance that with an education that prepares them for the professional world of theatre, which, though filled with wonderful and accepting people, can also be somewhat unforgiving. Should we accommodate students in academia in ways that may be unavailable in the professional world? Is there a point where accommodations in higher education ill-prepare a student, rather than enable them to succeed? It is a charged, complex, and difficult topic. In my own experience, some discussions on this led to a pre-emptive





Teachers must take into account all their students and their respective abilities when building a course. Photograph from the 2016 NSCW.

meeting with our Title IX and IDEA Office (Institutional Diversity, Equity, and Access). This article will share some of the information gained, and give teachers tools to better understand and navigate the tricky world of the ADA.

### These Offices Are Your Best Friends

The IDEA office (or your campus Equal Opportunity equivalents) can feel like a frightening place. For some teachers, it may sometimes seem that these offices (and the laws they represent) morph the classroom into a minefield where a false step can cost a career. Even though I was meeting for informational purposes only (to better understand how some of these rules apply to theatre performance classes), I still found having a formal meeting in the IDEA office intimidating. However, the conversation with the office left me feeling better, and more confidently informed. College professors probably get an annual fly-by pitch from compliance officers at beginning of the year meetings, but I encourage you to meet with them to chat in person, and ask specific questions before you have a specific problem. They are there to help you, and in my experience are quite good at it.

Here are some things I picked up from such a meeting that apply specifically to studio movement classes, including stage combat. A few caveats: this is not explicit legal advice, nor should it be considered a blanket statement for all situations. Always go your Equal Opportunity or Student Disabilities Services (SDS) offices with questions if you are the least bit uncertain. In fact, most of the advice you will get here boils down to this: get to those offices sooner rather than later. Also, the following examples are specific to higher education classrooms; private and/or professional work will have different situations and needs, and are a different matter (though

certainly related). That said, as theatre movement educators, here are two terms that matter to you, and will help you immeasurably: “reasonable accommodations,” and “essential functions.” I will be referencing and summarizing a lot of information available in greater detail from the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), or again your Equal Opportunity and SDS offices.

### Reasonable Accommodations

There are a number of legitimate challenges that a student could face that impact a stage combat class in difficult ways: physical disability that limits mobility or stamina, touch aversion, anxiety attacks, and even certain allergies could seriously affect work in the class. More than one religion prohibits direct physical contact with someone of the opposite gender outside family, or requires clothing that restricts movement (or prevents some required moves). In more explicit terms, how do we accommodate a person missing an arm who wants to study rapier/dagger? How do we accommodate a person unable to make physical contact with others in a class on unarmed grappling and contact techniques? How do we teach performance to a person whose anxiety of speaking in public prevents them even rehearsing in a small classroom?

Because of those syllabus statements we are typically required to include, the term “reasonable accommodation” is probably familiar. In practice, it can often (incorrectly) be interpreted as a frustration, a hardship that will make the class more difficult to work in. Again, go see your Equal Opportunity and/or SDS offices. Reasonable accommodations are about a level playing field, not compromising the class, and colleges and universities have these offices for a reason. Given a clear explanation of the requirements of the class

and a student's specific needs, these offices are excellent at finding ways to assist students to enable participation while maintaining the integrity of the class.

So what happens when you encounter a student with a need for an accommodation? Not to sound like a broken record, but this is likely the most important time I will say this: contact the student disability services office before you make accommodations. There is a bit of a pitfall that I have seen happen, and been guilty of myself: giving accommodations absent cooperation and work with the SDS or Equal Opportunity office, or ahead of documentation. A big takeaway for me from my meeting with them was that *giving an accommodation when a student has no official documentation could be as problematic (and potentially illegal) as not giving an accommodation a student is eligible for.*

The first time a student presents an issue preventing them from completing the functions of a class, absolutely assume that it is legitimate, and absolutely send them to SDS. While it may take some time and a few meetings, the sooner an accommodation is available through SDS, the better it is for everybody. Here is a tip to facilitate matters; not only should you direct the student to SDS, you should email the SDS office, informing them you have sent the student for consultation, and copy the student on the email. Follow up with both, and call the SDS office ahead of the student meeting to help them understand the situation. There must come a point where, if a student provides no documentation through Disability Services of how to accommodate an issue, the student must be held to the same basic needs of the class like any other student.

In a university setting, students who need accommodations must go through an SDS office, or its equivalent. Cutting SDS out of the loop and giving accommodations on your own is legally perilous, and even if you are doing it with the best of intentions, assisting an undocumented (or self-diagnosed) disability can be a liability to the integrity of your class. The ADA is a crucial bit of law designed to give everybody a fair chance. Ignoring the structures of it denies a student in need the chance they desperately want. Faculty and the university work together to provide reasonable accommodations *appropriate to the course*. Students trying to use the ADA where it does not apply misrepresent the purpose of accommodations.

## Essential Functions

At what point does an issue present an insurmountable challenge to participation? The key term here is "Essential Functions." I know that at my university, our required non-discrimination and equal access statement does not mention the term, so I was a bit surprised when it was introduced to me. According to the EEOC, "Essential functions are the basic job duties that an employee must be able to perform, with or without reasonable accommodation."<sup>1</sup> You see these on job applications: you must be able to climb a ladder, you must be able to lift 50 pounds, you must be able to drive a car, etc. While it is a little harder to nail down exactly what counts as an essential function in the stage combat classroom, the concept is clear: a course, a major, or a job can have specific tasks or responsibilities that are absolutely necessary to complete.

There is an important bit of academic jargon to be specific with here. A class syllabus should include "learning outcomes," and these are different from "essential functions." For example, a learning outcome for a stage combat class could be "the student will be able to perform moments of choreographed violence on stage with safety and believability." An essential function for a stage combat class may be "the student must be able to hold five pounds of weight in an extended arm for a minimum of 5 minutes at a time."

Learning outcomes are things a teacher can grade: to what extent

did the student successfully perform moments of choreographed violence on stage with safety and believability? Essential functions need to be very precise; if a student is unable to complete the assignment on a fundamental level, they do not make it to the point of grading. If you are incapable of holding the sword for the length of the fight, you are not able to complete the course, and as a teacher, *you are allowed to tell them that.*

In my meeting with the IDEA office, one of the compliance officers recounted an instance where a student athlete was asked to reconsider registering for a particular section of a course, as attendance was an essential function of that class; it was a discussion and presentation setting where makeup work was not an option. The student athlete would fail the class if they took it because of the anticipated absences due to games, and the presentation feature of the class. I was under the impression that the frequent NCAA event notifications we get from student athletes were excuse notes; they are not. The NCAA notifications we get are requests to make adjustments, not excuses, and if the adjustments would violate an essential function, the student can still be held accountable for the work. The same can be true for other kinds of academic event notifications... and for reasonable accommodations.

There are not lecture notes to get from a fellow student in a practical stage combat classroom, and attendance is crucial to the work. A certain number of absences prevents a student from completing an essential aspect of the coursework, and however legitimate the causes for missing half the semester, a student cannot reasonably complete the work if they do so, excuse or no. If there is not a reasonable way to make up the work, attendance becomes an essential function.

There was an amazing bit of advice given by our IDEA office that our department is implementing immediately; on the first day of class, along with the syllabus, teachers give students an "Essential Functions of the Class" acknowledgement form that they must sign and return. Students will also sign an "Essential Functions of the Degree" every semester, and an "Essential Functions of the Field" form that they sign in their first-year theatre orientation class. Much like some of the injury waiver forms we have students sign, it is not 100% legally bulletproof, but it is a marvelous educational tool.

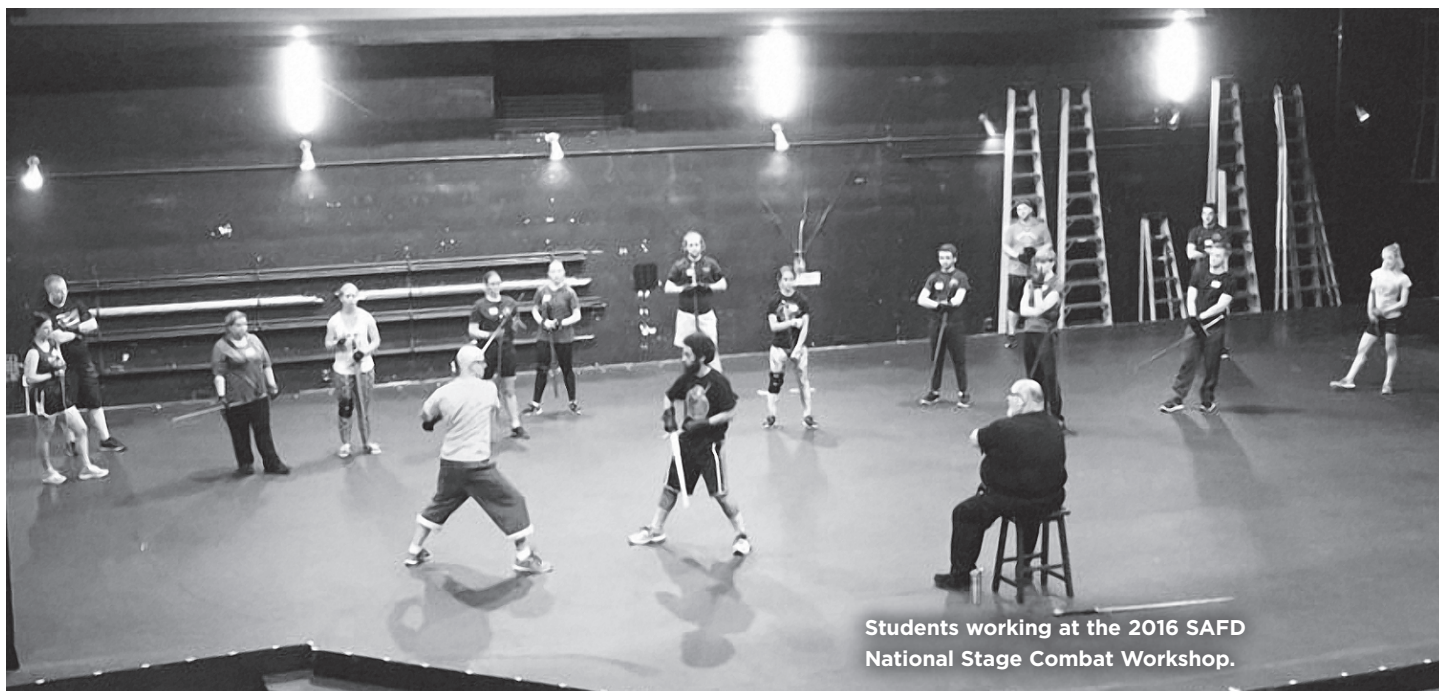
How do we identify essential functions in a stage combat class? Thankfully, the Society of American Fight Directors policies and procedures document makes that a bit easier, as there are discreet requirements for a Skills Proficiency Test. Let's look at the hypothetical situation of a student with touch aversion. If one of the class' essential functions was "the student must make sustained physical contact with other participants in the class," here is how the scenario will (hopefully) unfold:

- On seeing the essential functions form at the beginning of the semester, the student will inform the teacher of their issue, and the teacher will send them to the SDS office. Alternately, if the student says nothing, and the issue doesn't present itself until the first contact work, the teacher and the student will talk then, with the same result: go to the SDS office.

- The office will try to identify possible accommodations: is there a partner they would be comfortable with? Because the essential function says "students," the teacher may need to identify more than one, or verify whether it was essential to work with multiple partners. The teacher may also be asked why physical contact is necessary, and if there is a way to avoid, mitigate, or simulate it.

- Referring to the Policies and Procedures, said unarmed class requires a specific number of unarmed techniques to be an eligible choreographed fight.





Students working at the 2016 SAFD National Stage Combat Workshop.

- Absent any other workaround, the student could not complete the class if there are too many contact moves they cannot perform, and the teacher should be clear about that with the students from the beginning.

- The teacher should aim to complete these steps before the drop/add period ends, to minimize the impact on the student's schedule.

Applying this to the larger question of working outside academia, can an actor with touch aversion encounter difficulty in a stage combat situation professionally? Unfortunately, yes. So how do we prepare them for that adequately? One option is to adjust the essential function to say something like this: "the student must make sustained physical contact with random scene partners." It's a subtle difference, but it implies that the casting of a role is independent of their comfort with their partner, and they need to be prepared. That small change can make the essential function more clear, and help the SDS office better find a reasonable accommodation for the student.

There is the chance that no reasonable accommodation can overcome the challenge, and teachers should be prepared for that possibility. The more clearly a course's essential functions are defined, however, the less frequently that will be an issue. In a less savory scenario, a student who refuses to go through SDS and fails to complete essential functions has given grounds to fail the course, whatever their pleas or requests. The ADA exists to help people complete work, but it doesn't circumvent essential functions.

This is in no way intended to discourage students from participating in a class, or enable teachers to exclude a student for any reason. Identifying essential functions for a course or career is a means of enabling participation, not limiting it; absent a clear picture of what the class or job entails, a student will have no idea how to find support, or what to ask for. SDS and Equal Opportunity offices use knowledge of essential functions to ensure that students can participate in classes, not prevent them from doing so. Education, especially arts education, is and should be a personal journey of finding a way to excel, of identifying challenges and overcoming them, and finding a way in to a life in the arts.

## In Summation

We have to make every reasonable accommodation we can, and we want to enable every student to participate. As educators, we have a responsibility to identify how we can assist students in the classroom and the professional field beyond. We also have an obligation to adequately prepare them to do so successfully. Rather than dodging or dismissing the challenges that the ADA and reasonable accommodations may present, or allowing fear or frustration to shut down the discussion, go see the Student Disabilities Services and Equal Opportunity offices and have a conversation.

To conclude, here is a simple list of steps that can aid coursework and facilitate issues.

- Identify your course's essential functions. Limit these to the things necessary to complete the work of the class, not simply the things you are grading. If you have concerns, meet with SDS or Equal Opportunity offices to check if you have created a reasonable list, or may have missed something.
- Alongside your syllabus, hand out an essential functions acknowledgement form for students to sign at the beginning of the semester.
- Should a student present an scenario (either directly to you or in the classroom) that presents a challenge to completing an essential function, speak to the student, and contact the Student Disabilities Services office to recommend the student get documentation and consultation.
- Meet with the Student Disabilities Services Office to discuss the course's essential functions, and possible accommodations.
- Do not make an accommodation for a student, absent consultation from SDS.
- If a student fails to go through Student Disabilities Services, and continues to request an undocumented or self-diagnosed accommodation, refer them back to both SDS and the essential functions form.
- Keep in touch with Student Disabilities Services during and after the course, to ensure that accommodations were successful, and how to handle similar situations in the future. ✚

## Endnotes

- 1 The ADA: Your Responsibilities as an Employer. (2008, August 1). Retrieved from <https://www.eeoc.gov/facts/ada17.html>

# When the Problem is Personal

## Working on Naomi Iizuka's *Good Kids* as a Sexual Assault Survivor

BY KATE BUSSELLE

In Naomi Iizuka's *Good Kids*, both the actors and audience are confronted with the complex issue of consent and sexual assault. In this work, teenager Chloe is sexually assaulted by a group of football players who live-tweeted, photographed, and videoed segments of her attack. This event was swept under the rug by the community, which later erupted in a media firestorm after a hacker reposted all of the videos, tweets, and photographs of that night. While the young men are brought to justice, the victim is re-victimized all over again due to the work of the "hactivist." This work is based on the real events in the city of Steubenville, Ohio on August 11, 2012. Four months prior to the events in Steubenville, I was raped. This paper seeks to critically explore the challenges I faced working as a movement coordinator and violence and intimacy designer on the University of Missouri's recent production of *Good Kids* while navigating my status as a sexual assault survivor.

As I am a violence and intimacy designer, I knew I was going to encounter designing an act of sexual assault at some point in my career. With the frequent occurrence that these violent acts occur in the real world, it is no surprise that acts of sexual violence are now getting interpreted on stage, television, and film. The current national argument over policing women's bodies, versus punishing offenders, suggests this trend will continue. During the 2016 election alone, one of my female colleagues in the field designed four theatrical sexual assaults in one month. Knowing 1 in 5 college women and 1 in 16 college men will be sexually assaulted during their time on campus, it seemed fitting that University of Missouri produce Iizuka's work, especially after the university was featured in the widely popular documentary *The Hunting Ground*, which chronicled sexual assault and rape on college campuses.

My dear friend and colleague Carrie Winship served as director for this production and asked me to come on board to design violence, intimacy, and other movement sequences within the production. I jumped at the chance to come on board the production. I knew working on subject matter that affected me directly in such a critical, personal way would be a challenge I wanted to face head on in my young career.

The first hurdle I faced in the process was determining whether or not to disclose my status as a sexual assault survivor to anyone on my campus, not just the cast. Knowing that Carrie was a dear friend of mine, I felt safe and comfortable disclosing to her my status, and I asked her what she thought I should do regarding this information. As she was navigating these waters for the first time herself, she advised me to do whatever was best and healthiest for me to process during my times at rehearsal with her and her cast. At the time, Carrie was only the third person I had told. I wondered if disclosing this information early on in the process would drastically alter what people thought of me and how they might treat me as a colleague, educator, and violence designer. Would professors try to pull me from the production due to my status? Would the actors be afraid of having open conversations because of my presence in the room? I decided the best way to move forward into the production was to not disclose my past.

One of the first rehearsals that I joined the cast for was a Green Dot training session that the entire production crew, cast, and creative team were invited to be a part of. Green Dot Bystander Intervention training focuses on identifying how to be a reactive bystander instead of a passive one when faced with a potentially dangerous or violent situation. This training was pivotal for the group of young actors to feel like they could make impactful changes in the environments around them, and to protect themselves and others from getting into dangerous or violent situations. This process also





comforted me as a survivor. If I felt compelled to disclose my status to the cast, I would be in a space that was open, welcome, and safe for me to do so. The cast was also incredibly open and honest about their experiences, and they continued to share them on an almost daily basis on the productions' private Facebook group.

The students were not always perfect in their journey, however. There were many times when setbacks occurred. The difficulties of this process came to light during the rehearsal in which I was to stage the replications of the photographs taken the night that Chloe is assaulted. For designing this element of the show, Carrie stated that she wanted to replicate the most famous photograph from the Steubenville case, as well as some others in the sequence, to indicate Chloe's completely incapacitated and vulnerable state, in addition to the clear, poor decisions the young men (specifically the characters Ty and Connor) are about to make. It was a closed-door rehearsal in which the stage manager, the director, the five cast members, and myself involved in this sequence focused on creating this one aspect of the play.

I had entered the space feeling vulnerable and emotional about what I was about to face. Carrie gave me words of encouragement and validated my feelings that this would, indeed, be one of the most difficult nights of rehearsal that I had ever faced. We began

the evening by discussing in a small circle how the male actors thought the events of that scene (not seen by the audience) actually transpired, so we could have an idea of what images we may need to replicate. The young male actors had difficulty making their characters have sole responsibility for the sexual assault in the play and attempted to find ways to hold Chloe (the victim) partially responsible for their attack. Statements were made to the effect of, "Well, I think she probably came on to me in the car..." or "Well, I think she might have been into it and then fell asleep..." and even led to the eventual "I don't think my character did anything really bad." For about half an hour, we talked through the events in the play and eventually convinced the male actors that their characters did act out of malice and had sole responsibility for the sexual assault. We emphasized this was not a reflection on who they were as individual, real people.

This separation of actor and role was critical for this point in the rehearsal process, as the actors kept using "I" statements to discuss what had happened, and Carrie would counter and differentiate between actor and character. Each time the male cast proposed one of these rape culture narratives (focusing on victim behavior rather than attacker action), the director challenged them in the form of education and reinforcement that while it may feel "safer" to shift blame, that the victim is always blameless. At this point, I began

REBECCA ALLEN



**The cast of *Good Kids*, Cassandra Ferrick as Chloe (center), *Good Kids* by Naomi Iizuka, fight director: Kate Busselle, Director: Carrie Winship, University of Missouri Theatre, Fall 2016.**

to cry. I couldn't contain my feelings that the men, despite being open-minded and receptive, were still susceptible to the pitfalls of our rape culture, even while actively trying to fight it. Carrie was also overcome with emotion at this point of the rehearsal and admitted

to the actors that this would be a very difficult rehearsal for all of us to experience.

At this time, we took a short break and I confided to Carrie that I was feeling a strong need to disclose my status as a sexual assault survivor. I was overcome with feelings of shame and embarrassment that by crying, I had let the cast in on the big secret I was keeping from them. Shame and embarrassment are two of the common reactions sexual assault survivors experience when confronted with the topic, but I was unaware of this at the time. Carrie reassured me that I was welcome and able to do whatever I needed to do for my own personal wellbeing. She did suggest, however, that it may not be wise for me to disclose my history prior to staging tableaux of Chloe's assault, to prevent the cast from envisioning me in the role and feeling unable to explore the process while I was present. I agreed with her and again decided not to disclose my identity at that time. During the staging of these images, we all had very emotional, visceral reactions to what we were creating and were often wiping away tears, stifling sniffles, and even physically stepping away from the process for a moment to get through the process.

After the rehearsal, I gave myself time for self-care and decompression. It was during this time that I realized that I had made the right call of not disclosing my identity as a sexual assault survivor to the cast. In that raw moment, I felt overwhelmed and overcome with shame, embarrassment, and guilt, making it almost seem like I was confessing to a crime that "everyone" knew I committed, even though I hadn't committed any crime—a crime had been committed against my person. In hindsight, it may have been a defensive maneuver on my part against the rape culture that I experienced in the rehearsal. The actors were willing to blame the fictional victim, so what would stop them from blaming me for my sexual assault? I met with Carrie the following day and I explained to her that I didn't know what happened and why I felt the need to disclose so strongly, but I was thankful for her calming advice in the moment.

An additional layer of complexity with working on *Good Kids* was the fact that two of the cast members were current students of mine. Within the educational system, teachers have to often switch functions, and this can be challenging when facing a tricky topic with great personal meaning. For the most part, the interactions I had with my students on this production went well, but I was always wary of disclosing, simply because I was concerned that my vulnerability as a person would make me appear to be a "weak" educator.

Looking back on this production months later, and after a successful run at KCACTF Region 5, I realized that I truly could not

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have navigated this production without the support and guidance of Carrie Winship. I am incredibly lucky to have developed a colleague and friend who never made me feel like what happened to me made me less of a collaborator for her to work with on *Good Kids*.

To conclude, I want to give a few pointers based on my experience to assist educators and choreographers in navigating the topic of sexual violence your rehearsal space.

You will never know who has been a victim or perpetrator of sexual violence unless someone tells you. They could be your actors, designers, technicians, or audience members. Knowledge is

power, so find opportunities to empower your ensemble through knowledge. If it is available on your campus or in your community, bring in experts like the Green Dot Bystander Intervention Program to discuss how to navigate this topic both in conversation and in real world practice. Not only does this process build trust, but also encourages an atmosphere of respect in your rehearsal space.

Disclosing one's status as a sexual assault survivor is never easy, but it is always a choice by the survivor to do so or not. If someone discloses to you that they have experienced sexual assault, listen. Do not interrupt. Do not interject. Do not ask questions for further

REBECCA ALLEN



Charlie Durham as Connor (left), Matthew McCombs as Ty (center), Andre Steward (right), *Good Kids* by Naomi Iizuka, fight director: Kate Busselle, Director: Carrie Winship, University of Missouri Theatre, Fall 2016.

detail. This is the most vulnerable that the victim can be with you, so it is your job to make them feel heard and supported whether you are in the rehearsal space or not. When it is clear that the victim has stopped talking, thank the victim for sharing their story.

When encountering rape culture in the rehearsal space, find ways to counter it that is not attacking or accusatory. This response is common for those who are frustrated with hearing rape culture constantly being perpetuated in our society, but this response can cause those you are attempting to engage with to shut down. Instead, seek understanding by asking questions of these collaborators, such as

“Why do you think that?” or attempt to repeat what they said back to them like “I heard you say this....is that what you meant?” This gives the person the opportunity to clarify their position without feeling cornered and allow a dialogue to form rather than an argument.

Be aware of your ensemble’s energy. If you have had a particularly emotional rehearsal, give the cast space to decompress and unpack afterward. This process will leave your actors and designers more refreshed during the next rehearsal. This is also helpful for those who are sexual assault survivors to practice self-care on their own terms. ✦

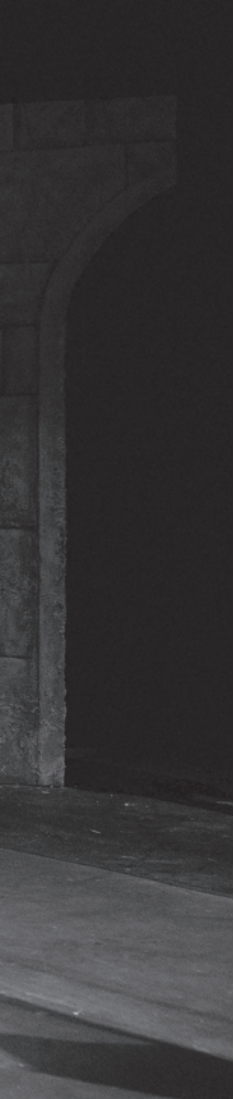




# Helpful Hints for Beginning Choreographers

BY EVAN HENDERSON (AAC)





**T**he world of stage combat continues to grow and thrive as new students picking up steel and teachers instruct them on how to use it. Anywhere young fighters study the art of staged, violence, new choreographers inevitably enter the scene. While learning from our experiences and mistakes is something we all must do, the stakes become higher when we are charged with the safety of others, and the truth is that being a good fighter does not necessarily make one a good choreographer. It takes much more than a couple of actors swinging their fists to make a great fight; the art of violence is as complex as the art of acting itself. To anyone looking to begin creating violence for others to perform I say, welcome! Let me to provide you with a few tips as you embark on your journey.

First and foremost is safety. Doubtless you have heard this before, but it bears repeating ad infinitum. It is always better to choose a safe and easy move in lieu of a flashy looking one that your actor is struggling with. Push them, challenge them, but keep it within a level the actor can master without endangering themselves or others. One great resounding slap can stun an entire audience, so save the backflips and fancy spin-kicks for another time and the cast that can do them with ease.

Safety extends beyond the actors; any props used should be inspected regularly to ensure nothing has changed or poses a threat to the actors. Knives and any edged weapons should *always* be dulled and checked in between performances for any dings or burrs on the blade. Anything wooden should be checked for cracks or splintering. If something is wrong, fix it or replace it. And if all those people and

props weren't enough to keep track, of there is one last thing we must strive to keep safe: the story. A trap always lurking underfoot is falling to the sheer fun and exhilaration of the choreography (because, let's be honest, all this violence is a blast). With emotions running high from the scene leading up to the moment of explosive action, adrenaline kicks in and we move a bit faster than we planned or fall a little less gracefully than we meant to. Sometimes the character can fall away in these moments and all that's left is a couple of actors enthusiastically going through pre-planned motions. Protect the actors from getting swept away by the rush, and protect the scene from becoming a casualty.

You've most likely already seen this in action while in class. You've heard teachers telling you to slow down when you get excited, to play up the danger of the weapons in your hand(s), keep your targets specific and accurate. Not going overly fast and staying specific keeps you in control and lets you focus on the moment. Playing up the danger helps keep you present in the scene. Perhaps your instructor gave

you an intention, such as "float" or "flick" if they had studied Laban. I've been fortunate enough to work with a few such teachers and it changed so much in the nature of the scene and kept us playing with our characters. Such exercises can also change the mood of a fight, as it inspires movement choices (for example,

**OPPOSITE:** Will Snyder and CJ Chapman in *Forget Me Not* Theater Company's Production of *Gothic Arch* at The Den Theater in Chicago.

**ABOVE:** From right to left: Will Snyder and CJ Chapman rehearsing for production on Loyola Beach.



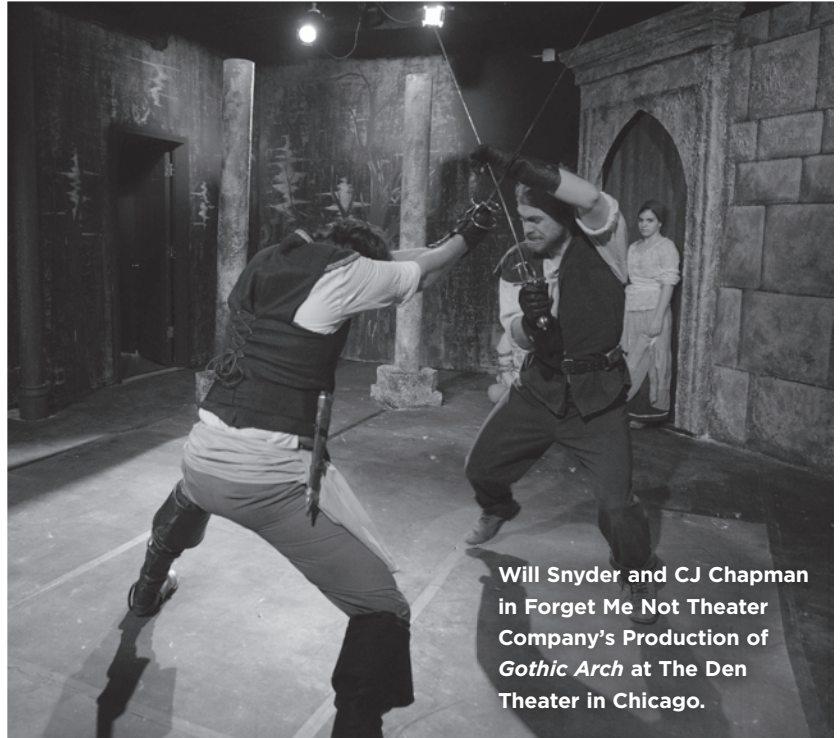
to become heavier as if from exhaustion, or more desperate to live if blood has been drawn).

The second purpose of every fight is to advance the story. Violence must fit into the story as flawlessly as a puzzle piece and advance the work of the actors. An easy way to help with this as a choreographer is to study the characters as if you yourself were the actor who is playing them. Pay attention to clues in the script. If a character tends to be more evasive in conversation that trait can stay with them in combat; dodging and moving around their opponent rather than meeting them head on. Which character is the angriest in the lines leading up to the fight? How much does that anger influence the styles of attack? What is the intention of the characters before the first blow is thrown? How do the other characters react to the sudden violence?

As an example, let's take a look at a well-known scene: the fight between Tybalt and Mercutio in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Mercutio is usually a joker—quick-witted and tending to ramble on. How would a character such as this move? How does this movement change when his priority is protecting his friend Romeo? Tybalt, on the other hand, is serious, quick to anger, and highly aggressive. He has probably lost count of the number of fights he has started in his life, so how does he react when Mercutio, a clown of a man and the prince's relative, suddenly comes after him seemingly out of the blue? Is he taken aback? Does he struggle to regain himself, or does he meet the rare challenge with gusto? How would the form and motions of these two very different characters look in contrast to each other? These are just some of the questions to think about when creating a fight.

Third, it is extremely important to pay attention to your actors. Consider how much experience and training they might already have. Possibly more important is how they move in their bodies. A practice I have adopted is to set aside a little time when first working with actors and run them through a few stretches and some basic choreography drills, just so I can get a feel for how they carry themselves. This lets me tailor the fight to the way their bodies naturally move, which makes it that much easier for them to learn the choreography and master it safely. Beyond the physical prowess of your cast, you should also pay attention to how they interpret their characters. No matter how much research you've done into a character, your actors will still surprise you with their choices, and how a character behaves in a fight may need to adapt to this particular actor's interpretation.

As your actors go through the fight you've created, you can challenge them beyond the immediate physical movements. How do they react if they win? How do they react to the first time they hit their scene partner, or to getting hit for the first time? A fight is a scene between partners that has gone beyond words, but the emotions and intentions still carry through. A fight that begins with anger and then builds into shock, terror, or regret makes for a good story, while a fight that is all rage is one note and not as engaging. Take a scene that you will see many times as you continue in this craft: the fight between Lee and Austin in Sam Shepard's *True West*. The brothers have an argument that turns physical, ending with Austin strangling Lee, and for a moment Austin is unsure whether or not he has killed his brother. One can reasonably say that Austin is angry when the fight starts, but at what point will the terror of possible fratricide set in? Maybe part of Austin actually wanted Lee dead and maybe that scares him even more? During the fight Lee is



Will Snyder and CJ Chapman in Forget Me Not Theater Company's Production of *Gothic Arch* at The Den Theater in Chicago.

determined to leave. How invested in the struggle does he become or conversely how much does he want to avoid it? What goes through his head when he awakens and faces Austin at the end of the scene? Don't be afraid to challenge the actors to think about the fight and all the moments therein.

Lastly—and I cannot stress this enough—always check in with your actors. Give them a heads up and check in with comfortability before you teach a daring crotch grab on their thigh. Ask them if they feel comfortable and safe as they are learning and exploring the fight, and once again after the rehearsal is done. It can be something as simple as making sure their knees aren't hitting the floor too hard or they are falling on their hands. Keep yourself open and approachable, so the actors will talk to you if they have concerns. They might not always be forthcoming about it, so you may need to carefully approach the topic yourself. I once knew an actor who waited until opening night to tell the director, and not the fight choreographer, that they weren't comfortable with a certain moment of violence and that they didn't want to do it. It was fixed and the show went on, but the timing was far from ideal and the issue should and could have easily been addressed earlier.

This is by no means a comprehensive guide to choreographing for stage. It's merely a few things that I have learned in my early years on the job and hope that you find helpful. It takes years of training and experience to master the art of stage combat, and I would highly suggest continuing to go to classes and keep up your education. There is so much to learn from the masters and even the other students, so keep your mind sharp and polished. If there is one last tidbit I can impart it would be to take a little time to step back during the process. Fights will rarely go perfectly and when mistakes inevitably happen the most important thing is how your cast takes care of each other. Talk to them after the show, make sure everyone is okay, but don't sweat it too much as long as no one is badly hurt. Those little mistakes are often harmless and may even add something comedic or increase the stakes of the fight if you are lucky. So allow yourself to kick back (pun intended) and enjoy the show once your part is over. —

# The Lonely Actor/Combatant

BY KEVIN INOUE



Kevin Inouye looks for an opponent. Photograph by Kevin Inouye (using a remote, an option for any isolated fighter)





# The Rocky Mountain region, for which

I'm currently SAFD regional representative, has almost 4,000 square miles of space per active (i.e., turns up on a query on our website) member.

Think about that: If we were evenly spaced throughout the five states of Colorado, Utah, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming, we'd be driving about an hour to find another person to train, practice, or collaborate with. We're not, however, evenly spaced, but exist in little pools in cities like Denver, Salt Lake City, and even (to a lesser extent) my current home of Laramie, but unless you're lucky enough to live in one of these cities, your options for working and playing with your fight family are few and far between. This is not just true of the Rocky Mountain region, but much of the Midwest, some of the West Coast, and rural America in general.

It does help that the SAFD has found its most successful niche within academic theatre training, as University programs are more widely spread than professional LORT theatres; if our society had chosen to set itself up as more of a performer's union, it would likely have more limited spread than it does today. For

example, I've yet to see SDC membership be nearly as relevant in these more isolated areas. As it stands, we walk the lines between academia, professional training, professional theatrical society, and stunts.<sup>1</sup>

Our training and skills help us in all our endeavors, from Broadway to community theatre, touring live stunt shows to small renaissance faires, Hollywood blockbusters to fan-films, and as such we can be useful wherever we find ourselves. But like many popular pursuits, from fencing to football to swing dance, it's hard to do stage combat on your own. So what do you do when life takes you away from an established scene, or when you're interested in stage combat but live in a small town?

One excellent answer, if you have the money and flexibility in your schedule, is to look into regional workshops. The number of regional workshops offered around the country has expanded, and is constantly in flux. Many can be found on the website under [safd.org/train/workshops](http://safd.org/train/workshops) or advertising in *the Fight Master*, but there are many that forget to re-list themselves, don't get sanctioned in



Kevin Inouye, using a homemade target made from a roll of masking tape on a microphone stand, ideal for practicing thrusts

time for publication, or otherwise fall through the cracks. Make sure you ask around, especially through your regional representatives—I use the plural there because you should not limit yourself to just your own region. Often cheap flights can be found through major airport hubs, and even if you're driving, you may find yourself closer to a neighboring region's workshop than one on the far side of your own.

This ties into one of the best perks of earning your SAFFD Advanced Actor/Combatant certification—many workshops will then let you apply to intern. Exact duties will vary, but typically interns split their time between props maintenance and other logistics, assisting teachers during instruction, and free time to take classes. While usually not paid positions, internships let you attend workshops for free, sometimes including a place to stay, and assisting the Certified Teachers, Fight Directors, and Fight Masters is an excellent learning (and networking) opportunity. With time these also begin to serve as little family reunions as well as training opportunities. Of course one can't forget the SAFFD Nationals every summer at UNCSA, which are your best bet if you are looking to gain certification, but live somewhere without regular SPT classes. For those for whom international travel is a possibility, there are also similar workshops with our sister organizations in other countries, as well as events such as the biennial Paddy Crean International Stage Combat Workshop, or The World Conference, which was held for the first time last year.

Yet chances are most of us can only budget one or two such events per year at best. In the interim, how do we avoid getting rusty and keep progressing in our art? If I were to put our common options into categories, they'd include: Academic Study, Solo Study, Buddy Study, and Related Studies.

## ACADEMIC STUDY

Any self-designed distance learning plan should include perusal of the relevant publications. This includes getting *The Fight Master* (and did you know that as a member you can peruse back-issues on the website?), but there are also a number of books you can hunt down, from classics like *Combat Mime*, *Swashbuckling*, or *Fight Directing for the Theatre* to the new books by Rob Najarian or Chris DuVal. You can also research specialty topics like Victorian-era stage combat (*A Terrific Combat!!!* by Tony Wolf) or *the Theatrical Firearms Handbook*, which just went into its second print run last year (full disclosure: I'm the author). While it's by no means exhaustive, Dr. Meron Langsner has a list of stage combat resources (including books) on his personal website<sup>2</sup>. It's a good place to start.

In non-stage-combat but related studies there's a massive amount of material available now on relevant topics, not just in theatre and

film, but also military history, combat psychology, and martial arts. The newly-rediscovered world of Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA) offers another avenue of research. There's a ton of great resources available now on longsword, rapier, pole axe, even obscure things like Bartitsu<sup>3</sup>, none of which existed commercially back when I was starting out in stage combat in the 90s.

Also, improve yourself by watching others work, whether it's local plays, movies, recorded shows via online services like Broadway HD or Digital Theatre, or even other people's SPT tests on YouTube. Find the stuff you like, and examine why the things you don't like fail. What would you do to fix some of those scenes if you were Fight Captain? Check out documentaries like *Red Trousers*, or Jackie Chan's *My Stunts*. Find podcasts and YouTube channels with helpful information—they're out there. Study art. Go to museums or get art books from your local library. What does that show you about composition and form?

## SOLO STUDY

Yes, sometimes the only person to play with is yourself. Sometimes grabbing a sword and running some flow drills is just what you need to feel connected to your training again. Work your basics—are you clean on your targeting? Are you making straight lines where you should? Are you using your whole body for that broadsword move, and keeping your relaxation and ease for that smallsword sequence? Work your falls and rolls. If you really want to know how you're doing, get your cellphone set up and video yourself. Be brutally honest on what you see. Slow-mo video on a smartphone can be a good way to diagnose issues with falls, if something isn't working.

Bored with swinging at air? Build a pell\* for swordwork, or get (or improvise) a wooden dummy or heavy bag for unarmed. I've seen a variety of homemade pell options put to good use, including old tires, 4x4 boards wrapped in carpet scraps, or whatever is available. Assuming you can ensure everyone's safety, get a sharp and practice edge alignment by cutting tatami on a stand (if you have the money) or water bottles (if you're on the cheap). The Tinker line of medieval swords by Cas/Hanwei has both sharp blades and blunts that can be swapped out easily. Make a target you can use for thrusting, be it a reinforced wall-mount contraption, or something more interactive like a ring on a string. Even that Amazon Prime box you haven't taken out to the recycling yet can be used for targeting. Many historical fencing schools have versions of this, from the wall bags of wing chun to the diagrammatic thrusting targets pictured in Joachim Meyer's treatise. Practice gauging distances as well as targets; can you choose when to hit with the center of percussion<sup>4</sup> and when you miss by proper 'stage distance' consistently? If not, that's a good thing to work on.

Many martial and fencing manuals also spend a great deal of time on footwork, creating circles or diagrams for understanding linear and off-line steps. These can be readily duplicated in masking tape, but even just a straight line to stand on can help with checking your form, whether lunging or practicing a volte.

## BUDDY STUDY

Friends are great to have. Friends you trust to swing swords with are even better. My primary caution here is to know your own limits as a teacher; if you've had an hour and a half workshop at a theatre festival somewhere, that doesn't mean you're really the best person to grab steel swords and try to re-create and add to those moves with your friend from down the street. Safety always comes first, and adding another person to the equation amplifies that. If done well,



Buddy Study can help you make the most out of your books you're going through from above. Plus, you can even create your own work with buddies. Write yourselves a ren-faire act and pitch it. Create a low-budget short film. Make demo reels. Find local festivals, talent shows, and events that might need an act.

## RELATED STUDIES

I've always seen stage combat as more of a paradigm than a skill set. It's a way of applying and interpreting actions, but the things we're interpreting and applying need to come from somewhere else. It might be martial arts, and those are a great place to build skills.

Trends come and go in stage combat and stunt work, so you can either try to chase the newest thing as it shifts from ninjitsu to kung fu to MMA to Krav Maga to Tricking or whatever the flavor *du jour* is, or you can just find something you like. Any good martial art, whether sport-, defense-, fitness-, or historically-based has the potential to teach you good things about how to use your body and how to view physical interactions. But there are also a lot of bad martial arts classes out there, and it usually has more to do with the instructor than the style. Always keep an open mind about styles, take things said with a grain of salt, and be ready to both try new things in humility and to walk away if your danger or hokum alarms start going off. Unfortunately many of us who are in smaller towns have limited options in terms of martial arts as well, but it's worth seeing what's available. This could also apply to fencing, wrestling, and other 'sport' forms. You could even learn a fair bit about theatrical grappling and partnering from a good swing dance class.

Acting and directing are obviously related to what we do as well.




I've known people over the years who've insisted "I'm not an actor, I'm just a stunt guy," and not surprisingly they're not either anymore. Your job as an actor-combatant and stunt person includes selling the action, as well as sometimes being able to mimic a lead or portray another type of person (or creature), and for these acting and movement skills are key. Plus, being able to deliver a couple lines well while on set can be a pay bump and a fun thing to show your friends, and might mean you get to put a name on your resume instead of just "thug number four."

If you're interested in historical forms of combat, dance can also be relevant. Ballet and smallsword used to be taught at the same schools, for example, and the study of one can benefit the other. Hip-hop and Capoeira are close cousins, and really any physical skill can be turned into a gimmicky fight style if you try hard enough—and if you don't believe me, watch *Gymkata* (Olympic Gymnastics), or if your bad movie tolerance isn't up for that level of 80's schlock, then try *Raging Phoenix* (Dance) or *Strictly B-13* (Parkour). Yoga's a great way to maintain fitness and flexibility, but remember the yogi character Dhalsim from the old *Street Fighter* video games? These are all great examples of the ways in which any movement discipline can be applied to stage combat.

These examples segue into the world of stunts, where it can be especially useful to have other specialties, whether it's riding (motor-cross, racing, mountain biking, horses, jet ski, skateboard, etc.), climbing, scuba certification, firearms experience, skydiving, medical training, or even the ability to quickly shoot and edit a good pre-vis sequence on your smartphone. Within live theatre, things like stage magic can come in handy. Some of us, like Lewis Shaw or Neil Massey or Benaiah Anderson, end up getting so much into the armoring side of things that it turns into a side-business with making swords, and having a sword business, or other prop weapons rental business (like Robb Hunter and I have done) is another way to stay involved in the industry.

## CONCLUSION

In short, there's a lot you can do even without having a class you can take, a group you can join, or a show to work on. Even for those with ready access to an instructor or group, it can be beneficial to keep tabs on what else is happening in the industry, and to be able to bring new information and skills to your rehearsals, so don't become entirely dependent on a single authority figure to parcel out skills and knowledge. Excuses are easy to find, but don't do you any good in the long run. Nobody promised this would be an easy field to work in, but it's a fun one, so find ways to pursue it even when life takes you away from the major centers of the action. Ultimately, that's how our field will grow: through modern fight-pioneers bringing it out to the little towns on the plains, spreading the gospel and modeling safe action. 

## Endnotes

- 1 I suspect generally in that order but with a fairly wide range of specializations on an individual basis.
- 2 [www.meronlangner.com/stage-combat-resources.html](http://www.meronlangner.com/stage-combat-resources.html)
- 3 A style of post-Victorian "gentlemen's" mixed martial art founded by Edward William Barton-Wright referenced in the Sherlock Holmes novels of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.
- 4 "Pell" originally just meant "stake," and was a wooden post used to practice solid, properly aligned sword attacks, like a heavy bag is used for practicing punches. Its use goes back at least to ancient Rome.
- 5 Also colloquially referred to as the "sweet spot," this is the optimal point for striking with in. In a well-designed blade, there will be a harmonic point in the foible that will transfer less vibration and shock into the grip when struck.

# A Letter from the SAFD President



Greetings to all! I hope this missive finds you well and living a life that often finds you with sword in hand. There are a lot of organizational happenings that the Governing Body has been focused on and I thought I'd share a few with you.

The GB approved a new scholarship for Ethnic Minorities and Women for the National Stage Combat Workshop. The scholarship is named after our late friend, combatant, and stunt player Carlos Lopez IV. We hope to see many take advantage of this scholarship starting with the next NSCW! Peaking of scholarships, our t-shirt of the month campaign has been going well. I encourage you to take a look at these fine threads and consider showing your SAFD pride and make a difference in a potential Combatant's life who might not otherwise be able to attend the NSCW.

On the subject of the NSCW, we're moving! We must, for now, leave behind the University of the North Carolina School of the Arts as the performance facilities are to undergo major interior renovations. We are grateful for the many years of hosting and support from UNCSCA and the efforts every year from our on-site coordinator, Fight Master Dale Girard. The GB has been scouting potential sites for a few months and hopes to have an official location announcement soon.

Perhaps the most exciting development is our new relationship as Fight Directors with the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society. The L.O.R.T. contract with SDC was negotiated this spring and SDC gave high priority to the recognition of Fight Directors during the negotiation. Chuck Coyle, Robert Wesley, Geoff Alm, and Geoffrey Kent spearheaded the effort from the SAFD ranks with many other SAFD and independent Fight Directors working in support.

Currently, SDC is willing to sign on fight choreographers to their associate membership, which requires only annual dues (approx. \$220/year). Initiation fees and full membership will only be required once we succeed in signing a member their third union contract. Meaning it is a great and affordable way to start the union process for any fight choreographer. And, naturally that union membership comes with protection for property rights as well as an 8% & 8% contribution to health & pension. Potentially allowing fight choreographers to land retirement benefits and health insurance over multiple contracts. For further information, check out the SDC website at [sdweb.org](http://sdweb.org), or contact their member services representative, Marisa Levy, at [mlevey@sdweb.org](mailto:mlevey@sdweb.org)

—Scot Mann

## “Knyghthode and Bataile”

by John Neele

*This poem was submitted by SAFD Regional Representative Kevin Inouye as a supplement to his article “The Lonely Actor/Combatant.” This is an excerpt from that poem, called “The Poem of the Pell.”*

Of fight the disciplyne and exercise  
Was this: To haue a pale or pile vpright  
Of mannys hight, thus writeth olde and wyse ;  
Therwith a bachelor, or a yong knyght  
Shal first be taught to stonde & lerne fight ;

Of shelde & sword in [con]flicte or bataile,  
Shal exercise as wel swordmen as knyghtys,  
And noo man (as thei seyn) is seyn prevaile  
In felde or in gravel thoughe he assaile  
That with the pile nath first grete exercise ;  
Thus writeth werreourys olde & wyse.

Have vche his pile or pale vpfixed faste,  
And, as in werre vppon his mortal foo,  
With wightnesse & wepon most he caste  
To fighte stronge, that he ne shape him fro,—  
On him with shild & sword avised so,

That thou be cloos, and prest thi foo to smyte,  
Lest of thin owne deth thou be to wite.

Empeche his hed, his face, have at his gorge,  
Bere at the breste, or s[e]rue him on the side  
With myghti knyghtly poort, eue as Seynt George,  
Lepe o thi foo, loke if he dar abide ;  
Wil he nat fle, wounde him ; mak woundis wide,  
Hew of his honde, his legge, his thegh, his armys ;  
It is the Turk : though he be sleyn, noon harm is.

And forto foyne [thrust] is better then to smyte ;  
The smyter is deluded mony oonys,  
The sword may nat through steel & bonys bite,  
Thentrailys ar couert in steel & bonys,  
But with a foyne anoon thi foo fordoon is ;  
Tweyne vnchys entirfoyned hurteth more  
Then kerf or ege, although it wounde sore.





# **DIGITAL VIOLENCE**

**Finding Stage Combat's Place  
in the Age of Information**

By Stephen Louis

**Y**ou can learn just about anything from the Internet: how to fix cars, how to code, how to juggle, how to speak a new language, how to play an instrument, or even how to dance. The average American has more access to more information than at any other time in history. To quote novelist and online educator John Green, “the relentless and unquenchable ambition of humans led to a world where the entire contents of the Library of Alexandria would fit on my iPhone along with recordings of everything Mozart ever composed.” [1] Despite this unprecedented level of access, there is still an anomalous lack of information regarding the art of stage combat.

Over the course of any minute, over 300 hours of video will be uploaded to YouTube [2], so it’s pretty easy to understand that any given search should produce a profusion of content focused on the criteria entered in the search bar. For the purposes of this article, I shall be using the art of ballet as a point of comparison to the art of stage combat, since both of them are physical forms of performative expression with storied histories in the theatre. If you search for ballet on YouTube, you will find pages of high-quality videos about specific techniques, as well as complete dances, recordings of professional and amateur productions, and dozens of videos about miscellaneous topics ranging from how to tie shoe ribbons to how make a foot stretcher. If you search for stage combat, you’ll mostly find showcases from introductory courses, and brief handheld recordings of specific techniques, yet essentially no professional tutorials or history about the art of staged combat.

Why have our techniques remained so unknown? Why is Balanchine a household name and Crane is not? Perhaps we share a playfully clandestine manner with magicians. Stage combat, the mystical love-child of fencing and of magic, stands as an honored and celebrated art form whose secrets are only shared with those willing to rob themselves of the wonder that comes with watching. This makes sense to a degree; people may not want to know because

they believe knowing would ruin the illusion of violence. This hesitation to see behind the scenes may play a part, but people not wanting to know about something has never stopped others from uploading videos about it. And what about actors? Why do so few actors, professional and amateur, know how to fight? Perhaps it is a matter of job security within the fight community; after all, if people don’t know how to fight, they need to hire someone who does. This idea makes a sort of logical sense, but quickly falls apart when you bear witness to one of the thousands of yearly productions which contain cringe-worthy fight scenes clearly not choreographed or directed by a professional.

By limiting access to technical information, we may think we’re increasing job security, but we’re not. In fact, we may be harming it. Let me explain. Stage combat has two main components: the artistic, and the technical.

The artistic side goes far beyond the mechanics of choreography and, unlike the technical component, requires the tutelage of a qualified pedagogue. In other words, while I could learn how to safely do a basic slap from a YouTube video, I would not be rehearsing it in front of a trained eye over and over again to make sure it is dramatically effective. There is no technological replacement for live classes with a master in the field. After all, there may be hundreds and hundreds of ballet tutorials online, some of which appear to be quite profitable, but that does not stop the hundreds of ballet schools and studios across the country from making ends meet. There is an understanding that being good at something still requires professional instruction, regardless of the art form, meaning that a fight director’s job security would be largely unaffected by the electronic proliferation of our techniques.

The technical component, while more interesting for the sake of this article, isn’t the hard part for students to learn. Though it certainly helps to have a qualified teacher, learning basic stage combat mechanics isn’t overly difficult, and is something that could be taught, at least rudimentarily, by a beginner. Now, the concern with a dramatic increase of *access* to information is that it creates the illusion of *mastery* of information. Providing technical information for little or no cost might encourage theatre companies to choreograph violence without professional consultation. While this concern is certainly valid, it’s not a new concern. As mentioned before, theatre companies are already doing it, and not in small numbers. Continuing the ballet analogy, YouTube has probably helped to create thousands of terrible ballet dancers, but they are still dancers nonetheless, who, without those videos, would have no skill at all as compared to very little. In stage combat, just as in ballet, those who want to become competitive at any





skill are also usually willing to seek out the resources necessary, regardless of their level of access. Those who are willing to be terrible will be terrible regardless. The least that we as a Society could do is make sure that, like those terrible dancers, the actors who learn from electronic sources are safe combatants, even if they're terrible fighters.

I would argue this need represents an obligation on our part, and one on which we must act soon. There is nothing stopping someone with no actual stage combat experience from creating a series of videos to be monetized and distributed online. If they're made well enough and are cheap enough, they will be watched and used as teaching material, even if other available resources are better and safer. All of a sudden, a person who is teaching dangerous techniques to a handful of shows a year is teaching dangerous techniques to hundreds. There is a need in the theatrical world for information, and it can be filled either by people who promote safe practices, or people who might cause injury.

The SAFD finds itself with an almost entirely untapped market. If the SAFD can capitalize on this opportunity, it would be responsible for not only decreasing stage combat injuries across the United States and perhaps the globe, but also for monetizing a market that was (potentially) not going to hire any of its members in the first place. Not only that, but it would serve us in helping to eliminate some of the inconsistency between stage combat's practices and image.

Stage combat is primarily about being an actor telling a story, and is secondarily about knowing complex technical information. The issue is that most people outside the fight community believe it to be the other way around. The wondrous, almost magical image stage

combat creates, especially in beginner-level practitioners, is the idea that the choreography comes above all else, including story and sometimes even safety. This is why, even among seasoned actors, an instructor must continuously remind the combatants that they are characters who must not forget the context of the script. Because the new combatants are peeking behind the curtain for the first time, the novelty of the techniques actually take mental precedence over making dramatic and creative choices. By exposing our techniques to the world, we could begin to dismantle this longstanding misperception. If we are willing to sacrifice this lingering mysticism hovering over our art, we will inevitably find that we are able to better market and capitalize on the half of our job for which we are still desperately needed: the artistic half.

As an example, I was recently hired to fight direct a high school production of *The Trojan Women*. The director wanted a battle scene before the events of the script so that those unfamiliar with the Trojan War might follow along better. The fight they wanted turned out to be nearly eight minutes long, included three different weapon disciplines, and had to be timed out to music. Not only that, but because of a strict timetable, I was only granted about 10 hours of rehearsal with my fighters. I taught them the actual choreography in rehearsal, but knew there was no way they could retain nearly eight minutes of choreography after picking up a sword for the first time. Out of desperation I adapted my style, and used online video to get the fight on its feet. I asked my fighting partner Troy to come over to my home, where we recorded the entirety of the fight, one step at a time from different angles, narrating our actions as we performed them. After we finished, I privately uploaded them to YouTube, and shared them with the cast, directors, and SM. The fight, though not professionally brilliant, did manage to not only be safe, but also to steal a few gasps from its opening night audience, all of which goes to the credit of the actors' amazing focus and perseverance.<sup>1</sup>

This mix of live instruction and online supplementation proved to be of much benefit to the show, as it allowed me to spend more time focusing on how to tell a story through violence. The use of online video to teach technical information is already advancing the way we teach our art, and while I recognize that I am certainly not the first person to use online video as I did, I must also state that my usage of it isn't currently a pedagogical approach utilized throughout the SAFD.

Moving forward, it is abundantly clear that the SAFD has not only an opportunity, but an obligation to create interesting, compelling, and educational online content. Not only will this create safer theatrical productions, and improve the marketability of fight directors, but will also help those learning to better contextualize the violence in which they are participating. The digitization of our curriculum will serve as a massive step forward, and will give the SAFD a modernized edge as it continues to adapt its storied art to the Age of Information. ✚

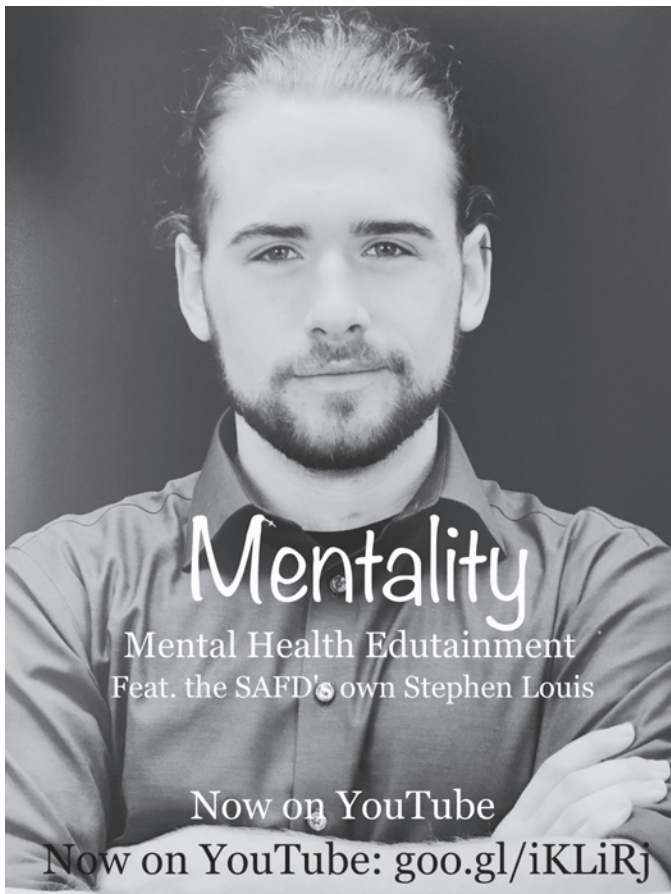
## Notes

1 It should be noted here that the aforementioned adaptation should not be used as a method or excuse to cut down on the number of your rehearsals. It was only successful in this case because it allowed a school to hire a Fight Director where they would otherwise have hired none.

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# When Silver Fought Saviolo

By Charles Conwell, FD

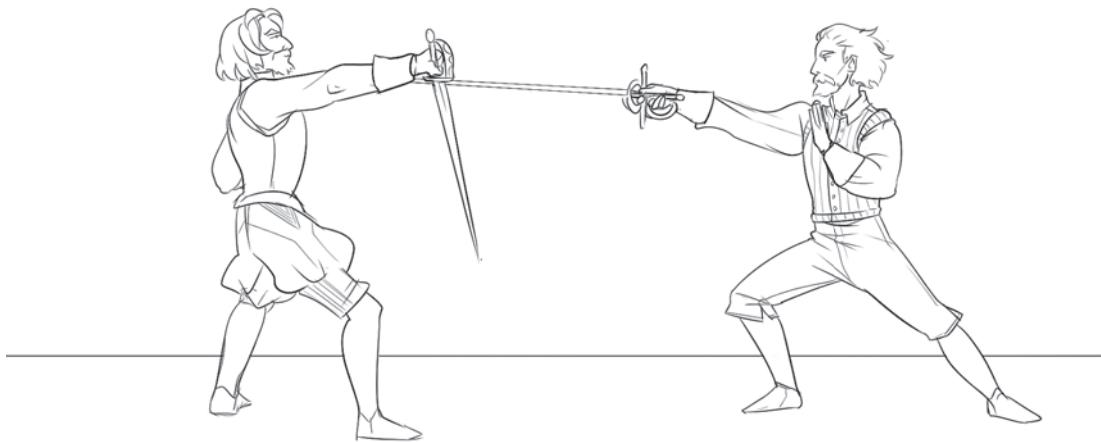


Silver assumes a high offensive ward. Saviolo assumes a stocatta ward.

**T**hey didn't duel, but what if they had? Silver hated Saviolo and would have enjoyed killing him and proving the superiority of English short sword over the Italian rapier. The purpose of this article is to create a hypothetical duel between Vincentio Salviolo and George Silver, the two most famous swordsmen in Shakespeare's time.

Vincentio Saviolo made a lot of money teaching Italian rapier to wealthy Englishmen in the 1590's. He published *Vincentio Saviolo, His Practise* in 1595. The first part of this book described the use of single rapier, and rapier & dagger. The second part concerned itself with honor and honorable quarrels. The Italian rapier was a new and increasingly fashionable weapon in London in the 1590's.





George Silver, an English gentleman, was an advocate of the English short sword, a single-handed basket-hilted broadsword or backsword. Silver wrote *The Paradoxes of Defence* in 1599. His book denounced rapiers and Saviolo's fencing style. Silver had several complaints. First, that Saviolo emphasized offense at the expense of defense. Second, that Saviolo encouraged dueling. Finally, while Silver believed Saviolo's techniques worked in careful practice, he did not think they succeeded under the pressure of a street fight or duel. The rapier was too long. The rapier was insubstantial and ineffective on the battlefield. To Silver, Saviolo was responsible for Englishmen killing each other in duels without preparing them for battle with England's enemies.

When Saviolo complained that Englishmen lacked cunning and retreated too much, George Silver and his brother Toby challenged Saviolo and his associate Jeronimo to "play" with them on a scaffold outside the Belle Savage Tavern, which was near Saviolo's school in the Black Friars section of London. The Silvers proposed fighting with ten different weapons. The word "play" implies sparring without the intent to injure and kill.

The Silvers may have arrived at the scaffold with dull weapons and padded doublets. Silver said that whoever retreated too quickly on the scaffold would break their neck. The Silver brothers posted handbills advertising the confrontation and were at the scaffold on the appointed day and hour. The Italians didn't show up.<sup>1</sup>

What if Silver and Saviolo had confronted each other on a London street? What if they fought each other with sharp weapons and intent to kill, Silver with his English short sword and Saviolo with his Italian rapier? What advantages would each combatant enjoy? How were their fighting styles similar? How were they different? Who would win?

A good place to begin would be to look at the physical differences between the weaponry. The typical English rapier had a 41.5-inch blade and weighed between 3 and 3.5 pounds. No one knows the length of Saviolo's rapier, but Stephen Hand believes Saviolo would probably fight with a swept hilt rapier with a 38-inch blade. This would give Saviolo a 3 inch advantage in blade length over Silver's short sword. Silver

maintained that the length of the rapier made it difficult to disengage after a parry. This criticism would be true if Saviolo's English students used the typical 41.5-inch English rapier. Saviolo's rapier could deliver painful and distracting cuts, but could not match the fight ending cuts delivered by Silver's sword. The rapier was designed primarily for the thrust.

Silver called his sword a "short sword" to distinguish it from a hand-and-a-half

long sword. Silver would use a basket-hilted sword with two edges or a basket-hilted backsword with one edge. It wasn't very short. The blade would be approximately 35 inches long. The sword would weigh between 2.6 and 2.9 pounds. This sword was very well balanced for cuts and thrusts. The broad blade was capable of devastating, fight ending cuts.

Now I'd like to examine possible attacks and defenses. Both fighters had a lot in common. They would both use distance, time, judgment, and position to gain an advantage over their opponent. They would parry cuts with their weapons. Their left hands were ready to parry thrusts, or grab the opponent's hilt, wrist, or weapon arm. They both used cuts and thrusts.

Saviolo would fight primarily in a circular fashion, changing direction to surprise his opponent. Silver would fight in both a linear and circular manner. When Saviolo attacked, Silver would step forward with a sword or hand parry to close the distance and make it difficult for Saviolo to make a second attack. Saviolo's circular fight would force Silver into a circular fight, as Silver moves to keep Saviolo directly in front of him.

Saviolo would use a "stoccata ward," threatening Silver's face or stomach with the point. Both Saviolo and Silver would hold their left hand in front of their chest. Silver would have several ward options at his disposal. He could use a stoccata like Saviolo, or an offensive ward with the sword held high above his head. This ward would be a threat and an invitation. If Saviolo thrust, Silver could parry with his left hand and simultaneously split Saviolo's skull in half. Silver's defensive hanging ward protected the left side of the head and the



**ABOVE: Saviolo thrusts to the heart.**

**Silver parries with sword.**

**RIGHT: Silver cuts to the head. Saviolo parries re-enforcing his rapier with his left hand and thrusts to the face in one tempo.**

left torso. This ward would also invite a Saviolo thrust and result in the same devastating consequence.

Saviolo emphasized the thrust, especially the “stoccata thrust,” an ascending thrust under the sword or the left hand of the opponent. He also used an “imbroccata thrust,” a descending thrust over the opponent’s sword or left hand, and the “punta reversa,” a supine thrust to the opponent’s right side.

Both fighters would maintain a distance that would allow them to stab or cut their opponent with an advance, pass, or lunge. Silver complained that a rapier thrust was not as immediately lethal as a short sword cut. This would be true for a thrust to an arm, leg, lung or stomach. However, a thrust to the heart, throat, or eye would end the fight.

If Silver thrust at Saviolo, Saviolo would have two options. He could parry thrusts with his left hand, take an evasive step away from the thrust, and simultaneously counter thrust in one tempo. Saviolo could also counter a thrust with an “opposition thrust” which would combine a thrust with a pressure deflection in one tempo. Silver complained that opposition thrusts frequently resulted in the death of both opponents. It is important to note that Saviolo also cut with his rapier. In his first rapier exercise, which includes seven thrusts, there are three cuts to the head. Saviolo would follow a painful, bloody, and distracting cut to the head with a fight ending thrust.

Silver preferred the cut, especially a diagonal forehand cut to the head that he called a “downright blow.” Silver would attempt to end the fight with a cut that severed a hand, arm, leg, neck, or head. Silver had several cutting options. He could parry with his sword and counter-cut in double tempo. He could evade a cut and then counter-cut in single tempo. He could use a stop cut to the weapon hand or the head in single tempo. He could also parry a thrust with the left hand and counter cut in one tempo. If a cut of Silver’s were parried and deflected, he would use his left hand to parry a counter thrust.

Saviolo would parry cuts with the rapier. The parry would be combined with an opposition thrust in one tempo. The left hand could re-enforce the rapier blade in this action by grabbing the blade approximately thirty inches from the hilt. This half-sword technique would be wise against Silver’s powerful short sword cuts. Silver was also prepared to punch Saviolo in the face with his hilt or pommel.

Whenever possible, Saviolo would attempt a stoccata thrust, left handed deflection and a circular evasion in single tempo. Silver would rely primarily on the double tempo of a sword parry and counter-cut. Saviolo would try to end the fight with a thrust. Silver would try to end the fight with a cut.

Both weapons were lethal and both swordsmen were skilled. Who would win? It is impossible to predict the outcome of this hypothetical fight with any confidence. Neither weapon nor swordsman was inherently superior. Silver might surprise Saviolo with a pommel to the face followed by a downright blow to the head. Saviolo did not teach the use of the pommel. Saviolo might surprise Silver with a single tempo half-sword parry and a simultaneous thrust to the face. Silver did not include half-swording in his manual. The contest might be decided on a momentary hesitation, a miscalculation in the heat of the action, or a stumble on the cobblestones of a Blackfriar’s street.

Whoever lost the fight, Silver ultimately lost the battle of blades to fashion. The rapier became the gentleman’s weapon in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. However, the shortsword remained the battlefield weapon of many English warriors and the choice of lower and middle class sword and buckler fighters.

Interestingly enough, the winner of the hypothetical Silver/Saviolo fight might have faced legal consequences. In 1598, Ben Jonson was indicted for manslaughter when he killed actor Gabriel Spenser in a duel. Jonson pleaded guilty but escaped hanging by pleading

“benefit of clergy” and successfully reciting a biblical passage in Latin. Jonson was briefly imprisoned, branded on the left thumb with “T” for Tyburn, and released forfeit of all his possessions.

Which begs the question: For all their expertise with weapons, did Silver or Saviolo know Latin? —

## Endnotes

1 Was Shakespeare a member of the disappointed crowd around the scaffold outside the Belle Savage? He probably read both masters’ books. Silver may have been an inspiration for Mercutio, Saviolo may have been an inspiration for Tybalt.

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The following guides, manuals, and books are great starting points if the reader wishes to study and decide for themselves who would have won this contest of masters. Most of these references are available online:

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Stoccatta:  
*George Silver in 4.5 Minutes*  
*Silver on the Italians*  
Paul Wagner:  
*The Master of Defence*  
Henry Walker:  
*A Fencer’s Ramblings*

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cconwell@uarts.edu





# Fight Matters

# The First Day

BY JOSEPH TRAVERS, SAFD CT/FD

A few days ago, in the midst of preparing for the first day of Summer term at the conservatory where I work (AMDA), I happened to connect with someone who attended the school where I received my initial stage combat training in New York—the Actors Combat Training School (ACTS). Though the person I met had attended ACTS before I had started there, the meeting and the sharing of memories brought me back to my first days of training at the Ken Zen dojo—a long, somewhat narrow martial arts studio where we could only work barefoot, and where ACTS founder and teacher J. Allen Sudeth ran classes five nights a week and all day Saturday in Basic, Intermediate and Advanced stage combat. There I had the privilege to work alongside students and young teachers such as Richard Raether, Brian Burns, Steve Vaughn, Ricki Ravitts and Rick Sordelet. We slapped, we swiped, we parried, we punched, and we fell in love with this art—all because of those first days. We walked in knowing next to nothing, and we left with an insatiable hunger to know more.

The timing of all this recollection was of course inspiring to me—here I was remembering my beginnings, and at the same time getting ready to start a journey with a new crop of students. These students would travel with my colleagues and I through two years and 5 different disciplines as part of their conservatory training. I've taught at AMDA (NYC) for 18 years, so this wasn't going to be my first "first day," but it was theirs, and I began to feel I owed it to myself and them to rethink and renew what a first day should be like.

Students may come with open minds, but they also come with preconceived notions, habits, fears, prejudices and sometimes the feeling that they "get" the subject already. There are often attitudes and resistances we as teachers of stage combat encounter right at the

beginning that we need to help students overcome with the lessons that we teach. Below, I will offer a few examples.

## **"This isn't fighting."**

Some student begin by thinking this is a fight class. Some believe their martial arts training gives them a "leg up" in achieving success in stage combat. Others, who see themselves as not good at fighting, or who don't like the idea of fighting, might be reticent to commit to what they see as a fight class.

Of course, stage combat isn't fighting. While a martial arts background will give a student experience with things like learning techniques and developing a strong and flexible instrument, it will not help them be good storytellers or even good partners. For these and

for other students, it's best to emphasize that this is a *physical acting* class and that our job is to tell stories—very specialized stories, but stories nonetheless. Martial arts training (and also competitive fencing training) can be wonderful preparation, but it can also make it challenging for students to wrap their heads around something like cueing, or even the idea that a character might not make a “martially correct” choice.

Even without a martial arts background, a student who feels like they “get” fighting can find the opening days of stage combat class quite frustrating. Rather than needing strength and quickness alone, they find themselves needing a level of observational skill and physical specificity that is new to them. Rather than being applauded for having good fighting reflexes, they may find themselves critiqued for not making what they do clear to the viewer. The more the importance of physical storytelling is reinforced for the student, the greater the benefits for the actor and the fight.

### “This isn’t about you.”

On my first day of class, my teacher said, “Your job is to make your partner look good.” Since I thought my job was to look good myself, this was a bit surprising! So much in our makeup as performers causes us to focus on how we’re doing and whether or not we look good, that it can be a relief to turn my focus entirely on my partner and really be there for them. Of course, I eventually need some focus on what I do as well, but in order to achieve balance, encouraging students to forget themselves a bit and make their partner the most important person in their scene can make for a wonderful trust-building approach. Providing partnering and trust exercises in the first days of training can help everyone find that balance.

### “This isn’t as easy as it looks.”

So many students have come to the midterm point and said, “you know, at first I thought, ‘I totally got this!’, but now, wow! This is hard!” There may be no way for a student to learn this but to go through the fire. It’s a good reminder that while the class must be fun, it must also be rigorous. The insistence that all the elements that make up the story be ultimately firing at once—safety, clarity, specificity, breath, centering, “wear and tear,” arc-of-story and teamwork (to name more than a few) is what brings the students to that very important realization.

### “This isn’t as hard as it looks.”

This is often a later realization. Once each individual’s clarity, physical responsiveness and consistency has grown (often as the end of term approaches), the fun returns (though ideally it never left) and the student begins to exhibit increased confidence. In order to reach this point, the student’s trust in the vision of the teacher is key. During the time before this, when the student is struggling to put it all together, the teacher’s patient encouragement, the feeling that “my teacher knows I can do this” serves as the bridge to the new, confident relationship the student will have to the material.

### “It’s not about the techniques.”

Even the most conscientious student can become narrowly focused on the difficulty in one particular technique and get stuck there. Try though they might, they can’t get the moment to the place where you (or they) want it. This is the time to remind them that the technique, while important, is not the goal. Diaphragmatic breathing exists to help one sing better. Turnout helps you dance. The goal in the scene of violence is the dynamic physical intention, or the explosive reaction—the point is the story, not the techniques that help tell it. Sometimes you have to say to the student “Just sing!”, “Just dance!”, “Just fight!” When the brain gets out of the way, the body will then take over, and the technique will be improved.

### “Breathe.”

Career-minded acting students (especially young ones) often need to get “it” now—right now! Especially in our current climate of instant gratification, success is the sign to move right on, and failure is devastating. Right from the beginning, students need to be prepared for *process*—repetition, reexamination, reflection, renovation and reapplication. It doesn’t all come immediately; it comes in particular moments over a long time. We need to remind them to breathe, to remember this whole thing was their idea—this “being an actor” thing. We need to remind them it takes patience.

I know I’ve spoken about a lot more than the students’ first day, but, since everything in every class begins there, it all somehow connects to there. May all your first days be filled with questions, laughter, memories, and with possibilities. ✦



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# Approaching *the* Ethics of Violence

BY JIM STARK

**T**he intention of this article is to describe a system that fight directors may use in conversation with directors, especially in discussions of the story of a fight. Some of these discussions may employ the terminology of moral judgments, representing the points of view of the play's protagonist or another character, of the director, or of the audience. Taking time to consider the many potential ethical variations of violence may open new possibilities for interpreting the play in ways that please a crowd.

The system works in a simple matrix that may be applied from a point of view that is external to the play—that is, in a dramaturgical manner—or may be used from many points of view within the play. Within the fictitious world of the play, the matrix may be used, broadly, to interpret the moral landscape of all of the violence in the story, or it may be used narrowly to clarify the beats in a single scene.

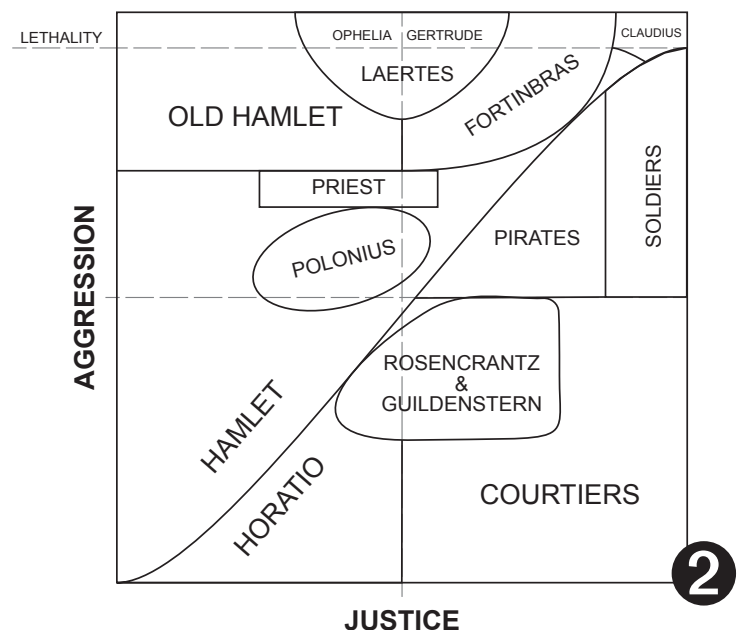
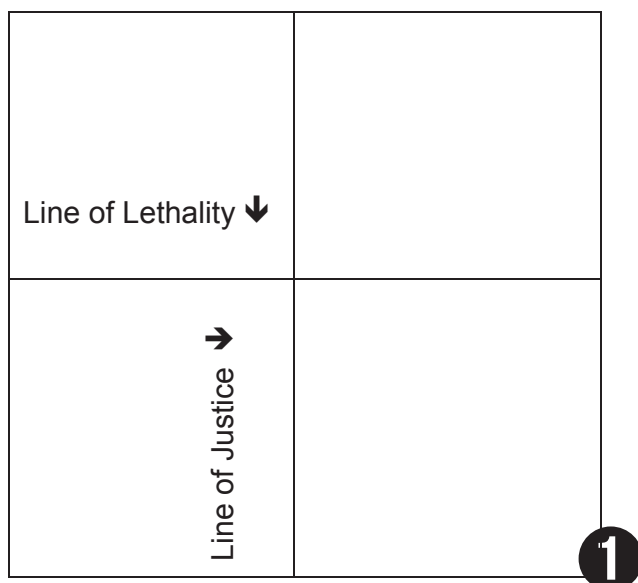
Consider a foursquare matrix in which the horizontal continuum begins with “innocence” on the left and ends at “total depravity” on the right. The vertical dimension expresses the intensity of the action, with “defensive” actions at the low end and “lethal force” at the high end. (This scale may be described with the familiar “4 Ds of Distance, Disarm, Disable, Dispatch; as many trained actor-combatants will have heard.) There is also the meta-violence of the “fate worse than death” that may appear in any script, from Greek tragedy to contemporary drama.

Imagine the vertical centerline as the line between just and unjust

actions, and the horizontal centerline as the tipping point between defensive and offensive actions. (This grid does *not* address the tactic of flight, since flight is not an act of violence.)

It may be surprising to imagine an innocent use of lethal force. What might be the circumstances of such an action? (For example, I had a friend who once used intense force to stop a would-be rapist. That action was innocent of any ill intention.) In contrast, what action belongs in the upper right corner—murder, torture, or mayhem? Is random, lethal violence more depraved than pre-meditated torture?

Take a moment to consider a few hypothetical applications of this matrix. In a production of *Hamlet*, the director expects the audience to see Laertes as a villain as he approaches the fencing match. The fight director has a different point of view, and wants the audience to fear for Hamlet because Laertes is a truly great fencer. The discussion centers on the third pass of the fencing match in the last act. Is it a sneak attack by Laertes, wounding Hamlet when he is expecting to be at ease between bouts, or does Laertes pull himself together, call Hamlet to *en garde*, attack, and win a legitimate hit? In the first scenario, Laertes is guilty of cheating in the match, in addition to the deceptions embodied in the sharp, poisoned blade. In the second version, Laertes returns to his truer self. He asserts his skill, takes revenge for his own father's killing, and begins to move toward his eventual redemption by exposing his conspiracy with Claudius. Either story is legitimate within the given circumstances of the



play—but can only be “correct” if it fits within a comprehensible moral landscape for the individual production.

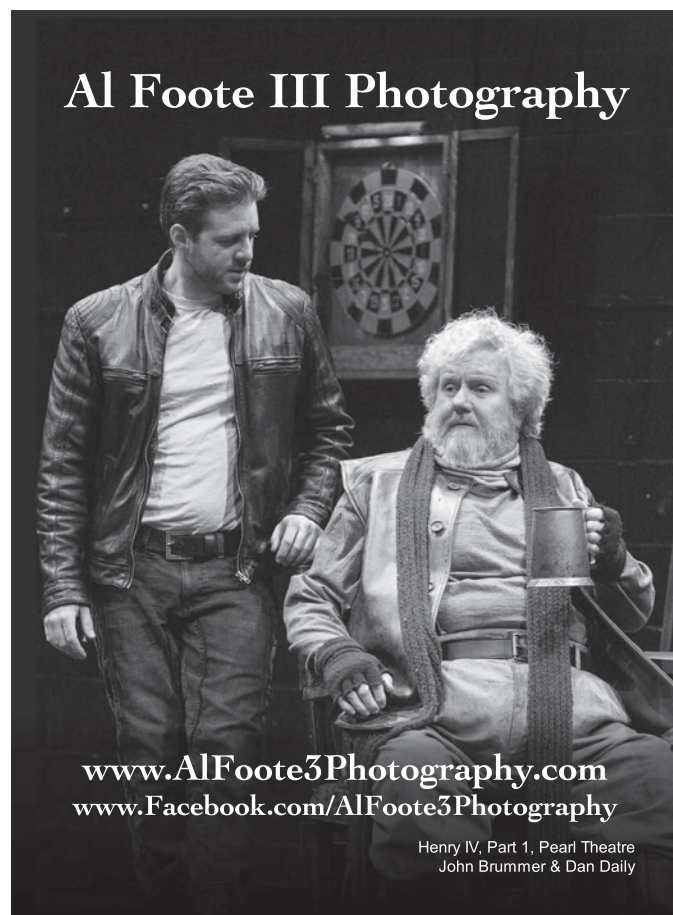
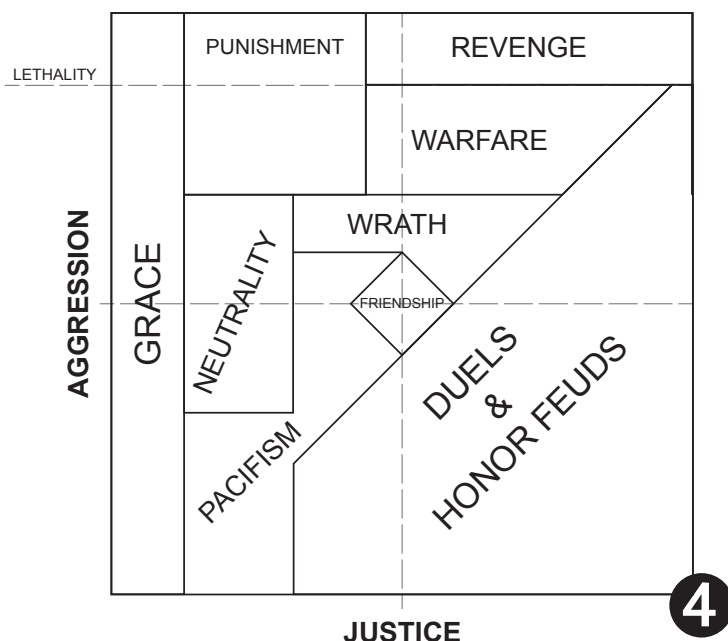
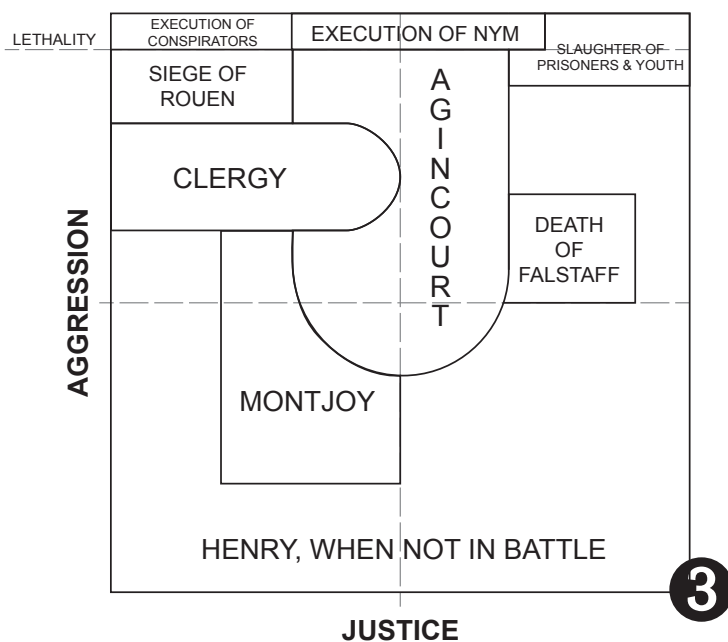
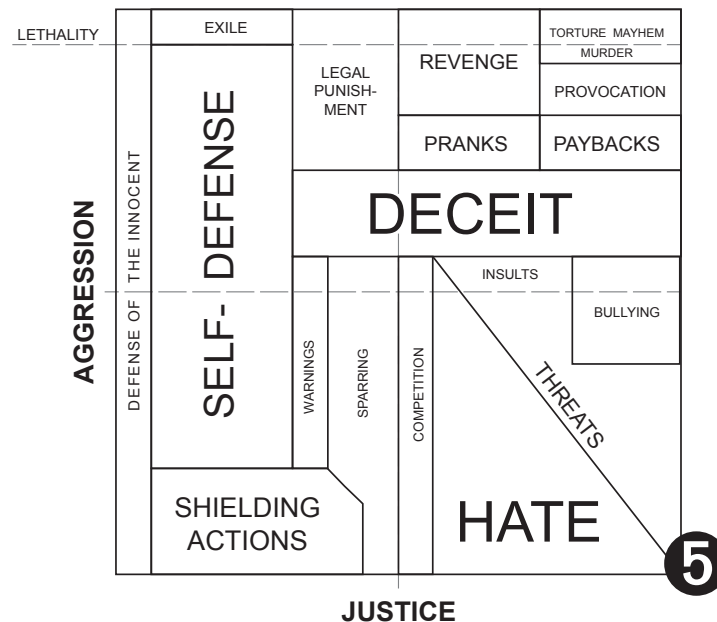
Fight directors might begin with the aforementioned blank grid. In the early stages of planning a production, a fight director might map out the generalized impressions of various characters and events. In Figure 2, a fight director has the chance to provide dramatic input on a production of *Hamlet*, and the grid might describe the ethical relationships of the principal characters and storylines.

In another example Figures 3 and 4 outline the violent trends in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*. A very ambitious fight director might try to outline *all* violence in a picture such as in figure 5, though it might be more reasonable to work with a particular act of aggression, or a scene, for simplicity’s sake.

None of these matrices ought to be considered the final word on the ethics of violence. As fight directors work, they draw on many sources as they build the moral elements of a production. These may include chivalric traditions from Western Europe and/or East Asia, religious teachings or traditions, or the instinctive “taboo” reactions

that many cultures hold in common. All of these sources are legitimate, even when they may come into conflict with one another.

Good fight directors know that their audiences will react to the violence they witness with their own moral judgments. The artists will do well to begin by acknowledging this fact, as they prepare their interpretations of the violence in the plays they undertake. It is my hope that matrices like these might create space for both actors and choreographers to identify the specific point of morality for a scene. ✦



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# A Place at the Table

**J. Allen Suddeth Addresses the  
Southeastern Theatre Conference**

BY MATTHEW R. WILSON



**TOP: J. Allen Suddeth addresses a packed room at the 2017 Southeastern Theatre Conference. BOTTOM: J. Allen Suddeth (left) and SETC President Tiza Garland (right) outside the SETC conference.**

*Portions of this article were originally published in Southern Theatre magazine, the quarterly publication of the Southeastern Theatre Conference.*

## “Sixty-eight years,” the Fight Master whispers as he scans the crowd.

Sixty-eight years since the Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC) hosted its first annual convention in a tiny Florida town. In those days, SETC was a new idea, a small association in a peripheral region. Meanwhile, the stage combat world as it exists today had not even been thought up. Combat was a niche sector in an industry that had yet to imagine fight societies, certification tests or union representation for choreographers. Swordsmen like Patrick Cren crossed steel with the likes of Laurence Olivier and Errol Flynn, but the leads won acclaim while the fight director’s voice was rarely heard.

Flash forward to Lexington, Kentucky. March 3, 2017. The Southeastern Theatre Conference is now the largest gathering of theatre professionals and educators across the United States. At a packed plenary session, J. Allen Suddeth takes the podium and humbly states that he is honored to be the first member of the fight community ever invited to address the convention as keynote speaker.

The first in sixty-eight years.

The audience applauds in support, and a few “Whoop”s are heard from other combat professionals, many of them Suddeth’s former students. In their minds, it’s about time.

### A STAGE FOR COMBAT

Suddeth was one of three keynote speakers at the 68th annual SETC convention. Actor-singer-songwriter Alice Ripley delivered an address Thursday and also performed a concert of her greatest hits.

Public Theatre Artistic Director Oskar Eustis spoke Saturday afternoon in one of the closing events of the convention.

Suddeth’s talk, delivered in one of the grand ballrooms of the Lexington Hilton on Friday, was peppered with anecdotes from his own life and the history of stage combat combined with a sort of rhetorical *apologia* on the necessity of combat training in the industry. He referenced fights from Shakespeare to Disney, deftly balanced on his palm a gleaming rapier by armorer and artisan Tom Fiocchi, dryly drew repeated laughs (“Let’s *talk* about *movement*,” he began with an exasperated tilt of the head), and provoked a communal “Ack!” at a single image (“meat hooks”). However, Suddeth’s humorous and scintillating stories were anchored by a solemn thesis about the demand for respect and the struggle to change perceptions within the industry, a struggle supported by the audience’s frequent interjections of applause.

The afternoon’s biggest crowd reaction followed the final question of the post-talk Q&A: A female student looked up at Suddeth from a microphone in the aisle and asked simply, “What is the career field for women in stage combat?” Immediately, Suddeth’s eyes widened with excitement as he leapt sprightly from the stage to kneel before SETC President Tiza Garland, offering her the microphone as a knight presents a sword. Garland, herself an SA

FD Certified Teacher, vaulted to the platform (“in heels,” she noted) and proclaimed, to an exuberant crowd, “The field of stage combat for women is the exact same as men. My gender does not identify me as an artist; my artistry identifies me as an artist.” It’s a tribute to Garland and feminists everywhere that the crowd cheered for gender equality. It’s a tribute to Suddeth and his forebears that no one blanched at her other assertion: Garland had equated “stage combat” with “artistry.”

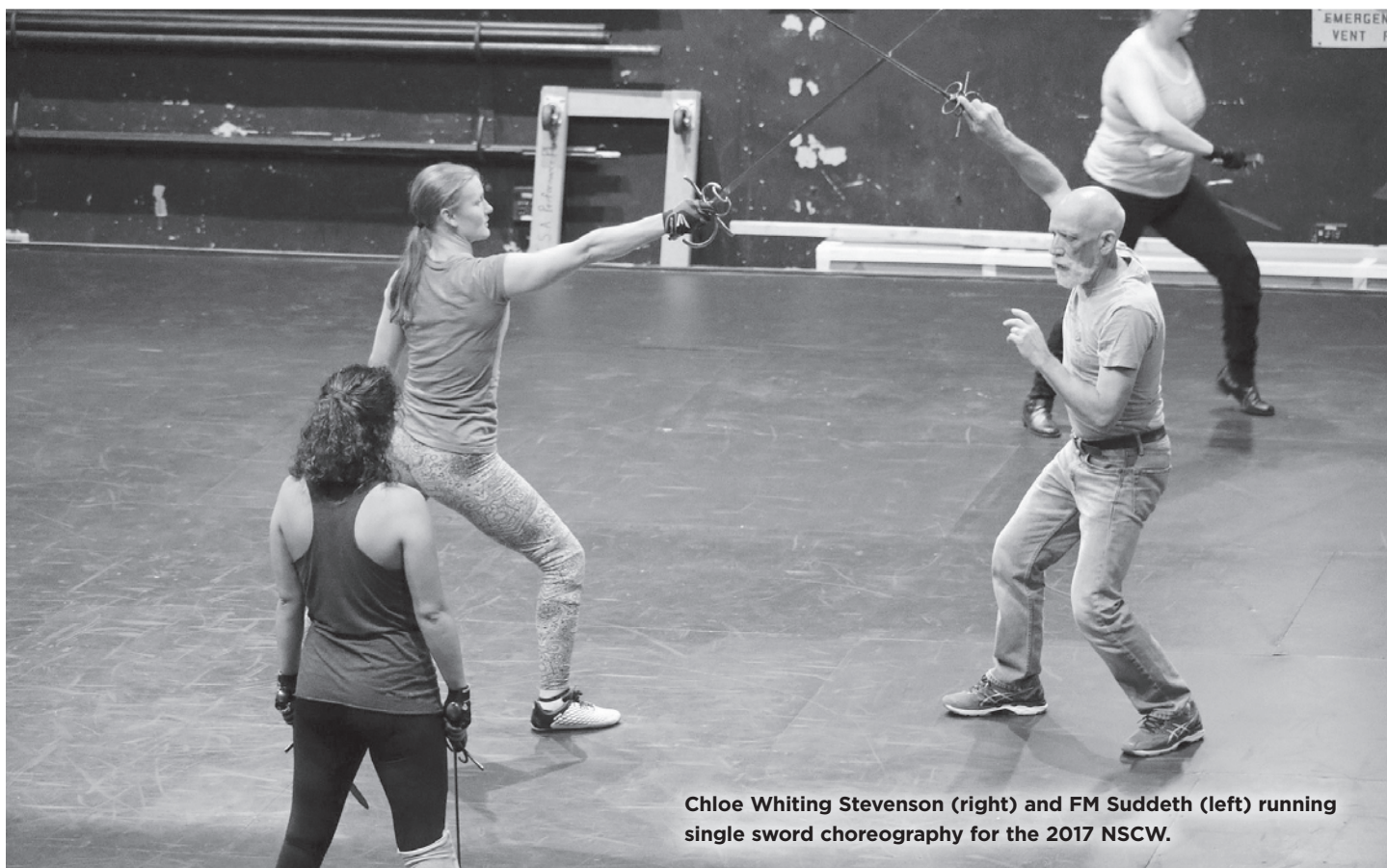
### IS STAGE COMBAT AN “ART FORM”?

A current theatre student might toss off, “Sure,” as quickly and thoughtlessly as a producer of yesteryear (and many who are still around) could offer a confused, scoffing, “No.” These days, Suddeth noted, “Stage combat is everywhere, from high school theatre to the vastness of the Metropolitan Opera stage,” and yet the struggle is far from over in defining what combat is (or is not) and how it fits into the artistic process.

Looking at Suddeth’s career, one might be surprised to hear that he and others in the field are not always respected as equal artistic partners. His work is currently featured on Broadway in Disney’s *Aladdin*, and his résumé includes fight direction at nearly every major theatre from NYC to the Pacific, as well as stunts for over 750 television shows. In general, the fight director touches the most crucial, most exciting, most difficult and most dangerous part of any project and, in Suddeth’s words, is “called upon to solve problems.” Still, the work is often seen as an afterthought.

No one would approach *42nd Street* saying, “We’ll get it all staged and then invite a dance choreographer in for a day to teach the actors how to tap,” but fight directors are frequently asked to stage climactic battle scenes in a matter of hours. Directors might say, “We’ve got it all blocked; we just need you to add the fights,” but the fight, itself, is the blocking, the story, a part of the character, an extension of the script, the main event of the play. Sometimes a fight director is





Chloe Whiting Stevenson (right) and FM Suddeth (left) running single sword choreography for the 2017 NSCW.

reduced to serving as a safety monitor (read as, *liability shield*): “It’s choreographed; can you just make it safe?” Imagine telling a designer, “We’ve finished sewing all the costumes; now can you make them fit?” or “We finished building the set; can you just make sure it’s load-bearing?”

Neither safety nor artistry should be an afterthought because, as Suddeth proclaimed, “Fights are not little moments!” He noted that six of the ten most produced professional plays and six of the ten most produced high school plays last year contain moments of violence, but the combat is not always given serious attention. “I take it personally,” Suddeth said, when actors anywhere are hurt, traumatized or even killed because of errors on set or onstage, and he proved his investment not only through his passionate appeal but also through stories of putting his own body on the line to

protect performers. He once leapt into a raging river to rescue an actor and would himself have drowned had he not arranged to have rescue boat on call. That one incident is a microcosm of an entire industry that is now much safer than it used to be thanks to the work of professionals like J. Allen Suddeth.

## A FIGHT MASTER’S JOURNEY

So how does one find oneself on set battling a raging river or on Broadway wrangling 23 musical theatre performers (including a nine-year-old child actor) for the Act One finale of *Newsies*? Suddeth, like many in the entertainment industry, first encountered theatre as an actor and arrived at Ohio University as a self-described “skinny, nerdy, tightly-wound” kid. Despite failing his Movement 101 class, he found an awakening through stage combat, which granted him the permission he had been lacking to “live in the moment.” “The training,” he assured his audience, “can set you free.”

It was in Ohio that Suddeth first met Patrick Crean, an instrumental figure in the development of professional stage combat training in the United Kingdom and North America. Crean came to teach workshops at the school for five weeks each year, and, after training with Crean, Suddeth found himself hired as an undergrad to teach combat regularly to the actors in the master’s program. (Recounting those first experiences teaching, he confessed to attendees at the convention’s SAFD panel, “I figured I only had to stay a week ahead” of the class.)

After graduation, Suddeth moved to New York and continued working as an actor but realized, “Stage combat gave me another road to the industry that in those days was unknown.” The phone continued to ring more and more for fight gigs, and the rest is a history that can be read in his formidable bio.

## Is Stage Combat Good Actor Training? Suddeth’s Appeal to SETC

1. It is the ultimate “outside-in training”: you get it right, or you don’t!
2. It hones partnering.
3. It provides the physical confidence to bring forth an emotion and control it.
4. It is mental, physical and kinetic training.
5. It teaches you to retain choreography.
6. It makes you better with props.
7. It leads to physical transformation.
8. It makes theatre history “something you grab onto” and experience.

## THE RISE OF STAGE COMBAT

Suddeth's personal history can also be read alongside the rise of stage combat as a recognized part of the entertainment industry. Combat first entered actor training programs as nothing more than what Suddeth called "the trick-of-the-month club," where someone like Crean would visit a program for a few weeks to offer "a surface touch" of the discipline. However, by the seventies, professional fight societies such as the SAFD provided a networking forum where teachers and professionals could improve training, standards and opportunities. For Suddeth, American combat in the 1980s was defined by the establishment of the SAFD National Stage Combat Workshop, a yearly intensive where students and performers can train under recognized Fight Masters and participate in "skills tests" for credentialed proficiency as stage combatants.

The 1990s saw a sea change for stage combat based on the tools, professional opportunities and training available. For the first time in contemporary theatre, an industry of skilled artisans emerged to create specific weapons for different periods and styles, a phenomenon Suddeth dubs "The Rise of the Armorer." While fights had previously been staged using whatever could be borrowed from the realm of sport fencing, Suddeth marveled, "Now you can buy anything you can dream up." In professional productions, it also became more common to have fight directors included alongside other production members, contributing in design meetings and collaborating with the director to envision, develop and implement moments of stage violence as an integral part of the production. Meanwhile, within university programs, stage combat began to be a regular part of actor training curricula.

Suddeth described the 2000s as the decade of the SAFD Certified Teachers, credentialed instructors and practitioners whose expanding ranks broadened opportunities for training and testing. (There are currently 160 Certified Teachers recognized by the SAFD.) In

the current decade, the craft benefits from a wealth of international connections between various fight societies, as well as a richness of resources from artistic, martial and historical sources to push the discipline in new directions.

## THE FIGHT GOING FORWARD

Stage combat continues to gain momentum, as evidenced in part by the ten SAFD Certified Teachers who attended this year's SETC Convention and the nine combat-related workshops programmed by its Stage Movement Committee; however, the fight world still struggles for equal artistic acceptance. AGMA and SAG-AFTRA have ways of acknowledging stunt and combat professionals, but Actors' Equity Association remains vague in its standards. The Stage Directors and Choreographers Society now represents professional fight directors, but producers' organizations continue to oppose unionization or standards for the people hired to choreograph fights. Unlike the old days, stunt players are now credited in films, but stunt coordinators and performers are still shut out of the Academy Awards, just as fight directors are omitted at the Tony's. "We are not a category," Suddeth offered matter-of-factly.

Even so, he is optimistic about the future of stage combat. Safety standards are better today than they have ever been. Theatrical training from children's programming to graduate education now recognizes the importance of safe and effective stage combat. The best professional processes today include a fight director as a full contributor on the artistic team.

"So, does stage combat finally have a place at the table?" Suddeth mused with satisfaction. "I think we finally do."

### Endnotes

1 J. Allen Suddeth, *Fight Directing for Theatre* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinmann, 1996), xiii.

## How Do We Reduce Risk? Advice for the Entire Production Team

In *Fight Directing for the Theatre*, J. Allen Suddeth writes, "Stage combat is not just 'something the actors do,' it is the job of the entire production staff from the producer to the interns."<sup>1</sup>

Here are his tips for how everyone can help make stage combat safer and more exciting:

### DIRECTORS

Wrap the Fight Director into design meetings from the beginning.  
Budget time and resources realistically to reduce risk.

### STAGE MANAGERS

Make sure actors have elbow and knee pads in rehearsal. Simple things can make a difference.  
Don't be afraid to speak up if you see things getting dangerous.  
Always remember the stage manager motto: Safe and Sanitary!

### DESIGNERS

Designs can be "fight friendly" without compromising your ideas.  
Collaborate early and often with the Fight Director.

### ACTORS

It is your right to demand a professional Fight Director when the staging warrants it.  
You are most at risk early in your career because, in non-union productions, you are on your own. Take responsibility for reducing your own risk.  
Plan for the long haul. You are castable in every decade of your career, not just your twenties!  
No class can prepare you for the pressure of professional work. Be tough.  
Please stand your ground when the voice inside of you says you should.

### TEACHERS, ADMINISTRATORS AND PRODUCERS

When choosing plays and budgets, be realistic about the safety of your students, actors and crew.  
*Reduce risk—we'll all be the better for it!*





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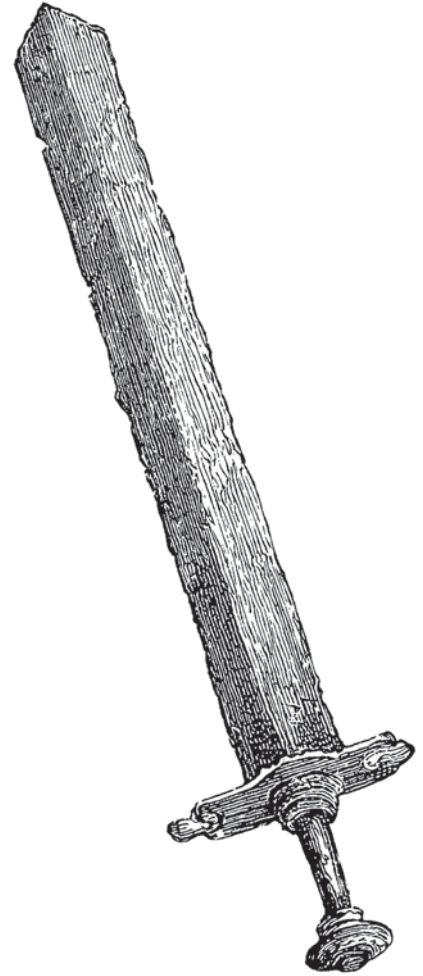
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The Society of American Fight Directors is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to promoting safety and fostering excellence in the art of stage combat. The SAFD is committed to providing the highest level of service through initiating and maintaining guidelines and standards of quality, providing education and training, promoting scholarly research, as well as encouraging communication and collaboration throughout the entertainment industry.

Whether you are a producer, director, actor or teacher, we can help accelerate your stage combat skills. SAFD members gain access to a world class networking organization, high caliber stage combat training and mentorship designed to expand your career. Our members include professional actors, directors, producers, educators, dancers, singers, stunt performers, historians, scholars and armorers working in theatre, film, television, all levels of academia, stunt shows, opera and the video gaming industry.

### The SAFD Recognized Membership Levels

#### **Friend**

One need not be a stage fighter, teacher, or choreographer to join and be active in the SAFD. Any individual who has an interest in the stage combative arts who wants to keep abreast of the field and receive all the benefits of memberships may join as a friend.

#### **Certified Teacher**

Any individual who has successfully completed the SAFD Teacher Certification Workshop. These individuals are endorsed by the Society to teach staged combat and may teach the SAFD Skills Proficiency Test.

#### **Actor Combatant**

Any individual who has passed an SAFD Skills Proficiency Test and is current in Unarmed, Rapier & Dagger (or Single Sword), and another discipline. The SAFD considers Actor/Combatants to be proficient in performing staged combat safely and effectively.

#### **Fight Director**

Any individual who has held the status of Certified Teacher of the SAFD for a minimum of three years and has demonstrated through work in the professional arena a high level of expertise as a teacher and choreographer of staged combat. These individuals are endorsed by the Society to direct and/or choreograph incidents of physical violence.

#### **Advanced Actor Combatant**

Any individual who is current in six of eight SAFD disciplines, of which at least three (3) must be recommended passes and is a member in good standing. The SAFD acknowledges Advanced Actor Combatants as highly skilled performers of staged fighting.

#### **Fight Master**

Individuals who have successfully fulfilled the requirements of Fight Master as established and published by the Governing Body and awarded recognition by the current body of Fight Masters (College of Fight Masters). Individuals must be members in good standing and engage in continued active service to the Society.

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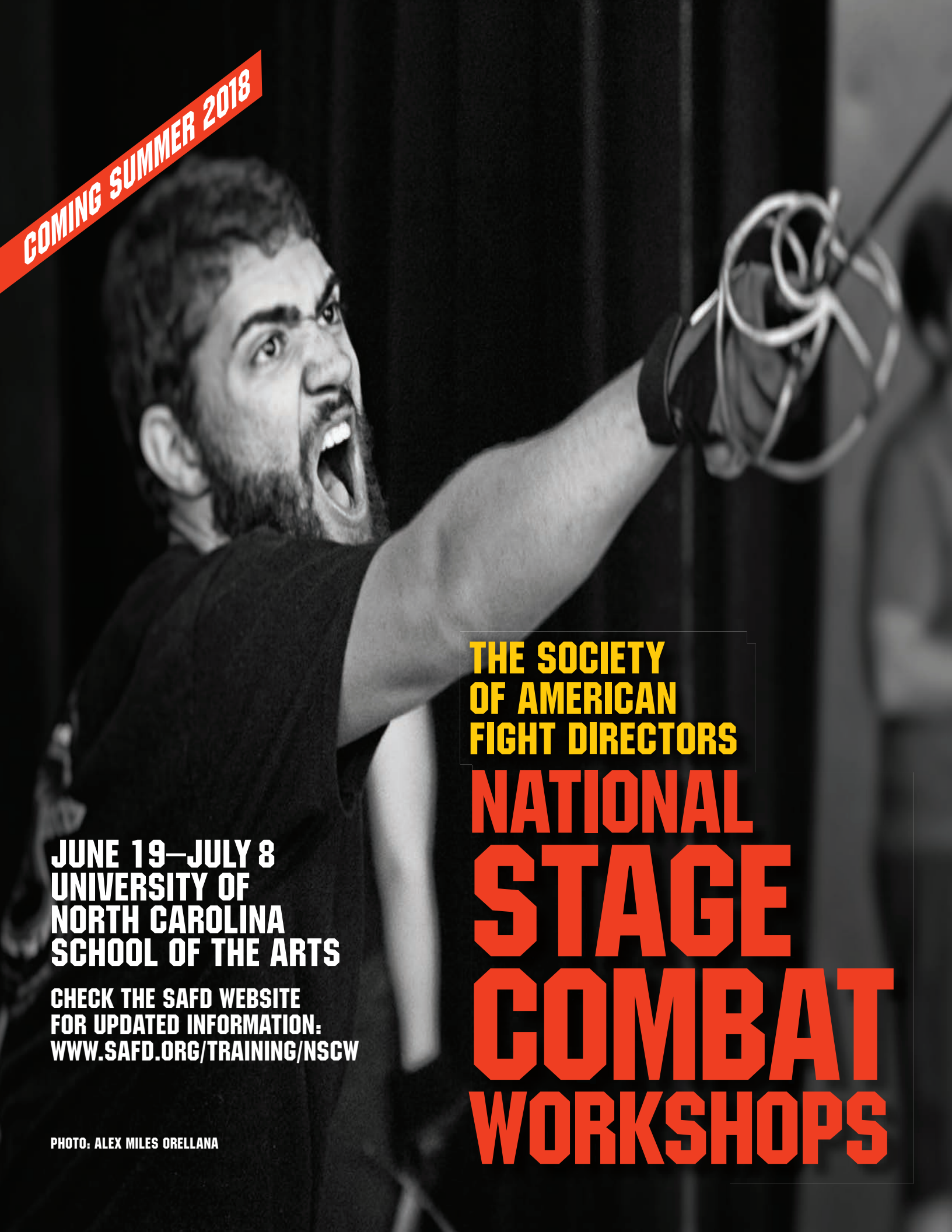
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You will need to login or set up an account at through the SAFD website ([www.safd.org](http://www.safd.org)). From there you will be guided through the membership payment process.

Thank you for supporting The Society of American Fight Directors.







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