The Anatomy Of A Fight Scene Characterization Through Stage Combat And Movement

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THE ANATOMY OF A FIGHT SCENE: CHARACTERIZATION THROUGH STAGE COMBAT AND MOVEMENT

by

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B.S. Western Carolina University, 1995

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Theatre in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2011
ABSTRACT

The study of stage combat is designed to fabricate the illusion of physical combat without causing harm to the performers. Most research in this field does not take into account the characterization of the actor during the training of a fight scene. An actor primarily learns the stunt choreography of the scene and often times the subtleties of the character is often forgotten. Scenes that involve physical contact are an essential aspect of the dramatic action. My aim is to eventually devise a process that will consistently create fight scenes that maintain the integrity of the fight director’s work as well as the mastery of the actor’s character composition. I am aware this is an ambitious project therefore will I approach this endeavor in two stages. This document will cover the first stage of this project: the investigation of the current process of several professionals who have varying experiences with fight choreography.

I will propose and explore the significance of a series of questions a director, actor and fight choreographer should answer before embarking upon a fight sequence successfully. Questions such as: How important is the stunt physiologically and psychologically on the character? Does gender play a role in a fight sequence? Do size, age, and race play a role on character choice in a sequence? Why did the character choose that weapon? Where did that character learn to fight and why in that style?
To my dear Mother: without her love and generous purse strings this would have not been possible. I love you Mom! To my loving partner Camille, you are my rock and my light. I appreciate all your love and support. And to Fiji for keeping my lap warm.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my thesis Chair Be Boyd: thank you for all of your help and pointing me in the right direction. To my committee members, Jim Helsinger and Kate Ingram: thank you for all your contributions. Special thanks to my interviewees: Jeanine Henry, Claire Eye, Tim Bell, Vicki Phillips, and Bobby Talbert.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES ...................................................................................................................... vii

INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................................... 1

DIRECTOR.................................................................................................................................... 5

  Role of the Director in a fight scene ......................................................................................... 5
  Interview with Director, Theatre Professor: Jeanine Henry .................................................. 7
  Final thoughts on the Director ................................................................................................. 10

ACTOR .......................................................................................................................................... 12

  Role of the Actor in a fight scene ............................................................................................ 12
  Interview with Actress, Acting Professor: Claire Eye .............................................................. 14
  Final thoughts on the actor ....................................................................................................... 18

THE FIGHT DIRECTOR ............................................................................................................... 20

  Role of the Fight Director in a fight scene .............................................................................. 20
  Interview with Actor, Stuntman, Fight Director: Tim Bell .................................................... 22
  Final thoughts on the fight director ......................................................................................... 31

THE CINEMATIC LENS ............................................................................................................... 32

  Role of a Stuntwoman in a film .............................................................................................. 32
  Interview with Stuntwoman: Vicki Phillips ............................................................................ 34
  Role of a Fight Director in a film ............................................................................................ 41
  Interview with Stuntman, Fight Director: Bobby Talbert ....................................................... 44
  Final thoughts on the cinematic lens ....................................................................................... 50

CONCLUSION .............................................................................................................................. 51

APPENDIX A INTERVIEW WITH JEANINE HENRY ................................................................. 55

APPENDIX B INTERVIEW WITH CLAIRE EYE ........................................................................ 60

APPENDIX C INTERVIEW WITH TIM BELL .............................................................................. 65

APPENDIX D INTERVIEW WITH VICKI PHILLIPS ................................................................... 73

APPENDIX E INTERVIEW WITH BOBBY TALBERT ................................................................. 82

APPENDIX F COPYRIGHT PERMISSION FORMS .................................................................... 87

REFERENCES ............................................................................................................................... 93
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Stunt-Actor Tim Bell ............................................................................................................ 22
Figure 2: Tim Bell performing a full body burn stunt ........................................................................ 23
Figure 3: Tim Bell’s auto stunt work .................................................................................................. 29
Figure 4: Vicki Phillip’s professional headshot .................................................................................. 33
Figure 5: Bobby Talbert’s professional head shots ............................................................................. 43
Figure 6: Bobby Talbert’s full body burn stunt ................................................................................... 45
Figure 7: Bobby Talbert’s excitement ................................................................................................. 47
Figure 8: Bobby Talbert’s excitement continued ................................................................................ 48
INTRODUCTION

Extremities is a play by William Mastrosimone that was first performed off Broadway in 1982. The play is about a woman, Marjorie, who is attacked by a man named Raul in her own home. Raul attempts to rape Marjorie but to his surprise, she fights back. After a violent struggle Marjorie finally gets the upper hand. She impairs him by spraying insecticide in his eyes and is able to knock him unconscious. Fearing for her life if or when he comes to, she ties him up and drags him into the fireplace. This opening sequence is one of the most brutal stage fights both psychologically and physiologically in theatre.

Before I was chosen to be the fight director for the play Extremities, I did my job without giving much thought to the psychological factors involved in the staging of the fight sequence. Every director I had worked with up to this point had just handed me the show to fill in the fight sequences. Most of them told me where they wanted the sequence to begin and where they wanted the sequence to end. While researching this show, I began to question my approach to fight directing in general. As I worked on this show I became aware of how movement (in this case stage combat) can help inform and clarify characterization. Stage combat is not simply a fight scene as I once believed. It is another choice for the actor to utilize in the creation of their character.

I believe movement has everything to do with characterization. First let me be clear that when I use the word movement, I mean physical action. Characterization can be further developed through stage combat and movement (physical altercations and physical actions). There should be no break in the performer’s character from the beginning to the end of the fight sequence. The choreography of the physical altercations and physical actions should also match and support the psychological choices. Stanislavski developed an acting method for just this process. This process is called the Method of Physical Action. Jean Benedetti explains
Stanislavski’s Method of Physical Action best in the book *Stanislavski and the Actor*. “It has two fundamental principles: 1. That I can do nothing creatively until I know what happens in the play, what the situations are, what demands they make. 2. That by finding out what happens and deciding what I would do physically in any given situation, and believing in the truth of my actions, I release my creative energies and my natural emotional responses organically, without falling into familiar acting clichés” (Benedetti, 1998). There is no separation of the physical action or movement from the psychological process. They are connected. The fight scene happens because the thought process leads the movement in that direction. Therefore movement has everything to do with thought and thought has everything to do with driving a character. I am suggesting there should be no difference in a fight sequence. Stanislavski’s Method of Physical Action is the perfect guide to follow. Start the process by asking some very basic questions: what is happening in the play and in the fight sequence itself, what are the situations, and what demands are they making?

Taking a look at a small portion of Act One: Scene One from the show *Extremities* we can ask these very questions.


What is happening in the play? Marjorie has realized there is no escape from Raul. He has invaded her home and attempted to invade her body. What is happening in the fight sequence and what are the situations? The fight has already begun, Marjorie has bolted for the door and Raul has smacked her around, pinned her and even smothered her with a pillow before the previous dialogue takes place. However, in this scene the phrase “I love you” is repeated several
times. It is important for the actress playing Marjorie to make active and physical choices on each phrase for the audience to connect with her pain.

MARJORIE: I love you I love you I love you.

RAUL: And keep touching me.

MARJORIE: I love you I love you.

RAUL: And touch me down there” (Mastrosimone, 1.1).

Raul is making his demands very apparent. Because he is so caught up in how Marjorie is verbally responding to him, he relaxes a bit and becomes distracted by her answers. Meanwhile, Marjorie is desperately seeking a way out of the situation. Marjorie is determined this rape will not happen. The scene continues with dialogue that is slightly repetitive and can become monotonous if no physical action takes place. The script suggests that the fight sequence start at the door and move quickly to the floor. But this is merely a stage direction. It is up to the fight choreographer to fill in the gaps so that the fight has texture. Using the entire space for the fight will make the sequence more visually exciting for the audience and clearly illustrate Marjorie’s struggle for her life. It also provides an interesting cat and mouse game if she keeps wiggling free and is caught again.

When I blocked this sequence we started with Marjorie pinned to a wall. When she runs for the door, he grabs her by the hair and throws her to the back of the couch. He forces her onto the couch. Climbing on top of her and using the pillows from the couch to smother her. It is important for Marjorie’s face to be open to the audience so they do not miss the expressions that reflect her emotional choices. There are a few slaps that take place here. A scuffle happens where
she is able to break loose for a moment. He is able to regain control and slams her into the refrigerator. This is another opportunity for her face to be shown. Raul should be facing upstage pinning her against the refrigerator. This gives a clear view of Marjorie. The audience can see her decision to grab the bug spray and the frying pan because they have been placed within her reach. Because I used Stanislavski’s Method of Physical Action to support the fight choreography for this play, I learned that I can take a fight scene from mere stage violence to an exciting psychological thrill ride.

Because I grew from my experience with *Extremities*, I thought it would be fascinating to gather more information for a future project. To solidify the research I decided to interview a director, an actor, two fight directors and a stuntwoman. Although the execution of fight choreography for film is slightly different, the information obtained from the following interviews can be translated into any fight sequence. With the information compiled from the interviews, I would like to eventually create kind of a “how to manual” for other fight choreographers.
DIRECTOR

Role of the Director in a fight scene

The director is the first piece of the fight sequence puzzle. She/he is ultimately the deciding factor on how to block a sequence. The director is in charge of telling the story. Mel Shapiro is the head of acting at UCLA’s Theatre Department. He has written a wonderful book titled The Director’s Companion. Shapiro defines directing as, “telling the story” (Shapiro 9). He goes on to say, “Essentially a play works on many different levels—narrative, emotional, psychological, social, symbolic, and so forth—and the director’s job is to illuminate all those levels. A story is invariably held together by dramatic tension. This is the glue that binds the elements of a play, a novel or a film” (Shapiro 9). The same “glue” is used to bind together the fight sequences. Dramatic tension is exactly what makes a fight sequence more interesting. This is where the audience discovers the conflict. This is the explosion that happens onstage. Why didn’t the playwright have the fight offstage? If the sequence was only violent with no build and no understanding of the movement it would be rather boring. Adding a narrative with several different levels brings the movement sequence alive.

The first thing the fight director should do is schedule a meeting with the director before they start the fight blocking rehearsals. There are several questions a fight director needs answered before attempting to block a fight sequence. For the fight sequence in Extremities, the fight director should ask the director the following questions about the set: May I see the blueprint/design of the set? Where is the fireplace? Where is the kitchen (the frying pan)? Where is the bug spray? Where is the rope located? What set pieces are on stage (couch, table, chairs or other obstacles)? By asking these beginning questions the fight director can determine where this
fight sequence needs to take place.

The next step is the props. Asking where they are located is only part of it, ropes can cause nasty burns, bug spray is poisonous and of course no one truly wants to be hit on the head with a cast iron skillet. The director should provide the fight director with the rehearsal or performance props at the beginning of fight rehearsals. The actor needs time to work with the weight of the prop, or any abnormalities they may encounter using said prop.

The fight director should also ask the director the size of the actors. It is important to grasp the height and weight of each actor in blocking your fight sequence. This is especially important in the show Extremities because of the man being hog-tied and shoved into a fireplace. The dimensions of the fireplace are extremely important. The costumes are also important. What are the actors wearing? Can they run in those shoes? Will they trip over a dress? Can they bend down or stand up quickly? Are they wearing a wig that needs to be secured? Do they have jewelry on that can be hazardous -such as earrings that could rip out of their ears, or long necklaces that could choke them in certain positions? It is vital for Raul, the rapist in Extremities, not to wear a watch, because his wrists are tied up with a rope. Wearing a watch can get in the way or cut off his circulation. When Raul references the time in the script and that he knows when Marjorie’s roommates will return, there needs to be a clock somewhere on stage instead of having the actor where a watch.

Lighting needs to be discussed in the preliminary meetings with the director. A dark or dimly lit stage can be dangerous to an actor moving across the stage in a fight scene and deadly if they are carrying a weapon. It is essential to know exactly how much light is being used so that the fight director can block the scene accordingly. Sound and special effects should also be taken into consideration. Fake blood and break away glass can be extremely slippery, the fight
director needs to know when the fake blood or break away glass can be removed or cleaned to allow for a safe space for the actors to continue their performance. If there is not going to be a black out, it is crucial to block around the soiled areas.

I wanted to interview a director to get some idea of how they approached a fight scene with violence. I had the pleasure of interviewing Jeanine Henry. Jeanine holds a M.A. in Theatre from Florida State University and a B.A. in Theatre from Agnes Scott College. She is currently Director of Theatre Arts at Brevard Community College where she directs and teaches a variety of courses including acting, theatre history and stagecraft.

*Interview with Director, Theatre Professor: Jeanine Henry*

1. When you read a script with violence or fight scenes is there any hesitations and why?
   - Yes, because I do not have the training to handle it myself, nor do I have the funds or resources to hire a fight coordinator. It is also difficult to find a fight coordinator in our area. Many students consider themselves experts because they have taken a workshop – this can be both helpful and difficult. It is helpful in that they can manage the fight themselves. It is difficult in that they sometimes think they know more than they do. It is also a great concern that someone will get hurt – a huge responsibility.

2. What are the FIRST steps to organizing a fight or stunt sequence for a Director?
   - Understanding why it exists in the first place. Why do the characters do this now? What is the function of the fight/stunt in the script as a whole? Why did the playwright put it there? Why not put it off stage or describe it? Why do we have to see it?
3. As a Director, what do you like to see accomplished in a fight sequence?
   - Needs to be exciting. It is the height of a character fighting for his goal/objective. It also needs to have its own beginning, middle and end.

4. As a Director, what are the most important elements to a scene with violence?
   - Safety. That feels like a non-answer, but that is critical.

5. What's the most violent show you have directed?
   - *I Hate Hamlet*. Also did *A Comedy of Errors* which has a fight sequence at the end. We staged it on a contemporary waterfront town and the actors fought with pool noodles. Was hysterical and worked because the actors could fight hard but not worry about hurting one another. Also used a boogie board as a shield – great fun.

6. How do you prepare for each show you direct that includes a fight sequence?
   - I prepare the play as I would any play. I decide if I need a fight director or if it is within my capabilities. I would do whatever research necessary and proceed from there.

7. Do you research the weapons or do you leave that to your fight director?
   - I would like to research the weapons but frankly do not often have time. If I hired a fight director, I would expect them to be the expert: what weapons do I use, where do I get them? How do I maintain them? Etc.

8. Do you take the fight sequence and the movement of that sequence into consideration when you are developing costume designs
   - Absolutely.
9. Do you feel that costumes or set design can be a potential danger to the actors during a fight sequence? Do you consider that when designing your set or blocking?

- Yes, costumes and scenery can be a potential danger – on the other hand, they can be a creative obstacle. Platforms, stairs, countertops can create levels for interesting stage pictures. A woman fighting in a dress can be a creative obstacle – what does she have to do to get it out of her way? Can the actor use his costume to assist him in the fight (I’m thinking of Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet* with long sleeves and wrapping those sleeves around the sword – maybe that only works in animation or the movies).

10. Can you explain how you approach a scene with physical contact with your actors?

- We start with baby steps. If the physical contact is romantic, we start holding hands, then embracing, and work our way up to full embraces, kissing, etc. Depends on the maturity/experience of the actors. If it is physical, then we choreograph it to create a foundation and, as with blocking, work towards making it smoother, making the actor’s intentions stronger/clearer, etc.

11. Do you explain emotional context of the physical scene?

- I ask the actors questions of the emotional context. What do you want? How do you feel about him right now? How does fight/engagement help you get what you want? I imagine in many fight scenes the emotional context is fairly obvious – perhaps that is a problem – we take it for granted.

12. Does gender play a role in a fight sequence? Why?

- I think the character plays a role in the fight sequence more than gender in and of itself. A strong female character will fight differently than a timid female
character. Also, one must take into consideration gender issues for the time period of the play. That will impact the fight sequence.

13. Do size, age, and race play a role on character choice in a sequence?
- Certainly, since those factors affect character in the first place.

14. Do you ever research why the character learns to fight or fights in a particular style?
- I have never addressed that question, although it seems to be a critical one. In *Hate Hamlet*, Andrew doesn’t know how to fight and Barrymore makes the comment that “I can. Hamlet can.” Their two levels of experience is part of what makes that fight fun. I did not, however, research Barrymore’s experience with stage combat or the style that he would have learned.

*Final thoughts on the Director*

This interview with Ms. Henry begins to support my theory that the fight director had better arrive on the set prepared. She admittedly says she only hires a fight director when she lacks the training herself. I will apply the list of questions Henry suggested to Extremities, “Why do the characters do this now? What is the function of the fight/stunt in the script as a whole? Why did the playwright put it there? Why not put it off stage or describe it? Why do we have to see it?” to determine how it will affect the first stage of the fight scene (Henry, 2010).

Marjorie and Raul fight at the beginning of the show, because the fight sets up the entire plot. We need to see the brutality of the rapist’s actions toward Marjorie so that we understand the dramatic question of this play. Does Marjorie have the right to demand justice and revenge when she was not raped? If she lets him go, he will he escape going to jail for rape? Technically, he did not rape her. She will have to answer questions of why she didn’t just call 911 but tortured him instead. The court system would turn it around making Raul the victim. The fight solidifies
audience's understanding of why she took such drastic measures to secure him and establishes the tension that drives the show to the very end.

The role of a director in a fight sequence is to define the narrative of the sequence. The director should explain their exact vision of the scene. Collaboration is important. Discussing every detail from movement, props, costumes, lighting and sound is critical to a successful fight sequence.
Role of the Actor in a fight scene

Sanford Meisner is known for his acting technique of “the foundation of acting is the reality of doing” (Meisner 16). An actor preparing for a scene that includes violence has the right to approach this idea with caution. I have heard several times from actors, “Just hit me, I can take it.” These words can really get someone hurt. There’s a difference between being “in the moment” and being incredibly unsafe and uninformed. My response to actors who are trying to balance the ideas of reality and safety in a fight is simple: rehearse...a lot, and make it look real and “in the moment.” As with any scene in a play, the actor is responsible for determining the specificity of the reality of the scene while maintaining an awareness of the pretense. Then she/he can make it look like it is the first time this violent scene has ever occurred, performance after performance. Without adequate rehearsal time, it only takes one unsafe performance to end that actor’s run.

Preparing an actor for a stage combat sequence takes time and a great deal of preparation. “One can use standard principles and textbooks in educating people for law, medicine, architecture, chemistry or almost any other profession—but not for theater. For, in most professions, every practitioner uses the same tools and techniques, while the actor’s chief instrument is himself. And since no two persons are alike, no universal rule is applicable to any two actors in the same way” (Meisner xvii). This is a statement I can truly grasp from Meisner. No two actors are alike therefore: training and rehearsing should lead toward a mastery of the technique in the way that is comfortable for the actor(s).
After addressing all the questions for the director in relation to the fight sequence, the fight director then needs to schedule a meeting with the actors who are involved in the fight. The fight director should explain the set and how it will be used in the sequence. Next the fight director should explain the use of props. Most actors will have an idea of how they think the sequence should go. However, once the fight director has the green light for the fight sequence from the director, it is the fight director who should be in charge of determining the beats in the fight sequence. If an actor feels unsafe at any moment they should be allowed to say so without repercussions. Dale Anthony Girard is an award winning Fight Director. He is a senior member of the Society for American Fight Directors (SAFD), and one of only ten Fight Masters recognized by the SAFD in the United States. Mr. Girard spent five years on the faculty at the National Theatre Conservatory and has been the resident Fight Director for Yale's prestigious School of Drama and School of Music's Opera Program. In his book, *Actors on Guard: a Practical Guide for the Use of the Rapier and Dagger for Stage and Screen*, he agrees with this, “It is essential that actors protect their most valuable instrument: their body” (Girard, 1996).

Exhibiting a clear understanding of the dramatic content of the scene, style choice, set design and props will allow the fight director to lead the fight blocking rehearsals with ease. The actor(s) should feel safe and well trained from beginning to the end of the process.

After the fight director has assessed the physical stamina of the performers and blocked the scene, the psychological aspects should be discussed. The show *Extremities* has sensitive themes involving rape. The fight sequence requires the male actor to make the female actor incredibly uncomfortable and vulnerable during the entire sequence. It is important that the actors have the opportunity to discuss any physical or emotional boundaries they might have before you begin to block the sequence. When I was talking with my cast, it was brought to my
attention that our female lead had been raped and this sequence was incredibly uncomfortable for her. After many talks, she decided to use this show as a way to help her heal. It was important for me as a fight director to stress that fact that she needed to stay in control as a performer to keep the sequence safe for her and her fellow actor. And that he was not to be used as a real punching bag for her therapy or past experiences. It was vital for us to define and set psychological boundaries for her to remember it was a show.

Claire Eye is a graduate of Western Carolina University, Professional Actor Training Program at Louisiana State University. Ms. Eye did her stunt training there with Kevin Coleman (Fight Director for King Lear and Hamlet) of Shakespeare and Company, Lenox, Mass., a founding member of Louisiana’s only Equity stage company, Swine Palace. After graduation, Ms. Eye worked as a voice-over actor in Louisiana with Swine Palace. She spent a few years in New York, worked in off-Broadway shows such as Measure for Measure at Theatre for a New Audience, and Drink at The Underground, as well as voice-over work. Ms. Eye then relocated to coastal North Carolina, where she worked in television and film, including Paradise Falls and The Wedding, produced by Harpo Productions. Since the mid-90’s, Ms. Eye has been teaching theatre studies at Western Carolina University. She has directed several shows for WCU including Fat Pig, The Laramie Project, Othello, and A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Ms. Eye founded the Actor’s Conservatory at WCU and now serves as Program Director for Theatre at the School of Stage & Screen at WCU. I had the pleasure of interviewing Ms. Eye for the Actor portion of this thesis.

Interview with Actress, Acting Professor: Claire Eye

1. When you read a script with violence or fight scenes is there any hesitation and why?
• None. Actually, the opposite – violence or fight scenes just provide another way of expressing the character conflict and drama, and I go into them expecting to train/work with someone who knows what they’re doing, so it’s actually an opportunity, to get physical, to play! The only time I feel hesitant is if my scene partner is an idiot and I don’t trust him/her.

2. What’s the most dangerous show you’ve ever seen on stage? Did it work and why?
• Actually, it would have to be a production I directed of Othello, set in 1962… we did a lot of knife work, blood packs, military style, and it worked really well, because the actor playing Iago had the stunts down cold so could “act” them really believably. It never looked out of control, so we were able to really push it just to that point. Knives and Iago naturally go together – sneaky… and there was a moment or two when I really believed he was killing someone.

3. What are the FIRST steps to organizing a fight or stunt sequence for an actor?
• a-what part of the story is it coming out b-what’s motivating it
• c- what part of the story does it lead into
• d- what “style” of fight or stunt is it, so I can physically prepare my body to pull it off.
• e- Can I physically pull it off? What do I need to do to be able to sell it?

4. As an Actor, what do you like to see accomplished in a fight sequence?
• It MUST further the story or it doesn’t work at all, no matter how well executed or complicated; then, it should have the right combination of “reality” and “bells and whistles” to make me say, “woah…”

5. As an Actor, what are the most important elements to a scene with violence?
• I must trust the fight coordinator, I MUST trust my partner, I must know thoroughly about any weapons, I have to feel confident that I can “pull it off”, which means I have to rehearse it to where it becomes second nature and I don’t have to “think” about each move – has to be plugged into the body and the sequence itself needs a beginning, middle and end – even if the end is that it’s stopped before it’s over.

6. What's the most violent show you have been involved in as an actor?
   • Extremities, in graduate school.

7. How do you prepare for each show that includes a fight sequence?
   • Fight call every night – warmup first, then fight call at ½ speed, then full speed.

8. Do you research the weapons or do you leave that to your fight director?
   • Honestly? Yes and no. I research the weapons, but rely primarily on the fight director to be the main source of the research! He/she needs to know what they’re talking about!

9. Do you take the fight sequence and the movement of that sequence into consideration when you are getting fitted for your costumes and shoes?
   • YES, ABSOLUTELY.

10. Do you feel that costumes or set design can be a potential danger to the actors during a fight sequence? Do you consider them during blocking?
   • YES, ABSOLUTELY – you can actually find things in costume or set choices that you may be able to use in the fight, at least in terms of the character.

11. How important is the emotional context of the physical scene for an actor?
12. How important is the stunt physiologically and psychologically on the actors?

- Very. Fight lets you express rage, and fear, and all manner of emotion… it simply must be a part of the fight.

13. Does gender play a role in a fight sequence? Why?

- Yeah. Different fighting with a woman than a man… woman/man fights tend to be either the woman getting beaten up (yawn) or taking revenge (yea) – but a woman/woman fight takes a different tone, and women are so much more than rage – we bring history to the fight!

14. Do size, age, and race play a role on character choice in a sequence?

- Yes. They determine what you can do physically; how the audience is going to interpret what you do (beating up an elderly black woman? Gonna change things!) and how the actor will inhabit the scene.

15. Do you ever research why a character learns to fight? Why in a particular style?

- YES!! Reference the above, with Iago – he was a soldier, and a brilliant, sneaky one at that – of course he would have a knife in his sock… but if it’s a different culture, background, the style will be different – imperative to know why they know this.

16. As a professor, what are the specific things you make the actor aware of in a violent scene?

- A loss of control does not equal a good fight – MUST know your sequence like the back of your hand BEFORE you can even begin to act it… can’t let go until
you trust each other. **B-MUST** be character based, not stunt based – has to be part of the character and story – if it’s not in the script, find it in yourself.

17. Any other comments?

- I **LOVE** fights and stunts, and have the utmost respect for actors who do them well, and those who teach us how to do it… keep it connected to the story, take risks safely, and it’s the best thing to get to be a part of… seek it out!

**Final thoughts on the actor**

Connection to storyline and safety are truly the important elements of a good fight scene. Understanding how an audience might interpret a scene is also critical. As Ms. Eye said, “…how the audience is going to interpret what you do (beating up an elderly black woman? Gonna change things!) and how the actor will inhabit the scene” (Eye, 2010).

How will the actor inhabit a scene? The way an actor approaches a fight scene depends on how the fight director introduces the process. If the fight director understands the intent of that actor, provides a safe environment physically and psychologically then the trust will form more naturally. The intent is for the performance of the fight scene to come from an organic core. Richard J. Lane is the president of the Academy of the Sword, a Northern California organization that choreographs plays and operas, and teaches stage fighting techniques. In Lane’s book, *Swashbuckling: a Step-by-step Guide to the Art of Stage Combat and Theatrical Swordplay*, he explains the root of combat. “At the root of any combat are the intense feelings we’ve each experienced during conflict as children, teens or adults. As the stakes in a dispute get higher and tempers flare, our natural ‘fight or flight’ reaction kicks in. Our respiration, heart rate, and blood pressure all increase. Our muscles contract. Our eyes focus more sharply. Our fingers
roll into fists. As we mature, our conflicts may become less violent, but the physiological reactions remain the same. These are the symptoms, the palpable signs that performers can use to show that the violence about to happen is not only believable, but inevitable” (Lane, 2004). The final product should be amazing, intense yet, completely believable.

Ms. Eye’s questions for an actor would also help a fight director approaching a show such as *Extremities*. What part of the story is it coming out through Marjorie and for Raul? What’s motivating this fight sequence for Raul? Is it rage? Is it dominance? What about Marjorie? Is it fear, survival and stamina? What part of the story does it lead into, such as the potential murder of Raul? Will Marjorie’s roommates come home and stop her? Is the actor physically capable of pulling off what this fight choreographer has asked of them? What does the actor need to do to be able to sell this as a true potential rape?
THE FIGHT DIRECTOR

Role of the Fight Director in a fight scene

Jenn Zuko Boughn, is an adjunct professor of English and theater at Metro State College of Denver. She has performed with the Colorado Shakespeare Festival, the award-winning Trouble Clef Theatre, and Frequent Flyers Aerial Dance Company. In her book, Stage Combat: Fisticuffs, Stunts, and Swordplay for Theater and Film, she discusses step by step instructions on stage combat with or without weapons. “There is no justification for real violence onstage. Hiring a trained fight coordinator may seem like an unnecessary expense, especially in a small theatre with a minuscule budget, but without stage combat choreography, serious problems can occur. Even a simple pratfall or slap in the face can cause real damage to an actor if not done properly” (Boughn 2). The challenge of a fight director is making the audience believe the fight is real. “Quality stage combat provides the best of both worlds: The violence looks real to an audience, plays real for actor’s intentions, and keeps everyone onstage safe at all times” (Boughn 5). Taking the time to make a fight believable will add value to the sequence. Taking the time to make it safe will add value to the show in general.

I began this study because I believe it is the goal of the fight director to truly understand the intention of the actors. John Kreng has worked as a Stunt Coordinator, Fight Choreographer, Stand-Up Comedian, Author, Actor, Video Game Designer/Producer, and Stuntman. In his book, Fight Choreography: the Art of Non-verbal Dialogue he helps to clarify the intention in the fight scene. It is imperative for the Fight Director to understand how to create an entertaining storyline for an audience that is “interested in seeing a dramatic conflict that (can) only be resolved by a physical altercation” (Kreng, 2008). Tim Bell is one of the best swordsmen in the United States.
He is a talented Fight Director and accomplished stuntman. Figure 1 is a depiction of Tim Bell as a professional stuntman. You may have seen some of his work in the recent film, *Red*. He earned his BA in Theater Performance from Western Michigan University. Bell has over fifteen years working professionally in the entertainment industry. Bell was trained as a stage actor with extensive stage combat experience. He began working in TV and Film shortly after college, and is currently working as a stuntman on feature films in New Orleans and Baton Rouge, LA. Mr. Bell is the sword captain for the Universal Studios show, *Swashbucklers*. I had the privilege of working with him in this show. He was kind enough to answer my fight director questions.
Figure 1: Stunt-Actor Tim Bell

Interview with Actor, Stuntman, Fight Director: Tim Bell

1. What was your first job and was there any hesitation on your part about getting into stunt work?

   • My first “stunt” job was before I had any formal training, for a stage production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. It was the early 90’s and the production concept was to “modernize” it into a college campus. I was asked to choreograph the 39 lashes, which we were making into 39 ‘beatings’ (Rodney King’s beating was still relatively fresh in everyone’s minds) There were two of us “beating” Jesus, and being the more physically capable of the two, the choreography was handed to me, which I was more than happy to take on. It went very well, with the exception of Jesus getting knee’d in the groin for real in one performance, and I breaking a tooth in another. It taught me a lot about direction of action / energy and about sticking to your blocking in a fight. Both incidents were due to minor changes, but there were major consequences. Lesson learned. I started training in Stage Combat right after that.

2. What's the most dangerous stunt you've ever done?

   • It's a coin toss between a full body burn (as seen in figure 2) and getting hit by a car going 20 mph; probably the car hit.
Figure 2: Tim Bell performing a full body burn stunt
3. When did you get into fight directing?

- Pretty early on, in college. I was heavy into theatrical sword fighting / stage combat in school as it satisfied my need to do something physical and artistic. But, 1) You need someone to fight with; and 2) You need choreography. It wasn’t long before the dept chair was asking me and a few others to begin choreographing for the schools shows. Our fellow students who were doing directing labs and black box one-acts saw us as a valuable asset to their shows as well; expanding the list of the shows they wanted to do, that might have violence in them. This created great opportunity for us to cut our teeth as fight performers and fight directors.

4. Explain the difference between coordinating a fight for live shows and film/television?

- Well, that can be a tough one. Rehearsals, for one. In live shows, you generally have more time (never enough, but more!!) If I have time, I can take a performer with good physical sense and teach him to fight decent enough. In film, you don’t have that luxury, so your performers better bring something to the table. In both, if the action can’t be performed well, then you need to change the action. But if film, it happens NOW!! Both have blocking and sight line aspects you have to follow to hide the ‘magic’ of the illusion, but film is tighter, with the action often feeling physically uncomfortable, but it ‘looks good on camera’. Film is generally more physical as well, because it can be slowed down and looked at by the viewer, so it needs to be more “real”. Live shows, it happens and it’s gone. The audience gets the impression, and fills in any little “mistakes” in the performance. One of the things I learned early is that you can actually do your live audience a
disservice by having the action be to violent, to real. They can be taken out of the story, and start worrying about the actor / performers’ health and safety if the violence is to real. In film, the audience is behind the 4th wall, and has been conditioned for the most part. A sick, horrific scene (SAW?) might make someone squeamish, but generally we “the audience” don’t worry about the actors’ safety in these film scenes.

5. What are the FIRST steps to organizing a fight or stunt sequence?
   • Find out what the director wants from the violence. How does this action help support their story as a whole? What is the story within the violence; what information about the characters will we reveal to the audience during this action? What can the performers physically do; what are they capable of, what are their restrictions either mentally or physically? What does the performer (if it’s an actor doing his own physical action) see his character doing in this scene?

6. What's the strangest thing you've ever had to do?
   • I’ve been pretty lucky, and haven’t had to do anything to crazy. A buddy had to run naked through a corn field with a headboard handcuffed to him, but I’ve had no such bizarre requests. Playing a dead body that’s cut down from a tree into a swamp might be it. I had to jump out of a Condor lift that was 15 feet up, with a rope noose around my neck and 8 feet of rope trailing. I landed in a shallow swamp, buried up to my knees in muck, and had to bend over onto my stomach and ‘float’. Of course, it was the last shot of the night, as the sun was coming up, and it was Now, Now, NOW!!
7. How do you prepare for each job you do?

- Buy a bottle of scotch. A big bottle. Kidding! It’s all about information; find out everything you can. What you’re doing, what you’ll need. Make lists. Imagine what the gag will be, and then think about everything that might go wrong and come up with a plan. Double check that you have everything you need, and if you think for an instant you might need something, grab it.

8. Can you explain how you approach a scene with physical contact as an actor, stunt person, and stunt choreographer?

- They are all very similar to me, as my training / career started as an actor and I found stunts along the way. I think my background training brings me to the project from a performer’s point of view no matter what my actual title is. As mentioned prior, information is key. What is the action? What does the director want the action to say? How can I pull the action off best, safest? What are my concerns about the action? If I’m acting in the role, then I’d layer more character information into my choices. If I’m choreographing, I’m looking much more at the bigger picture obviously, and making notes as to what I might want a performer to do, and what options I might need if the physical work is to much for them to accomplish successfully.

9. How important is the stunt physiologically and psychologically on the character as a stunt actor?

- In my opinion, very. Choices of violence or serious physical action are ones made for a reason. Why are they driving fast, against traffic? Why is he jumping off a roof in to a passing garbage truck? Why does she slap him? Everything the
character does is for a reason, with a goal and consequences’ for that action. When I first started training in stage combat, I spent a summer and I went to a workshop in Maine for two weeks, followed by another immediately in Vegas for three weeks. When I came back, my mentor, a professor at my University, told me that my acting had grown leaps and bounds after that. It was the focus I had learned as a fighter. As a fight performer. And the training I had started was one of character choices and performing action, acting the action. This all made sense to me, allowed me to stop monitoring my performance and live more in the moment. I had to, safety and the choreography demanded it, demanded a strict focus. I was fortunate that my approach was guided by instructors that reminded me that we were actors first, and fighters second. And that “we fight, when words will no longer do…” When is that, for that character?

10. Does gender play a role in a fight sequence? Why?

- Yes, absolutely. Because, thank goodness, men and women are different!! Men stereotypically approach violence differently than women. Men want to punch and pommel, women want to tear and rip. Men fight from a higher center, the chest, women lower, from their stomach and hips. Yes, there are exceptions. And when we use these exceptions, we are telling the audience that the character is ‘exceptional’ at what they’re doing. It all goes back to telling the story. What do we want to tell the audience with our physical action?

11. Do size, age, and race play a role on character choice in a sequence?

- Yes, of course! All these things will affect what choices the character makes. If they’re young, they might not have extensive ‘training’ or even life experience to
draw upon. If they’re excessively old, their action might be slower, but perhaps more efficient. If there are four white cops beating up a young black man, is that different than two white and two black cops beating a young black man? Or 4 black cops beating a black man? Of course. Our perception of our world influences what we feel and believe, and when we see it performed we draw from our own life’s experiences. This is information we use to make decisions about the story we’re telling. If we choose to play against the stereotype, then we are telling the viewer something else. Often going into comedic performances. Old timers, acting like children as they race after an ice cream truck, tripping and pulling at each other, trying to ‘get their first’.

12. Do you ever research why the character choose that weapon?

- Yes, always. Although it’s often more of a ‘justification’ as to why the character has that weapon. Because the director wants a 12 gauge pump shotgun, or because it’s the sword the prop dept had. It’s not often that an actor / performer gets to choose their weapon based on their character development. But we are still telling a story as to why they have that weapon. Rob Roy shows this well with Liam Neeson having a broadsword, and Tim Roth with a transitional rapier. Their weapons and the style of fighting with each is an intricate part of each of their characters. And Dirty Harry? He doesn’t just have any gun, it’s a 44 Magnum. “The most powerful handgun in the world. Do you feel lucky punk? Do ya?”
Figure 3: Tim Bell’s auto stunt work
13. Do you ever research why did that character learn to fight and why in that style?

- Yes, of course. Again, more information about the character. The Karate Kid (first version), tells that well. He’s beat up, but has no money to take classes. Finds an old eccentric neighbor who knows Karate and begs to be taught. He does chores to pay for the instruction, but seems to be doing more ‘work’ than training. Until his frustration comes out in an argument with the old man, and he’s shown that the ‘work’ was the foundation of his training. “wax on, wax off” Do you think that became an international catch phrase for no reason? It was clever, and the audience, who didn’t know upon the first viewing, went “Oh, now I see!” and it stuck like glue. How a character fights, why they fight, and the path they took to get there is all part of the character. In The Karate Kid, it was the basis of the story.

14. What’s the most important element of a scene with physical violence?

- Safety. Followed by, “does the violence support the story?” That’s why we do what we do, to tell a story.

15. What do you aim for in each sequence?

- To support the directors vision of where the story is going. To have the audience see aspects of the characters through the action that is performed. To have climaxes and valleys in the action, that support the directors vision of becoming more endeared to a character, or dislike them more if that’s the goal. To tell a story with the action, that reveals information about the character, their past, and the choices they make as they work towards their goals in both the action sequence and the story as a whole.
Final thoughts on the fight director

Tim Bell is exactly right, “that’s why we do what we do, to tell a story” (Bell, 2010). It is up to the fight director to determine what story to tell with the fight sequence. Maintaining the integrity of the original vision should be in every choreographed moved. Bell’s question, when choreographing Extremities, it is important that Raul also has a story. It may be easier to understand Marjorie’s fight for survival than Raul’s thirst for conquest. However, it is important to explore both stories within the violence.

Gathering this knowledge and being prepared, researching all of these elements before day one of rehearsal will help the fight director succeed in this vision. Jonathan Howell is a British fight director, actor, dancer, choreographer, singer and director, as well as co-founder of The Society of British Fight Directors, now known as The British Academy of Dramatic Combat (BADC). In his book, Stage Fighting a Practical Guide, he said, “In stage fighting, the techniques are broken down into their component parts, such as who does what to whom and, without changing the appearance of the attack, the energies and controls are then reversed, leading to the stage-combat concepts of reverse energy, mis-direction, victim control, and so forth. Stage combat also removes the usual end result of the real techniques, which is pain” (Howell, 2008). Accomplishing the actor’s intent, the director’s total dream, keeping the performers safe and understanding the true art of stage combat, a fight director will accomplish a polished fight sequence.
THE CINEMATIC LENS

Role of a Stuntwoman in a film

There are obvious differences between the stage and film. The most obvious is theatre is live, film is camera magic. The rehearsal time for theatrical productions is usually longer, but once the show opens, everything is now or never. Film has the advantage of camera angles, edits, reshoots, sound effects and of course the ever growing field of computer graphic imaging. It is possible for a woman to jump off the roof, fall 300ft and kill a zombie.

In other words, with the cinematic lens, almost anything is possible. However, with action films on high demand, the pressure of stuntmen and women and their coordinators is growing. Who can come up with the most unique fight scene? Who can blow up the most stuff? Or who is going to stunt double that blue woman Mystique in the X-men films. Actually her name is Vicki Phillips. Figure 4 is a depiction of Vicki Phillips. And she was kind enough to sit down and explain the crazy world of stuntwomen. A competitive gymnast for 15 years, Vicki began her stunt career working in live theme park stunt shows. She quickly made the move to film and television, working all over the world with some of the most well-known stunt coordinators and most famous actresses in the entertainment industry. She has not only doubled Charlize Theron, Rebecca Romijn, Gena Lee Nolin, and many other actresses, but she is very instrumental in choreographing action sequences for maximum intensity.
Figure 4: Vicki Phillip’s professional headshot
Interview with Stuntwoman: Vicki Phillips

1. What was your first stunt job and were you hesitant at all?

- That would be *Batman Forever Stunt Spectacular* in Houston, TX, as the female lead, Chase Meridian. The only stunt was some stage combat, some fighting. Yes, I was hesitant. I wasn’t actually interested at all in stunt work, because I was a competitive gymnast for 17 years. I kinda felt I was done performing. But a coach I was working with in Houston asked me to audition for a live stunt show in the summer, because I was teaching gymnastics at the time. And he asked since classes were slow, why don’t you audition with me and we will do this stunt show together this summer. I said fine. I auditioned and I got it, and he didn’t. ha ha.

2. What was the most dangerous stunt you have ever done?

- The most dangerous stunt I have ever done is actually one of the most fun stunts I have ever done. And it was repelling out of the governor’s helicopter in Puerto Rico, over the world’s largest telescope in Puerto Rico. It was 3,000ft above the ground. It was freezing up there. But they wanted a really far off shot. It was Jim Vickers and I repelled out of the helicopter and they dropped us down to the telescope. It was for *The Dream Team*, which was a TV series.

3. Do find it is hard for women in the world of stuntmen?

- Well, I don’t know, I can really only answer that for myself, not anyone else. I have never had a problem, because I have always been one of the guys. I get along very well with men. I get them, maybe it’s because I had two brothers. Ha ha If I had a job where there was some sensitive issues, like my costume being
revealing or what I was doing was sensitive. Then I would have a conversation with the guys and the stunt riggers asking them to be respectful. That I am going to professional and I expect them to be professional. I have never had really any problem as far as male/female issues.

4. Have you ever felt fear?
   - Ohhhhhh yeah. Yeah! Like, what am I doing? Why am I doing this? I have my degree in education. I could be teaching kindergarten right now and instead… I am standing on this branch 20ft in the air above this moving vehicle and I have to dive onto the hood of it. While it’s moving! This may be my last stunt. This may be my last day on the planet! Ha ha Ya know?

5. Did you ever wonder why you never just became an actor?
   - Haaaa I am not very good at acting. So, no. I never ask that question but I did wonder why I never stuck with the kindergarteners, ha ha!

6. Who influenced you the most?
   - Glen Wilder, he’s a stunt coordinator and 2\textsuperscript{nd} Unit Director. He’s an amazing man. He’s been in the business for so many years. He really took me under his wing and taught me so many things I needed to know about films and positioning on camera. And how to play to the camera and how to get into character. Even how to be safe, and be able to go home every night and not go to the hospital. So, yeah, he’s my biggest role model in the business. Ya know, wonder woman influenced me as well. I saw that on television and I was a gymnast. I use to think, ‘I can do that stuff.’ The early action adventure shows were inspiring.

7. How do you prepare for each job?
8. Do you learn about the person you are going to stunt for or wing it?

- If I don’t know the actress right off the bat I will google them, pictures of them or projects they’ve done. Rent a couple of movies they were in so you can see how they move. Usually they carry themselves a certain way. So I study their posture before I get there on set. Prepare a little bit. Simple things, do they walk with their feet in, or out? It makes a big difference. In the way you carry your hips, do they hunch shoulders, do they have large or small breasts, what’s their hair like? Because you need to know in a fight scene how you’re going to work your hair. Because we have to cover our faces, so we use creative ways to do that.

9. Please explain the difference between a stunt double and a stunt actor?

- A stunt actor is your own character, your own person. A stunt double you are doubling the actress. You have to look like, act like, fight like the actor and match everything they’ve already done. Sometimes they’ve done the first part of the fight scene and you have to follow them.

10. Can you explain how you approach a scene with physical contact?

- As an actress, I would want to know what the director wants. Then you can work the choreography around what the director wants to see. As a stunt person, you do what the coordinator tells you to do, ha ha. There is a pecking order as a stunt double you have to follow the ranks there. As a coordinator, you find out what the director wants, read the script, find out your location, what are your props, your
costumes. That is actually a huge thing. Are you in 4 inch heals? Are you barefoot? Are you in lingerie? Or do you have jeans and a long shirt so you can hide your elbow pads or are you painted with no clothes on. Once you have found out the important details you can go for that. What do you do best? What can you offer to the fight?

11. Approaching a fight scene what do you look at first?

- Everything! Then the choreography. You can’t just look at a situation from the fighting or it won’t fit at all. You have to find out the location. Are you on stairs? If you are on top of a stair case that’s completely different or if you are out in the jungle or on the beach. You just have to understand the situation. Day, or night, weapons?

12. Does gender play a role?

- Of course, sometimes you are supposed to fight like a girl and sometimes you get to wow the audience. There are sensitive areas between men and women, body areas. A lot of times when you are fighting with other girls, they typical don’t throw as many punches to the face. I personally have never been in a real fight with another girl. I have no idea if I would actually go for pulling her hair first. However, that is typically how the choreography goes. Maybe they have studied women cat fighting, ha ha. I mean really, I would go for an elbow to the nose and be done, ha ha. I know, Nonalee, and that is most certainly what you would do. Ha ha. I mean I wouldn’t break a knuckle or even a nail, just elbow to the nose and walk away.

13. Is culture a factor?
• I know I when I was doing some choreography in India, the director wanted it toned down a bit. He wanted it more “gentle”.

14. Size?
• I’ve actually had some of my best fight scenes with really, really big guys. It can really open up choreography with really big, strong people. The only way it affects it, is with extremes.

15. How much of these elements are determined by the script?
• Really it is the director to the coordinator to the stunt person. Sometimes they let you bring them a, b or c. I always appreciate it when they ask me. I know what I can do best, so if I have the opportunity to communicate that with them, it will be a great fight scene. It’s nice to have a little of both. A bit of direction and creativity.

16. Do you ever research why a character uses a specific weapon?
• No, but I have certainly questioned that, ha ha. Numerous times.

17. Do you think an actor should question it?
• YES! It is important to the character. Perhaps they can’t use guns, there is a back story. Like my father was killed by one or something like that. But I can use a knife and I don’t have a moral issue with that. But it needs to be explained in the story.

18. What about style?
• Yes, definitely. If there is a style that the character has been gifted. Like a martial artist, or a spy or SWAT, or they are a creature of some sort. Then it is decided for you. But if it is not given to you, then look at emotionally what the character is
going through at that moment. My face shouldn’t be shown because I am
doubling, but I try to get the facial expressions and I am extremely verbal. I am
also really into the fight. Because it comes inside out. It comes from your gut and
goes to your fingertips. If you are just doing the outside work, I think that’s where
a lot of characters detach themselves. The stunt person does the fighting the actor
does the acting. But your job, your goal is for the audience not to be able to tell
the difference. The biggest thrill and compliment to me, is when the actor takes
the credit for it. It means we fooled everybody. It doesn’t make me angry; I still
got to take a paycheck home. And I know I did my job right. I did it so well, no
one in the audience could tell.

19. Emotions?

- YES, cry if the actor is supposed to cry. It will be more convincing body wise.

20. Goals?

- The first one is not to get hurt. And not to hurt anyone. Safety is the most
  important. If you don’t get to walk away from the scene, then you don’t get to
  work.

21. You know I have to ask about the Xmen films and you doubling Rebecca Romijn as
Mystique?

- Rebecca Romijn was so wonderful. She was fun, creative and we got along so
  great. So was so miserable in the costume so we sort of helped each other get
  through that. Through hours and hours of make-up process. It took 10 hours when
  they first started it. They got it down to 5 hours to get into it and 2 hours to get out
  of it. Most days I was in overtime before I started a stunt. My days on that set
were like 20 hour days. It was grueling, but I was so excited to be a part of that project and so blessed to be picked for that role. It was so unique and so cool. And I got to do so many cool stunts. It was just super awesome.

22. What about doubling for Charlize Theron in Aeon Flux?

- She’s very talented. Physically and acting wise she could probably be a stunt woman. She was a theatre ballerina. She’s very soft and a coordinated, I mean really coordinated. So it was really fun doubling her. I didn’t have to try that hard with my gymnastics background. The way she would move her arms, touch things, and place her hands on things before she was about to do a tumbling move was exactly the way I would do. So, when I watched her I thought, sigh, that is so great. I didn’t have to act very much or study her movements very much because they were so similar to performing gymnastics. The way she placed her feet, hands and postures. This is not the case with all actresses. They can act but the physicality’s are not there. They just can’t fake their way out of it. Then the stunt double really has to step it up. The transitions in and out of fight scenes are so important. For instance, one actress I was doubling I had to walk into the scene really girly, then turn it up a notch, then walk out of the scene very girly because the actress simply could not find that animal aggression inside her. So, they could not have her lead into the fight at all. We couldn’t even let her throw the first punch or initiate the fight sequence. We couldn’t even film her running because it was so feminine. Then I was used to transition as well, to try to transition the scenes. It should always play straight through. Sometimes, it is simply the fault of
the actor not being trained well enough or the stunt person not transitioning well enough to become the actor.

23. How can we train an actor to transition?

- They have to work together. Rehearse! They have to train. They have to watch their transitions.

24. Most important advice:

- Whatever emotion is in that fight scene, they need to grasp on to it. And in a really big way. And if that means you have to take them somewhere to punch a bag, a dummy or grab a weapon and really let them have it. Then need to know what that emotion feels like 100%. They have to emotionally connect that with their face, their sounds, and all of them.

**Role of a Fight Director in a film**

Bobby Talbert knows exactly how to jump back and forth from live shows stunt coordination to the big block buster films. Mr. Talbert was kind enough to lend his advice to the thesis project as well. Figure 5 is a depiction of Bobby Talbert. Bobby Talbert grew up in Palm Bay, Florida. Bobby was one of the youngest Firefighters to join the Palm Bay Fire department at the age of fourteen utilizing the junior volunteer program. There he would learn rappelling, rope, and harness work as well as a wealth of knowledge that would be invaluable in his future in the stunt business. Bobby started riding motorcycles at the age of seven. Bobby builds, designs, fabricates and is known in the stunt world for his unique rigging abilities. He has worked for all of the major studios including stunt coordinating for Disney Cruise lines. Bobby has stunt
coordinated such well known live shows as the *American Gladiators* live show, *Lights, Motors, Action EXTREME STUNT SHOW* at Hollywood studios, *FEAR FACTOR live* at Universal studios Florida and California. He has also performed in live stunt shows all over the world. You can see Bobby on the big screen in *Bad Boys 2, Fast and Furious 2* and *Fast 5, WhiteBread, Florida City, Flood of Fear*, and over twenty other films. Bobby will spend every moment possible developing and implementing the newest most cutting edge safety standards possible. Bobby specializes in pushing the envelope of action while maintaining a safe and exciting style.
Figure 5: Bobby Talbert’s professional head shots
Interview with Stuntman, Fight Director: Bobby Talbert

1. What was your first job and was there any hesitation on your part about getting into stunt work?

   • My first job was, Separate but Equal with Bert Lancaster and Sydney Poitier. I have never had any hesitation—I’ve loved it from day one!

2. What's the most dangerous stunt you've ever done?

   • As difficult as it is to narrow it down, I’d have to say the most dangerous stunt I have done was a full body burn for the movie, Special Weapons and Tactics, (as shown in figure 6).

3. When did you know you wanted to coordinate?

   • It was the next step for me in the industry.

4. Explain the difference between coordinating for live shows and film/television?

   • When it comes to coordinating for films, the pace is more intense, the risk is much greater, and the budgets are much larger. On the other hand, live shows utilize less risky stunts, due to the amount of times a specific stunt is performed daily.

5. What are the FIRST steps to organizing a fight or stunt sequence?

   • Establish a fight team, determine each individual’s fighting strengths, implement those strengths, and then begin the choreography.

6. Do you find it's hard for women in the world of the 'stuntman'?

   • No, due the fact that both sexes are necessary for doubles. Just in the past ten years we are seeing more women stunt coordinators.
Figure 6: Bobby Talbert’s full body burn stunt
7. Do you ever feel fear?
   - Yes, very often. Fear is the base of what keeps me focused.

8. Do you ever wonder why you didn’t just become an actor?
   - I found stunts to be much more exciting. (Figures 7 and 8 display the type of excitement.)

9. What's the strangest thing you've ever had to do?
   - Once I had to dress up in full SCUBA gear; wet-suit and all, and run through an airport.

10. How do you prepare for each job you do?
    - Part of the fun in this job, is that you never know what a director will dream up in his head. So each job is prepared differently according to the director’s vision.

11. Do you learn about the person you are going to stunt for or wing it?
    - If you are aware of whom it is ahead of time, then yes, for sure. But, most of the time you are performing ND (Non-descript Stunts).

12. You are also a stunt actor can you explain the difference between that and a stuntman?
    - A Stunt actor focuses more on the acting vs. a normal ‘stuntman’, whereas a ‘stuntman’ focused purely on stunts. The stunt actors are generally found in live shows, theme park, etc.

13. Can you explain how you approach a scene with physical contact as an actor, stunt person, and stunt choreographer?
    - First, we assess the Risks. If it is decided that the risks are at an acceptable level, then we move into choreography. If not…. we focus on finding a happy medium between acceptable risks, and the director’s vision. Sometimes this could be as
Figure 7: Bobby Talbert’s excitement
Figure 8: Bobby Talbert’s excitement continued
simple as using a pad, and cutting to a second shot, or as difficult as a week’s worth of rigging—for a five second shot.

14. How important is the stunt physiologically and psychologically on the character as a stunt actor?
   • It depends on the situation. Sometimes it’s not important at all. Then again one fight scene can introduce, and tell the story of a character.

15. Does gender play a role in a fight sequence? Why?
   • Yes. For many reasons. One being, society is not as accepting of violence towards women. Audiences are much more tolerable when men are violent towards one-another.

16. Do size, age, and race play a role on character choice in a sequence?
   • 100% Since the stunt person is chosen based on who they are doubling.

17. Do you ever research why did that character learn to fight and why in that style?
   • Only if the character has a unique style of fighting, the writer or director will usually fill us in on the motivation for this unique style.

18. What’s the most important element of a scene with physical violence?
   • Speed, with very clean and articulate movement. Cuts being placed strategically as to avoid being overly violent which could result in losing your audience.

19. What do you aim for in each sequence?
   • The message of the stunt is delivered in the same fashion the director had envisioned it. Knowing that I made the directors vision come to life to help tell his story in his movie the way he sees it in his head.

20. Any other comments?
Based on my life so far as a stuntperson I wouldn’t say this life is for everyone but it has been a passion for me and I have been blessed enough to have realized my dreams of waking up every morning excited about going to work and never knowing what country or situation I will get to experience next.!!

*Final thoughts on the cinematic lens*

The angles, rehearsal time, lighting and special effects are drastically different on a film set versus a theatrical set. However, that did not stop the show *Extremities* from becoming a film in 1986 starring Farrah Fawcett, Alfre Woodard, Diana Scarwid and James Russo. The storyline from the Internet Movie Database known as IMDb poses even more questions for the audience. “An intended rape victim manages to escape from her attacker but leaves her purse behind. Worried that he may visit her house and finish what he has started, she contacts the police but they are unable to help, saying that she has no proof. "If he calls, let us know and we'll send a man round!" A fat load of good that would be. Her worst fears are realized when, alone one day in the house, her attacker visits and attempts again to rape her. Circumstances allow her not only to resist the attack but to turn the tables and lock him away. And that is where her dilemma really starts. Does she release him and risk another attack? Does she go to the police and risk being called a liar? Or does she kill him - and become as low as him?” (IMDb, 2010).

Even in a cinematic scope, questions are posed about the violence. Does she risk another attack or kill him? The almost rape scene in *Extremities* is the catalyst for the show whether is done on stage or on film.
CONCLUSION

I have made a living as a stunt performer, safety diver, actress, director, and fight director. I have fought against the blatant stereotype for years that stunt people are merely meat heads with all brawn and no brain. A great fight scene or stunt scene should be a beautiful demonstration of the physical action that represents the psychology of the character. Whether the performer is a stunt actor or the actor performing her/his own stunts or whether it is lighting someone on fire or flipping a car, they must all remain true to the story and how the character is responding to what is happening to them.

In order to attempt to have a flawless show with a fight sequence, it is imperative to have the Fight Director be a part of the collaborative team. The Fight Director should be there from the first meeting with the producers, director, actors, designers, dramaturges, etc. Cirque du Soleil is a company that demonstrates successful teamwork because the collaboration begins early in the process. They have the physical action creators and designers present from the start. I have had the privilege of working for the show Le Reve, in Las Vegas. It was directed by Franco Dragone. Mr. Dragone has directed several shows for cirque in Vegas and all over the world such as Mystère, Alegría, Quidam, O, and La Nouba. He has a team that can produce unbelievable art from movement. The physical action these performers create defies gravity and sometimes even physics itself. Watching a Dragone directed show is a wonderful use of physical performers creating moving art with conscious psychological choices. The success of their artistry relies on good partnership from the beginning of the process.

Once the Fight Director has been recognized as part of the creative team from the very beginning, she/he needs to answer questions. “How does this action help support their story as a whole? What is the story within the violence; what information about the characters will we
reveal to the audience during this action? What can the performers physically do; what are they capable of, what are their restrictions either mentally or physically? What does the performer (if it’s an actor doing his own physical action) see his character doing in this scene? What is the action? What does the director want the action to say? How can I pull the action off best, safest? What are my concerns about the action?” (Bell, 2010).

Tim Bell put it best, “everything the character does is for a reason, with a goal and consequences’ for that action” (Bell, 2010). If you are approaching a fight scene with no reason, no goal and no consequence for that action, it will fall flat. By answering these questions and more, the fight scene can be fully equipped to handle any emotional rollercoaster. This is the key to dissecting the characterization in a fight scene. Understanding physics, for every action there is a reaction. The choices stunt performers make are not merely athletic, the understanding of physics is critical for safety. Educating actors on timing, balance and always having your head in the scene is vital. It is important to enter the scene as prepared as possible.

Approach the scene emotionally as well as physically and visually. Truly grasp the vision of the director, understand the needs of the actor, and visualize the space and timing. Keith Ducklin and John Waller have a book, *Sword Fighting: a Manual for Actors & Directors*, which also agrees with this approach. Keith Ducklin taught dramatic combat at some of England's top drama schools and is also involved with the Royal Armouries Museum. He is an accredited teaching member of the British Academy of Dramatic Combat and secretary of the European Historical Combat Guild. John Waller has spent more than thirty years as an action arranger and historical consultant for stage and screen. For nineteen years he taught stage combat at drama schools including the London Academy of Music and Drama and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. As Head of Interpretation for the Royal Armouries at Leeds he has helped
to produce many specialist film projects. He is a member of the British Academy of Dramatic Combat and the Equity Fight Director's Register, and in 1999 founded the European Historical Combat Guild. Waller’s stage, film and TV credits include: Martin Guerre, Elizabeth R, Dr Who, and Pride and Prejudice and Arms in Action. “When the attention of an audience is not on the choreography of the fight, but instead on the fight’s outcome as a part of the story being told, then everyone involved has got it right” (Ducklin, Waller, 2001). Rehearse, rehearse, and if given more time, rehearse some more.

The director should also include fight choreography questions in their vision. Questions like, “Why do the characters do this now? What is the function of the fight/stunt in the script as a whole? Why did the playwright put it there? Why not put it off stage or describe it? Why do we have to see it? What do you want? How do you feel about him right now? How does fight/engagement help you get what you want?” (Henry, 2010).

The actor has to answer even more questions. “What part of the story is it coming out? What’s motivating it? What part of the story does it lead into? What “style” of fight or stunt is it, so I can physically prepare my body to pull it off? Can I physically pull it off? What do I need to do to be able to sell it?” (Eye, 2010).

When I began this thesis project, I wanted to prove that it is practical and possible to answer all of these questions. Every person that I interviewed had their own set of questions they ask when approaching a fight scene. Each person did take characterization into account. It was not just merely a violent movement they were creating. The fight scene had meaning. I hope to incorporate all of these questions when I am asked to choreograph my next fight scene.
Over the course of my stunt work career, I have jumped off buildings, wrecked cars, used all kinds of weapons, traveled the world, worked underwater, worked with dangerous animals and have successfully kicked some major derrière. There has always been a symbiotic relationship between body movement and performance. I have never considered my stunt work separate from my acting work. Every movement whether it was a slight twist of a sword or a car flip over a bridge was a conscious choice of that character I was portraying.

Each movement is a choice. It is important the performer’s choice for their character is from that organic base. Their body and voice is the instrument of creation. Lighting, sets, props and costumes are merely enhancements of their original creation. Movement is the core, the center and the beginning life force of their character. The fight scene should always be safe for performers, exciting for the audience, and organic to the concept of the play (Suddeth, 1996). Unlocking that movement potential, no matter what the performers physical make up or body type, is the anatomy of a fight scene.
APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW WITH JEANINE HENRY
1. When you read a script with violence or fight scenes is there any hesitations and why?
   - Yes, because I do not have the training to handle it myself, nor do I have the funds or resources to hire a fight coordinator. It is also difficult to find a fight coordinator in our area. Many students consider themselves experts because they have taken a workshop – this can be both helpful and difficult. It is helpful in that they can manage the fight themselves. It is difficult in that they sometimes think they know more than they do. It is also a great concern that someone will get hurt – a huge responsibility.

2. What are the FIRST steps to organizing a fight or stunt sequence for a Director?
   a. Understanding why it exists in the first place. Why do the characters do this now? What is the function of the fight/stunt in the script as a whole? Why did the playwright put it there? Why not put it off stage or describe it? Why do we have to see it?

3. As a Director, what do you like to see accomplished in a fight sequence?
   - Needs to be exciting. It is the height of a character fighting for his goal/objective. It also needs to have its own beginning, middle and end.

4. As a Director, what are the most important elements to a scene with violence?
   - Safety. That feels like a non-answer, but that is critical.

5. What's the most violent show you have directed?
   - *I Hate Hamlet*. Also did *A Comedy of Errors* which has a fight sequence at the end. We staged it on a contemporary waterfront town and the actors fought with
pool noodles. Was hysterical and worked because the actors could fight hard but not worry about hurting one another. Also used a boogie board as a shield – great fun.

6. How do you prepare for each show you direct that includes a fight sequence?
   - I prepare the play as I would any play. I decide if I need a fight director or if it is within my capabilities. I would do whatever research necessary and proceed from there.

7. Do you research the weapons or do you leave that to your fight director?
   - I would like to research the weapons but frankly do not often have time. If I hired a fight director, I would expect them to be the expert: what weapons do I use, where do I get them? How do I maintain them? Etc.

8. Do you take the fight sequence and the movement of that sequence into consideration when you are developing costume designs?
   - Absolutely.

9. Do you feel that costumes or set design can be a potential danger to the actors during a fight sequence? Do you consider that when designing your set or blocking?
   - Yes, costumes and scenery can be a potential danger – on the other hand, they can be a creative obstacle. Platforms, stairs, countertops can create levels for interesting stage pictures. A woman fighting in a dress can be a creative obstacle – what does she have to do to get it out of her way? Can the actor use his costume to assist him in the fight (I’m thinking of Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet* with long sleeves and wrapping those sleeves around the sword – maybe that only works in animation or the movies).
10. Can you explain how you approach a scene with physical contact with your actors?
   - We start with baby steps. If the physical contact is romantic, we start holding hands, then embracing, and work our way up to full embraces, kissing, etc. Depends on the maturity/experience of the actors. If it is physical, then we choreograph it to create a foundation and, as with blocking, work towards making it smoother, making the actor’s intentions stronger/clearer, etc.

11. Do you explain emotional context of the physical scene?
   - I ask the actors questions of the emotional context. What do you want? How do you feel about him right now? How does fight/engagement help you get what you want? I imagine in many fight scenes the emotional context is fairly obvious – perhaps that is a problem – we take it for granted.

12. Does gender play a role in a fight sequence? Why?
   - I think the character plays a role in the fight sequence more than gender in and of itself. A strong female character will fight differently than a timid female character. Also, one must take into consideration gender issues for the time period of the play. That will impact the fight sequence.

13. Do size, age, and race play a role on character choice in a sequence?
   - Certainly, since those factors affect character in the first place.

14. Do you ever research why the character learns to fight or fights in a particular style?
   - I have never addressed that question, although it seems to be a critical one. In *I Hate Hamlet*, Andrew doesn’t know how to fight and Barrymore makes the comment that “I can. Hamlet can.” Their two levels of experience is part of what
makes that fight fun. I did not, however, research Barrymore’s experience with stage combat or the style that he would have learned.
APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW WITH CLAIRE EYE
1. When you read a script with violence or fight scenes is there any hesitation and why?

- None. Actually, the opposite – violence or fight scenes just provide another way of expressing the character conflict and drama, and I go into them expecting to train/work with someone who knows what they’re doing, so it’s actually an opportunity, to get physical, to play! The only time I feel hesitant is if my scene partner is an idiot and I don’t trust him/her.

18. What’s the most dangerous show you’ve ever seen on stage? Did it work and why?

- Actually, it would have to be a production I directed of *Othello*, set in 1962… we did a lot of knife work, blood packs, military style, and it worked really well, because the actor playing Iago had the stunts down cold so could “act” them really believably. It never looked out of control, so we were able to really push it just to that point. Knives and Iago naturally go together – sneaky… and there was a moment or two when I really believed he was killing someone.

19. What are the FIRST steps to organizing a fight or stunt sequence for an actor?

- a-what part of the story is it coming out b-what’s motivating it
- c- what part of the story does it lead into
- d- what “style” of fight or stunt is it, so I can physically prepare my body to pull it off.
- e- Can I physically pull it off? What do I need to do to be able to sell it?

20. As an Actor, what do you like to see accomplished in a fight sequence?
It MUST further the story or it doesn’t work at all, no matter how well executed or complicated; then, it should have the right combination of “reality” and “bells and whistles” to make me say, “woah…”

21. As an Actor, what are the most important elements to a scene with violence?

- I must trust the fight coordinator, I MUST trust my partner, I must know thoroughly about any weapons, I have to feel confident that I can “pull it off”, which means I have to rehearse it to where it becomes second nature and I don’t have to “think” about each move – has to be plugged into the body and the sequence itself needs a beginning, middle and end – even if the end is that it’s stopped before it’s over.

22. What’s the most violent show you have been involved in as an actor?

- Extremities, in graduate school.

23. How do you prepare for each show that includes a fight sequence?

- Fight call every night – warmup first, then fight call at ½ speed, then full speed.

24. Do you research the weapons or do you leave that to your fight director?

- Honestly? Yes and no. I research the weapons, but rely primarily on the fight director to be the main source of the research! He/she needs to know what they’re talking about!

25. Do you take the fight sequence and the movement of that sequence into consideration when you are getting fitted for your costumes and shoes?

- YES, ABSOLUTELY.

26. Do you feel that costumes or set design can be a potential danger to the actors during a fight sequence? Do you consider them during blocking?
• YES, ABSOLUTELY – you can actually find things in costume or set choices that you may be able to use in the fight, at least in terms of the character.

27. How important is the emotional context of the physical scene for an actor?
• CRITICAL. Otherwise, no matter how good, it’s just slaps and punches and throws.

28. How important is the stunt physiologically and psychologically on the actors?
• Very. Fight lets you express rage, and fear, and all manner of emotion… it simply must be a part of the fight.

29. Does gender play a role in a fight sequence? Why?
• Yeah. Different fighting with a woman than a man… woman/man fights tend to be either the woman getting beaten up (yawn) or taking revenge (yea) – but a woman/woman fight takes a different tone, and women are so much more than rage – we bring history to the fight!

30. Do size, age, and race play a role on character choice in a sequence?
• Yes. They determine what you can do physically, how the audience is going to interpret what you do (beating up an elderly black woman? Gonna change things!) and how the actor will inhabit the scene.

31. Do you ever research why a character learns to fight? Why in a particular style?
• YES!! Reference the above, with Iago – he was a soldier, and a brilliant, sneaky one at that – of course he would have a knife in his sock… but if it’s a different culture, background, the style will be different – imperative to know why they know this.
32. As a professor, what are the specific things you make the actor aware of in a violent scene?

- A-loss of control does not equal a good fight – MUST know your sequence like the back of your hand BEFORE you can even begin to act it… can’t let go until you trust each other.  B-MUST be character based, not stunt based – has to be part of the character and story – if it’s not in the script, find it in yourself.

33. Any other comments?

- I LOVE fights and stunts, and have the utmost respect for actors who do them well, and those who teach us how to do it… keep it connected to the story, take risks safely, and it’s the best thing to get to be a part of… seek it out!
APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW WITH TIM BELL
1. What was your first job and was there any hesitation on your part about getting into stunt work?

- My first “stunt” job was before I had any formal training, for a stage production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. It was the early 90’s and the production concept was to “modernize” it into a college campus. I was asked to choreograph the 39 lashes, which we were making into 39 ‘beatings’ (Rodney King’s beating was still relatively fresh in everyone’s minds) There were two of us “beating” Jesus, and being the more physically capable of the two, the choreography was handed to me, which I was more than happy to take on. It went very well, with the exception of Jesus getting knee’d in the groin for real in one performance, and I breaking a tooth in another. It taught me a lot about direction of action / energy and about sticking to your blocking in a fight. Both incidents were due to minor changes, but there were major consequences. Lesson learned. I started training in Stage Combat right after that.

2. What’s the most dangerous stunt you’ve ever done?

- It’s a coin toss between a full body burn (as seen in figure 2) and getting hit by a car going 20 mph; probably the car hit.

3. When did you get into fight directing?

- Pretty early on, in college. I was heavy into theatrical sword fighting / stage combat in school as it satisfied my need to do something physical and artistic. But, 1) You need someone to fight with; and 2) You need choreography. It
wasn’t long before the dept chair was asking me and a few others to begin choreographing for the schools shows. Our fellow students who were doing directing labs and black box one-acts saw us as a valuable asset to their shows as well; expanding the list of the shows they wanted to do, that might have violence in them. This created great opportunity for us to cut our teeth as fight performers and fight directors.

4. Explain the difference between coordinating a fight for live shows and film/television?

- Well, that can be a tough one. Rehearsals, for one. In live shows, you generally have more time (never enough, but more!!) If I have time, I can take a performer with good physical sense and teach him to fight decent enough. In film, you don’t have that luxury, so your performers better bring something to the table. In both, if the action can’t be performed well, then you need to change the action. But if film, it happens NOW!! Both have blocking and sight line aspects you have to follow to hide the ‘magic’ of the illusion, but film is tighter, with the action often feeling physically uncomfortable, but it ‘looks good on camera’. Film is generally more physical as well, because it can be slowed down and looked at by the viewer, so it needs to be more “real”. Live shows, it happens and it’s gone. The audience gets the impression, and fills in any little “mistakes” in the performance. One of the things I learned early is that you can actually do your live audience a disservice by having the action be to violent, to real. They can be taken out of the story, and start worrying about the actor / performers’ health and safety if the violence is to real. In film, the audience is behind the 4th wall, and has been conditioned for the most part. A sick, horrific scene (SAW?) might make
someone squeamish, but generally we “the audience” don’t worry about the actors’ safety in these film scenes.

5. What are the FIRST steps to organizing a fight or stunt sequence?
   - Find out what the director wants from the violence. How does this action help support their story as a whole? What is the story within the violence; what information about the characters will we reveal to the audience during this action? What can the performers physically do; what are they capable of, what are their restrictions either mentally or physically? What does the performer (if it’s an actor doing his own physical action) see his character doing in this scene?

6. What's the strangest thing you've ever had to do?
   - I’ve been pretty lucky, and haven’t had to do anything to crazy. A buddy had to run naked through a corn field with a headboard handcuffed to him, but I’ve had no such bizarre requests. Playing a dead body that’s cut down from a tree into a swamp might be it. I had to jump out of a Condor lift that was 15 feet up, with a rope noose around my neck and 8 feet of rope trailing. I landed in a shallow swamp, buried up to my knees in muck, and had to bend over onto my stomach and ‘float’. Of course, it was the last shot of the night, as the sun was coming up, and it was Now, Now, NOW!!

7. How do you prepare for each job you do?
   - Buy a bottle of scotch. A big bottle. Kidding! It’s all about information; find out everything you can. What you’re doing, what you’ll need. Make lists. Imagine what the gag will be, and then think about everything that might go wrong and
come up with a plan. Double check that you have everything you need, and if you think for an instant you might need something, grab it.

8. Can you explain how you approach a scene with physical contact as an actor, stunt person, and stunt choreographer?

- They are all very similar to me, as my training / career started as an actor and I found stunts along the way. I think my background training brings me to the project from a performer’s point of view no matter what my actual title is. As mentioned prior, information is key. What is the action? What does the director want the action to say? How can I pull the action off best, safest? What are my concerns about the action? If I’m acting in the role, then I’d layer more character information into my choices. If I’m choreographing, I’m looking much more at the bigger picture obviously, and making notes as to what I might want a performer to do, and what options I might need if the physical work is too much for them to accomplish successfully.

9. How important is the stunt physiologically and psychologically on the character as a stunt actor?

- In my opinion, very. Choices of violence or serious physical action are ones made for a reason. Why are they driving fast, against traffic? Why is he jumping off a roof in to a passing garbage truck? Why does she slap him? Everything the character does is for a reason, with a goal and consequences’ for that action.

When I first started training in stage combat, I spent a summer and I went to a workshop in Maine for two weeks, followed by another immediately in Vegas for three weeks. When I came back, my mentor, a professor at my University, told me
that my acting had grown leaps and bounds after that. It was the focus I had learned as a fighter. As a fight performer. And the training I had started was one of character choices and performing action, acting the action. This all made sense to me, allowed me to stop monitoring my performance and live more in the moment. I had to, safety and the choreography demanded it, demanded a strict focus. I was fortunate that my approach was guided by instructors that reminded me that we were actors first, and fighters second. And that “we fight, when words will no longer do…” When is that, for that character?

10. Does gender play a role in a fight sequence? Why?

- Yes, absolutely. Because, thank goodness, men and women are different!! Men stereotypically approach violence differently than women. Men want to punch and pommel, women want to tear and rip. Men fight from a higher center, the chest, women lower, from their stomach and hips. Yes, there are exceptions. And when we use these exceptions, we are telling the audience that the character is ‘exceptional’ at what they’re doing. It all goes back to telling the story. What do we want to tell the audience with our physical action?

11. Do size, age, and race play a role on character choice in a sequence?

- Yes, of course! All these things will affect what choices the character makes. If they’re young, they might not have extensive ‘training’ or even life experience to draw upon. If they’re excessively old, their action might be slower, but perhaps more efficient. If there are four white cops beating up a young black man, is that different than two white and two black cops beating a young black man? Or 4 black cops beating a black man? Of course. Our perception of our world
influences what we feel and believe, and when we see it performed we draw from our own life’s experiences. This is information we use to make decisions about the story we’re telling. If we choose to play against the stereotype, then we are telling the viewer something else. Often going into comedic performances. Old timers, acting like children as they race after an ice cream truck, tripping and pulling at each other, trying to ‘get their first’.

12. Do you ever research why the character choose that weapon?

- Yes, always. Although it’s often more of a ‘justification’ as to why the character has that weapon. Because the director wants a 12 gauge pump shotgun, or because it’s the sword the prop dept had. It’s not often that an actor / performer gets to choose their weapon based on their character development. But we are still telling a story as to why they have that weapon. Rob Roy shows this well with Liam Neeson having a broadsword, and Tim Roth with a transitional rapier. Their weapons and the style of fighting with each is an intricate part of each of their characters. And Dirty Harry? He doesn’t just have any gun, it’s a 44 Magnum. “The most powerful handgun in the world. Do you feel lucky punk? Do ya?”

13. Do you ever research why did that character learn to fight and why in that style?

- Yes, of course. Again, more information about the character. The Karate Kid (first version), tells that well. He’s beat up, but has no money to take classes. Finds an old eccentric neighbor who knows Karate and begs to be taught. He does chores to pay for the instruction, but seems to be doing more ‘work’ than training. Until his frustration comes out in an argument with the old man, and he’s shown that the ‘work’ was the foundation of his training. “wax on, wax off” Do you think
that became an international catch phrase for no reason? It was clever, and the audience, who didn’t know upon the first viewing, went “Oh, now I see!” and it stuck like glue. How a character fights, why they fight, and the path they took to get there is all part of the character. In The Karate Kid, it was the basis of the story.

14. What’s the most important element of a scene with physical violence?

- Safety. Followed by, “does the violence support the story?” That’s why we do what we do, to tell a story.

15. What do you aim for in each sequence?

- To support the director’s vision of where the story is going. To have the audience see aspects of the characters through the action that is performed. To have climaxes and valleys in the action, that support the director’s vision of becoming more endeared to a character, or dislike them more if that’s the goal. To tell a story with the action, that reveals information about the character, their past, and the choices they make as they work towards their goals in both the action sequence and the story as a whole.
APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW WITH VICKI PHILLIPS
1. What was your first stunt job and were you hesitant at all?

- That would be *Batman Forever Stunt Spectacular* in Houston, TX, as the female lead, Chase Meridian. The only stunt was some stage combat, some fighting. Yes, I was hesitant. I wasn’t actually interested at all in stunt work, because I was a competitive gymnast for 17 years. I kinda felt I was done performing. But a coach I was working with in Houston asked me to audition for a live stunt show in the summer, because I was teaching gymnastics at the time. And he asked since classes were slow, why don’t you audition with me and we will do this stunt show together this summer. I said fine. I auditioned and I got it, and he didn’t. ha ha.

2. What was the most dangerous stunt you have ever done?

- The most dangerous stunt I have ever done is actually one of the most fun stunts I have ever done. And it was repelling out of the governor’s helicopter in Puerto Rico, over the world’s largest telescope in Puerto Rico. It was 3,000ft above the ground. It was freezing up there. But they wanted a really far off shot. It was Jim Vickers and I repelled out of the helicopter and they dropped us down to the telescope. It was for *The Dream Team*, which was a TV series.

3. Do find it is hard for women in the world of stuntmen?

- Well, I don’t know, I can really only answer that for myself, not anyone else. I have never had a problem, because I have always been one of the guys. I get along very well with men. I get them, maybe it’s because I had two brothers. Ha ha If I had a job where there was some sensitive issues, like my costume being
revealing or what I was doing was sensitive. Then I would have a conversation with the guys and the stunt riggers asking them to be respectful. That I am going to professional and I expect them to be professional. I have never had really any problem as far as male/female issues.

4. Have you ever felt fear?

- Ohhhhhh yeah. Yeah! Like, what am I doing? Why am I doing this? I have my degree in education. I could be teaching kindergarten right now and instead…I am standing on this branch 20ft in the air above this moving vehicle and I have to dive onto the hood of it. While it’s moving! This may be my last stunt. This may be my last day on the planet! Ha ha Ya know?

5. Did you ever wonder why you never just became an actor?

- Haaaa I am not very good at acting. So, no. I never ask that question but I did wonder why I never stuck with the kindergarteners, ha ha!

6. Who influenced you the most?

- Glen Wilder, he’s a stunt coordinator and 2\textsuperscript{nd} Unit Director. He’s an amazing man. He’s been in the business for so many years. He really took me under his wing and taught me so many things I needed to know about films and positioning on camera. And how to play to the camera and how to get into character. Even how to be safe, and be able to go home every night and not go to the hospital. So, yeah, he’s my biggest role model in the business. Ya know, wonder woman influenced me as well. I saw that on television and I was a gymnast. I use to think, ‘I can do that stuff.’ The early action adventure shows were inspiring.

7. How do you prepare for each job?
• I find out what they need me to do. Is it general non-descript stuff? Then be in
shape, be on time and be professional. If it is something specific, I try to get the
information as early as possible so I can start training.

8. Do you learn about the person you are going to stunt for or wing it?
• If I don’t know the actress right off the bat I will google them, pictures of them or
projects they’ve done. Rent a couple of movies they were in so you can see how
they move. Usually they carry themselves a certain way. So I study their posture
before I get there on set. Prepare a little bit. Simple things, do they walk with their
feet in, or out? It makes a big difference. In the way you carry your hips, do they
hunch shoulders, do they have large or small breasts, what’s their hair like?
Because you need to know in a fight scene how you’re going to work your hair.
Because we have to cover our faces, so we use creative ways to do that.

9. Please explain the difference between a stunt double and a stunt actor?
• A stunt actor is your own character, your own person. A stunt double you are
doubling the actress. You have to look like, act like, fight like the actor and match
everything they’ve already done. Sometimes they’ve done the first part of the
fight scene and you have to follow them.

10. Can you explain how you approach a scene with physical contact?
• As an actress, I would want to know what the director wants. Then you can work
the choreography around what the director wants to see. As a stunt person, you do
what the coordinator tells you to do, ha ha. There is a pecking order as a stunt
double you have to follow the ranks there. As a coordinator, you find out what the
director wants, read the script, find out your location, what are your props, your
costumes. That is actually a huge thing. Are you in 4 inch heals? Are you barefoot? Are you in lingerie? Or do you have jeans and a long shirt so you can hide your elbow pads or are you painted with no clothes on. Once you have found out the important details you can go for that. What do you do best? What can you offer to the fight?

11. Approaching a fight scene what do you look at first?

- Everything! Then the choreography. You can’t just look at a situation from the fighting or it won’t fit at all. You have to find out the location. Are you on stairs? If you are on top of a stair case that’s completely different or if you are out in the jungle or on the beach. You just have to understand the situation. Day, or night, weapons?

12. Does gender play a role?

- Of course, sometimes you are supposed to fight like a girl and sometimes you get to wow the audience. There are sensitive areas between men and women, body areas. A lot of times when you are fighting with other girls, they typical don’t throw as many punches to the face. I personally have never been in a real fight with another girl. I have no idea if I would actually go for pulling her hair first. However, that is typically how the choreography goes. Maybe they have studied women cat fighting, ha ha. I mean really, I would go for an elbow to the nose and be done, ha ha. I know, Nonalee, and that is most certainly what you would do. Ha ha. I mean I wouldn’t break a knuckle or even a nail, just elbow to the nose and walk away.

13. Is culture a factor?
I know when I was doing some choreography in India, the director wanted it toned down a bit. He wanted it more “gentle”.

14. Size?
- I’ve actually had some of my best fight scenes with really, really big guys. It can really open up choreography with really big, strong people. The only way it affects it, is with extremes.

15. How much of these elements are determined by the script?
- Really it is the director to the coordinator to the stunt person. Sometimes they let you bring them a, b or c. I always appreciate it when they ask me. I know what I can do best, so if I have the opportunity to communicate that with them, it will be a great fight scene. It’s nice to have a little of both. A bit of direction and creativity.

16. Do you ever research why a character uses a specific weapon?
- No, but I have certainly questioned that, ha ha. Numerous times.

17. Do you think an actor should question it?
- YES! It is important to the character. Perhaps they can’t use guns, there is a backstory. Like my father was killed by one or something like that. But I can use a knife and I don’t have a moral issue with that. But it needs to be explained in the story.

18. What about style?
- Yes, definitely. If there is a style that the character has been gifted. Like a martial artist, or a spy or SWAT, or they are a creature of some sort. Then it is decided for you. But if it is not given to you, then look at emotionally what the character is
going through at that moment. My face shouldn’t be shown because I am
doubling, but I try to get the facial expressions and I am extremely verbal. I am
also really into the fight. Because it comes inside out. It comes from your gut and
goes to your fingertips. If you are just doing the outside work, I think that’s where
a lot of characters detach themselves. The stunt person does the fighting the actor
does the acting. But your job, your goal is for the audience not to be able to tell
the difference. The biggest thrill and compliment to me, is when the actor takes
the credit for it. It means we fooled everybody. It doesn’t make me angry; I still
got to take a paycheck home. And I know I did my job right. I did it so well, no
one in the audience could tell.

19. Emotions?

• YES, cry if the actor is supposed to cry. It will be more convincing body wise.

20. Goals?

• The first one is not to get hurt. And not to hurt anyone. Safety is the most
  important. If you don’t get to walk away from the scene, then you don’t get to
  work.

21. You know I have to ask about the Xmen films and you doubling Rebecca Romijn as
   Mystique?

• Rebecca Romijn was so wonderful. She was fun, creative and we got along so
great. So was so miserable in the costume so we sort of helped each other get
through that. Through hours and hours of make-up process. It took 10 hours when
they first started it. They got it down to 5 hours to get into it and 2 hours to get out
of it. Most days I was in overtime before I started a stunt. My days on that set
were like 20 hour days. It was grueling, but I was so excited to be a part of that project and so blessed to be picked for that role. It was so unique and so cool. And I got to do so many cool stunts. It was just super awesome.

22. What about doubling for Charlize Theron in Aeon Flux?

- She’s very talented. Physically and acting wise she could probably be a stunt woman. She was a theatre ballerina. She’s very soft and a coordinated, I mean really coordinated. So it was really fun doubling her. I didn’t have to try that hard with my gymnastics background. The way she would move her arms, touch things, and place her hands on things before she was about to do a tumbling move was exactly the way I would do. So, when I watched her I thought, sigh, that is so great. I didn’t have to act very much or study her movements very much because they were so similar to performing gymnastics. The way she placed her feet, hands and postures. This is not the case with all actresses. They can act but the physicality’s are not there. They just can’t fake their way out of it. Then the stunt double really has to step it up. The transitions in and out of fight scenes are so important. For instance, one actress I was doubling I had to walk into the scene really girly, then turn it up a notch, then walk out of the scene very girly because the actress simply could not find that animal aggression inside her. So, they could not have her lead into the fight at all. We couldn’t even let her throw the first punch or initiate the fight sequence. We couldn’t even film her running because it was so feminine. Then I was used to transition as well, to try to transition the scenes. It should always play straight through. Sometimes, it is simply the fault of
the actor not being trained well enough or the stunt person not transitioning well enough to become the actor.

23. How can we train an actor to transition?

- They have to work together. Rehearse! They have to train. They have to watch their transitions.

24. Most important advice:

- Whatever emotion is in that fight scene, they need to grasp on to it. And in a really big way. And if that means you have to take them somewhere to punch a bag, a dummy or grab a weapon and really let them have it. Then need to know what that emotion feels like 100%. They have to emotionally connect that with their face, their sounds, and all of them.
APPENDIX E
INTERVIEW WITH BOBBY TALBERT
1. What was your first job and was there any hesitation on your part about getting into stunt work?
   - My first job was, *Separate but Equal* with Bert Lancaster and Sydney Poitier. I have never had any hesitation—I’ve loved it from day one!

2. What's the most dangerous stunt you've ever done?
   - As difficult as it is to narrow it down, I’d have to say the most dangerous stunt I have done was a full body burn for the movie, *Special Weapons and Tactics*, (as shown in figure 6).

3. When did you know you wanted to coordinate?
   - It was the next step for me in the industry.

4. Explain the difference between coordinating for live shows and film/television?
   - When it comes to coordinating for films, the pace is more intense, the risk is much greater, and the budgets are much larger. On the other hand, live shows utilize less risky stunts, due to the amount of times a specific stunt is performed daily.

5. What are the FIRST steps to organizing a fight or stunt sequence?
   - Establish a fight team, determine each individual’s fighting strengths, implement those strengths, and then begin the choreography.

6. Do you find it's hard for women in the world of the 'stuntman'?
- No, due the fact that both sexes are necessary for doubles. Just in the past ten years we are seeing more women stunt coordinators.

7. Do you ever feel fear?

- Yes, very often. Fear is the base of what keeps me focused.

8. Do you ever wonder why you didn’t just become an actor?

- I found stunts to be much more exciting. (Figures 7 and 8 display the type of excitement.)

9. What's the strangest thing you've ever had to do?

- Once I had to dress up in full SCUBA gear; wet-suit and all, and run through an airport.

10. How do you prepare for each job you do?

- Part of the fun in this job, is that you never know what a director will dream up in his head. So each job is prepared differently according to the director’s vision.

11. Do you learn about the person you are going to stunt for or wing it?

- If you are aware of whom it is ahead of time, then yes, for sure. But, most of the time you are performing ND (Non-descript Stunts).

12. You are also a stunt actor can you explain the difference between that and a stuntman?

- A Stunt actor focuses more on the acting vs. a normal ‘stuntman’, whereas a ‘stuntman’ focused purely on stunts. The stunt actors are generally found in live shows, theme park, etc.

13. Can you explain how you approach a scene with physical contact as an actor, stunt person, and stunt choreographer?
First, we assess the Risks. If it is decided that the risks are at an acceptable level, then we move into choreography. If not…. we focus on finding a happy medium between acceptable risks, and the director’s vision. Sometimes this could be as simple as using a pad, and cutting to a second shot, or as difficult as a week’s worth of rigging—for a five second shot.

14. How important is the stunt physiologically and psychologically on the character as a stunt actor?
   - It depends on the situation. Sometimes it’s not important at all. Then again one fight scene can introduce, and tell the story of a character.

15. Does gender play a role in a fight sequence? Why?
   - Yes. For many reasons. One being, society is not as accepting of violence towards women. Audiences are much more tolerable when men are violent towards one-another.

16. Do size, age, and race play a role on character choice in a sequence?
   - 100 % Since the stunt person is chosen based on who they are doubling.

17. Do you ever research why did that character learn to fight and why in that style?
   - Only if the character has a unique style of fighting, the writer or director will usually fill us in on the motivation for this unique style.

18. What’s the most important element of a scene with physical violence?
   - Speed, with very clean and articulate movement. Cuts being placed strategically as to avoid being overly violent which could result in losing your audience.

19. What do you aim for in each sequence?
• The message of the stunt is delivered in the same fashion the director had envisioned it. Knowing that I made the directors vision come to life to help tell his story in his movie the way he sees it in his head.

20. Any other comments?

• Based on my life so far as a stuntperson I wouldn’t say this life is for everyone but it has been a passion for me and I have been blessed enough to have realized my dreams of waking up every morning excited about going to work and never knowing what country or situation I will get to experience next.!!
APPENDIX F
COPYRIGHT PERMISSION FORMS
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483 Spruce Dr.  
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Stundiva@aol.com

February 11, 2011

Name: JEANINE HENRY  
Address of addressee: jeanine_henry@hotmail.com

Dear Jeanine Henry:

This letter will confirm our recent email correspondence. I am completing a master’s Thesis at the University of Central Florida entitled "The Anatomy of a Fight Scene: Characterization through Stage Combat and Movement." I would like your permission to reprint in my thesis excerpts from the following:

- Your complete interview, shown on the following pages

The excerpts to be reproduced are used in my thesis to show and support the idea that a fight scene should tell a story, provide dramatic tension, and connect the audience with the violence that is being shown.

The requested permission extends to any future revisions and editions of my thesis/dissertation, including non-exclusive world rights in all languages. These rights will in no way restrict republication of the material in any other form by you or by others authorized by you. Your signing of this letter will also confirm that you own or your company owns the copyright to the above-described material.

If these arrangements meet with your approval, please sign this letter where indicated below and return it to me via email (stundiva@aol.com) in a pdf file. Thank you for your attention in this matter.

Sincerely,

Nonalee Davis

PERMISSION GRANTED FOR THE USE REQUESTED ABOVE:

Print: __Jeanine Henry_________________ Sign: __________________

Date: ___2/14/11________________
Nonalee Davis  
483 Spruce Dr.  
Fine Lake, GA 30072  
Stuntdiva@aol.com

February 11, 2011

Name: Claire Eye  
Address of addressee: eye@email.wcu.edu

Dear Claire Eye:

This letter will confirm our recent email correspondence. I am completing a master’s Thesis at the University of Central Florida entitled “The Anatomy of a Fight Scene: Characterization through Stage Combat and Movement.” I would like your permission to reprint in my thesis excerpts from the following:

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Sincerely,

Nonalee Davis

PERMISSION GRANTED FOR THE USE REQUESTED ABOVE:

Print: Claire Eye  
Sign: Claire Eye

Date: 2/14/11
Nonalee Davis  
483 Spruce Dr.  
Pine Lake, GA 30072  
Stuntdiva@aol.com

February 11, 2011

Name: TIM BELL  
Address of addressee: stuntbell@earthlink.net

Dear Tim Bell:

This letter will confirm our recent email correspondence. I am completing a master’s Thesis at the University of Central Florida entitled “The Anatomy of a Fight Scene: Characterization through Stage Combat and Movement.” I would like your permission to reprint in my thesis excerpts from the following:

- Your complete interview, shown on the following pages
- The picture(s) that follow the interview

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Sincerely,

Nonalee Davis

PERMISSION GRANTED FOR THE USE REQUESTED ABOVE:

Print: Tim Bell  
Sign: Tim Bell  
Date: Feb 11, 2011
Nonalee Davis  
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February 11, 2011  

Name: VICKI PHILLIPS  
Address of addressee: dvstunts@earthlink.net  

Dear Vicki Phillips:  

This letter will confirm our recent personal interview. I am completing a master’s Thesis at the University of Central Florida entitled "The Anatomy of a Fight Scene: Characterization through Stage Combat and Movement." I would like your permission to reprint in my thesis excerpts from the following:  

- Your complete interview, shown on the following pages  
- The picture(s) that follow the interview  

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Sincerely,  

Nonalee Davis  

PERMISSION GRANTED FOR THE USE REQUESTED ABOVE:  

Print: VICKI L. PHILLIPS  
Sign: Vicki L. Phillips  

Date: 2-11-11
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