

The FightMaster

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The Sixth Sense in Action

The Language of Actions & Reactions

The World Conference 2016

Inviting the combat testing giants to play

A Deer Caught in Stage Fright

**Body alarm reaction and its effects
on our stage combat students**

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The Sixth Sense in Action

BY KEVIN INOUYE



Elaina Osburn at the University of Wyoming's SPT course in Broadsword, discovering the moment when a prop turns into an extension of the will.

“I have no words. My voice is in my sword”

—*Macbeth*, Act 5 Scene 8

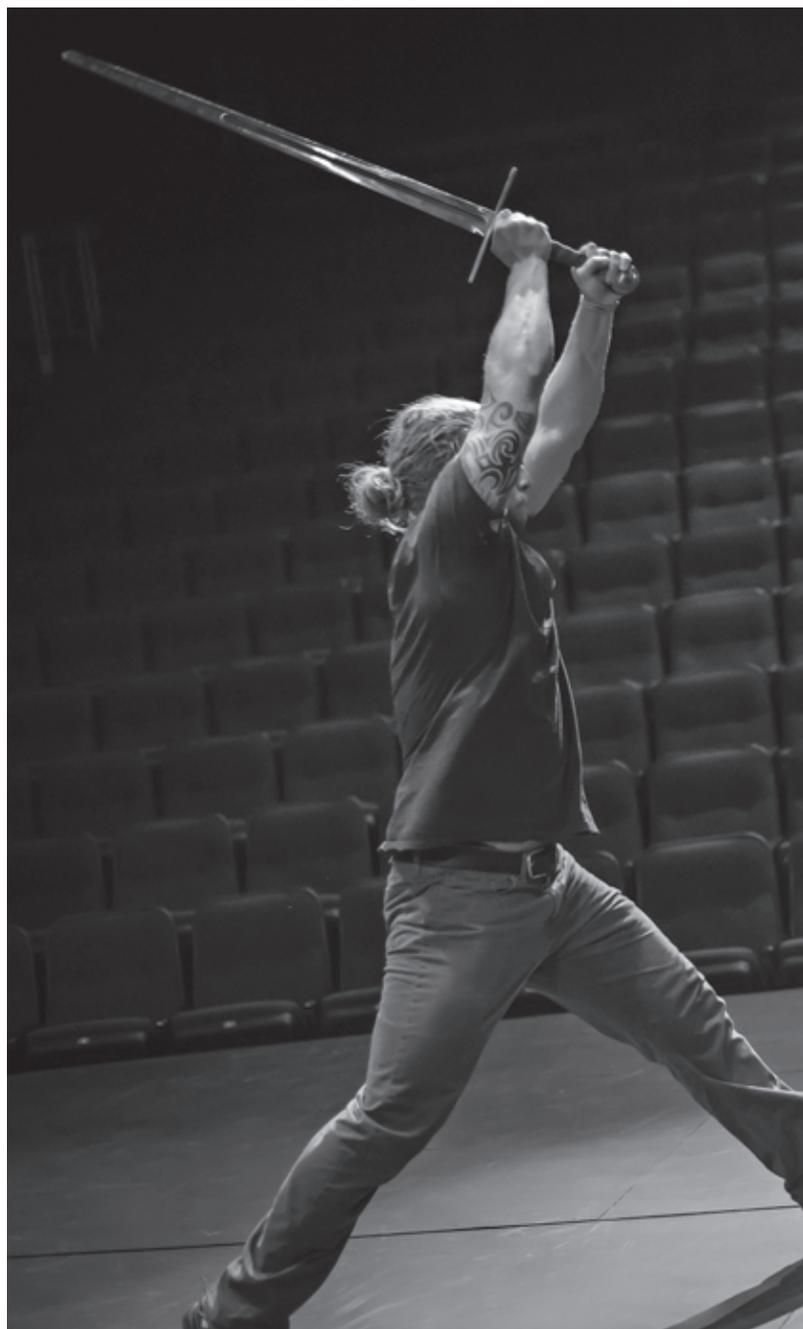
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HAT’S the difference between a swordsman and a man with a sword? When does a woman become a fencer instead of a person who is fencing? There are many possible answers to these questions, from competitive ability to experience, accumulation of skills to that intangible quality of “*Za!*”, as the late great Paddy Crean used to call it (quite possibly a shortening of the Italian *sprezzatura*, the studied nonchalance and panache that comes when skill and style transcend effort and become as natural as breathing). For me, it is perhaps a question of achieving that state where one’s sword makes the transition from being a prop or accessory to being a virtual extension of the body. Swordsman—it is a compound word for a single thing born of the union of two.

That may sound mystic, but it needn’t be. Close your eyes and picture yourself, not in any particular situation but just you, who you are. I periodically ask this in workshops when working on these qualities, and the closing of eyes also helps keep answers both honest and anonymous. The vast majority of us picture ourselves with clothes, shoes, etc. —and even the 5% or so who picture themselves without still carry a self image that has hair, and fingernails. What does this tell us? It shows that what we include in that package of “me” is not just living flesh or nerves. In other words, there’s something at play beyond what our nervous system can account for, and this something is malleable. Actors have long manipulated this self-image, whether through adapting their bodies to support a mask, or through visualization and embodiment as you might find in something like LeCoq’s elements, animal imagery, or Michael Chekhov’s “Imaginary Body.”

One of the common pitfalls I see in beginning stage combat classes is people who focus overmuch on the weapon itself, letting blade traffic take priority over the movement of the body, to the detriment of their capacity as physical storytellers. The inert prop should never be more interesting than the actor using it; It cannot reach, it cannot flinch, it cannot pursue an objective or overcome an obstacle or have a genuine response to the outcome of said struggle. That said, we can’t just forget about blade traffic and technique. The answer, as it usually is in theatre, is a ‘Yes, And’ approach. What we need to work towards is breaking down the barrier between what is prop and what is actor, so blade traffic ceases to be a distracting separate issue and becomes just another part of the actor’s corporeal performance. The sword becomes a part of our Imaginary Body, our aura, within the energetic body through which we extend our chi/ki; pick your own movement vocabulary of choice, and chances are good there’s some way of expressing this.

There is a rarely mentioned (outside of medical or movement disciplines) sixth sense, one that lets us perceive ourselves in three-dimensional space; proprioception. It’s what allows you to point



at your own nose or knee with your eyes closed, or to scratch your mosquito bite without looking down, or applaud while still looking at the stage. Some of this is inherently biological, while some is acquired through calibration over time. For those with interest in it, the past few decades have brought some fascinating research into proprioception, but for the performer, our subjective experience is more important than academic wisdom or medical fact. If it doesn’t lead to playable actions, it’s not immediately useful on stage.

What actors need to understand is how to feel and use this sense. With familiarity comes incorporation. Elements like hair and clothing and nails become incorporated through habituation, helping us keep from tripping over our shoes, tottering on our high heels, catching our hair in things, scratching ourselves or breaking nails constantly. The same can be said of habitual accessories, such as cigarettes or canes. People who have habitual accessories learn to track where those objects are unconsciously, and can grasp or and

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Vincent Olton (left) and Abram Sayre (right), finding their Za! At the University of Wyoming's SPT class in Broadsword.

just as easily as we do with our fingers, or we tap the floor with our cane for emphasis. We actively use these items in the same manner as our own extremities. When I had corrective eye surgery done about a decade ago and stopped wearing glasses, it took me a while to stop periodically—habitually—trying to shift them up my nose when they were no longer there. When I cut the hair I'd had long for a decade, it took me a week or two before I adjusted how I turned my head quickly, or to stop trying to clear it out of my collar when putting on a shirt. I expected these things to be there, and felt like they were.

This is not just a matter of passive knowledge of the presence of

manipulate them without looking. Often those same objects become integrated into habitual gestures—we push up our glasses as we shift our attention, we point with the cigarette or pencil we're holding

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ine that you have to feel around and with another object. The most [ironically] visible example of this might be a blind person navigating with a cane, but anyone who is a skilled craftsman does it; A woodworker can feel when they start going with or against the grain. An experienced driver can tell when a tire is going soft, or when they start to lose their grip on the road. A dentist has to feel the border between softer, rotten cavity and healthy tooth enamel with his pick or drill. The tools of your trade become your body's point of interaction with the world—not its surrogate, but necessary enhancements.

Getting to know a tool or prop requires the practice of both acting upon it and feeling how it acts back upon you. We all do this; everyone picks up an epee and starts swinging it around to make that lovely swoosh sound. We all make that initial moulinet with a new broadsword. These initial moments are not always practiced or graceful. I've seen plenty a student pick up a new sword, start swinging it around, and quickly hit the floor with the tip. They have not yet

these things, or of using them to act upon the outside world. The world also acts upon them, and as they become a part of ourselves we feel that personally. We sense the floor through our shoes, we feel the writing surface through our pencil, we experience the crackle of the cigarette—all through our interactions with them, and the feedback we get through the point of connection (hands, feet, lips, balance). It is a quality that fencers dubbed *sentiment du fer*, the feel of and through the steel, and it's what allows *prise de fer* in swordplay from longsword to smallsword. Our integration of the sword into our calibrated sense of self lets us not just track where it is without looking, but also allows us to listen to the information we can receive through contact with another's blade. Minor variations in pressure, or the vibrations of an edge sliding against another edge, or the release and slide of an edge rolling over into contact with the flat—all of these give us almost as much tactile information (which tends to be faster and more useful for defensive or offensive impulse than visually-processed information) as you'd get from forearm contact in a sticky-hands exercise.

Being able to gain useful information through an inanimate prop requires active physical focus, something sent outside the body as you would your vision, but independent of eyesight. Think about when you get a stitch in your side, or something pops in a joint that isn't supposed to; you send a non-visual focus to that area inside your body, searching for information about what's going on there. A similar process happens when reaching inside a purse or pack to feel around for a "missing" cellphone. Now you just need to imagine



calibrated their body to the length of that blade. Striking the floor, while inadvisable for a number of reasons, actually gave them more useful information that will help them know where that tip is later.

The point of contact with the prop needs to be secure but not tense—what we want is for energy to be able to flow in both directions, from an actor’s center to the point of impact and back again. Too much tension can block this flow. This truth is known to martial artists, boxers, and fencers across the ages, but is also

Danny Daigle (left) and Lana Percival (right), at the University of Wyoming SPT course

students (all fictional of course—that’s the conceit of Stanislavski’s text), leads them through a visualization exercise where a physical focus or energy travels through the body, and they go on to define

found in the gospel of actors. Turning to Stanislavski, by way of Jean Benedetti’s 2008 translation of *An Actor’s Work: Sonova*, a movement expert brought in to assist Tortsov with his class of acting

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relaxation as the free flow of energy. Tension, by contrast, is a blockage in the flow of energy. There are times when we need that blockage, but it is not conducive to listening, be it with the ears or through our mid-blade during a bind. As I was once told by the Italian rapier fencing maestro Andrea Lupo Sinclair at the 2000 Paddy Crean workshop in Edinburgh you need to hold the sword like it was a little bird; “Too tight, and you kill her. Too loose, and the little bitch, she fly away!” Tension in your sword is a punctuation mark to emphasize a willful action. As such, it cannot exist through most of your physical dialogue, as even during a fight we don’t talk primarily in punctuation.

What a performer can take away from this tactile exchange is a way to honor impulses, but direct them according to the needs of the scene. Breathe. Relax and flow. Listen, then respond, and have an active, constantly shifting focus. Always be interacting with your scene partners (even the inanimate ones) according to the given circumstances at hand. This should all sound familiar to actors, but it’s also essential to those who live by the sword, sharp or blunt. These things will help you become one with your props, even within the accelerated timeframe of your typical rehearsal period. The best news is, while you do have to re-calibrate every time you change props, the more experience you have with this calibration and incorporation, the better (and faster) you get at the process in general.

Within the classroom/ rehearsal space, I have various exercises I run my students through that can help consciously build up that feedback mechanism. These include feeling surfaces through the sword (such as the floor, or a variety of different props), trying to point to the tips of different objects held blindly, and sticky-hands type exercises incorporating props. Sometimes just incorporating a little extra sword-handling time into our warm-ups can help. That said, there are also variations a character can do within a scene. Picture Hamlet, sampling the wares and commenting “these foils have all a length?” while picking them up, testing the responsiveness of the blade, doing a few moulinets, checking the point of balance, etc. He does all this not by balancing the blade on a finger like a see-saw, as that tells the visual/analytical point of balance, but by seeing what point it wants to pivot around most easily when handled, which is same information packaged as a subjective and actually useful bit of knowledge. Perhaps your modern Tybalt (or Bernardo, if doing *West Side Story*) likes to play with his balisong or butterfly knife, flipping it open and closed, switching grips, and generally making sure everyone knows just how familiar he is with that piece of sharp steel. Though most of those flourishes are gratuitous at face value, what it demonstrates is that the character knows the balance, resistance, reach, shape, weight, and grip of that knife very well. Whether or not that translates directly to combat effectiveness is another question, but at least they know the prop, and by having the character do this the actor also becomes fluent in speaking its language.

The end goal here is to be familiar enough with the prop that it feels natural holding it, no more or less so than with it not in your hand. You can point with it without looking, yet you don’t feel the need to do every single gesture with it any more than you need to do every gesture with your index finger (many of us have a pet peeve with actors who feel the need to constantly point with their swords). You reach out to interact with the world with the prop just as naturally as you do with your hand or foot, and if someone slaps it away, you feel their level of intent and commitment just as much as if they’d struck the bones of your forearm. It’s an essential skill in antagonistic or agonistic sword fights, cueing you in on when to resist and when to yield or redirect.

This is true whether the object is a sword, a projectile weapon (look up instinctive or point-shooting for more on that—a gunman is to a gun what a swordsman is to a sword), a swagger-stick, stilts, an extended animal mask, or even wardrobe; until he gets used to wearing one and has a sense for how far behind him it flares out, I imagine Batman probably catches his cape in the odd doorway, or steps on it while trying to come out of a backwards shoulder roll. Those who go into mime or screen work may have to maintain that sense of something being there even when it’s not—the completely CG blade has become a standard way to handle penetrating wounds on screen, and if you can’t maintain that intentional phantom limb syndrome of the missing blade, chances are it won’t move quite right in your final edit. Being able to maintain that sense of the blade being there can also make the low-key or impromptu finger-fighting rehearsal much more productive.

One might even argue that we maintain a similar relationship with our audience or camera; with time, we know where they are without looking, and we respond to their intent accordingly. It’s awareness without self-awareness, a non-cognitive way of keeping track and gauging feedback without detracting from our ability to focus on the work of our characters in the scene. It is in both cases, to use Michael Chekhov terms again, a radiating and receiving, ideally just as instinctive as feeling someone hold your hand and holding them back. Perhaps that’s one of those indelible elements of Za that Paddy spoke of - that studied nonchalance, something that can make us not just swashbucklers, not just swordsmen and women or actor/ combatants, but also the audience’s heroes and villains. The next time you feel like you’re not finding what you need in your scene, listen harder. Your sword just might tell you what you need to hear. ♣

