

## BLOOD SIMPLE

By Lisa Mulcahy, STAGE DIRECTIONS, January 2005

Very few special effects can make as shocking a visual impact as stage blood. Think about it: a blood effect done well in terms of both its physical execution and staging can wring more raw emotion out of an audience than just about any pyrotechnical or lighting trick.

But knowing the right way to handle and employ stage blood isn't all that common of a skill. The good news is that the basics couldn't be simpler to learn (and cheaper to achieve.) Read on to discover a few secrets for using stage blood the right, in terms of proper product selection, execution, safety considerations and special inside tips (like protecting our company costumes from ruin.)

Your first priority is mastering the ABCs of stage blood is to choose the product that works best for your needs. Different types of effects demand products with diverse, high-quality elements. For example, to make a gory wound look true to life, you want blood with a heavy, dense consistency. For dripping effects, a thinner liquid will suffice, but you need to make sure the product's color is rich enough to appear realistic under stage lights.

As owner and president of Merrimack, New Hampshire-based Academic Stage Production Services (APS), a provider of production services and theatrical products, Norm St. Germain is an expert when it comes to recommending the best stage blood on the market.

"At APS we have the most experience with Ben Nye products," he says (visit [www.bennyemakeup.com](http://www.bennyemakeup.com) for up to date product prices). "Ben Nye blood flows well, has great color, is safe to use in the mouth, and has a peppermint flavor. The thick blood is jam-like in texture and is good for filling wounds or simulating abrasions. The "fresh scab" is a brownish-blood tint for older, dryer blood-clotting effects. This blood doesn't completely set, but the outer layer 'scabs over.'" St. Germain also likes Ben Nye's Effects Gel Wound Kit: "You can pre-make or create on-the-spot durable and realistic lacerations, burns, wounds and scars with this kit," he says.

Stein's stage blood product line is an insider favorite with theatre and film SFX artists. Stein's is available in both external use (wound creation) and nontoxic (mouth use) formulas. For great gore, you can purchase Stein's stage blood in one ounce, eight ounce, 32 ounce and one gallon containers. To order, visit Star Light and Magic at [www.starmgc.com](http://www.starmgc.com). Stein's also offers liquid blood capsules.

St. Germain says many colleagues have also had great luck with the stage blood manufactured by Mehron ([www.mehron.com](http://www.mehron.com)), Graftobian ([www.graftobian.com](http://www.graftobian.com)), and Kryolan ([www.kryolan.com](http://www.kryolan.com)). Graftobian's Blood Gel is a slow-drip syrup with a honey-like texture and a realistically wet sheen. It's available in a neat, deep, veiny red. The company also makes single-shot blood gel packs and a versatile Blood Paste to fill wound cavities.

Mehron offers myriad gore options, such as Squirt Blood, a water-based formula that can be rigged to gush through tubing. It comes in a great vivid red. Mehron's Stage Blood is full opaque, edible, non-toxic and comes in two shades. Another superbly scary selection is digestible blood capsules that make gruesome mouthy effects disturbingly true-to-life.

Kryolan manufactures an easy-to-work-with Transparent Blood, which is non-staining and comes in light or dark shades. Fix-Blood is an inventive paste that dries to an incredibly lifelike appearance and won't rub off; it also comes in a Hydro Fix-Blood formula, and in light and dark shades. And let's not forget Kryolan's Instant Blood Powder, a water-activated product, and magic Blood, which is rendered invisible until mixed as two specialized components.

St. Germain warns against lower quality items: "Avoid 'dime-store' blood products; they tend to be very runny and not realistic looking."

If you don't have a lot of experience working with stage blood, get your feet wet (or red, for that matter) by executing an actual effect. St. Germain worked with the people at Ben Nye to create a terrific gunshot wound procedure that can be accomplished by beginners and professionals alike.

## MATERIALS YOU'LL NEED

Nose and scar wax  
Spirit gum (and remover)  
Cotton balls  
Stipple sponge  
Modeling tool  
Thick blood  
Skin-tone foundations  
Trauma simulation wheel  
Neutral set powder  
Stage blood

**DIRECTIONS** (modeling materials can be tricky to work with, so follow these carefully)

Use a cotton applicator to apply spirit gum to a somewhat bony area of the body (since modeling wax will not stick well to fleshy areas). Tap to make sure spirit gum is tacky.

Pull some thin strands from a cotton ball and press them into the tacky gum. This allows the modeling wax to adhere better to the textured surface than it would with the spirit gum alone.

Select the correct color of modeling wax for your subject.

Remove an appropriate amount of wax and roll it into a ball.

Press the wax to the cotton-covered section and contour using your fingers of the modeling tool.

Blend the edges of the wax to the skin. If the wax becomes sticky, apply a little spirit gum remover to your fingers or modeling tool and continue blending. The edges of the wax must gradually mold into the shape of the body or face. A forehead wound, for example, must blend naturally, not abruptly, to the temple. Wax must not be too thick.

Remove any excess oil with a tissue.

Create a porous texture in the wax to approximate skin by stippling with a section of the stipple sponge.

Use the flat end of a pencil to make a hole in the wax.

Select the appropriate shade of skin tone foundation and apply to the wax and skin. Blend well and powder.

Apply either thick blood to interior edges of hole or place a small piece of cotton soaked with stage blood in the hole for a clotted look. Apply bruise colors to the area near the wound and a little flowing blood.

Repeat this effect a few times until you get a good feel for working with the blood products, as well as to sharpen your eye so you can perfect the appearance of your "wound."

Keeping your actors safe while using stage blood SFX should be your primary concern at all times. The thing you need to keep in mind is whether the blood you're using is truly edible or not.

“Different manufacturers of stage blood will use different ingredients,” explains St. Germain. “It’s best to check with the manufacturer to make sure its blood is edible.”

And if your costumer asks if he can add liquid laundry soap to stage blood prior to its stage use (a common practice since it aids stain removal on laundry day), be careful. “There is nothing wrong with doing that, but you must remember that the blood is no longer edible at that point,” St. Germain warns.

You may be tempted to make your own stage blood. After all, the Internet is jam-packed with blood recipe ideas involving other ingredients ranging from Hershey’s syrup to Kool-Aid powder to chemical preservatives. Don’t bother. Why? The commercial stage blood available is safer (for example, it won’t go rancid in your kitchen after a couple of days), plus it’s more affordable than the combined ingredients you’d need to whip up a batch on your own.

Here’s another tip: Be sure to schedule ample rehearsal time so actors can avoid accidents. “Obviously, care should be taken if using small blood packets or blood bags so that blood doesn’t squirt into actor’s eyes,” says St. Germain. “It probably won’t cause harm, but it will sting, and the eyes should be flushed immediately with water.”

When it comes to protecting your valuable costume and set piece fabric from stage blood stains, be swift and thorough. As quickly as possible, wipe blood completely off any set pieces it happens to spill or spatter on. Also, schedule laundry directly after each performance so that stains have little time to set. “Most manufacturers state that their blood products may stain fabrics, and it’s advised to run a test with each costume’s fabric,” says St. Germain. “This is a very good idea, and I encourage anyone concerned about their costumes coming clean to do a test.”

Light or white cotton will absorb stains the easiest, but wool and delicate fabrics are also susceptible. Bleaching your white and/or using a commercial stain remover will probably be necessary. You can also try repeated washings with a detergent such as Woolite for more fragile textiles. Also, adding detergent to the blood prior to external usage can affect the consistency of the blood, and not every detergent is suitable for delicate fabrics.

To avoid staining issues altogether, you could use disposable costuming (i.e., multiple white, cotton shirts that can be worn for a single performance and then tossed) since a throwaway wardrobe allows you to gush all the stage blood you want to, with no permanent damage.

Either way, following these simple guidelines will help you enjoy a vivid, worry-free theatrical bloodbath – so let your imagination run wild!