

Beating the Punches

(Scene and Fight Break
Down Techniques)

By T. Fulton Burns



As a fight choreographer it is my responsibility to sit down with the director and discover her/his vision for the production. Similarly, actors need to serve the script and work with the choreographer in connecting the action to the playwright's words. Each preceding article, relating to the exploration of the skills proficiency tests (SPTs), has offered tools for connecting the scripts, stories, and characters with the language of the choreography. We are now ready to move deeper into directly linking fight choreography with the script and vice versa.

Some actors see pre-planning objectives for a scene and rehearsal as an important component to the creative process. Other performers prefer to approach rehearsals with little or no planning because they prefer not to be tied down to a single idea. A compromise for these two valid approaches is to consider options for the scene and write down plans in "pencil" (instead of pen or permanent ink). This will provide opportunity for change in the rehearsal process. The first step is to take the written word of the script and place it next to the fight choreography.

1. Suit the WORD to the Action

"The choreography should be well rehearsed, but the scene work should be well researched and built just as if the scene was being performed in an acting class...I often quiz my actors when [the] action doesn't seem truthful: 'What are your objectives? What has brought you to this point? What is going to happen after this scene?' If they don't know these answers, how could they possibly play the role? They can say the lines, sure, but they can't PLAY THE ROLE." – CT Matthew Ellis

Being able to deconstruct the dialogue and dramatic needs of a scene are important for actors, fight choreographers, and directors. In Harold Clurman's *On Directing* he provides a technique for directors to view every page of the script from an analytical point of view. The purpose, and benefit, of this pre-rehearsal planning is to provide a guide to follow during the rehearsal process. This type of guide can be extremely helpful with SPTs as well.

In a fight scene, or SPT, the trick is to break down the scene first, paying particular attention to the following areas:

- ★ Objectives/Intentions
(See "A Violent Character" in the March/April 2009 issue)
- ★ Verbs played at every beat change
(See "A Violent Character" in the March/April 2009 issue)
- ★ Beats
- ★ Subtext within the Language
- ★ Wins and Losses in the Fight

Beats are changes in thoughts within the scene, which can be brought about by questions asked by characters, topic changes in the dialogue, the introduction/entrance of another character to the scene, or an objective change. It is important to note that a beat change does not infer a PAUSE, but instead is meant to reveal a change in thought or action.

Go through the scene and mark each moment where a beat change takes place. Wherever the beat change occurs, place a new verb to change the action and

perhaps a new objective will be identified too. This identification will improve the scene specificity and help to discover appropriate areas for fight choreography placement.

Subtext is the wonderful unspoken dialogue that the audience is compelled to experience. What is written on the page only tells part of the story. I have watched adults instruct children to tell a person that the child loves them. While the words "I love you" are simple when written, how the child delivers them tells a more detailed story. If the child is standing with their fists clinched tightly and the words are spoken through gritted teeth, the words now contain a heavier subtext of "I hate you" rather than a phrase of endearment. Look at the scene and isolate what unspoken words are being revealed. Subtext variation can also determine new beat changes.

Identifying Wins and Losses is a helpful tool for any scene. It keeps the audience on their toes with anticipation and excitement. A sporting event with a heavily one sided score is not very exciting for the fans watching, where as a close match compels the audience's excitement. Theatre is similar with regard to providing hope as to the outcome of a duel or fight. At times a character will be winning the battle of wits, words, and/or actions, which will raise the stakes for the opposing character and increase the intensity of the fight. When this takes place it is important that the winning character have a stronger verb to play in order to win this moment and achieve their objective. Once they have the upper hand (no matter how big or small) in the scene, the other character will need to make an adjustment in their next actions to ensure their own victory.

In a SPT an actor can look at the moments in the dialogue that allow for breaks where the action may take place. In some scripts these moments are already acknowledged, but in other cases it is left to the actor or director to determine. Look at the beats, subtext, wins/losses and overall changes in thought to help decide the appropriate moments for the fight phrases. Regardless of the result, it is always important to consider all the options during the discovery process.

2. Suit the ACTION to the Word

"I find it also helps to break the fight down phrase by phrase and work each section slow and to a technical precision, but *with* the acting intent...even if you are working slow, you can still peruse the objective." – CT Jill Matarelli Carlson

Justifying the physical needs of the fight is an extension of the scene. This action does not replace the words, but instead will build upon the needs established by the playwright. One major concern for a SPT is where to place the dialogue. The following will help in determining strong moments for the action:

★ Locate the spark for the fight; this idea is similar to the "inciting incident" in the Well-Made-Play structure. In most acting classes instructors will ask, "What has happened before this scene?" in order to preserve the integrity of the play's ideas. The moment that has occurred prior to the fight is important too. This moment is the catalyst for the reaction, which is the physical fight. Perhaps one of the following items has occurred:

- One or more characters have been insulted
- A misunderstanding has occurred
- Something has been taken
- A secret has been revealed
- Or any other number of options you may discover

★ Whatever may have occurred prior to the physical action must be identified to clarify the spark which activates the violence and sets the dialogue of stage combat in motion.

★ Next, determine whether the character is involved in a fight or combat. Jill Matarelli Carlson introduced me to the ideas of Marc "Animal" MacYoung, who is the author of *Knives, Knife Fighting, and Related Hassles*. In this book he identifies a fight as ego or "showing off". With combat there is a battle to either kill or defend one's own life. As an actor there is great value in discovering when the "combat" begins in the scene. A scene could be a fight or combat, but making the decision is key in the exploration of any scene.

Hopefully, a scene will have both combat and fighting so the result will be stronger for the audience. An example of the escalation from fighting to combat can be found in *Hamlet*. The duel at the end of the play has incredible beat changes. The scene begins with clear objectives on all sides. As Laertes and Hamlet duel, the stakes are raised as Claudius and Laertes' plot to assassinate Hamlet unfolds. Hamlet dominates the duel in the beginning and does not fall prey to any of the preconceived plans by the secret assassins.

In a moment of frustration Laertes crosses to Hamlet and cuts him with the poisoned tip of his sword to ensure his objective, which is the death of Hamlet. The result is a change in the scene. Hamlet, by way of the combat, exchanges weapons with Laertes and lashes out by violently pursuing him. The fight now takes on higher stakes because Hamlet is after blood from Laertes, and Laertes is fighting for his own life. There is even a brilliant verbal cue where Claudius calls out "Part them, they are incensed!" While not every scene will provide such clearly marked dialogue as *Hamlet*, it is the responsibility of the actor to identify the level of intensity in the stage combat and modify it according to the demands of the text.

Another crucial component in the equation is finding the important moments and moves with the physical fight. I have seen some people who approach every single move as though each was the kill move. While possible, if this is the only choice made, then an extensive fight will prove monochromatic. Consider the following:

★ Take the time to look at what moves are defensive. Even an advancing move can be defensive. This is very important since some actor/combatants prefer to go directly to the aggressive moves first. Additionally, this approach may provide insight to both character's thinking process.

★ Determine what moves are intended to hurt or injure the opponent. These choices may be to stop, maim or humiliate the antagonist in the fight story. The need for these less violent moves can also make the high moments in the fight scene even higher.

★ For another approach to the complexity of a fight, look long term for what the character is trying to accomplish with their movement. A particular move that is stronger than perhaps the three proceeding it is sometimes called a kill move. In weapons training the kill move is often associated with particular schools of thought, such as Angelo's small sword behind the back move. If a character is smart and trained, then take a look at what this character may do to trap their opponent. Much like the game of chess, it is important to anticipate the moves of an opponent. This anticipation, however can work for or against the character. Consider the idea that the actor knows where the fight will go next. Knowing the end to the story is important when looking at other possible outcomes, such as how Macbeth does not believe he will die until he learns MacDuff's secret. If the fight goes favorably, the character may celebrate a victory, but if it does not, then the actor must deal with this "Oh crap!" moment. By linking three or more moves for emphasis the actor can stress a particular moment in the same way a particular word may be emphasized in the dialogue.

In looking at the script for clues toward the placement of fight phrases, it is also important to take a hard look at the choreography. If the choreography calls for a character to be disarmed, the appropriate location for the action must align with the needs of the scene. Find where these physical and script needs overlap for the strongest relationship between the two elements.

Please note: Now is a great time to combine the ideas from parts one and two by writing out the choreography with the appropriately placed text so that all the beats, objectives, and tactics of the fight can be viewed and adjusted with the rehearsal process.

3. Keeping Score

"I also find it helpful to 'script' in the vocal reactions as well as the lines...that way they [the students] don't get sloppy and cover over knaps and lines with their vocal reactions. If the vocals are planned out then the students can build in vocal variety and avoid the dreaded GPM (grunt per move) ratio." – CT Jill Matarelli Carlson

Scoring the vocal needs in a fight scene is a great tool. Jill mentions a "grunt per move ratio" idea. This is a common vocal action for beginning fighters told that they should vocalize during the fight. It is also important for advanced fighters to remember as well. An actor may stop and realize that there is too much silence in the room. That silence is due to a lack of their own sounds. As a reaction to this discovery, the performer may just add a grunt for every choreographed move. This lack of variety is akin to the idea that every move must be a kill move because both leave the actor playing one single note. For the scene's vocal needs, an actor may consider pitch, volume, and/or duration to tell the story. It's important to remember to vocalize when inflicting pain as well as when being injured. A strong martial artist makes use of this technique to release their own physical tension, and intimidate other fighters.

Pitch is the higher or lower notes in the piece and often relate to placement on the body. If the injury takes place on the head, then the result most likely will be a higher pitched reaction in sound. Where as a punch to the stomach will bring about the medium/lower registered vocal quality, and a foot stomp can mean the lowest sound. A comical character, however could easily be stomped on the foot and use a shrill, high pitched voice to bring a strong comical moment. Look at the placement of the injury to determine pitch.

Volume does not mean screaming, but the key is to be heard. Look at variety in volume. Deeper wounds may mean greater volume, as with most animals in nature that are hurt. In other cases, the character may not wish to reveal the pain and choose to hold back due to their overwhelming sense of pride. It is also entirely possible that the volume may grow because the pain may increase over time. This growth in volume is especially true whenever an injury is hit for a second or third time. The

initial volume of a broken nose will reveal one level of pain, but if that broken nose is punched again, then the higher level of pain must be expressed as well. Duration is another key element to overcoming the GPM factor. As with beats, where several thoughts have been linked together, linking fight moves through vocal techniques for a particular outcome is equally important. Perhaps a character has several moves where they are either winning or defending themselves. One continuous vocal sound could help tell the positive or negative outcome of those actions. In another situation a character could be cut short in their objective, resulting in a quick/short outburst.

Please mix it up! Try combining components of these three vocal tools to tell the story too. If a character has their opponent on the defensive, they may be attacking with a long duration of sound that rises in volume to accentuate the story. If a fight is comical, then the pitch could start high, with low volume and a short duration; only to shift immediately to a low pitch, with medium volume and a long duration, to help tell the comedic story.

These vocal techniques are important while training in the primarily physical world of stage combat. Be sure not to overlook these components while learning the choreography and text. One major problem faced in stage combat comes from the great deal of physical tension required during a fight. Using the voice will relieve this tension and reveal many other subtle factors within the fight. By remembering that vocals are every bit as important as any punch or evasion, the actor will truly sell the acting of the fight.

Final Thoughts

This process is not intended to solve every problem that may arise in rehearsals. It is for this reason that writing in pencil, instead of pen, is stressed. Preparing to meld text to action and action to text before rehearsals begin will allow for greater growth and development once in the process. The beginning template will, and should, change for improving the acting of the fight; but, in order for it to change, a solid template must be in place first.

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