

ONLINE
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CONTENT

STAGE COMBAT: UNARMED



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*For Tina.
My rock.
My inspiration.
You are the wind beneath my wings.*

Foreword

Richard Ryan

There are few books on stage combat and even fewer written by someone who has professionally performed, choreographed and taught the craft. Roger Bartlett is one of those few who does this professionally - he has tested whether what he preaches actually works in practice.

I have known Roger for sixteen years since he first applied to become a Certified Teacher with the British Academy of Stage & Screen Combat, an organisation which is respected, nationally and internationally, as the leading provider of professional-level stage combat training and assessment within the UK. Since that time I have been impressed with his diligence in improving his own technique and knowledge, and his curiosity in learning more and stretching himself. He has gone on to train in the related skills of fencing and martial arts, and become a member of British Equity's Fight Directors Register, a Master Teacher of the BASSC, and a Certified Teacher with the Society of American Fight Directors. I rate Roger's work highly and have engaged him as a part of my stunt team on two television productions - *Hammer of the Gods* and *Vikings* - and he's also assisted me on various theatre shows, including Bristol Old Vic Theatre's highly successful production of *The Three Musketeers*.

Most stage combat teachers, when outlining their course of study to new students, will ask what those students think is the most important element of the craft. More often than not, the response is 'safety', which is a good and correct

answer. However, simply to say that 'You must always be safe' is not enough. The essential issue regarding safety is *by what means* do you achieve it? What practical steps do you take, which processes do you follow? The answers to these questions dictate the fundamental philosophy of stage fighting – and these questions are answered in this book.

This book serves as an excellent reference tool. If one wishes to master the art of stage combat, as with any physical discipline, a book will never be able to replace a tutor. However, what Roger offers here comes very close. He has written his book to introduce the main concepts and principles that inform unarmed stage combat as taught commonly by members of the BASSC. What is unique about this book is that in addition to clear and concise explanations, there is a large online resource of videos to back up the written word.

The book outlines a systematic progression of the key technicalities including practical 'how to' exercises and drills that aim to develop the essential skills of partnering, eye contact, Reversal of Energy, balance and centering, and intention. It will be a great addition to anyone's library and a much-needed resource for students, actors and theatre companies alike.

Richard Ryan is a leading stunt and fight co-ordinator, whose many credits on screen include Troy, Guy Ritchie's Sherlock Holmes films, Solomon Kane, Stardust, The Dark Knight, which won the 2009 SAG Award for Best Movie Stunt Ensemble, and all five seasons of Vikings. His theatre experience includes productions at the National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Donmar Warehouse, and he served as Master at Arms to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

Introduction: Playing Safe

This is a book about unarmed stage combat. Or to put it another way, this is a book about how to beat the living daylights out of another human being safely.

I'll repeat that in case you missed it. SAFELY. There is never any excuse to compromise your personal safety and well-being or that of your fellow actor.

A real fight is something that few people actually understand and so there are many people, and many theatre companies, who do not realise the importance of hiring a fight director for their shows. A fight director's job in theatre is to understand fights - how they happen, how they affect people - and to enable the actors to portray that violence as safely as possible.

The history of theatre is littered with stories of actors getting injured. I have a good friend who was working as an actor in a show and she had to be slapped on stage. No one involved in the production knew anything about stage combat and so it was decided that the slap would be real. It went wrong on opening night and ruptured her eardrum. She now only has about 30% hearing in that ear - just from a 'simple slap'. This incident prompted her to get trained properly and she is now one of the top fight masters in America. She does also say, 'the tear has become a

wonderful barometer of sorts and I can tell the coming on of a storm or change of weather... no lie.'

This book is designed to give you an understanding of the basic concepts and techniques commonly used in stage fights. It is meant as a guide only. However good a book may be, I would always recommend that you train in a class with a qualified professional. If you have already had some training then you can use this book as a reminder of what you have learned, or to supplement your ongoing training. If you are involved in amateur, student or fringe theatre then this book aims to give you an understanding of practical techniques and how to perform them safely. It should give you a good basic grasp of the practicalities of staging a fight, and hopefully it will help you to recognise when you need to call upon the services of a qualified professional.

The techniques are arranged by concepts, as taught by myself and other members of the British Academy of Stage and Screen Combat (BASSC) - the UK's leading provider of stage combat training. Anyone who teaches with the BASSC or has studied on a course with the BASSC will be familiar with these concepts and techniques.

Above all, I hope you will be inspired to come and learn this beautiful art form for yourself.

Partnering

Stage combat is an acting skill and requires both combatants, or partners, to work together to tell the story. When you are acting with someone you cannot just say your lines. You must *speak to* another human being. You must *hear* what the other actor has said and respond to it. A good actor is often described as a *giving* actor or a *generous* actor. These qualities are important in stage combat too.

When learning the skills in this book you should always strive to be the best partner you can be. This means being sensitive to the person you are working with, being aware of their needs, supporting and encouraging them.

To be a good partner you should:

- Be patient with yourself and your partner.
- Respect your partner and their work.
- Do your part of the technique as well as you can.
- Check what *you* are doing first to make sure it is correct before trying to correct your partner.
- Be positive in any feedback you give to your partner.
- Ask your partner if there is anything you can do that will help them be more comfortable, confident and secure in their work.

To be a good fight partner you should always pay attention to your fellow actor, watch them closely, give them the right physical and emotional cues to respond to, and work towards making the *whole* fight as good as it can be - not just your part in it. Be a giving and generous actor in your fight scenes as well as in your other scenes.

Eye Contact

Eye contact is a vital method of communicating with your partner. It is a means of checking that they are ready for what you are about to do and for them to see that you are ready for the next action. It is an essential part of the cueing system used when performing fights. It helps ensure an ongoing connection between you both, and it also helps to communicate your character's thoughts and emotions, not just to your fellow actor but also to the audience.

Have you ever looked at your fellow actor on stage and seen that telltale look in their eyes that says, 'Oh help. I've

forgotten my next line'? It happens in fights as well. People do sometimes forget what they are meant to be doing. I have heard of one occasion when an actor had to talk their partner through the whole fight move by move because they had forgotten the entire routine.

Eye contact is a hugely important aspect of stage combat. It helps you connect and engage with your fellow actor, it helps you communicate thoughts and intentions. Eye contact needs to be regular and frequent to maintain that good connection and tell an effective story.

Above all else, eye contact is there to help keep you *safe*.

Dominant Sides

Most of the photographs and the video footage that accompany this book will show the techniques being demonstrated by a right-handed fighter. Consequently, most of the images show the right hand or foot being used.

This is simply because those of us in the pictures are right-handed ourselves. If you are left-handed and want to practise the techniques with your own dominant side, I heartily encourage you to do so. I have tried to keep the written descriptions as neutral as possible so that you can do this. In fact, I always encourage my students to practise these unarmed techniques on both sides, partly because I believe it assists the learning process to work on your non-dominant side, but also because, in a production, you may be called upon to do something with your non-dominant hand or leg.

So by all means, use your dominant side, whichever that is. But do also feel free to practise slowly and carefully with your non-dominant side.

Using This Book

This book is accompanied by videos of each technique, forty in total, which show me as the attacker in most contexts, with my brilliant colleagues, Enric Ortúñó and Yarit Dor, as my unwitting ‘victims’. Whenever this symbol appears ➤ click it to access the videos.

Please read the descriptions in this book and work through each technique *before* watching the video. You need to understand the principles – especially how to stay safe – before getting up on your feet. Each video shows a technique being performed slowly, so that you can see the mechanics of the action, and the tricks that the audience should not see. You will then see the same technique performed at approximately performance pace from the audience’s point of view. In other words, you will see it as the audience should see it.

Follow the stages described in the book with what you are watching in the videos, and try to ensure that your own actions match them as closely as you can. Use the videos to enhance your understanding of the words written here – but please remember that it’s in these pages that the specific details and vital safety information is contained.

Chapter 1: Strangling

'An attack which appears to constrict or squeeze the victim's throat to prevent them from breathing.'

Strangles are the first technique we will look at that use *Victim Control*. This is a safety concept whereby the victim is in control of what is happening, thus preventing them from hurting themselves.

Reversal of Energy is another safety concept whereby the energy of an attack is directed away from the perceived direction of force, again allowing the victim to remain in control of the technique. In strangles, it can help us establish Victim Control.

To see how these concepts work in practice, let's look at different ways to strangle someone on stage.

Let's start with the version I always teach first because it incorporates both Victim Control, Reversal of Energy and many other ideas that an actor should learn and be familiar with.

The Reverse-Energy Strangle

A Reverse-Energy Strangle is when we approach from in front of the victim and use both hands to strangle them. To

keep this as safe as we can we need to make sure our hands are in the correct position for the attack.

Hold your hands out as if you are holding a bottle in each hand. Now overlap your hands so that the webbing between your thumbs and forefingers are directly on top of each other. It should look like a U-shaped collar that will fit comfortably around your partner's neck. I refer to this as the 'Safety Collar'. I have also heard it called the 'Dove of Peace' and, perhaps less encouragingly, the 'Butterfly of Death'.



This is the shape your hands will form during the attack.

- Get eye contact first of all, to make sure your partner is ready.
- Raise your hands up to throat height as you approach and keep your hands in line with your partner's shoulders to prevent the risk of accidentally poking them in the face with your fingers.



- With relaxed hands and arms, make a sound on the victim's chest by patting both hands against their chest muscles (pectorals). This is called a 'knap'. Avoid striking onto the collar bone - try to find somewhere that is comfortable for the victim. The action should be just like clapping your hands together - nice and relaxed with no force transferred beyond the surface of their chest. Pat onto their chest then bounce the hands off a short distance as soon as you make contact.





The purpose of this knap on the chest is to allow the attacker to take the energy of the strangle into the attack without endangering the victim's throat. It also produces a sharp sound which helps to convince the audience of the aggression we are displaying for them.

- Allow your hands to form the U-shaped safety collar and place this around the victim's throat. The top of your safety collar should rest directly under their jawbone and your fingertips should rest lightly on the side of their neck.



This is where the Reversal of Energy and Victim Control come into play.