

PULL YOUR PUNCHES

by Bruce Lecure, STAGE DIRECTIONS, October 1996

How do you advance the action with realistic stage violence that the audience will believe but keep the actors safe from injury?

If you choose to cut the violence, the scene does not climax properly. If you allow or encourage your actors to "wing it," you may have injuries, and perhaps a lawsuit, on your hands.

Because of the ultra-realistic violence we're accustomed to seeing in the movies, anything less than realism on stage is not acceptable. If you use poor fighting techniques, your scene will look something like TV wrestling and the whole illusion you've created for your audience is lost. But if a fight during the climax of a play looks real and is executed safely, the audience's belief in the world of the play grows enormously.

If executed properly, the following tips will help you create effective but safe illusions of violence on the stage. The safest approach, of course, is to hire a certified fight director, take a workshop given by the Society of American Fight Directors, or take personal lessons from an expert in stage combat. However you learn the right moves, always remember that the most important principle of stage combat is safety.

THE FUNDAMENTALS

There are two basic moves in stage combat: non-contact and contact. In non-contact moves the illusion of violence is created by the way the move is staged, or what you allow the audience to see. Contact moves make actual contact to large muscle masses of the body, with a maximum contact of 25 percent of the total force of the move.

Each and every contact and non-contact move needs to be executed flawlessly so it looks real yet is executed safely. There are several safety factors built into every combat move that should not be noticed by the audience but protect the actors.

Actors always should make eye contact first. Only a brief exchange of glances is necessary before each combat move -- but it is necessary. The eye contact keeps actors in sync with each other during a fight. Eye contact also keeps them safe when a problem arises. If an actor accidentally gets hurt prior to the fight or forgets a line in the middle of a fight, the other actor will see the terror on his partner's face and adjust accordingly, instead of continuing the fight as rehearsed.

THIS HIT IS A MISS

With non-contact moves, actors must maintain proper fighting distance. This means a non-contact punch to the face, for example, actually "lands" no more than four to six inches from the face. The audience thinks it sees the punch hit the face, but it is an illusion, created by the way the punch is staged.

Beginning combatants need to practice measuring this distance. Instruct your actors to stand facing each other and have one actor extend a straight arm toward his or her partner with the hand closed into a fist. The other actor measures the four-to-six-inch distance by placing an open hand to his or her face, with the thumb touching the nose, and extend the hand out to the full extent of the little finger. The combatant with the extended fist should adjust until the fist barely touches the edge of the open hand. After several hours of measuring the distance in this manner, actors will become accustomed to the spatial relationship between their bodies and easily find the proper fighting distance without measuring. The "victim" must remember not to lean into the punch.

AVOID TENSION HEADACHES

Actors also must "act the tension." After they've learned the fighting techniques, most inexperienced combatants will tend to "fight" with a great deal of tension in the body. This can be dangerous. If actors get too caught up in a fight scene, this tension will take over and they'll feel so much adrenaline they lose their fighting technique and could injure another actor or themselves.

I always tell my actors to act the tension of the fight and keep their minds and bodies free. They need to keep concentrating on the fight's technical aspects. There always must be a balance between the acting and the technique. One must not rule the other. Physical acting exercises can be useful in learning to act the tension of a violent act.

CONTROL IS KEY

In fighting moves that require physical contact between combatants -- such as a choke, hairpull, or shove -- the "victim" always must initiate the movement and control the follow through.

this is exactly the opposite of what we are accustomed to in real life and so must be reinforced in rehearsal. If actor A must choke and push actor B across [the] stage during the choke, the victim -- actor B -- controls the backwards movement across the stage. Actor A must make it look as if he is pushing the other person, but in actuality, the victim is pulling. This allows for more control and, therefore, safety.

In contact punches or kicks, "energy pullback" is essential. first, contact punches or kicks are only thrown to large muscle masses (i.e., abdominals, quadriceps, trapezius muscles of the back, etc.), never to more sensitive areas such as the face or ribs.

Second, with contact punches or kicks, we use what's called the "25/75 percent ratio." That is, 25 percent of the actual energy of the blow

makes contact to the body. The remaining 75 percent of the energy of the punch or kick is dissipated as the receiver pulls back as soon as the punch or kick hits the target area. This is critical and must happen as quickly as possible.

To be safe, you must understand the four parts to any stage combat move: windup, follow-through, "knap" (the audible sound of the hand or foot hitting the body of the victim, artificially made in non-contact moves and naturally made in contact moves), and reaction (physical and vocal).

The windup and reaction are the most critical of these four parts to sell to an audience. The windup needs to be large and committed in order to draw the focus of the audience to the impending violent act.

In this way, the windup directs the focus of the audience to what you want them to see. The reaction needs to sell the pain of the move to the audience, through both a physical and vocal expression of pain.

In creating an effective illusion of a non-contact move, proper staging is essential, so the audience is unable to tell the punch is not literally hitting the body.

This is possible because the human eye cannot judge depth accurately. Place the actors on the stage so that the audience cannot see the fighting distance and the knap in a non-contact move. If Actor A punches Actor B and is responsible for the windup and follow-through, and Actor B is responsible for the knap and the reaction, Actor A must be upstage of Actor B and on a slight angle relative to the audience. This way, the audience cannot see the fist of the attacker is actually passing four to six inches upstage of the victim. This staging also hides the knap (the body-blow sound produced by the victim) from the audience's view.

In non-contact moves, pay special attention to the staging of the move so that you allow the audience to see what you want it to see as well as hide your technique from view.

CONTACT VS. NON-CONTACT MOVES

Non-contact moves work best in a proscenium style stage where the audience is on one side and the action of the fight is on the other. You also can use non-contact moves in a three-quarter thrust stage if you place the move as far upstage as possible so that the audience members in the side sections cannot see the fighting distance or the knap. Do not attempt to use a non-contact move in an arena or theatre-in-the-round configuration. The move won't work from at least one angle and the illusion will not be created for the entire audience. Contact moves, on the other hand, will work from any type of stage configuration. On an arena stage, I would confine myself to using only contact moves.

The key to learning any stage combat move is patience and repetition. Practice each move slowly -- actors should pretend they are underwater. Practice it over and over again. Actors will be tempted to go all out and perform the move before they are ready. But they should resist the temptation to practice the move at full speed as soon as they learn it. Slow repetition gives the body needed time to learn the technique properly. This will help avoid accidents later on.

While practicing, keep concentration and focus levels high. Allow plenty of time to learn each move. When focus starts to fade, take a break.

Also beware of having too much fun in the learning. I have seen many actors have so much fun learning these techniques that they lose their concentration and come dangerously close to getting injured. Stay focused on the safety.

Knowing these basic principles of stage combat will help make your next stage fight realistic and make your audience gasp.