

# **BASICS OF STAGE COMBAT**



# **BASICS OF STAGE COMBAT** **UNARMED**

**Andrew Ashenden**



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*Basics of Stage Combat: Unarmed*

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## DISCLAIMER

The techniques described in this book are meant as an aid for stage combat training or for actors who have taken stage combat exams and are looking to revise their personal skills before re-training and/or commencing work that involves a fight sequence in a theatre, film, or television production. The author does not take any responsibility for misuse of the techniques shown in this book. Practicing these techniques without the aid of a qualified Fight Teacher or Fight Director is at the risk of the participants.

It is strongly suggested to look for qualified stage combat teachers and Fight Directors (and to check their credentials).

The short fight in Chapter 11 is free to use in the practice of the techniques within this book; however, permission is **not** granted for its use in:

- The public performance of a show
- A fight exam
- Or to be shown in any media with the claim (implied or explicit) that the work is your own.

Disregard for these limitations of use will result in prosecution.

All the techniques featured in this book are taught as standard teaching techniques of stage combat around the world. In some cases, names, phrasing and minor moves may vary. This does not mean the technique is wrong, it simply means that a slightly different approach is being used to teach that particular skill.



# **1 STAGE COMBAT: WHAT IS THIS BOOK ALL ABOUT?**

This book is intended as a guide for students taking their stage combat exams, or actors who are looking to revise their skills from their drama school training days, or amateur actors who have an interest in all its aspects of theatre. If you are new to the world of stage combat, take the time to read this book and find out what it is all about from the technical chapters. Reading this book will not qualify you as a Fight Director or make you stunt man. It is here to help and give guidance on the more popular techniques used in BASIC unarmed stage combat exams and the more commonly used unarmed techniques used in drama schools, on stage, and on the screen today. To show you how a stage combat fight works, there is a small fight at the back of this book which is a combination of the techniques listed within the chapters; it is there to help you see the choreography of a fight as a whole. It may not be used on stage for a public show or used as choreography for a fight exam. This book covers all the basic rules that apply to stage combat, not just to unarmed combat (which is in this book), but also how to do it safely. The practice and study of these skills is best used in conjunction with the qualified Fight Teacher or Fight Director you are working with.

Unarmed combat on stage and screen is one of the most commonly used disciplines in stage combat. Unarmed can cover everything from a push, a single punch, domestic violence, a wrestling match (as in Shakespeare's *As you like it*), a police officer bringing down a criminal, a martial arts fight, and the list can go on. We will be looking at: the BASICS of unarmed combat: throwing a punch, kicking someone in the

groin, and pulling your partner around by the hair, but all done safely.

## **Violence: Real and Fiction**

Human history is littered with violence, from skirmishes on our streets to world wars. Humans are brought up from an early age with violence all about them, in both positive and negative ways. Children are shown that super heroes fight to keep the peace and for the safety and protection of others. They may also experience it from bullying or even within the home. We learn very quickly that it is a very violent world in which we live. And yet, with all this real violence around us, we still want to watch it on television, in films, in theatre, to read it in books, and we even listen to it on the radio in plays.

I have been teaching stage combat for just over two decades. I have seen actors who have trained for musical theatre for years never get a role in a single musical; they get nothing but dramas and television. Conversely, I have seen classically trained actors get nothing but musical theatre. As an actor you may have to go where the work is if you want to have a strong and successful career. However, as I say to my students, the one thing that I can guarantee in your career is that you will be used in a fight. Audiences love violence, from Shakespeare to a hard hitting action film. It is simply exciting to see. Stage combat allows actors to do all the violent things we see and hear about with safety and control.

## **Preparation**

Before you begin your class, rehearsal, call for a show, or even your fight, warm up. Warming up is the most important thing you can do for your mind and body. It helps to get the body ready for the show/fight test, but also it helps to focus the mind. In stage combat, focus is a very important part of the

skill inventory. It is very easy to just rush into doing your class or choreography, but you could injure yourself if you did not warm up or injure your partner because you were not focused. This may prevent them from doing their exam or disrupt the show because the fight scene could not be performed with all the actors involved.

Here are some simple stretches just to help you warming up before a class or a fight call, just in case this is an area you are not familiar with. If you suffer from injuries, or have other medical concerns, you should always seek professional medical advice before starting any new exercise program.

## **Legs**

A lot of the techniques in this book come from using the legs as a firm base to work from, so stretching the legs is important, as is stretching the arms and body.

### **Hip flexor stretch**

- Place your hands on your hips and stand with the legs shoulder width apart. Take a large step forward on the right foot and keep it flat upon the floor during the stretch. Then slightly bend the knees.
- Rise up on the left foot till you are on the ball of the foot.
- Bend your knees and tilt the pelvis forward to feel the stretch in the left hip flexor and quadriceps.
- Stretch for 15-30 seconds, then return to the starting position.
- Repeat the stretch on the opposite leg.



**1. 1 Hip Flexor**

### **Inner thigh stretch**

- Sit on the floor with the bottom of your feet touching and the knees bent. Bring in the feet as close to the body without feeling discomfort.



### **1.2 Inner Thigh Stretch**

- Rest your elbows on your thighs and take hold of the ankles.
- Breathe in and straighten your back. Begin to lean forward from the upper body and apply a gentle push from the elbows to the thighs.

- You should feel a stretch in your lower back and your inner thighs. Hold for 15 - 30 seconds then release slowly sitting back straight and releasing the pressure from the elbows in the thighs

## **Arms**

This stretch will help with flexibility within the arm as well as lengthening the muscles. Do not over extend with this stretch. If you have a shoulder injury, make sure that you get medical advice before attempting this exercise.

- Stand with the right side of your body next to a wall. Legs should be straight but with a slight bend. Place the left hand up by the right shoulder.
- Open the hand and point the fingers backwards and straighten the arm, then place it on the wall at shoulder level.
- Slowly begin to turn the body to the left. Begin to feel the stretch in the bicep, forearm and in the front of the shoulder. Hold the stretch for 10 seconds.
- Then reverse the stretch to the left side.



### **1.3 Arm Stretch**

#### **Wrists**

It is very easy to forget the hands and wrists, but a lot of stage combat work is the hands and wrists, so they must be stretched as well.

- Begin with the legs standing parallel, then slightly bend the knees.



#### **1.4 Wrist Stretch**

- Stretch the arms out in front of you. Then stretch out the fingers so they are fully expanded.
- Keeping the fingers stretched out, fully begin to rotate the right hand clockwise in wide circles while rotating the left hand anticlockwise. Maintain the rotation for 10 seconds, then reverse rotations.

#### **Neck**

This stretch not only helps to limber the neck but also helps to relieve stress and tension you may have before you start a class, rehearsal, or performance.

- Begin standing with the legs parallel and then slightly bend the knees.
- Tilt the left side of the head to the left shoulder while turning the chin slightly towards that shoulder.



### 1.5 Neck Stretch

- Place the left hand on the top of the head and then apply a small amount of pressure. **Do not pull** your head down with your hand. Hold for five seconds then gently release.

- Repeat the stretch on the right hand side of the neck.
- Then repeat on the left for another five seconds and back to the right side again.

## **Back**

Back stretches help to keep the vertebrate loose and mobile. If you do not stretch the back, you run a risk of pulling a muscle. This could prevent you from performing or taking class that day.

- Lie on your back with your knees pulled into your chest, and the feet off the floor.
- Wrap your arms around your legs.



### **1.6 Back stretch**

- Slowly begin to bring your knees towards your chest. You should feel a small stretch in the lower part of the back.

- Make sure your head does not come up from the floor. Hold the stretch between 15 and 30 seconds.

### **Side Stretch (Abdominal muscles)**



#### **1.7 Side Stretch**

This stretch helps to improve flexibility in the midsection of the body, which is controlled by the abdominal muscles.

- Begin with the legs standing parallel and slightly bend the knees.

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- Place the left hand on the hip and extend the right arm and hand upwards.
- Keeping the arm and hand extended, begin to lean to the left; you should feel a pull in the abdominal muscles on the right side of the body.
- Hold the stretch between 10 - 20 seconds, then stretch the other side of the body.

## 2 THE BASICS OF STAGE COMBAT

The basic rules of stage combat apply to everything from unarmed combat to broadswords, from quarterstaves to rapiers and daggers. These are the basic rules for using any weapons on the stage or screen. They serve as the foundation of an actor's movement, safety and technical performance.

The basic rules of stage combat:

- **Balance**
- **Distance**
- **Eye contact**
- **Angle**
- **Preparation and Execution**
- **Knaps**

These rules are vital to the safety, control and performance of the techniques demonstrated in this book.

Check your balance. Check your distance. Make sure you have eye contact. Make sure you are in the correct position in relation to your partner as well as to the audience. Make sure that your preparation is safe and clear enough to the audience. Be clear as on your finish as you execute of a move.

In regard to knaps, make sure that can be heard if it is a punch or a slap.

### **Balance**

If you are not balanced, then you cannot achieve anything.

To me, this is the first rule. If you stand with both feet parallel, you will find the natural inclination is to lean into one of the hips or straighten the legs so they become stiff or locked...or any number of things people do when they think they have straight legs.



### **2-1 Straight Legs**

Natural balance takes time to achieve. Babies pick it up; so when they learn to stand, it is instinct. Experienced dancers have great balance; this is training. But it takes time to train the body to regain this natural balance that it loses as we grow up. Seeing an actor with straight legs on stage performing a punch, slap or anything physical makes them look awkward and can break the illusion of the character they are portraying. The trick is to keep your balance natural.

For the benefit of the stage combat techniques I have used in this book, I am working with the left foot forward and right foot back, and from a right hander's point of view. Certain techniques require slightly wider stances than the initial stance; this will be covered in each chapter.

One thing I will say now to save time saying it in other chapters is that once you have gotten used to a technique, reverse it. Swapping it around is an exercise for the mind as well as the body: left becomes right and right becomes left. It is all very well being able to perfect a punch with the left hand, but what happens when you need it to originate from the other side?

Practice, then practice again, and just for the fun of it, practice some more.

## **Eye contact**

In fighting scenes this is the most important requirement of all. I think eye contact should be applied at least 99% of time. There are however some cases when eye contact is not possible. These will be detailed in the relevant chapters.

An audience will look where you look. For example, if you are watching a scene between two actors and both actors look at a door on stage right, they are simply making the audience look where they need them to look. The same applies to stage combat. For starters, if you are looking at your partner, you are communicating with each other—not just about what moves you are both performing (because it's what you both rehearsed), but also the story of the physical conflict you are portraying. You are making an audience focus on you, your partner and the scene, which happens to be a fight scene at that present moment.

Never forget your eye contact.



**2-2 Fighting Stance**

## Distance

Distance varies with each and every individual technique as well as with each actor. However, each actor is different: some are tall, some are small, etc. The crucial thing is that you work *with* your partner, not *against* them. Stage combat only works when you work in partnership with your cohort, (or cohorts if you end up working in a mass battle scene). It is a simple rule, but some actors forget it. Keep your distance from each other and maintain the distance your established initial distance.

As an exercise, I always get students to work with other students of different heights. This normally results a slight disgruntled moans because they will not get to work with their friends. However, as a working actor, how many times are you going to work with your friends? There is no guarantee that you will get to work with an actor who is the same build, height and/or physical confidence as you. Challenge yourself when you work because no one else will.

## Angle

A lot of actors forget this final and most crucial aspect of a move. I have sat on many fight tests as an examiner and said “great punch, but...” or, “great lunge, but...” It is an easy thing to forget...angle, but the angle is the part of what makes the illusion work. A punch at the wrong angle or a lunge two foot away from the other actor ruins the illusion. Always be aware of where your audience is; make sure you are in the position you should be. If you are told to be in that position, BE IN IT. If it is not right after rehearsing it, raise the issue with the Fight Director. From an audience’s point of view, if you are not in the right position, they feel cheated. It is the equivalent of seeing a magician ruin a trick. The angle is what makes you