

Stage Combat

What Is Stage Combat?

Stage Combat is a specialised art form for the language of fighting on stage. It is a device developed by performers to keep themselves, and others safe, while performing stunning fight choreography to wow an audience.

Stage combat shows characters at their most primal, emotionally heightened state. Whereas in musical theatre characters can do nothing but sing about how they're feeling, stage combat is used when characters feel they can do nothing but lash out and hit, to attack, often out of fear, anger, stress and anxiety.

So, there are two sides to stage combat: the actual choreographed techniques and the acting of character and emotion. Both are important to get right, but both combine to tell a story on stage or screen.

Why not just hit one another?

Slapping is one of the most commonly performed fight moves, and one which actors are told to "just do it" by directors.

However, with all fight moves, there's an element of risk. A single slap may not be too harmful, but if done eight shows a week, for several months, that risk increases. Add into the mix the adrenaline of performance, it can become dangerous.

Risks include:

- Overreaching and slapping the ear, risking bursting a partner's ear drum
- Missing and hitting the nose or jaw, possibly breaking the nose, busting a lip, or knocking out teeth
- Missing and catching the eye, scratching it with nails, or worse gouging it out entirely!

The Different Bodies of Moves:

There are six main groups of stage combat moves:

- Out of distance, on target
- In distance, off target
- Reverse Control
- Contact blows
- Falls and throws
- Armed combat

Stage Combatants would have to train full-time for many months to gain mastery of these techniques. Theatre Workout's two-hour workshops only seek to teach the

basic principals of out of distance and reverse control moves, with longer sessions covering most of the rest.

The Basic Principals

There are three basic techniques which will keep actors safe on stage when using stage combat:

Distance

If your opponent is too far away, you can't hit them. This means you can aim 'on target' with all the force, energy, and power you can muster, because you are too far away to cause any harm. For any moves performed 'out of distance – on target', performers must use staging techniques to hide the distance from the audience, such as with one performer downstage, the other upstage.

If working in a smaller space, performers may have to work in striking distance, and therefore must aim off-target. Distance is still used to stay safe, but is masked from the audience in different ways.

Communication

Most performers know what it is like when they forget a line, or a piece of blocking, but in a fight routine someone could get hurt. As performers can't talk to each other out of character, other forms of communication have to be employed. Eye contact is vital. A performer can throw the best punch in the world, but if their victim isn't looking, they won't react. Eye contact ensures both performers are ready, and can work together to perform the move.

Secondly, every fight move has a 'prep', a move which demonstrates what is coming next. This communicates the choreography to other performers, and helps with the storytelling to the audience.

For example, a straight punch would have the arm drawn back with a fist near the attacker's shoulder. A round-house punch would be similar, but the fist would be further out to the side of the attacker, as if hugging a friend. To the victim this says what punch is coming, to the audience it says 'someone is about to get punched'!

It Doesn't Sound Right:

It may look amazing, but if you don't hear that contact it won't seem real. The knap (pronounced nap) is the answer.

The knap can be made many ways and is the sound effect of the hit, often involving one of the actors hitting themselves in a controlled way out of the sight of the audience, such as clapping hands, slapping the chest or thigh.

There also needs to be a vocal connection. If we get hurt, we are rarely quiet about it. Express pain, fear, anger, frustration, etc through the voice to sell it to the audience. It's called acting!

Reverse Control

This is a technique which ‘reverses the control’ of a grab from the attacker to the victim. The victim controls the move, so they can end it whenever they need to, staying safe throughout the process.

This is where physics comes into play!

The attacker grabs the victims clothing, clutching fabric and pulls them across the stage. The victim grabs both the attacker’s wrists and tries to pull them off them in self-defence. The attacker throws the victim to the floor.

What the audience doesn’t see is the attacker first places both hands flat on the victim’s chest, then forms a loose fist, clutching just enough fabric in the process to be seen to have a firm hold on their victim. The victim grabs both the attacker’s wrists with a C-Grip (thumb underneath and fingers over the top of the wrist). The victim pulls the attackers fists into their chest and holds them there. The connection between the victim’s hands and the attacker’s wrists is the main point of contact.

As the attacker pulls away and the victim continues to pull the attackers fists into their chest, when the victim is ready they release the attacker’s wrist and they separate.

The victim is in control of the move. The attacker doesn’t actually have hold of the victims clothing. Both actors are applying force and the more strongly the victim pulls the attackers fists into them, the more force the attacker must use to pull away, resulting in what looks like a powerful struggle.

Similar techniques can be used when grabbing hair, ears and noses, but in each case the victim is in complete control.

Rehearsal

In the development of choreography, it is important that each move has a purpose.

What does a character feel? What do they want to do? Why? How do they feel when they hit or miss their victim? How does the victim feel?

This will help guide the choreography, which is best choreographed in slow motion, like Tai-chi. This will help actors focus on intention and get the story right, performed through correct technique which will prevent harm.

Fight moves should then be rehearsed as often as possible, and in the rehearsal process, should be done first to allow as much time as possible to keep rehearsing choreography during rehearsals.

Before a performance, the routine should always be rehearsed at least three times.

First in slow motion (but with full intention), secondly at medium pace, and finally at performance level. Any concerns should be addressed at this time.

Professional Advice

A professional fight director can choreograph a fight routine for your production, working with the performers and their unique abilities, strengths and weaknesses. Theatre Workout’s Stage Combat Workshops are led by experienced performers and professional fight directors, who have worked in theatre, film and television performing in, or directing, fight scenes.

Theatre Workout's practitioners are available for one-off workshops, short courses, fight directing, rehearsals, and on-going support for your productions.

Roundhouse / Hook Punch

Stand facing your partner, out of distance. The attacker raises their right arm with fist at shoulder height and a 90° angle in the elbow. The right arm stays bent as it passes the plane of the victims face, maintaining up to 30cm distance. The move follows through to the left. The attacker makes the knap by opening their left hand and making contact with their right pectoral area.

The victim's head turns to the left followed by the shoulders, arms and back.

Slap:

As with the Roundhouse punch but with an open hand rather than a fist. The victim makes the knap by holding the left hand palm down in front of the torso and clapping the right hand as it passes upwards to clutch the stinging face.

Hair Grab:

The attacker places their hand on the victims hair and makes a small circular motion with the heel of the hand. At the same time the fingers close in as if grabbing the hair, keeping the clutched hand loose and relaxed. While a few strands may get caught between fingers **DO NOT GRAB THE HAIR.**

The victim places both hands, one on top of the other, on top of the attackers hand and applies pressure to keep it there, at the same time connecting the forearms which can be used as support and communication. The attacker pulls away with the connection maintained by the victim. When the victim is ready they release the attackers hand and they should part.