

Fighting the Elements

Determining the Best Scenes for Skills Proficiency



**What a World - What a World
(Scene/Script Analysis for Fight Plays)
By T. Fulton Burns**

“While perfection is a wonderful goal, there comes a point where you have to let your creation out into the world or it isn’t worth a tinkerer’s damn.”

This is a fantastic quote by Twyla Tharp from her book *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It For Life: A Practical Guide*. So what does this have to do with you, the stage combatant? Well you are working hard but you are being told not to strive for perfection because perfection can never truly be achieved in the arts, so naturally it warrants the question “then for what exactly do you strive?” The answer is excellence! In the university setting an “A” represents excellence not perfection and the SAFD Skills Proficiency Test also has a similar recognition of excellence identified as the Recommended Pass.

**“Style is knowing
what play you are in” - Sir John
Gielgud**

In the past two issues of *The Cutting Edge* we have examined how to find plays containing fight scenes as well as the elements required for a great SPT scene. Now it is time to go beyond the means of just passing your test and get on track for achieving excellence in your own fight work. It is important to acknowledge first that this is not intended to replace any training with an SAFD instructor but instead to enhance the knowledge, context, and details that are available. By complimenting your training, with this additional work, you place yourself in a position to learn the most from your stage combat training.

Research and analysis are an important part of any skilled actor’s work. The challenge comes from the amount of time available for analysis, given the different settings that SPTs occur. Even with the time limitations we owe it to ourselves to research the background of each scene to the highest possible level. The basis for this article is similar to (and compliments) the script analysis techniques provided in texts like *Script Analysis for Actors, Directors, and Designers* by James Thomas, *Backwards and Forwards: A Technical Manual for Reading Plays* by David Ball or *Acting: Onstage and Off* by Robert Barton. The goal here is to help research fight specific issues in the script in order to elevate our Combative Actor training to the greatest level of excellence. The following points are key to preparing yourself to achieve such a goal.

1. Where are you?

“When I analyze a play, as an actor, I look at all the normal stuff (given circumstances, time period, etc.) but also the role of violence in that particular society.” – CT Jill Matarelli Carlson

After reading your script you should be able to determine the time period where the story takes place as well as the geography. Often this can be identified in a couple of ways. It can be stated either in the historical context of the story or by noting when the play was first produced.

An example of historical context is *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. It was written in a contemporary time period (1980s) however the story is placed in the 18th century. Being aware of the time period where a story takes place plays an important role for a fighter because it illustrates the world of the play and provides a point of reference for the type of violence in the script.

The alternative is to look at when the play was produced. You may find it located in the same period as when it was written. Greek plays and many of Shakespeare’s pieces fall into this category, however read your plays carefully. While Shakespeare’s plays often are placed in the Elizabethan time period he did write plays like *Julius Caesar*.

Common times periods are as follows:

Greek	Restoration
Roman	Modern
Medieval	Contemporary
Elizabethan	Neo-Classic

Also consider the region too; actions in one part of the world are different from another. While considering the time period don’t forget to research the region. Every little bit of information places your character in the strongest context of the play.

2. What's your Style?

"As Gielgud once put it 'style is knowing what play you are in.'" – CT Darrell Rushton

Period Style often plays a huge part of our training. Your Certified Teachers will address the bulk of the style needed in order to understand the particular movements associated with appropriate weapons. Unfortunately, period style seems to be a bit of a dying art form these days and it is based in part on the costs to build costumes. Still the knowledge is important, wonderful, and often puts weapons training in a strong perspective for the actors and audience alike.

A few sources that provide a great bit of information in the styles/periods listed above are as follows:

Acting: In Person and In Style by Jerry L. Crawford

Acting with Style by Harrop & Epstein

Acting: The Creative Process by Albright & Albright

Style for Actors by Robert Barton

Manners and Movements in Costume Plays by Chisman & Raven-Hart

Period Style for the Theatre by Douglas A. Russel

Playing Period Plays by Lyn Oxford

The Polite World: A Guide to the Deportment of the English in Former Times by Joan Wilderblood

In these texts an actor will also find information supporting both comedic and dramatic fights. Regardless of the scene's tone, your sense of the movement and vocal life of the character, needed for these styles, are crucial in achieving excellence. By referencing these texts you will improve your own style techniques.

3. Walk the Walk

"The movement should live in its environment." – CT Jill Matarelli Carlson

I have seen many times, and been at fault myself of performing what could be considered by a novice as, a period style movement. Just as there are differences in the time periods, there are differences in the movement styles as well. Connecting to these different movements is important in maintaining the truth of the characters being portrayed. For an example, look at the differences between the broad gestures of the Greeks and the controlled movements of a character in a Noel Coward play to see how important movements vary through the generations.

One great example is found when we look at the Elizabethan Period. Over the past year I received a copy of an article written by FD Bruce Lecure entitled "Walk Like an Elizabethan." (This article was published in *Stage Directions*, January 1998) Bruce provides wonderful information for:

Stances	Walking	Bowing
Sitting	Greeting	

Lecure provides this information from both the female and male perspective as well as details the dance origins from which the movements are based. (This information is addressed similarly in the aforementioned styles books.)

By taking notice of verbal cues and proper deportment for the time, such as in the Elizabethan Period, one could look at a book like *Secrets of Acting Shakespeare: The Original Approach* by Patrick Tucker and find the moments for appropriate period style moves. Tucker provides cues for when bows should take place based upon verbal cues and even who receives the cues based upon the language of the time.

With the period style movement in place take another important historical view by looking at the stage combat texts that also provide background research. A great text to hit is *Swashbuckling; A Step-By-Step Guide To The Art Of Stage Combat and Theatrical Swordplay* by Richard Lane. In Section I of this text there are appropriate period moves for both you and your weapons. An actor can find the following:

- How to carry a weapon
- Bows for a duel
- Sitting with a weapon
- Sheathing a sword

Put all of the pieces together for the best movement in the period style.

4. Talk the Talk

“The vocal needs of the fight are essential to the acting intentions and are integral to the story telling” – CT Darrell Rushton

Strong projection, breath support, regionally appropriate dialects and proper pronunciation are always important. There are many great instructors for the voice including, but not limited to, Kristen Linklater, Patsy Rodenberg and Cecily Berry that help with vocal training and understanding text. In the SAFD FM Dale Anthony Girard has written a book entitled *Actors on Guard*. A section of Girard's book, which is called “The Sounds of Violence”, deals with specific vocal issues and supporting your vocal instrument in a fight scenario. In this text one can quickly reference the need for vocal work in a general sense for a scene that compliments both the needs for the actor and combatant. Girard also provides thoughts addressing vocal needs pertaining to both dramatic and comedic fights.

In the world of stage violence it is important to understand the psychology and vocal needs for stage combat. The number one source suited for addressing these needs is *The Voice in Violence* by Rocco Dal Vera. In this one source there are a number of articles by Voice & Speech Trainers Association (VASTA) officials and SAFD instructors collaborating to provide details for vocal fight requirements. There are also articles that address, but not limited to, the following:

- Vocal techniques for specific time periods
- Psychology of violence from the Greeks to Contemporary plays
- Fighting in Musical Theatre
- Sources for correct pronunciation of words throughout all periods

I highly recommend picking up a copy of *The Voice in Violence*, as a strong resource for the vocal research needed to excel in the fight world.

Take all of the tools of script research and place it with the tools listed above. The result will certainly enrich your fight scene and bring you closer to the excellence we all should strive to achieve.

Special thanks to Rebecca Britton, Jill Matarelli, Carlson and Darrell Rushton for their contributions to this article.

(Fulton Burns is an Advanced Actor Combatant and the Director of Acting & Performance at the University of South Alabama's Department of Dramatic Arts)

5. Put Your Weapons Back in Their Proper Place (and Time)

“Violence in the Restoration time period, with regards to dueling, would be something exciting and dangerous for the characters. The duel *may* have to do with honor, but it is also likely that the duel was something the characters may have been looking for an excuse to participate in – it's illegal, it's dangerous, and there for, highly favorable to young men looking to prove themselves.” – CT Jill Matarelli Carlson

Hit your history books and look at what they have to offer. There are lots of great weapons books that serve as incredible references for fight directors and instructors alike. Looking at the historical context will give you a better understanding of the world in which you are fighting. Texts can provide impressive illustrations and photos that will help to place the weapons with which you are training into perspective. Books like the following are great places to start:

- *The History and Art of Personal Combat* by Arthur Wise
- *Swords and Hilt Weapons* by Michael D. Coe & others
- *Medieval Combat: A Fifteenth-Century Manual of Swordfighting and Close-Quarter Combat* by Hans Talhoffer
- *Knives, Knife Fighting, and Related Hassles* by Marc “Animal” MacYoung
- *The School of Fencing with A General Explanation of the Principal Attitudes and Positions Peculiar to the Art* by Angelo
- *Swordsmen of the Screen: From Douglas Fairbanks to Michael York* by Jeffrey Richards

Another very important aspect of deportment is found in the duel. In Robert Baldick's *The Duel: A History of Dueling* one can look at how and where duels take place, as well as the rules associated with them. A person can look at how their own story falls into the time line of duels throughout history. By utilizing the point of history, where your fight occurs, more details will enrich both your acting choices as well as the audience's reception of the performance.