



STAGE COMBAT

What is Stage Combat?

Stage combat is a specialized technique in theatre designed to create the illusion of physical combat without causing harm to the performers. It is employed in live stage plays as well as operatic and ballet productions. The term is also used informally to describe fight choreography for other production media including film and television. It is a common field of study for actors and dancers and is closely related to the practice of stunts.

History

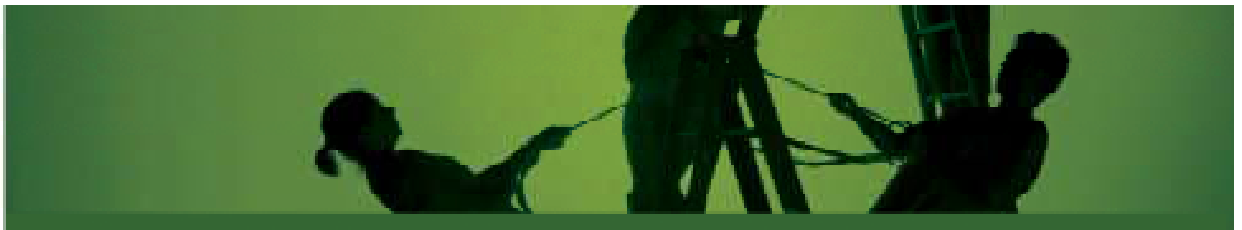
The history of staged fight and mock combat can be traced to antiquity, or indeed to the origins of the human species and primate display behaviour. Display of martial aptitude is a natural occurrence in warrior societies, and ritualized forms of mock combat often evolve into war dances. Fights staged for entertainment may also be in earnest for the combattants, as was the case with the Roman gladiators, and any public duel, such as the judicial duel of the European Middle Ages. Depiction of violence in theatre can also be traced to Antiquity, with Aristotle quoted as noting that "conflict is the essence of comedy".

The medieval tournament and joust are a classical examples of competitive ritualised mock combat. The joust from the time of Maximilian I developed into a sport with enormous cost involved for each knight and correspondingly high prestige attached, comparable to contemporary Formula 1 races, while at the same time minimizing the danger of injury with highly specialized equipment.

In the Late Middle Ages, staged fencing bouts, with or without choreography, became popular with fencing schools. The German combat manuals have sections dedicated to flashy techniques to be employed in such *Kloppfechten*, which would be impractical in serious combat, and the Late Medieval German masters distinguish mock fights (*fechten zu schimpf*) and real combat (*fechten zu ernst*).

In Asia, stylized stage combat has been a staple feature of traditional Japanese (Kabuki *tachimawari*), Chinese (Beijing Opera) and Indian performing arts for centuries. The history of European theatrical combat has its roots in medieval theatre, and becomes tangible in Elizabethan drama. It is speculated that Richard Tarleton, who was a member of both William Shakespeare's acting company and of the London Masters of Defence weapons guild, was among the first fight directors in the modern sense.

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, fight scenes in touring theatrical productions throughout Europe, the British Commonwealth and the USA were typically created by combining several widely known, generic routines. At about the same time, fencing masters in Europe began to research and experiment with historical fencing techniques, with weapons such as the two-handed sword, rapier and smallsword, and to instruct actors in their use. Notable amongst these were George Dubois, a Parisian fight director and martial artist who created performance fencing styles based on gladiatorial combat as well as Renaissance rapier and dagger fencing. Egerton Castle and Captain Alfred Hutton of London



were also involved both in reviving antique fencing systems and in teaching these styles to actors.

Cinematic fencing has its roots in the 1920s, with the movies of Douglas Fairbanks. Martial arts movies emerge as a distinct genre from the 1940s, popularized by Bruce Lee from the 1960s.

By the mid-to-late 20th century, due partly to the confluence of theatrical disciplines being taught at drama schools around the world, these two "streams" had combined with skills drawn from professional wrestling, mime, modern fencing, Asian martial arts and similar disciplines to form the basis of modern stage combat.

Informal guilds of fight choreographers began to take shape in the 1970s with the establishment of The Society of British Fight Directors, 1969 to 1996. More formal training was established with the formation of the Society of American Fight Directors in 1977. The British Academy Of Stage & Screen Combat and Fight Directors Canada in 1993, the New Zealand Stage Combat Society in 1995 and the British Academy of Dramatic Combat in 1996.

Techniques

Stage combat training includes unarmed combat skills such as illusory slaps, punches, kicks, throwing and holding techniques; theatrical adaptations of various forms of fencing such as rapier and dagger, smallsword and broadsword, as well as the use of other weapons, notably the quarterstaff; and more specialised skills such as professional wrestling and different styles of martial arts. However, stage combat can include any form of choreographed violence and the options are limited only by safety concerns, and the ability of the participants involved. As a note, most of these techniques are drawn from actual fighting techniques, but modified to be safer for actors. For example, although there are a number of ways of creating the safe illusion of a slap to the face (which is obviously something that could really be done in combat), none of these involve making actual contact with the victim's face.

The over-riding concern is for the safety of the actors and audience. This requirement has led to the adaptation of many standard martial arts and fencing skills specifically for performance. For example, many basic sword attacks and parries must be modified to ensure that the actors do not bring the points of their weapons past their partner's face or otherwise inadvertently risk the other actor's health and well-being. Likewise, whereas their characters may be trying to violently twist each other's limbs, slap, or punch, or grapple, and engaging in vicious unarmed combat, the actors must operate at a high level of complicity and communication to ensure a safe, exciting fight scene. Considerable professional judgement is called upon to determine what technical level may be appropriate for a given performer, taking into account allotted rehearsal time, and the expectations of the director.

The combat phase of a play rehearsal is referred to as a *fight rehearsal*. Choreography is typically learned step by step, and practiced at first very slowly before increasing to full speed. Even stage combat is risky, and it is preferable for actors to have as much training and experience as possible. A "fight call" or a brief rehearsal before the show is performed



each time, is set aside for the actors to "mark" through the fight to increase their muscle memory.

A show which includes a great deal of fighting will typically be trained and supervised by a professional fight choreographer and may also include a *fight captain*, who runs fight calls and ensures that actors are remaining safe throughout the duration of the show.