**Stage Combat** by Kathy Bruderer

**Objective**: Students will demonstrate an understanding of stage combating by performing a choreographed fight.

**Class Level:** Beginning

**Main Concepts**: Safety, stage combat moves, sound effects

**1994 National Standards:** CONTENT STANDARD 2: Acting by developing, communicating, and sustaining characters in improvisations and informal or formal productions.

**Lesson Plans**

Lesson 1: Stage Combat Basics

Students will demonstrate an understanding of stage fighting and hand-to-hand fighting moves by performing a small fight that incorporates the three types of break falls.

Lesson 2: Choreographing a Fight

Students will demonstrate an understanding of the basic punches, slaps, knaps, and kicks of stage combat and how to use these techniques by choreographing their own fight scene.

Lesson 3: Acting the Fight

Students will demonstrate an understanding of how to use acting techniques by rehearsing a teacher-choreographed fight and adding their own fight choreography.

Lesson 4: Rehearsal/Performance Day

Students will demonstrate an understanding of how to safely rehearse, perform, and write down a choreographed fight by performing their choreographed fight, turning a written notation of the fight and taking a quiz.

**Lesson 1: Stage Combat Basics**

**Objective**

Students will demonstrate an understanding of stage fighting and hand-to-hand fighting moves by performing a small fight that incorporates the three types of break falls.

**Materials Needed**

3 Different clips illustrating basic stage fights (i.e. *Seven Brides for Seven Brides, Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, West Side Story*, etc.) Horror Stories (Fight Directing for the Theatre) handout, Stage Combat Terms and Definitions handout

**Related Documents**

* Stage Combat Horror Stories
* Stage Combat Terms and Definitions

**Lesson Directions**

**Anticipatory Set/Hook**

Begin the class by showing two or three film clips of some basic staged fights both with and without weapons (ex: *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers, Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, West Side Story*, etc.). Point out that each of the these fights were choreographed by a fight director and practiced many times before filmed. Discuss the differences and similarities between the fights. Why were they fighting? Did it look real? What weapons were used? How did it add to the storyline? (If film clips are unavailable, then discuss different fights that studetns have seen performed on stage and the qualitites of those fights. )

**Instruction**

TEACHING PRESENTATION:

* Write "SAFETY FIRST!" on the board and explain that this is the number one rule in stage combat. Emphasize that the key to proper stage fighting is always being safe and always being in control of your body and your actions. Once you lose control and forget what you have been taught, it is called "red light fever" and that is when accidents happen. Each fight should be carefully choregraphed and *staged*.
* To emphasize the importance of safety, share some "horror examples" from the book *Fight Directing for the Theatre* (see attachment) or share some personal experiences of accidents that have happened, and ask for students to share a few examples as well.
* Go over the basic stage combat terms and instruct the students to take notes (they will be given a quiz of the terms later during the unit). Tell them that they will be doing each of the stage combat moves later.

GUIDED PRACTICE:

Do basic warm up exercises and begin teaching the three different break falls of stage combat. If possible, get some mats or go to a gym with mats on the floor for safety (or go outside and do it on the grass, if necessary). First demonstrate and point out keys for the three falls (front fall, back fall and side fall). Then have the students, in pairs, practice each fall one at a time by having one partner push the other (although the contact between the partners should be minimal; no one should actually be pushed).

CLOSURE:

At the end of class, give the students time to practice the three falls and go around to each group as they practice to answer any questions that they may have. End the class each partnership choreographing a basic fight where each partner must do each of the three falls once for participation points. Allow the partners to perform their fights for the class, but require the performances to be in 1/4 speed and if there are any safety problems, point them out after each performance.

**Lesson 2: Choreographing a Fight**

**Objective**

Students will demonstrate an understanding of the basic punches, slaps, knaps, and kicks of stage combat and how to use these techniques by choreographing their own fight scene.

**Lesson Directions**

**Anticipatory Set/Hook**

Begin the class by reviewing the three falls that were previously learned and asking students to properly demonstrate each fall. After each fall, ask for comments from the class and add your own comments on what they did right or wrong and safely or dangerously. You may also review some of the terms discussed last time (BLOOD, knap, etc.) and what the number one rule in stage combat is (SAFETY FIRST!).

**Instruction**

TEACHING PRESENTATION:

* Begin with a small lecture where they take  notes of things to take into consideration when choreographing a fight. I created the following list, although you may add to it as you feel necessary:
1. Audience Location - Always know where your audience is so the stage combat looks as realistic as possible. Also, take into consideration how close the audience is and make sure the audience is NEVER put into danger during any staged fight.
2. Set and Environment - Know what kinds of set pieces you have (and avoid dangerous sets or furniture pieces that may trip unsuspecting actors), whether it is indoors or outdoors, if people are watching or not, what kind of props you may have available, and the way the stage is lit (it should always be properly lit).
3. Script and Storyline - Determine what written clues are given in the script that may tell you waht kinds of weapons are used, who wins the fight, who is involved with the fight, how long the fight is, the historical time period and style of fighting, etc.
4. Costumes - If an actor has a big cape for their costume, do not have them do lots of twirls so they get wrapped up in their cape. The costumes should be appropriate and allow enough freedom to perform the choreographed moves.
5. Characters - When choreographing, you should know what kind of character choices would be made by each fighter. For example, is the character more likely to be angry and make lots of attacks, or are they smart fighter that would mostly defend and make a few very effective advances?
6. Actors - Choreograph the fight according to the abilities and limitations of your actors. For example, do not have an overweight actor doing repeated kicks against their attacker, or require a small, weak actor to do lots of strenuous and difficult moves that require lots of body strength.
* Also, instruct students how to write down a fight
* Begin with warm up exercises as described in the terms and definitions
* Teach the rest of the moves (kicks, punches, slaps, knee attack, elbow attack, hair pull and strangle) and properly show the safety precautions for each move. Teach those moves you feel are most appropriate for your class, and as you teach, put the students into partners for them to practice each move. It may take more than one period to teach all of the moves listed.

GUIDED PRACTICE:

After you teach a major move, give them time to practice it on their own and go around and watch each group on an individual basis. If time permits, it would also be helpful to give them a small fight that you have choreographed for them to practice with their partners, and give pointers about choreographing the fight as you present the fight to the students (apply the fight choreographing tips presented earlier). The fight you give them should be for only two people, and can be adapted as necessary. Also, demonstrate how to write down the fight in proper fight notation. It is best to prepare a student beforehand with the moves to your fight so you can have help demonstrating the fight to the rest of the class.

CLOSURE:

After teaching each of the stage combat moves, give the students an assignment to choreograph their own fight in pairs (or trios) using the techniques discussed earlier. Give them specific requirements for the assignment and require a certain number of moves per fight, as suggested below:

1. 2 break falls
2. 2 slaps or punches
3. 2 kicks or knee attacks
4. 1 hair pull or strangle
5. Performed in 1/2 speed and includes proper sounds (knaps, grunts, groans, etc.)
6. Purpose for the fight (can add dialogue if necessary)
7. Fight written in proper fight notation

The students may add to the requirements if they would like, but these are minimum requirements. Give them the rest of class to run through their fights and make sure they start slow and perform at 1/2 speed. Allow each group time to perform for the class and give participation points.

**Lesson 3: Acting the Fight**

**Objective**

Students will demonstrate an understanding of how to use acting techniques by rehearsing a teacher-choreographed fight and adding their own fight choreography.

**Materials Needed**

Clip of fight scene (possible scenes: Luke and Darth Vader from *Star Wars,*Wesley and Inigo Montoya from *The Princess Bride,*or Woody and Buss Lightyear from *Toy Story*), paper

**Lesson Directions**

**Anticipatory Set/Hook**

Show the class a fight scene from a movie between two characters (one that focuses on hand-to-hand combat, if possible) and have the students answer the following questions on a piece of paper about their character: How well do the characters know each other? What kind of environment do the characters fight in? How much fighting experience does each character have? What noises/sound effects do you hear during the fight? Discuss what they observed about the choreography and its overall impact on the audience.

**Instruction**

TEACHING PRESENTATION:

* Emphasize the importance of sounds in fights, and how these sounds are made on stage through knaps, grunts, groans, yells or sometimes sound effects added by the sound designer. Discuss the role of sound in a fight.
* Discuss the importance of acting a fight, or adding character-specific choices to the fight depending on the fighting experience of the character and the environment. When you watch a fight, you pay attention to the faces and reactions not necessarily the details of each fight move. The reactions of the characters are what makes a fight seem real, goofy, or stupid. You may demonstrate an example of a half-hearted reactions to a punch and contrast it with a more realistic reaction that involves your entire body and react both physically and vocally.
* Introduce the concept of a "found weapon". A found weapon is a weapon used in a fight that was found in the environment and would not normally be considered a weapon. For example: pulling out a rug from underneath your opponent, throwing a hot dog in your opponent's face, or threatening your opponent with some scissors you find laying on a nearby desk. These are all weapons that may not necessarily be used as a weapon. Instruct students that in their next choreographed fight, they will need to somehow use a found weapon in their fight that is not normally harmful and use the weapon in a threatening, but safe way (i.e. rubber chicken, smelly sock, pencil).
* Also, discuss "red-light fever" with the class. Red-light fever is when an actor forgets the rehearsed fight and loses control and makes a safe fight a dangerous fight. The name comes from movies or television shows because actors would rehearse the fight safely when behind the camera, but once the red light of the camera turned on when filming the fight, the actors would get too caught up in the moment and forget all safety precautions and lose control.

GUIDED PRACTICE:

Present the students with the first half of a fight that you have choreographed beforehand. Have the students choose to either be person A or person B in the fight so they have one person to watch as you demonstrate the fight, and instruct the students to write down the fight on a piece of paper. This teacher-choreographed portion of the fight must be performed by all the students in pairs. Then instruct each pair of students to choreograph their own ending to the fight. The ending must be as long as the first pre-choreography fight and must include only moves taught in class and have found weapon that would not normally be considered threatening. The found weapon may not put the other person in danger and should only be used as a threat (no sword fighting!). The fight must be performed in 3/4 speed (NOT full speed for safety purposes). When each pair performs their fight, they must also turn in a piece of paper with the entire fight written out in proper fight notation and a character description of each person in the fight and the specific environment of the fight and the reason for the fight (in complete sentences).

CLOSURE:

Instruct each pair of students to choreograph the last part of the fight in pairs and walk around as they do so to ensure the safety of all students. Give them the rest of the period to rehearse their fights as well as the beginning of the next class period. Instruct students that they must bring their found weapon to class next class period and be prepared to rehearse and perform their fight next class period. Also, make sure the students write down their fight in proper fight notation so they do not forget their fight. Remind students to also review their stage combat terms and notes for the stage combat quiz next class period.

**Lesson 4: Rehearsal/Performance Day**

**Objective**

Students will demonstrate an understanding of how to safely rehearse, perform, and write down a choreographed fight by performing their choreographed fight, turning a written notation of the fight and taking a quiz.

**Materials Needed**

Stage Combat quiz, Stage Combat Performance grading sheet

**Related Documents**

* Stage Combat Quiz
* Stage Combat Quiz KEY
* Stage Combat Performance Grading Sheet

**Lesson Directions**

**Anticipatory Set/Hook**

Begin with a class review of stage combat terms that are important to know. After the review, hand out the quizzes.

**Instruction**

TEACHING PRESENTATION:

* Do some basic muscle warm-ups as a class and then give some final run-through time to rehearse their choreographed fights. Remind students the requirements for the fight. It may help to write the requirements on the board.

GUIDED PRACTICE:

Give proper rehearsal time for the fights.

CLOSURE:

Begin the fight performances and make sure each pair turns in their written fight to you and briefly review the written fight before they begin their performance. (Grade each fight according to attached grading sheet.)