

# THE FIGHTMASTER

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In my years as a violence coordinator<sup>1</sup> and professor of movement for actors, I have become more and more aware of the dangerous gap between an obvious "fight show," such as *Killer Joe*, *Romeo & Juliet*, or *Lieutenant of Inishmore* and a "show with some sex or violence," like *Fool for Love*, *Closer*, or *A Streetcar Named Desire*. This latter category of plays often contain limited scenes of horrible violence or sexual extremity, and yet, in the absence of a fight director or movement specialist, these scenes are often fleshed out by an inexperienced director, or even the actors themselves.

In academia, this danger becomes even more glaring, as undergraduate and graduate students are routinely assigned scene work for classes, usually without a director in the process at all. In these cases, the students themselves are expected to create scenarios of intense physicality, often without adequate training or rehearsal.

I have spoken with far too many students who, at one time or another, have felt uncomfortable fleshing out such a scene. Whether it was a love scene that, out of necessity, was rehearsed in a dorm room or apartment, or a violent scene rehearsed without any technique, guidelines or safety net, these students (and the scores of professional actors forced into similar circumstances), deserve to feel safe and supported in the course of creating their work.

To avoid such unfavorable working conditions, I have developed a method of addressing these heightened theatrical moments that I refer to as Extreme Stage Physicality (E.S.P.). This particular technique assumes that the actors are working without a movement coach, so it relies upon their own creativity and impulses; however, it first provides them with a foundation of safety, and a framework in which their creative partnership may

flourish. I believe this is one of the reasons that I have received such energized responses from those<sup>2</sup> who have experimented with this E.S.P. structure: whatever the performers choose to make of their stage moment, it grows from their ideas, their bodies, and their impulses.

Now, please don't get me wrong: I am not looking to replace fight directors. On the contrary, I am only seeking to safely and effectively fill those gray areas in the theatre, where inexperienced actors and directors are left to their own devices.

In my own university setting, where I serve as resident movement coach, fight consultant and safety officer, I realized that I could not possibly be everywhere at once, tweaking student fights at all hours, and in the various strange locales that they found for themselves to rehearse. The necessity of teaching students a way to safely approach scenes containing sexual intimacy or aggression *on their own* became clear. Of course, having a third party in the room was helpful, but not always possible. The approach in question needed to allow room for a director, but not necessitate one.

The principles and exercises that I developed have proved successful, and so I offer them here, to spark discussion with other artists and teachers. But perhaps most importantly, I offer these techniques to the actors or actresses reading, who know that they may have to work through a tough scene without the benefit of a professional fight director.

Whether the scene involves a sexual situation or a violent one, I find the means to approach them quite similar. In either situation, we find that when words are no longer sufficient to express the depth of a character's emotions, the body steps in to fill the void.

Before beginning with the techniques themselves, here are a few principles to consider:

- I. This is not an official title, of course, but rather a succinct classification of what I do. While many would classify my role as a "Fight Director," because I am a member of the SAFD, I understand that this title is reserved for those who have been recognized for their specific qualifications and the standing of their body of work.
- II. This E.S.P. Technique has been developed with the help of many fine students from Indiana University, Bloomington Stages, Illinois State University, and Earlham College.





# The Foundation of the E.S.P. Technique

## PRINCIPLE ONE: Partnering

When I was a young ballet dancer, pas de deux<sup>III</sup> class in particular made a huge impression on me. The most advanced couple in my class was magnificent to watch, and then suddenly, after more than eight years of partnering together, they “lost their groove.” Though the two never fought nor argued in class, it was clear that something was gone from their dancing. They abruptly stopped partnering, and I approached my teacher to ask why.

Her answer was simple: *trust*. In an advanced evening class, the male of the pair had dropped the female during a lift. She was okay, but badly bruised and shaken. Unfortunately, she never recovered from the experience. Every time he took her in his hands and started to lift her, she would tense, and their poetry together was lost.

To this day, I tell my students this story, and remind them that it only takes one mistake, one hit that lands too hard, one moment where your partner feels you’ve gone too far or lost control, to bring the trust established crashing down, even after years of playing or partnering together. Trust is all too quickly lost, and extremely time and labor intensive to restore, if it can be restored at all.

The caution and restraint necessary to safely execute stage combat or these E.S.P. techniques should not place actors “in their heads,” nor should it make them scared to interact with their partner. They should, however, carry this awareness with them - even one mistake may be too many. Good partnering requires constant mindfulness and vigilance.

## PRINCIPLE TWO: Slow Motion

In my own studies as a performer, I have been blessed by an immersion in the techniques of Ōta Shogo, a Japanese theatre practitioner steeped in the traditions of the Noh Theatre. Mr. Ōta’s work in extreme slow tempo has been incredibly enlightening for me in a myriad of ways, but suffice to say that I now understand on a deep level that anything you can do slowly, you can do quickly... though not necessarily vice versa.

This is hardly revolutionary for teachers of stage combat, who know that slow and technically sound repetition of movement is what solidifies it into muscle memory. But slow tempo provides more than simple *body* control, it gives the *mind* time to assimilate stimuli, evaluate courses of action, remind us of proper technique, warn us of impending issues, and circumvent developing problems. Of course, the famous swordsman and Fight Master Patrick “Paddy” Crean’s maxim “Thoughts Fast, Blades Slow...” also speaks to this.

When coaching students through this process, I advise them that the slow motion necessary for beginning work is in the ballpark of “tai chi” speed, what we might call 10-25% of normal speed. In our world, where speed has been referred to by Mr. Ōta as our “new religion,” this style of working is often deceptively difficult. I assure you, in the techniques to follow, slow motion is the bedrock of safety and the guardian of fully embodied acting. Be vigilant.

## PRINCIPLE THREE: Repetition

Although it has been touched on above, it bears repeating: repetition is the basis of all rehearsal, and the spine of safety in stage combat. Here is my favorite reminder of the benefit of slowness and repetition in training, given by Moshe Feldenkrais in his book, *Hadaka-jime: Practical Unarmed Combat*:

Hurry creates confusion. Very little speed is gained by trying to go too fast. Real speed is gained by simple, smooth, and well-balanced movements. The only way of acquiring these is repetition – calm repetition – especially in the beginning...

With these principles in mind, let’s get started with the technique:

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<sup>III</sup> From the French, “step for two,” 1) a dance or figure for two performers, 2) an intricate relationship or activity involving two parties or things (Merriam Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1989).



# The Framework of the E.S.P. Technique

## STEP ONE: Blueprints

Whether there is a director in the room or not, I have found that any in-depth exploration of a scene must begin with the framework of what is happening. These "Blueprints" of extreme physicality must address three perspectives:



1) *The Story* – The physicality being created should exist within the world of the play and further the playwright's vision. What piece of the story is told through this ballet of bodies?

2) *The Characters* – The physicality being created should clearly forward the objectives of both characters. What specifically is each character after? Is it the same thing? Are they at odds? How would each character approach it? Would it be better for characters to act in keeping with what we have already seen of them in the play, or would it be more interesting to see "another side of them" in this physicality?

3) *The Audience* – What do you want the audience to get out of witnessing this extreme physicality? This ties into "story," of course, but is also separate. Should the audience be disgusted, amused, or aroused by what they see? Should they be rooting for one character over another? What do you want those watching to feel or understand?

To these three considerations, I would add one overriding mission, which I call *Finding the Juice*. This is the lynchpin of the "Blueprints" section, and yet it seems to be extremely difficult for young actors. Think of it like this: if the E.S.P. moment being explored is an exotic fruit, then, in the course of discussing the "Blueprints" for it, we are looking to squeeze as much "juice" out of it as we can.

Many times, actors abandon the "Blueprints" section when they have an "okay" idea. They have taken the easy way out! The story they have created should incite both partners into action. The "juice" they have found should drive them both to their feet, wanting to try it out. Don't be content with your first idea. Dig until you have made the boldest, most energized choice possible for the circumstances (See *Finding the Juice*). If, in this process, it becomes clear that the scene is a fight (necessitating punches, slaps, chokes and other advanced techniques), it is time to seek outside help. This is what fight directors are for! That aside, once the actors have discussed specifically what they want to achieve with their physical moment, it is time establish the ground rules.

### \*\*\* Finding the Juice\*\*\*

While working with high school students, I spoke with a young man and woman working on a scene in which they had decided that the woman was leaving, and the man was stopping her. It fit the circumstances of the scene, but failed to elicit any interesting behavior from them once they got on their feet.

I returned them to their "Blueprints," and asked them a few leading questions: Why are you leaving? What do you want him to do, feel, or understand? Why don't you let her go? What do you need from her? Gradually, their "Blueprints" got more specific. In the end, the young woman alighted upon: "I want to punish him!" (The young man, recognizing how much harder his job became, proclaimed "Oh! That sucks!") There was instantly excitement between them, and they wanted me to get out of the way, so they could try it.

This refinement of their "Blueprints" created tons of behavior for the young actress, only some of which involved her original intention to simply leave. The increased tension between them fed the young man's behavior as well. There was electricity between them. Isn't that how scene work should always feel? Find the Juice!

## STEP TWO: "No-Fly Zones"

The actors should sit or stand in close proximity. At this point, they should be close enough to touch, so each may easily hear the other, but not making physical contact yet. This is the time for the participants to speak frankly to their partner about what is NOT allowed in this exploration. Examples of this communication could be, "I don't want you to touch my neck, or try to choke me," "you cannot touch my breasts," "my left ankle is injured," or "my ears are very sensitive, so please don't touch them."

Anything that is deemed a "no-fly zone" may be *acknowledged* or *clarified* (for example: "when you say 'don't touch my upper thigh,' do you mean above the midway point between knee and hip?"), but *not argued*.

IV Although steps two and three are especially important for sexual scenes, I have found them useful in violent scenes as well. Even touchy-feely artists may have body issues, physical hang-ups and other baggage that is not readily apparent by looking them. These two steps help expose issues before a line has been crossed, and allow partners to proceed with a clear understanding established between them.





Depending on the actors, they may have a great many “no-fly zones,” or they may have none at all. Either way, the opportunity has been given to discuss them, and both actors should take this time seriously. Where are your boundaries? How far are you willing to go for this scene? Think about it. In my experience, actors are more comfortable with the heart-rending conflict of the stage than they are sitting and speaking their truth to one another. Somehow, simple honesty is seen as confrontational, or “being difficult.” Many actors go so far as to assume that establishing a clear boundary will somehow limit the scene. Nothing could be farther from the truth! We must make clear, specific choices on stage. The ways in which our characters interact with obstacles creates theatre. Iconic director Anne Bogart refers to these choices as necessary acts of “violence.”

“Only when something has been decided can the work really begin. The decisiveness, the cruelty, which has extinguished the spontaneity of the moment, demands that the actor begin an extraordinary work: to resurrect the dead. The actor must now find a new, deeper spontaneity within this set form. And this, to me, is why actors are heroes. They accept this violence and work with it, bringing skill and imagination to the art of repetition.”<sup>v</sup>

So, be honest. Be clear. Speak your truth to your partner. Let him or her know where the boundaries are. Then, once you are certain as to what may NOT be done, move on to what you MAY do to each other.

#### \*\*\*KEEPING AN OPEN MIND: The Case Study of Sam & Frank\*\*\*

Often times, even the most “difficult” partners can create magic together on stage. It’s all a matter of mindset. Obstacles can hinder us, grinding us to an impasse, or they can inspire us to find other choices.

While working with a class of graduate actors (whose names I have changed), I was approached by Sam. He knew that we were working on love scenes that day, and he had been partnered with another man, Frank. Sam confided in me that he was not at all comfortable kissing his partner on the mouth, even though their scene called for kissing in the stage directions. I assured him that this was okay, that no one could force him to do anything he did not wish to, and that he should tell his partner when the time came.

The partnerships in the class separated to discuss the “Blueprints” of their love scenes, their “no-fly zones,” and their permissions. I watched Frank’s face when Sam informed him that kissing was off the table. It was clear that he wanted to argue the point, but when he saw me watching, he just tightened his jaw and nodded to his partner.

After permissions were given, the couples began working. After fifteen minutes of exploration, I asked each partnership to show me what they had come up with, at whatever speed they were currently rehearsing.

Sam and Frank’s scene was, without a doubt, the “hottest” and most passionate of the bunch. Although Sam had clearly outlined several “no-fly zones,” he and Frank had created a passionate, intense love scene within the scope of the permissions Sam offered. The kissing was still there, but now it was on the forehead, the neck, and the chest.

I offer this case study as a reminder to keep an open mind. If Frank had shut down, or allowed his ego to be bruised by his partner’s reticence to kiss him, it would have been a disaster. If Frank had been too attached to an idea of what the scene was “supposed to be,” then the partnership, and the scene, would have failed, but that’s not what happened. Both partners spoke their truth, established their boundaries, and then went about creating the best scene they could with what they had. That singularity of vision and purpose served them very, very well.

#### STEP THREE: Permission and Touch

With the actors still sitting or standing in close proximity, they may now begin to interact physically, in addition to verbally. I have found that it is very powerful to actually take your partner’s hand, and place it where you are giving them permission to touch you. For instance, a participant may take their partner’s hand and place it on their neck: “You may touch my neck.” Or place their partner’s hand on their upper pectoral: “You may touch or push me here on the chest.” Or place their partner’s fingers on their lips: “You may kiss me on the lips.” This is an opportunity to set yourself up for success. Do you know it sends shivers down your spine when someone touches your ears? Give that permission. Send your partner’s attention there. Do you know it makes your temperature rise when someone steps on your shoes? Give that permission to your partner, and help them help you with the scene! As with the “no-fly zones,” actors may have a great many permissions to give out, or just a few. Either way, they know what they have to work with in the scene, and have “broken the ice” of physical interaction (See *Establishing a Safety Word*).





\*\*\*Establishing a Safety Word\*\*\*

At this point in the process, I find it very useful to establish a "safety word." The safety word should not appear in the text of the scene, and it should be easy to remember. For example, whenever I am working with students who are not from New Zealand, I use the safety word "kiwi."

When the safety word is spoken, the scene instantaneously stops, and the actors separate by several feet. No exceptions. Though the safety word is very rarely used in my experience, knowing that it's there can make all the difference.

**STEP FOUR: Ruthless Pursuit**

The actors should now begin to work the physicality of the scene in *slow motion*. Often I will ask students to begin work without the words in the text, since so often what is happening occurs underneath or beyond the language anyway. Each circumstance is different however, and should be handled accordingly.

From the very start, I remind actors to *ruthlessly pursue* their objective. By this I mean that, in my experience, actors are far too nice. They are polite, even if their characters would not be. For instance, when one actor's character has chosen to leave the room, the actor still won't do so, knowing that if they do, the scene is finished. Because they don't actually try to leave, their partner doesn't actually try to stop them, and everything occurring becomes false. I remind actors to "actually, actually"<sup>VI</sup> do what they would do. That is what I mean by "ruthless pursuit" of an objective. If the character has chosen to leave, the actor must do *everything in their power* to do so (*Remember, we're working in slow motion!*). This forces their partner to behave accordingly and to actively pursue their own objective, as they are now faced with the true obstacle their partner is presenting. Scenes of extreme physicality that grow from this seed of truth always read as more "realistic" than those that don't.



**STEP FIVE: Finding your Flow**

As the actors explore the scene, especially early in the process, they must be willing to let bits of movement come and go. Jon Jory, one of my teachers, was fond of reminding me, "ideas are cheap. You can always have another one." Sometimes, a partnership will find that the "Blueprints" they discovered were not specific or potent enough to carry the scene. Don't be afraid to go back to the drawing board and reassess what's occurring. *Find the Juice!*

Through an honest exploration of "ruthless pursuit," occasionally the actor who is not supposed to "win," will. This is okay. Do not make concessions for the partner who lost! Try just as hard the next time, and force them to rise to the challenge. Gradually, through a process of slow motion, improvisation and fine-tuning, the flow of the fight or the love scene will emerge. Through the natural impulses of the performers, the physicality of the scene comes to life. Eventually, through trial and error, the actors and/or director will feel that they have accumulated the moves and order that they believe most effectively tells the story. The shape, or "flow" of the physicality is then set and honed through slow repetition.

In this phase of the process, I have noticed a startling tendency to be avoided: As actors begin to hone the flow of their physicality, they tend to want to "smooth it out." They always seem to want to make the messy parts clean, and the ugly parts beautiful. Resist this urge! It is precisely the messy, ugly, frustrating mess that you've created that makes your moment so effective. That is what the audience wants to see! By all means, make it safe, but don't be in a hurry to make it too smooth or pretty!

Finally, do not worry about speed. The pace of your moment, through the process of rehearsal, will increase all on its own. Concentrate on keeping all your movements slow, energized, and full of intention. Repetition breeds speed. The movements, indeed the scene itself, will find its pace.

For those who are already looking at their watches, wondering how they'll ever find the time for all this exploration, know this - the flow I'm speaking of comes quite quickly. In my experiments with high school students, undergraduates, and graduate-level actors, most E.S.P. moments grew from "Blueprints" to a moderate flow (just under performance speed) in less than thirty minutes!

My hope is that this framework I have put forth will serve you as well as it has my students. Remember to connect with your partner, work slowly and methodically, speak your truth, and pursue your objective ruthlessly. Collaborate. Don't rush. Have fun with the sex and violence!

VI A repetition stolen from director Aaron Posner, with respect.