

Chapter 3

Fighting Fundamentals

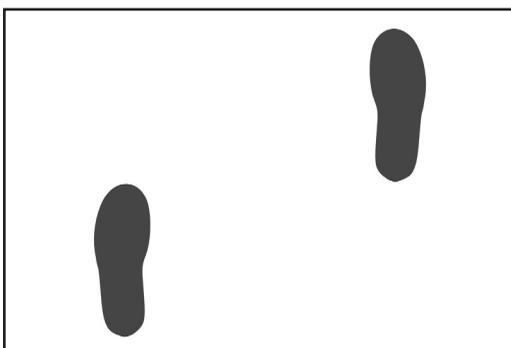
There are certain important elements to every kind of fight choreography you perform, whether it is unarmed or with weapons. We'll cover these before going into specifics of each particular move.

Balance

Unless choreographed to do otherwise, you should always keep your weight evenly distributed between your feet. This allows you to move in any direction at any time. The feet should be at least shoulder width apart, with one foot forward. Keep the knees bent to lower your center of gravity. Keep your back straight and vertical to keep yourself centered. This also has the effect of making you look a lot better in a fight. (Here's a secret to remember. Stage combat is not about how good you are; it's about how good you look.)

This basic stance provides you with the most stability. The bigger the stance, the more stable the combatant. Typically, you will widen your stance when you employ weapons, the heavier the weapon, the wider the stance.

We tend to refer to this stance as the "ready," "en garde," or "neutral" stance.



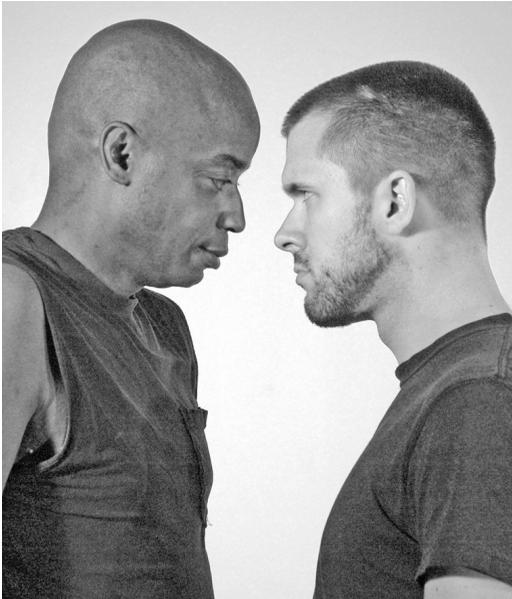
En garde (right foot forward).



Eye Contact

Eye contact is used for a variety of reasons, all dealing with non-verbal communication.

When you are ready to perform a fight, you first establish eye contact with your partner. If you avoid eye contact, this is your way to say, "I'm not ready for whatever reason." You should make eye contact at the beginning of the fight and at the beginning of each move or series of moves, whenever it makes practical sense.



Eye contact is also the first indicator that something is wrong. If your partner has a "deer in the headlights" look, you know they are lost and can help them find their way back into the fight scene, or skip the fight altogether.

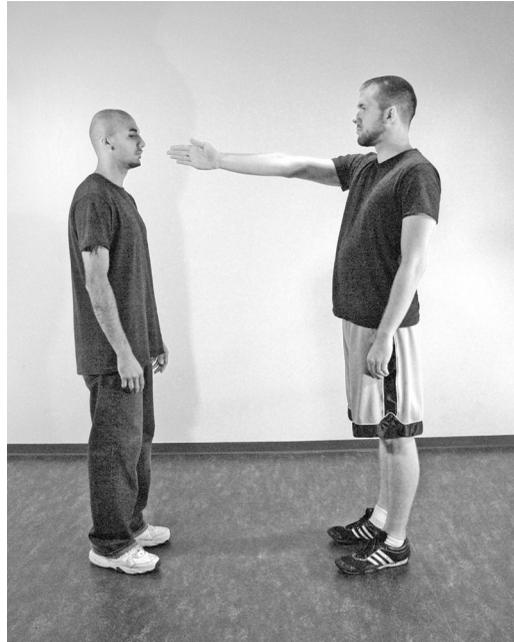
Never maintain constant eye contact. The hand tends to go wherever the eyes are looking, so a blow to the shoulder could easily transfer to the head if eye contact is maintained. After making the initial eye contact to say "I'm ready," look at the target you are attempting to hit. This helps you to stay on target and is an additional reminder to your partner of where the next move is going.

Remember that shifting your eyes is much less noticeable to an audience than moving your whole head. Look where you're going and use your peripheral vision where appropriate.

Distance

Most of the time, fighters perform their magic act out of distance. The greater the distance between two combatants, the more time the "victim" has to react to an attack and, subsequently, more time to adjust if something goes wrong.

From a neutral stance, you measure the distance from your partner based on the kind of weapons being used. Unarmed combatants extend their arms forward and mea-



Measuring unarmed distance.

sure 3-4 inches from the tip of the longest extended finger to the tip of the nose. By maintaining this distance, every punch, no matter how wild, will miss. At the same time, it is close enough to look like it connects.

As an experiment, while measuring this distance, roll your shoulder forward. You can gain an extra couple of inches with a simple shoulder roll. I mention it to illustrate how small body changes can have far-reaching effects (pun intended).

Put a sword in your hand and you need to increase the distance until there is 6-8 inches between the chest and the tip of the sword. Quarterstaff distance is the length of the quarterstaff from belly to belly (put one end

of the quarterstaff against your stomach, the other end against your partner's stomach).

Not maintaining the proper distance is the most common error for combatants. It is important to practice "coming into distance" by establishing your proper distance from your partner, walking away, then walking back to your partner and stopping when you think you are back at the proper distance. Once you come to a full stop, check the distance and make sure you eyeballed it correctly.



Measuring staff distance.

Also try this with various people, walls, trees, or any large object. If you can eyeball your distance, you will know when you violate it.

With a partner, face each other at distance, and then both walk 5-10 steps in one direction, maintaining distance. Check to make sure the distance is correct. After a while, practice "pushing" each other across the room. The person walking forward (the one who can see where they are going) should guide the other using eye contact and distance to avoid obstacles. If both of you are maintaining distance and the leader stops, the follower should also stop.

This exercise develops trust, non-verbal communication skills, and makes maintaining distance a second-nature habit.

Targeting

Stage fights are based on real fighting techniques, but with the targets altered to less dangerous locations. Targeting is critical for a successful stage fight. Proper targeting achieves two goals, safety and illusion.

When one combatant does not target properly, the other combatant has a tendency to adjust to the bad targeting. Typically, this results in the two partners closing the distance between them until every blow is a potential accident waiting to happen.

Whenever two fighters are not targeting properly, the first thing I check is their distance. Fixing the distance usually fixes the targeting problem.

When fighting a duel with swords, the real deal meant a lot of thrusts aimed at the face. Since the face is the actor's bread and butter, stage combat attacks redirect the aim at the chest and arms instead. It's not historically accurate, but remember, "Safety First, Safety Last, Safety Always."

Proper targeting also means making blows at the correct angle and height. It's very hard to sell a punch to the face if the fist is at chest level.

Correct targeting sells the illusion that two combatants are trying to hurt each other.

In most cases, proper targeting means aiming to miss, not to hit. There is very little actual contact involved with staged fights. There are exceptions, but I follow the mantra of "No pain, no pain."

C.R.A.P. (Cue Reaction Action Principle)

This acronym upsets some people, but I find it is easy for them to remember. Every attack begins with a cue. The cue varies from move to move. For unarmed combat, it is usually drawing the arm or foot back in preparation of the strike. For weapons combat it tends to be cocking the weapon back before cutting or thrusting. In general, the cue points to the target.

For stage productions, the cues tend to be larger than for film. On stage, the cue is

a movement which attracts the attention of the audience so that when the blow is struck, they are already looking in that direction and don't miss the action. Because the camera is already focused on the action, film cues tend to be much smaller, sometimes non-existent.

The cue also helps the actors by reminding the "victim" where the next attack is going and that it's on its way. Every cue has an internal rhythm that establishes the speed and timing of the impending attack. A slow cue means a slow attack. A fast cue means a fast attack. A proper cue allows both "attacker" and "victim" a final chance to continue or call it off.

The reaction is the "victim's" response to the impending attack. It could be the beginning of a block or parry, starting to duck, preparing to jump, or widening the eyes. The reaction lets the "attacker" know that the actor is ready and the move can be completed. If the "attacker" does not see the beginning of a reaction, it is a signal that the attack should be aborted or redirected into a safe area.

The action is the completion of the attack/reaction sequence. It could be blocking the strike or avoiding the attack, or taking the hit.

Every attack involves a cue-reaction-action sequence of some kind.

knees bent and maintain good posture. The purpose of footwork is to maintain proper balance while moving the fight in interesting visual patterns.

Footwork

The safest place to be in any fight scene is where the weapon isn't. Footwork is the key to getting to that safe place.

There are enough varieties of footwork patterns to write a whole pamphlet on the subject. For now, the fundamental principle to remember here is that whatever foot is bearing the weight is the foot that can't be moved easily.

Proper footwork will allow you to move from one attack to the next with ease. Improper footwork will make the choreography almost impossible to perform.

Movement patterns make fight scenes vastly more interesting to watch. Two fighters standing toe-to-toe, duking it out makes for great-sounding literature, but is visually boring.

Keep the lessons of balance in mind when performing footwork in a fight. Keep the weight centered between the feet, keep the

Angles

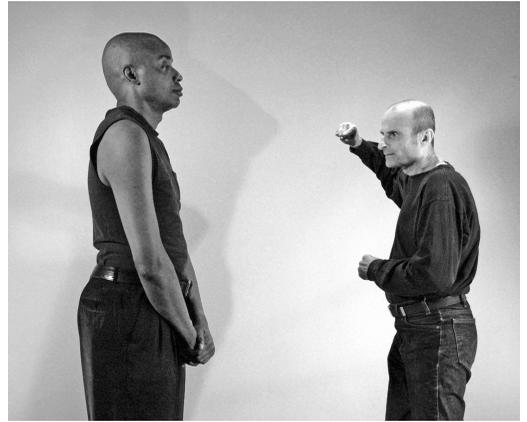
Remember when I said stage combat is a mixture of dance and illusion? Part of the illusion is performing the fight at the correct angle to the audience. Adjusting your relative angle to the audience 30 degrees could mean the difference between creating a successful illusion and revealing the magic trick.

Your angle to the audience (or camera) needs to follow some basic principles.

1. The weapon needs to appear to move from one side of the target to the other.
2. The audience should not be able to see the air between the weapon and the target. Instead they should see the space disappear until "contact" is made.
3. The height of the blow should follow the line of sight between the audience and the target.



Good angle start.



Bad angle start.



Good angle finish.



Bad angle finish.



Making Contact

Whenever possible, actual contact should be avoided. Sometimes that just isn't possible. If contact must be made, there is an order of priority.

1. *Muscle to muscle.* Muscles are tough and absorb shock. When two muscles collide, chances of damage are minimal.
2. *Muscle to bone.* There are bony parts of the body that don't have enough muscle to absorb the shock. So contact those parts of the body with something that has sufficient padding.
3. *Never bone to bone.* Bones are brittle. Bones break. Bones hurt. Whoever has the toughest bones wins, but there will be serious pain afterward for both of you. The likelihood of damage is high.

4. *Protect your joints.* Joints are the easiest places to damage and the toughest to heal.
5. *Wear padding.* Any padding that the costume will hide is recommended. Absorbent sanitary pads provide padding and flexibility and can be held in place with surgical tape. Body armor can also be quite effective. Thin body armor can be found in motorcycle supply stores. Elbow pads and knees pads are a staple for stage combatants.

When dealing with artificial objects, think of their properties in terms of muscle and bone. Apply the principles of making contact to the properties of the object you are using to find the best way to make contact with that object.



How to create a knap.

Knaps

Knaps are a sound effect, the sound of a flesh on flesh contact. How do you create a knap? Clap your hands together. Congratulations, you made a knapping sound.

There are four basic knaps:

1. *Victim Knap.* The person who is being hit makes the sound effect. Clap your hands or slap



Victim knap.



Aggressor knap.

your leg or other available body part when the blow “lands.”

2. *Aggressor Knap.* The person who is doing the hitting makes the sound effect. Slap your own hand as you strike, or perhaps slap your chest with your free hand as you strike with the other. Again, timing is critical, so make the sound when the blow “lands.”
3. *Shared Knap.* The victim presents a hand as the target in the path of the blow and the attacker slaps the target hand while striking. Timing is automatic in this case.
4. *Third Party Knap.* Someone not directly involved in the fight claps their hands as the attacker “strikes” the victim. This knap is the easiest to conceal and the hardest to get the timing right on.



Shared knap.



Third party knap.





Knap positioning.

All knaps share something in common. It's a magic trick. Don't let the audience see you make the knap. Conceal it as best as you can. Don't leave your arms and hands in an obvious 'ready' position. Keep your elbows close to your body. Elbows are the biggest give-away when setting up a knap.

For example, when performing an aggressor knap on a stage slap, I like to grab the collar of the shirt of the victim, leaving my palm open to receive the slap of my striking hand. In a shared knap, I frequently have the victim put his hands up in a "please don't hit me" reaction, placing the victim's hand in a position that makes sense.

When making a knap, you get the best sound if your fingers are together and the hands are loosely cupped. Strike fingers into the palm of the hand, making sure the hands and wrists are relaxed. Remember our friend, relaxation? The more relaxed the hands are, the better the sound and the less it hurts. It works best if the striking hand is relaxed from the fingertips to the shoulder.

Another thing to remember: Once the striking hand has made contact with the target hand, don't



Grabbing the collar.



Please don't hit me!



Fingers to palm.



Taking the knap along for the ride.

take the target hand along for the ride. I frequently see shared knaps where the target hand flies off to the side from the impact, or aggressor knaps where the aggressor starts the blow with one hand and ends it with both hands clasped together. These are dead giveaways. Once again, it's a magic trick. Use your common sense about not giving it away.

Knaps only apply to live stage fights. For film, the sound effect is added in post production. Combatants used to fighting in theatre sometimes have a hard time *not* knapping the blows.

Victim Controls the Action

Part of the illusion of stage combat is that the attacker is at an advantage. The truth is the victim is the person who controls each fight move. Who is the victim? The victim is the person who is being attacked at any given moment. Between person A and person B, either A or B could be the attacker or the victim. A attacks B, making B the victim. B counterattacks A, and the victim is now A. Who is the victim can change from one move to the next.

Whoever is the victim at any given moment is the person in charge of the action at that moment. The reason is simple: Safety First, Safety Last, Safety Always. The victim is the person most at risk of getting hurt. Therefore, the victim gets to call the shots. The attacker, while creating the illusion of intending harm, is really responsible for ensuring the victim is protected. The victim is responsible for protecting himself. The attacker is responsible for protecting his partner.

The victim usually is in the best position to make the decision to carry on with the fight or to abort for whatever reason. Sometimes the attacker will make the decision. This is where proper partnering comes into play.

Protect the Weapon

Protect the Weapon, protect the person behind the weapon.

I frequently get students who go "huh?" when I tell them to protect the weapon. It's a pretty simple philosophy, really. Inexperienced combatants always hit too hard. They depend on their partner's weapon to protect their partner. They are attempting to get a level of realism, or they simply lack the coordination and strength combination necessary to keep the weapon under control.

Even under the best of circumstances, you are going to get dings in your weapons. Staffs will get dented, swords will get their edges chipped. I have seen swords with so many chips in the edges, they resembled a cross-cut saw. If your sword has a serrated edge that can be used to cut lumber to build the set, you are

hitting too hard. By protecting your weapons, those dents and chips will be less severe.

Wear and tear happens. Eventually, the repeated shocks of making contact will cause the sword or staff to break. Minimizing that wear and tear will cause the weapon to last a lot longer. If you rent weapons, your supplier will really love you if you can return the weapon in the same condition in which you rented it.

I have a supplier I use regularly who gives great discounts on rentals when he finds out I am the choreographer, because he knows that I stress taking care of weapons to my combatants.

If you are hitting more lightly on the weapons themselves, then if you should miss, you will be hitting more lightly on the person holding the weapon. By protecting the weapon, you automatically protect your partner. You get the added benefit of not having to shell out a lot of money in replacement costs and you get better rental rates. Now who doesn't like to save money?

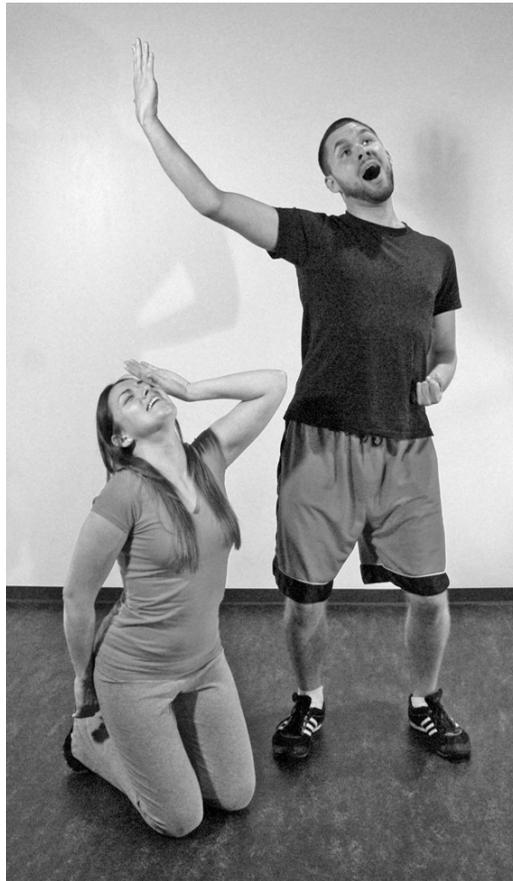
Psychologically, people are people. They tend to get into disagreements from time to time. Whenever two people who are not getting along have to perform a fight scene, I remind them of one important safety factor. "To hell with your partner, don't hurt my weapons." It gives them a chance to focus on being safe, even when they are emotionally inclined to do otherwise. On the surface, it appears to be a cavalier attitude. I assure you, it is anything but cavalier.

So, if you don't much like your partner, or even if you do, protect the weapon.

Acting the Fight

So far the principles I've discussed have to do with the mechanics of performing a fight. Technique is the basic foundation of all fight choreography, but stage combat is not complete without incorporating character and plot elements. Think of it this way. You can memorize lines as an actor, but until you add the emotional content and subtext to the line delivery, it ain't acting. It's just rote memorization.

The same is true of a fight scene. You can perform the moves and be technically correct,



but without the emotional commitment of the character which provides the reason and passion for the fight, it's just a robotic dance routine.

Here's another of my personal sayings, "The fight begins before the fight begins." In musicals, the theatrical wisdom for singing is that the characters are so moved by events that they are compelled to break into song. The same principle applies to fights. The character is pushed to the point that words are no longer enough to express emotion. The emotion must be expressed physically.

There are three basic reasons for people to fight: Rage, Self-defense, or Dominance. When fighting because of rage, the character has been pushed beyond the limits of emotional endurance. When fighting out of self-defense, the character has no choice but to fight. When fighting to establish dominance, violence is the character's way of establishing power over others. Think about the way a character would approach a fight, given one of these reasons. Someone in the grip of



rage will jump into the fray, whereas someone defending himself might be very reluctant to participate. A bully attempting to establish dominance could approach the fight with a varying mixture of reluctance and anticipation, depending on his faith in his own abilities.

By applying these emotional values to the fight scene, the same moves can be performed with vastly different rhythms and styles.

Fight scenes should also further the story line, which means the fight should be integrated seamlessly into the blocking of the scene. The first blow should not be preceded by a pause as the actors get set for the fight, but should go into the fight as a natural flow of the action.

The decision to fight is almost always made well before the first blow is struck. The characters involved are motivated to violence by events which occur much earlier in the plot. The effect of those events should carry forward through the scene until the fight breaks out.

Consequently, the fight isn't over when the fight is over. There are consequences to these actions. Those consequences need to be carried through as well. If wounded during the fight, the wound will continue to hurt and bleed through the rest of the fight and the rest of the scene. There is nothing worse than the magic "disappearing pain" of a fresh wound. Once the fight scene is completed, the characters must deal with the consequences of the violence. The wounds still exist. The mental stress does not magically disappear.

A fight without consequences is a cartoon. A fight between real human beings that shows no consequences trivializes violence. I believe as a fight choreographer that there is a responsibility to demonstrate the negative consequences of using violence to resolve problems. I find it ironic that for someone who creates simulated violence as part of my career, I am a predominantly non-violent person. That's why it's called acting.