

# Dueling with SPT Questions

Members of the College of Fight Masters share their thoughts on Skill Proficiency Tests

By: Fulton Burns



As the rehearsal process grows closer and closer to the Skills Proficiency Test (SPT) common questions arise regarding what is needed in order to pass. Many of these questions involve the same basic idea – “What are the Fight Masters looking for so that I can pass the test?”, but the most important question that is asked is – “Do you think I will pass?”

The concern may come from an bad experience with an instructor, teacher, or professor or a poor testing experience. Even the Fight Masters like Maestro J. Allen Suddeth have acknowledged that “the test is sometimes perceived as overly subjective in nature, and dependant on the whim of the judge. Indeed, SPT detractors point to ‘easy’ and ‘hard’ judges, and CT lore has it that the test, and choreography can be skewed toward a particular Fight Master. Indeed, it has been said that because we ‘pass’ about 90% of students each year, that the quality of the test, and indeed the student’s skills, has diminished over time, and is no longer relevant. Nevertheless, certain criteria are common when judging fight scenes...”

When it comes to technical elements regarding the SPT it would be in one’s best interests to review the SAFD Policy and Procedures (P & P) located on the website prior to test day. Fight Master Representative Richard Ryan brought up a very important point regarding the information contained in this article, which bears repeating. “As the CFM (College of Fight Masters) are adjudicators of the SPTs it might be easy to construe any personal opinion or advice as organizational policy, particularly with the recent introduction of new SPT [adjudication guidelines].” By no means is this article intended to provide insight on SAFD policy, but rather to offer guidance and a means to alleviate stress.

## Check Yourself Before You Wreck Yourself!

The fight process can be lengthy, whether three weeks or an entire semester, but an actor/combatant cannot neglect the needs of performing a great scene. When interviewing the CFM members for this article there were common elements that arose time and time again that provide a great list to consider when preparing fight scenes. The following information will give an actor/combatant the ability to evaluate their work based on the experiences and opinions of those who sit in the adjudication seats; and help to alleviate stress through knowledge and preparation.

*How is my scene and how does it serve my work?*

“Make sure the scene and characters you have chosen provide for growth, so that they are different at the end of the scene. If the scene does not, please rewrite and/or edit to assure that this happens.” - Maestro David Leong

*What is the level of my character and script analysis?*

“If students have done their work -- really done their work -- during the course of training (class-to-class, week-to-week, and semester-to-semester) then their work on an SPT will be in very good shape. [Students] need to treat the fight scene itself as a small piece of the whole production -- meaning . . . knowing the play inside and out, knowing the why’s and wherefore’s of what is driving the characters and the scene, etc. In other words . . . do your work as an actor.” – Maestro Brian Byrnes

*Where is my acting work including the vocal and physical needs of the piece?*

“Act the scene: find the variation, the tempo, the beat- intention- obstacle. Breathe and find vocal variation” – Maestro David Woolley

*Have I made (or how can I make) good use of my rehearsal time with my partner?*

“I do look for specific partner connection, safe targets, and a commitment to a paired (vs. ‘solo’) acting scene the dialogue of which is essentially physical. But is it DIALOGUE, not two people talking ‘at’ each other with weapons, etc. Thus, all actors warm up according to their inclinations, but they always make connecting with each other prior to the scene part of that preparation.” – Maestro Erik Frederikson

*Are you having fun?*

“Enjoy yourselves, if this isn’t fun find another career – Be bold.” – Maestro David Woolley

Whether you choose a scale that runs from 1-10 or A-F, then consider this rubric in your own work. The key is being objective in this part of the process. Wherever work is needed provide the extra attention it deserves; but also when there is success, then enjoy the success as well. The more this list is used the better the scene can and will improve, so use it and check back with it often.

## **Full House Tonight**

Unfortunately, even the use of the word “test” can cause many people to suffer from test anxieties. The beauty of our test is that it is a performance. In fact, this is a performance for which the actor/combatants are guaranteed a completely focused audience. That audience, of Fight Masters, wants a great show! Maestro Richard Raether encourages students to remember that “[the] actor’s job is to go out and do their scene (or fight scene) with courage and honesty and to tell the story to the best of their ability for their audience.” As actor/combatants “they must focus on, and work with, their scene partner. If their focus is on the adjudicator or critic, or obsessing about their technique they can not do their job effectively.” Yes this is simple advice, but as stress develops mountains can often be made out of mole hills, causing sight to be lost of the objective – Acting the Fight!

There is another side of simplification where one may feel that the acting is not as important as the fighting. Of course the fight skills matter and it is the basis of this style of acting. Still, it is the responsibility of the actor to combine these elements with the acting to the best of their abilities. Maestro David Woolley’s advice is, “Students: Do your best to entertain the audience with your fight scene. Technique is what the fight master is looking at, but he (or she) is an audience member as well as an adjudicator...tell the story.” Remember that the goal is not to obtain the title SAFD Fight Combatant but instead the level of Actor Combatant.

## **That Guy (Or Gal) Scares Me!!!**

If you make use of the previous idea that the adjudicator is your audience, then you have already taken a step in the right direction. Still many of us often see the adjudicator as one who may be looking to fail us. The truth is that many of the CFMs have been in the exact same spot in their careers facing an SPT. It is this past experience which makes them ideal for responding to our work. More importantly they are part of our growth process. Maestro Michael Chin shares that “when I adjudicate students I want them to know that I am in their corner. I want them to do well. I am there to support them. I am not there to trick them up, nor do I take any delight in failing students. Students shouldn’t try to impress me. They should trust the training that they received from their teacher. They should take care of their partner, fight safe, relax, commit to the scene and fight with conviction.” If you consider the Fight Masters as another great person in your training corner, then you will begin to view why the SAFD was started in the first place; to ensure safe and effective stage combat.

In fact, this idea of support should be considered throughout the entire testing process. This is why the second portion of the test exists. “The second part of the test can help [students] more than hurt them...I treat the second part of the test as a Master Class. I see what I think are weaknesses in the students’ first half and I try to address them in the second half. In addition, I try to give them something new and/or challenging. If the students focus on the techniques that I am teaching them, listen, learn and treat the second half as a class rather than a test, they will do well.” – Fight Master Chin

The entire process is intended to help one reach their stage combat and acting goals. Fight Masters are there to help students achieve this objective.

## **Did I get the Job?**

While training in stage combat is fun, it is also an important part that can help better our chances of being hired professionally as actors. It may come as a surprise that a person may get more than just a passing grade with an SPT. They may get a job! As the Fight Masters are working professionals, some are often looking for individuals that will help them on their professional paths. Maestro Drew Fracher reveals that “I’m always looking for a student that rises above the rest in terms of skill and acting chops and I often ask for resumes to put in my file for future casting possibility. View the process as your chance to show your talents and use that mindset to allow yourself to relax and do what you do best, perform.” So if extra incentive is desired, then look no further than the possibility of gainful employment. Not only can one become an Actor Combatant but perhaps a working Actor Combatant.

## **Try Being More Direct**

Certified Teachers and Fight Directors face a tough role in gaining their status in the organization, but this status is well deserved. Once the required moves of a skills test are in place CTs have the ability to provide personal attention by adding “additional choreography, depending of the skill level of the students, to help the scene. Therefore, in addition to the group choreography, which all students must perform, a few extra moves in the style of the scene (comedy, Mamet, Shakespeare), a death perhaps, or an extra bit of staging helps the students inhabit the scene, and allows the CT to ‘fight direct’ a bit, too.” – Maestro J. Allen Suddeth. So teachers should also remember to play as well. A happy learning environment is a positive learning environment where we all grow.

## It's an Art Form and Not a Science

As stated earlier, the purpose of this article is to help in alleviating stress with the approach to the SPT. I cannot thank the CFM enough for their generous contributions to this piece. The final piece of compelling advice comes from Maestro Richard Raether and he shares that "I see a great many students obsessed with achieving perfection in their SPT. Although I believe the pursuit of excellence is an admirable goal - perfection is not. Perfection denies the very element that makes live theater so exciting - it is real, human, alive and in the moment, and not perfect."

The idea of linking the Actor with the Combatant remains constant throughout; from the homework, rehearsal process, the test itself, and beyond. Still, while it is a test, perhaps the best advice is to focus less on the idea of testing or striving for perfection and more on working for excellence and do what we do best – PLAY BEFORE A LIVE AUDIENCE!

One commonality during this part of the process is the opportunity to perform. While performing technique, remember that there is a guaranteed audience during this time. Their enjoyment is always the main focus and why we all do theatre. In approaching a skills test keep all of these ideas in mind and enjoy the time on stage, but most importantly – HAVE FUN!!!

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The advertisement features a blue background with the SAFD logo at the top center, which includes the text "SAFD" in a large serif font and "THE SOCIETY OF AMERICAN FIGHT DIRECTORS" in a smaller sans-serif font below it. To the right of the logo is a circular emblem with a sword and the text "THE SOCIETY OF AMERICAN FIGHT DIRECTORS". Below the logo, the text "MERCHANDISE AVAILABLE ON-LINE!" is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font. On the left side, there is a framed image of a black t-shirt with a white graphic. In the center, a dashed-line box contains a list of merchandise items in green text: "T-shirts", "Hoodies", "Swordbags", "Sweatpants", "Ladies-wear", and "& more!". On the right side, there is a framed image of a pair of black sweatpants with white text. At the bottom, a green banner contains the website address "www.companycasuals.com/SAFD" in white text.