

BASICS OF STAGE COMBAT

BASICS OF STAGE COMBAT **SINGLE SWORD**

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Basics of Stage Combat: Single Sword

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DISCLAIMER

The techniques described in this book are meant as an aid for stage combat training, for actors who have taken stage combat exams and are looking to revise their personnel skills before re-training, or for those commencing work that involves a fight sequence in a theatre, film, or television production. The author does not take any responsibility for misuse of 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 participant.

It is strongly suggested that you look for a qualified stage combat teacher or fight director. Make sure to check the credentials of the teacher or fight director before making a selection.

The short fight in Chapter Thirteen is free for use in the practicing of techniques within this book. Permission is not given for the use of the fight to be used in:

- A public performance
- A fight exam
- Any media whatsoever with the claim that the work is your own.

Disregard for these conditions 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 is my second book, following *Basics of Stage Combat: Unarmed*. This previous book dealt with the use of unarmed techniques and outlined the basics that are required for stage combat. If you are not familiar with the basics of stage combat (balance, eye contact, etc.) it is intended to serve as a guide for students who are taking their stage combat exams, 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 in theatre. If you are new to the world of stage combat, take the time to read *Unarmed* and find about what the art is all about from its technical chapters.

Reading it will not qualify you as a fight director or make you a stunt man. It is here to help you and give you guidance on the more popular techniques used in BASIC single sword stage combat exams, single sword techniques used on the stage and screen today, and to lay a foundation for the use of the single rapier, sabre, and the eighteenth-century small sword, to name a few other types of sword. *Basics of Stage Combat: Unarmed* does not cover broadsword techniques.

There is a small fight at the back of *Unarmed*, which is a combination of the techniques listed within its 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 be used as choreography for a fight exam. It is also designed to show you how to note a fight down, (taught as a fight routine for an exam or for a show). *Unarmed* covers all the basic rules that apply to all areas of stage combat, not just single sword combat which is in this second book, but the simple rules of what to do and 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. Like to previous book, this book, *Basics of Stage Combat: Single Sword* is here to aid you during stage combat exams and working on stage, and hopefully to inspire you to do stage combat if you have not done it before looking at this book.

Single sword combat on the stage and screen is one of the most commonly used disciplines after unarmed techniques. Stage combat involving fencing and historical sword combat at the level this book is designed to help actors to be able to perform fights safely, with dramatic flair, and with confidence. Fencing and historical combat is based on *real* combative methods. In stage combat, we take this modus operandi and modify them for acting.

This book covers a general basis of all sword types. The Academy of Performance Combat uses a generic program to help actors understand the basics of sword techniques, set out in their basic level single sword syllabus, which covers all aspects of sword method. From this initial base, an actor can understand the use of a sword at a fundamental level.

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, or fight call for a show, you must warm up. Warming up is the most important thing you can do for your mind and body. For the actor, the need to be ‘warmed up’ is important before doing any fight because it helps to get the body ready for the show. It also helps to focus the mind. In stage combat, focus is very important, otherwise you could injure your partner. It’s very easy to rush into the class or choreography routine, but equally easy to pull a muscle. The last thing you want to be responsible for doing is injuring your partner or preventing them from doing their exam. You do not want to cause disruption to the show because the fight scene could not be performed with all the actors involved either.

Here are some suggested stretches just to help you with warming up before a class or a fight call. If you suffer from injuries, always seek medical advice before any exercise.

Calf Stretch

- Face a wall and stand with your legs shoulder-width apart with your toes pointing forward. Extend both your arms and place both the palms of your hands

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against the wall. Make sure your fingers are pointing upwards and your hands stay shoulder-width apart.

- Take a large step back with your right foot.
- Keep your feet flat on the floor, making sure your toes stay pointing forward during the stretch. Begin to very slowly bend your legs to feel the stretch in your right calf.
- Hold for a count of 10 seconds, then slowly stand upright with your legs returning to shoulder-width apart. Do not rush returning to the standing position.
- Repeat the process with your left foot going backwards.
- Repeat this once more with both legs. (See fig 1.1)



Fig. 1.1 Calf Stretch

Outer Hip Stretch

- Stand next to a wall with your right shoulder facing the wall. Extend your right arm to the wall. Slightly bend your arm. The palm of your hand should be flat against the wall with your fingers pointing up. Do not keep the arm straight. You will not get the full benefit of the stretch.
- Take your left foot and cross it over the right foot. Bend your legs and keep both feet flat on the floor.
- Very slowly, bend your right hip towards the wall. Do not rush this stretch as you may lose your balance and cause yourself injury. Hold this stretch for a count of 10 and return to the upright position.
- Repeat the process on the opposite side.
- Repeat this stretch on both sides once again. (See Fig. 1.2)



Fig. 1.2 Outer Hip Stretch

Arm Windmill Stretch

- Stand with feet shoulder-width apart. Take a step back on the right leg. Bend the knees and sit in the seated position.
- Extend your right arm straight out. Open your fingers and relax your hand. Do not tense the hand, but keep the hand open and the fingers pointed directly up.
- Drop the arm behind you and begin to rotate arm around in a circular motion. Rotate the arm slowly in the circular motion. Make sure that the shoulder is relaxed and rises up during the rotation. Circle the arm for a count of 20.
- Once you have completed this motion, rotate the arm in the opposite direction, again for a count of 20.
- Repeat the process for the opposite arm. (See Fig. 1.3)



Fig. 1.3 Arm Windmill Stretch

Wrist Stretch

- Stand with the legs shoulder-width apart. Extend your left arm forward and turn the hand so your thumb is pointing toward the center of the chest. (See Fig 1.4)
- Rotate your wrist so the little finger is now facing your chest.
- Wrap your right hand around the back of your left hand. Your right hand's fingers should be below the left thumb and the right hand thumb should be placed under the left little finger.



Fig. 1.4 Wrist Stretch Starting Position

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- Relax and open the fingers on the left hand. Slowly pull the hand toward the chest, while simultaneously gently pull back with the right hand fingers push with the right thumb. (See Fig 1.5)
- Hold the stretch for a count of 10, then release.
- Repeat with the other hand.
- Once both hands have been stretched. Give the hands a gentle shake.



Fig 1.5 Wrist Stretch Finishing Position

Neck Rotation

- Stand with your legs shoulder-width apart with a slight bend in the knees. Your head should begin with your chin resting down on your chest.
- Slowly begin to circle the head to the right shoulder in a clockwise rotation, letting your head fall backwards so you are looking directly up, continue the roll to the left shoulder, and finally return the head back to the chest. Repeat the steady circular motion with the head for 30 seconds.
- Repeat the process by taking the head to the left side and turning the head around in an anti clockwise rotation
- Keep the shoulders relaxed
- Allow the mouth to open to avoid jaw tension.
- Do not rush this stretch. (See Fig 1.6)



Fig 1.6 Neck Rotation

Bent Leg Stretch

Work only to your limits during this stretch; it is possible to over stretch attempting this exercise.

- Begin by standing with the legs hip-width apart. Take a big step forward with your right leg so that it is in front of the body. Keep your hands to the left hand side of the right leg. Balance is an important part of this stretch.
- Bend the leading leg and push your hips slightly forward. Place your hands on the ground and begin to straighten your left leg.
- Once the leg is fully extended, keep the body straight and the arms extended but not locked. You should feel the stretch in your right thigh.
- Hold this position between 10-20 seconds.
- To get out of the stretch, bend your back leg and push upwards with your arms to return to the starting position, all while straightening the leading leg. Be careful on your balance as you begin to straighten out of the move. (See Fig 1.7)
- Variation: This should only be attempted if you have a comfortable level of flexibility. Instead of keeping the arms straight during the stretch, bend them at the elbows and place your forearms on the ground. The stretch should increase with this move. To get out of the move, straighten your arms as before.



Fig 1.7 Bent Leg Stretch

2 THE SWORD ON STAGE

The style of a fight performed in a play is dependent on the period setting of the play. Broadswords have a very different style and use than the rapier or small sword or sabre. For example, you would not see broadswords being used in traditional productions of *Romeo and Juliet* or traditional productions of *Macbeth* using eighteenth-century small swords because of the time period these plays are set in.

The A.P.C. single sword syllabus at the basic level is designed to give an understanding of *how* a sword is used on stage or screen. It provides a foundation for the further study of swords at an intermediate and higher level of training. The most commonly used swords for sword fights are the rapier and small sword as pictured in Fig. 2.1. The last sword is a practice sword, ideally used during class, fight exams, and rehearsal until the real swords to be used in the scene have been provided.

The average rapier is 45-48 inches (114.3–121.92 cm) long and the small sword's blade is 29-35 (73.66–88.9cm) inches long. The practice sword is that it is shorter than a rapier and longer than a small sword. Therefore, for the purposes of practicing rapier or small sword techniques for exams or stage combat classes, it is an ideal sword.

The practice sword (also known as the stage sword) is a combined version of the epee, foils and sabre of modern fencing swords. The blade is an epee blade (35 inches or 90 cm) with a foil guard, sabre grip, and sabre pommel.

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Fig. 2.1 Rapier / Small Sword / Practice Sword



Fig. 2.2 A Practice Sword

The Anatomy of the Sword

- Tip (button): The safety tip on the end of a practice sword
- Foible: The top third of the blade and the weakest area of a blade.
- Forte: The lower part of the sword near the guard and the strongest part of the sword.
- Fuller: A groove which runs down the middle of the blade to reduce the weight.
- Guard: A metal cup or bow that protects the hand from being hit.
- Grip (handle): The part of a sword which sits under the guard that is held in the hand. The sabre grip as shown in Fig 2.3 has a slight curve. Your hand should conform comfortably around the grip. It should also sit in between the forefinger and thumb and rest comfortably on the mount (see chapter 3). The sword should follow the forearm as shown in Fig. 2.3
- Tang: This part of the sword is hidden from view. The tang is under the grip and has a thread at the end which allows the pommel to be screwed onto the blade.

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- Pommel: The fastener at the end of the sword blade. The pommel is screwed to the end of the sword blade, (the tang).
- True edge of the blade: The true edge of the blade is the outside edge of the blade. This part of the sword is the edge of the blade which parries attacks and is used in cutting with the sword.

One thing I always emphasize to all my students having been on the end of blunt stage swords is that they can still injure, blind and puncture. No matter what anyone says, I can assure you that I have a couple of injuries from stage swords because my partner was not focused on what they were doing. A stage sword does not automatically mean it as safe because it is not sharp. It is still metal and it can still injure.



Fig. 2.3 Sword along the Forearm

3 BASIC FIGHTING POSITION

How to use a sword on stage can depend on three main elements:

- What period the play is set in,
- Who the character is,
- What the ability of the character is.

When you are wearing a sword on stage, it is automatically making a statement to the audience. It doesn't matter what the character does with the sword, what experience the character is going to have, or even if it is just part of the costume. The instant the sword is brought on stage, it is a symbolic image saying to the audience: this character must be able to fight. It is a declaration to the audience of the character's fighting prowess. For example, if you are performing the Mercutio against Tybalt fight scene in *Romeo & Juliet*, Act 3 Scene 1, how the characters walk with their swords and the way they hold and draw their swords is equally important to the ability to 'sell the fight' to the audience when they perform the choreography.

The same applies to the reverse of this example; if the fight is Sir Andrew against Viola in *Twelfth Night*, which is normally played as a comical fight, knowing how to use the sword in all its techniques is still required for safety. The audience needs to be convinced that the characters they are watching have little to no ability with the sword. If an actor does not look or feel confident while holding a sword, no matter how good an actor they may be, they will still look uncomfortable on stage.

For the benefit of explanations in the following passage, assume that all descriptions are working from the right hander's