Theatre for Youth Techniques for the Stage Combat Classroom

BY JAMIE MACPHERSON

Students at First Act Children's Theater

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Jamie Macpherson (left), her assistant Dylan Todd (right), and a young actor (kneeling) working through a scene.

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As a community, we are drawn to the SAFD and to stage combat in general from a variety of paths. Some of us found our way through martial arts training, some are actors who happened to have a strong aptitude for movement and physical theatre styles. Some are drawn to the history, others from the magic of seeing superheroes fight on T.V. As for me, I found my way into the world of stage combat while getting my Masters in Theatre for Youth.

As a field, Theatre for Youth (TFY) is wide and varied, focused on partnering with young people in many different ways. We are puppeteers, theatre artists, educators, community arts organizers, and every combination in-between. What holds us together is our belief that theatre has a positive and transformational impact on young people, and that these theatrical experiences should be high quality and thoughtful in their approach. It is easy, then, to see the overlap with stage combat practices. In both disciplines, we balance the process of learning and discovery with the effort to make the final product as clean and specific as possible. In the same way that I find joy in working with my fight partner, I get satisfaction from my partnerships with young people as they make discoveries and create work in which they take pride.

Working as a teaching artist, I get to share a subject that I love with young people (a term I use here to refer to 8-16 year olds). I get to roll around on the floor and brandish swords with them and yell "courageous" (more often ridiculous) challenges to imaginary foes. I also get to witness young people gain confidence and a level of professionalism as they begin to take ownership of the fight moves we're practicing. This is a time when most young people are beginning to shape an understanding of themselves through their abilities: what are they good at, what do they like doing? There is a mental hunger to deepen their knowledge in areas of interest. Also, young bodies are still developing, which means they're just starting to push the limits of their physical capabilities. With guidance from someone who helps them feel capable, young people can pair self-discipline with their interest in stage combat to cultivate ownership of their abilities as actor combatants.

For example: a seventh grade boy came into my class with very little body awareness, and though he was excited to get to hold a sword, he was concerned he'd hit someone by accident. It didn't occur to him that he might have control over where his sword was pointed. I watched him work hard to master a fight scene, taking the parries and attacks I gave him and translating it into a language that made sense to him: the "flashlight" parry (a 3-4-3 parry), windshield wipers (2-3 parry combo), using the sword to say "oh hell no!" (parrying with a 7). He had taken ownership of his fight, and perhaps without being fully aware, he had developed his own creative process, one where he could be successful. As he worked, I was able to switch my role to being the outside eye, watching from the sidelines, on hand if he needed me.

So what can TFY offer Stage Combat? The goal of this article is to share insight I have gained from my work in the world of Theatre for Youth, and frame it in the context of teaching young people stage combat. To examine strategies that target the cognitive, social, and motor skills of pre- and adolescent students. This list is not necessarily a summative checklist of how to be a good teacher - there are many ways to teach well. Rather, I will focus on the ways in which one sub-field of theatre can help another. This is in part to call attention to some of the things we as stage combat instructors do well naturally, and in part to offer new ways of thinking about our methods for when we work with young actors.

Structuring a Class Session

A colleague of mine once likened a class session to a brownie – as long as the edges are solid, the middle can be as gooey and fluid as it needs to be. In other words, the first and last ten minutes are critical to having a strong lesson. Think about how you want students to enter the space, to get them in the right headspace, energized and focused. To do so first requires some idea of who your students are and what they'll need. Time of day is a large factor – is it first thing in the morning or are your students coming off of a long day?

Stage combat classes often exist in a time and space outside of the rest of students' lives. Our expectations are different than that of other classrooms, and much of the work we do walks a narrow path of what is deemed appropriate-seeming behavior. It's important to structure our lessons in such a way that denotes this shift from their daily routines. Ritual can be a great tool here — I like the traditional starting together in a circle — warm ups, opening sequences, or check-ins are also effective. Whatever you decide doesn't need to be something long and drawn out, just a quick way to efficiently reaffirm our purpose together and to help your students get into the proper mindset.

Also think about how you want to wrap up class, to make sure that students are solid on what they've learned, emotionally/physically intact, and are ready to re-enter the real world as non-combative citizens. Many of the fight classes I've taken do this very successfully, incorporating techniques like saluting together to seal the practice, or thanking our partners. Once after a more emotionally charged session, we took a moment to shake out the tension, and then rub our hands together and extend them to the middle of the circle as a way of coming together in a small but intentional way. Moments like these help us all to leave the room prepared to go on with our day, and are extremely important for students' wellbeing.

Extensions to the Real World

Young people are still making sense of the world around them (as opposed to us adults, who have such a *keen* understanding of everything going on around us). Help them fit stage combat into the larger framework of what they know about the world. Talk about the body's reactions to fighting, talk about technology, talk about how this applies to the superhero franchise movies they're undoubtedly watching at home. Talk about your own work – they've probably never met an actor combatant, or a fight director before. Demonstrate to them how what you do is a profession, a time-honored craft that takes years of study and practice. Providing context for the work we're doing allows for a richer experience for newer students.

Sometimes this can also lead to deeper conversations. Once while workshopping fight scenes with a class of sixth graders, we were giving feedback as a group about what was effective and what should change. A girl raised her hand after watching her peers' fight, and said she wanted to change the "boyfriend" hitting his "girlfriend." To make sure I understood, I asked if she meant the angle or the timing needed to change on the hit. She clarified she didn't want the male character to be hitting the female one *at all*, that it was against the law to hit women. As her teacher, I felt obligated to point out it's actually against the law to hit anyone, but it led to a really great discussion about why it made us as an audience uncomfortable to watch this scene. While everyone in the class could rattle off the golden rule of how to treat others, dissecting a fight scene happening in front of us made space for a richer conversation about how violence operates in our own community.

Tools for Classroom Management

Because fight work requires a high level of focus and discipline, I find that stage combat classes are some of the smoothest running classes. Generally, young people understand that studying stage combat is a privilege – most adults would never trust them with even pretending

to be violent – and so they rise to the occasion. Not always to be sure; sometimes it's not the right time for a student. But as the teacher, we generally have the ability to control way the class goes. Here are a few tools I've found help keep class flowing smoothly:

Use Attention getters – Having a phrase that signals a pause in the work will save your voice and valuable teaching time. Call and response phrases are particularly effective because they're active, rather than passive: students physically and vocally do something to show you they are listening. "Hold, please!" and "Hold" is a practice we make good use of in stage combat.

Establish clean guidelines for how information will be disseminated– Do you want everyone to just watch the first time, or do you want them to try it with you? Make this clear, so that you don't have to waste time stopping students from going off and doing their own interpretation. What looks like goofing around may very well be students eager to practice the moves and gain your praise.

Asking students to repeat what you've said back to you – This is a great way to check for understanding. It also keeps students active in their listening, and forces them to take ownership of the knowledge.

Focus – young people typically have about a two to four minute capacity for sitting and listening before they get antsy, or their minds start to wander. Structure lessons into smaller chunks so that students are on their feet quicker. If you set a brisker pace, then the students will have to work to keep up with you, and will stay focused.

Modify the Combination

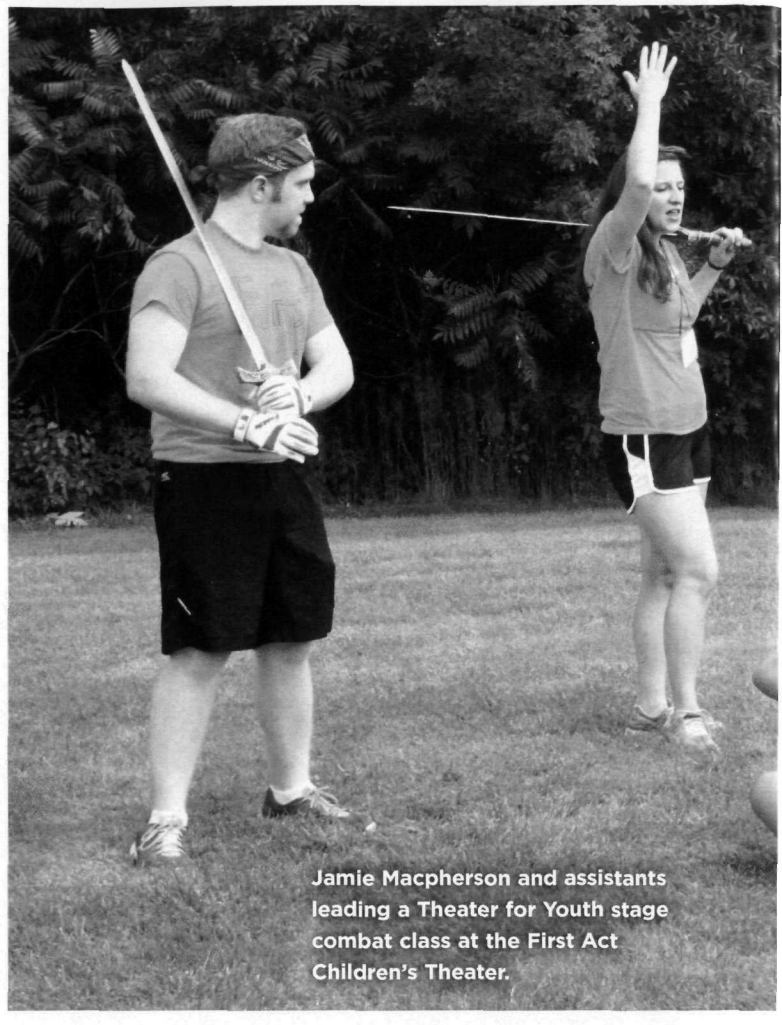
Make use of beats, slow motion, out-of-distance, etc. These techniques help students gain familiarity with the moves in a safe way before they work with their partners. As much as possible, find different ways to let students do the movements, to put them into their bodies. When you change up the approach or the mode in which you're guiding them through the movements, it causes them to think about the moves in a different way, effectively helping them to train with intention. Beats help parcel out the moves, moving in slow motion helps with fluidity and leads to new discoveries. I'm a big fan of fighting as though we're stuck in Jello, as it forces students to slow down while still maintaining the same level of intensity and intention in the movements. And depending on the ability level of students, pool noodles or "Jedi moves" that don't require physical contact may make for a safer, more effective lesson.

Side Coaching

Just as it sounds, side coaching is talking to students while standing on the sidelines, prompting them without stopping the activity they're currently engaging in. This is a very useful tool, and when done well, it can take a class to the next level. A few things to be in mind of:

Call attention to what you want students to be doing, rather than what you don't want –"I see lots of good eye contact"; "Some of you are really taking your time to fully actualize the movements, that looks great!" Students want to be the recipient of your praise. Many will self-adjust accordingly.

Positivity – praise and encouragement go a long way. As a student I respond better when someone says "you're doing so well, now add ___ to take it to the next level." Or perhaps, "I know this section is tough for you, but trust your body." Many young people are still learning how to process feedback, their abilities are still tied to their sense of self, so things can also be taken more personally. You don't always need to give "warm fuzzies" but if students doubt themselves, they're going to get in their heads or begin to doubt their partners, both of which we know as fighters is neither safe nor productive.



Jamie Macpherson and assistants leading a Theater for Youth stage combat class at the First Act Children's Theater.

Leave space – Make use of a few choice phrases, and then give space for your students to work on what you're asking for. Your voice will thank you, and you'll create an environment of intentional practice, rather than establishing a need to get it right on the first try. If you're constantly swooping in, students will get nervous. They'll see you as a presence that serves to tell them what they're doing wrong. Their eyes will track to you, rather than their partners because they'll be seeking your feedback over being focused on their partner.

Remember: This Is Supposed To Be Fun!

Our primary goal should be to impart to students some of the same joy and appreciation for stage combat that we have. To be more specific: it's true that young actors need to have a sense of the risk involved, but not so much so that they're terrified to try it out, or bored by being lectured at. We can set them up for success by finding thee to five moves that are challenging enough to be interesting, but still achievable so students walk away feeling like they've accomplished something. Sometimes that will mean adjusting your lesson once you've met your students, and not getting as far as you wanted. That's okay. A few months ago, I taught a class where we weren't able to get as far as I would have liked with a combination. I packed up feeling a bit disappointed, but when I came out to the lobby, I was greeted by all of the children in the process of demonstrating to their parents the three moves we had been able to learn. They were falling to the floor in mock defeat, rolling around laughing, proudly showing their parents the new skills they had just learned. It was a good reminder for me about keeping things in perspective.

If students leave with an understanding of what stage combat is

(story-telling, an illusion, not actually combat moves), and feeling like they can execute a few moves safely and with confidence, then we've done our job. We are not responsible for teaching them everything about stage combat, which should feel liberating. We give them a taste, a sample of what they could learn should they choose to pursue this art form, and let them seek out further opportunities for study. Stage combat is a particular language, and it can be tempting for both teacher and student to want to expand outward, learning as many new words as they can to be able to communicate. However, we need structure as learners to narrow in and help us focus. Having a few new moves that can be framed in different ways will go a long ways.

A Word on Power Dynamics

It's important to always remember that you're the adult in the room, and be mindful of what power that carries. I learned this lesson when I was a teaching assistant, partnering with a young actor working on slaps. I had known her for a week at this specific summer camp; we'd played games together and joked around. I knew her name, and she knew mine. When I swung up my hand to cue her however, I saw her eyes go wide with fear, and she crumpled up in a protective ball on the floor. In that moment, our prior relationship went out the window. I was suddenly an adult towering over her in a threatening manner.

Now, I could read all sorts of things into that moment: what was her home life like? Was there a history of violence in her family? Had she experienced bullying? But as her teacher, it's not my business to know, nor is it necessary. What I do know is in that moment, we'd crossed a line, and she was no longer acting, but reacting out of a very real place of fear. I instantly dropped out of role and comforted her. We left the room together and went on a walk. I learned that day that no matter what kind of friendly rapport I may have with my students, no matter that I'm only 5'2, I will always be an adult in their eyes. Adopting an angry demeanor even in-role can be upsetting.

However, as a counter-point example: since that incident, I adopted a different approach. I started having students attack me first. And this worked until one day at another school I where I was teaching. I was teaching a simple non-contact punch, and all the students refused to hit me during the demonstration. I could tell that it made them uncomfortable to attack an adult, even though we were acting, even though we were not making physical contact. Another factor at play here could very well have been my skin color – I was the only white person in the room. I was also a Minnesotan in their Phoenix inner-city elementary school – not a part of their community. I have no way of knowing for sure, but I think I'd be naïve not to at least assume these attributes didn't play factor in someway. So in this instance, I simply switched roles, and pretended to punch the student. She reacted beautifully, and her classmates all laughed and clapped. Tension successfully diffused.

The point I want to make is that as teachers, we need to be able to read the room, and know how you fit into the framework of the space you're entering. In the SAFD community we talk a lot about how we don't need to know students' personal histories of trauma or violence, but that we need to be able to react in the moment. The same is true with young people; perhaps even more so when said students may not have the sufficient language or emotional development to

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process or ask for what they need. We need to be ahead of the game, and anticipate what our students need. Our role as adults in power is not a neutral one.

The same is true for our race, class, and gender. These carry weight, and will read differently in different scenarios. On the one hand, I love how my feminine, short stature can serve as a role model for young girls who may be interested in stage combat; or at the very least, my presence offers them an opportunity to interrogate the roles they assumed are available for them. In other situations my gender works against me, such as in a classroom of middle school boys who are not comfortable in their changing bodies, and yet feel the pressure to present as hyper-masculine. The same could be said for when I work with students who are questioning their gender, or students who are in the early stages of being attracted to women, and are unsure of how to deal with new feelings with a young-looking female teacher in front of them.

In these cases, I am very mindful of gender expectations. I take on a coach-like role, intentionally de-sexualizing myself and being even more mindful of respecting the space around my students' bodies. Whereas I may do a lot of high-fives or a put hand on the shoulder of a younger student, who may be in need of more concrete modes of feedback, I keep my praise verbal for older students, and am careful with eye-contact. Yes, I need to be direct, and want to establish a connection, but it may also make older students uncomfortable, as eye contact with adults is riskier for them.

End on a High Note

The tone of the class is important. Beginning students, particularly younger ones who are less confident in their capabilities need to constantly be reminded they are on the right track. Young people experience so much pressure to do well – grades in school, their parents' expectations, getting into college. They have peers judging them, teachers grading them, and the voice in their own head doubting their every move. Young people have no problem with beating themselves up and telling themselves they're not good enough. If you want them to come back, you need to remind them of how well they've done, and how capable they are. They might not be able to contextualize the work they've done, or the extent to which they've mastered a specific move. For example, I had two young actors learn a fight in under and hour, which they would be performing later that night. I was extremely proud of them, but all they were focused on was that they must be weak and out of shape. They saw the mistakes, the hiccups, rather than how they had stayed calm and present and kept each other safe as they worked to get back on track. It's my job as the teacher to help them see what they accomplished.

As a colleague of mine once reflected, "When I do stage combat, I feel awesome. Who doesn't want to feel awesome?" We all do, children and seasoned Equity actors alike. We all deserve to feel awesome, both as the superheroes we play, and as the masters of illusion that we as stage combat artists are. Just as the experiences in our childhood helped shape the path that led each of us to pursue stage combat, we owe it to the next generation to be the teachers and mentors we would have wanted along the way. All students deserve to be treated with care, to be challenged as learners, and to be recognized as individuals committed to mastering a skill. It's just that for young people the approach has to be different, with expectations and methods specifically tailored for their bodies and their stages of development.

The Pen is Mightier...

Use this space to draft your choreography, take notes, or start your own contribution!