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THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSIDERING A STUDENT'S GENDER IDENTITY WHEN  
TEACHING STAGE COMBAT AND MOVEMENT TRAINING

Aliya Hunter

May 2023

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre  
Sarah Lawrence College

An actor's training is essential for the development of their craft. This training can be offered through schools, classes, or conservatories, cover interdisciplinary fields, and allow students to gain a solid foundation in their art. Among many components of acting training is movement training, which teaches students to recognize and relearn physical patterns in the body. Gender identity has been shown to affect people's movement, postures, and physical habits through the process of socialization. This has not formally been taken into account during theatrical movement training. Stage combat, which is usually a component of theatrical movement training, requires its students and practitioners to adopt an aggressive and strong physicality while also remaining safe and connected with a partner or partners. More often than not, movement training and stage combat have not officially taken the gender identities of students into account when structuring classes. Both types of training require students to take on various and sometimes strong and assertive physicalities; people who have faced gender-based discrimination, harm, or violence may be slower to learn these physicalities because of the way socialization has physically affected them. Movement class teachers and curriculum developers need to formally take gendered, physical socialization of students into account and continue allowing its students to explore movement within stage combat in a way that counteracts gendered and physical socialization.

Stage combat is the theatrical practice of choreographing and performing scripted fights live. It utilizes multiple weapons, prioritizes safety, and focuses on the acting and vocal work within the choreography itself. The modern art of stage combat began as an adapted form of fencing in the 18th and 19th centuries. It became more inventive, acrobatic, and gritty with the introduction of stunts and stunt people during the rise of Hollywood films in the early to mid 20th century. The priority and development of actor-first safety frameworks also became a

central component to stage combat during this time. All of these factors led to the development of the modern stage combat process and the fight director position: “The surging popularity and excitement these [Hollywood] films provided caused theatre to respond in kind...Experts were being sought out to stage realistic looking fights that could be performed consistently and (increasingly) safely.” (LeTraunik 16-17) From the 1960s onward, fight directors, actors, directors, and dramaturgs have united to build emotionally effective, safe, and believable fight sequences that elevate the text: “When all the elements pull together—and the production team, the performers, the text, and the fight choreography blend seamlessly—the effect is magical! Disbelief is willingly suspended, and the audience is transported into the physical lives of the characters. ” (Suddeth 307)

Stage combat is considered a basic of an actor’s education and is usually a required class in most BFA and MFA conservatory acting programs. Upon looking at eleven of the current top BFA and MFA acting programs in America, stage combat is a required class in six programs. Movement classes are required throughout most years, if not all of them, in each of the eleven programs. (“Acting: Plan of Study.”; “BFA in Acting.”; “Curriculum & Courses.”; “Drama, MFA.”; “Graduate Conservatory Acting Curriculum.”; “Major Completion Summary.”; “School of Theater Academic Requirements.”; “Theatre (MFA): Curricula for the Master of Fine Arts Degree.”; “The Acting Concentration.”; “The Program.”; “Undergraduate Programs: Acting/Music Theatre.”)

Movement classes for actors focus on breaking down habitual patterns of movement to allow for greater freedom of bodily expression within different roles. An actor is at their best when they are able to be as freely expressive as possible. Movement classes and training assist with an actor’s expression by helping “...the body move more effectively, [help] the body/mind

connection flow with less impediment.” (Lecture 78) This is done with a variety of techniques and somatic practices, including Alexander Technique, Tai Chi, Lucid Body, clowning, contact improvisation, authentic movement, and Butoh, among many others.

The most famous technique listed above is Alexander Technique. Actors use Alexander Technique to identify unnecessary habitual patterns of tension and misuse in order to re-develop better movement habits: “The actor needs to change old habits of tension and compression for new ones of expansion and ease which facilitate coordination.” (Richmond and Lengfelder 168) Additionally, Alexander Technique helps to separate an actor’s habitual movement from the physicality of the characters they portray. It allows them to control how much of themselves they physically put into their character. “...[B]ad habits, often the result of general patterns of misuse in daily life, can become exaggerated when one regularly practises a difficult or delicate activity...”, like performing, acting, memorizing lines, etc. (Gelb 2) When the term “misuse” is referred to in Alexander technique, it refers to a way of using the body that is physically damaging or inefficient. For example, lifting a heavy object with locked knees will put stress on the spine and lower back muscles that could be alleviated by squatting and keeping the spine aligned. Actors utilizing Alexander technique will prevent future misuse of their body and create pathways to greater use and ease of expression.

A prime goal of actor training is to develop an artist who can mentally, emotionally, and physically separate their own personality from the character they are building. This artist will also, ideally, easily embody a variety of physicalities. Because of the long-term and difficult nature of this process, acting programs typically conduct movement training in every year of the program, as previously stated. This lets each actor’s movement practice develop organically. Another goal of most acting training processes is that each student will achieve the same

freedom of expression by the end of movement training. However, the social identities of each student are typically not taken into consideration when doing this kind of training unless the person leading the class has a marginalized identity. Each student is approaching the work from a completely different social background and habitual physicality.

The path to free bodily expression is blocked by many things: a person's upbringing, their family life, their identity, their education, etc. Teacher and performer Fay Simpson, author of *The Lucid Body*, discusses this in what she refers to as the "soft body" and the "survival body". An actor "...must take off [their] survival body to reveal and thus access *the body in hiding underneath*...An actor must *unblock* tension personally before being able to *block* tension as a character." (Simpson 133) This gets at the main point of why movement classes and techniques are so important for actors. However, not everyone has the same level of tension they must unblock. Everyone has a different combination of identities and has had different life journeys. The soft body may not be as accessible to certain people because their survival body may have had to survive more.

Gender identity, in particular, is a strong influence on how habitual movement and/or the survival body are affected. In her 1990 article, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power", professor and feminist scholar Sandra Lee Bartky claims that cisgender women modify their habitual movement and bodies as a result of patriarchal surveillance. This results in a very particular style of movement: "...a woman must stand with stomach pulled in, shoulders thrown slightly back and chest out, this to display her bosom to maximum advantage." (Bartky 470) In fact, she expresses the societal limits on bodily freedom that movement classes are so intent on teaching: "The 'loose woman' violates these [patriarchal] norms: her looseness is manifest not only in her morals, but in her manner of speech and quite literally in the free and

easy way she moves.” (Bartky 469) Cisgender women are not the only people being trained into habitual physical restriction. This can apply to people who have faced gender-based discrimination, BIPOC communities (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) and trans and queer communities. These communities are routinely shamed, overtly and covertly, for their gender identity and expression.

According to established feminist scholar Judith Butler, people’s bodies are trained into this habit of movement through repetition: “...those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished...gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender, and without those acts there would be no gender at all.” (Butler 484) Repeatedly rewarding someone for performing gender correctly, or punishing them for mis-performing, establishes patterns of physical behavior. Actors will start movement training classes with these established pre-existing patterns of physical behavior. For this reason, people with gender identities who haven’t experienced this punishment as intensely, like cisgender men, may have some advantages in movement classes. Cisgender men, for example, have been allowed to relax their bodies more in public without social shame or punishment. A punishment may look like a man aggressively catcalling a woman who relaxes her legs open on the subway. In response to this, she may tense her legs together. If this harassment is repeated, she may start to do this habitually, and unprompted.

However, cisgender men potentially face harsher punishments for expressing non-masculine movement qualities. In the sociologist C.J. Pascoe’s ethnographical study of teenage boys at an American high school, *Dude, You’re a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*, she found that masculinity was a limiting yet highly sought-after “...identity expressed through sexual discourses and practices that indicate dominance and control.” (Pascoe 13) She found that the boys at the school would police each other’s masculinity by calling each

other the f-slur, whereas the girls would do no such thing, as there was no reason to. While cisgender men enjoy some freedoms of movement, the pressures on masculinity and femininity each produce their own set of physicalized patterns that must be considered in movement training.

Stage combat is uniquely equipped to help actors with marginalized gender identities overcome barriers in movement training. Without movement training, people who have been trained not to fight back for their lifespan won't convince an audience that they are a strong or confident character. Stage combat, however, requires actors to embody a powerful physicality. Studying stage combat requires that performers become comfortable in the activated fight stance, sharing body weight with other combatants, and wielding weapons confidently. The intensity and repeated frequency of powerful stances within stage combat allows for a strong physicality to become habitual in actors, both on and off the stage.

In journalist Justin Hayford's article on the theatre company, Babes with Blades, a stage-combat centered theatre company that produces plays focusing on people with marginalized gender identities, founding member Dawn Alden explains the connection between stage combat and empowerment: "For women, acting training—and life training—teach us to be disconnected from our bodies. Stage combat has put me back into myself...I feel strong in it, and I want to show it off. It awakens the innate badass in every woman." (Hayford 63) Alden is referring to women but this sentiment can be extended towards most people who have gone through gender-based discrimination.

The effect gender identity has on movement expression cannot be ignored by instructors, theatre curriculum developers, and creative teams. In order to create equitable movement training, students who have faced gender-based discrimination throughout their lives must be

given extra care and instruction when struggling to learn concepts that may come more easily to others. Otherwise, these students may fall behind in movement classes and fail to reach their full potential as actors, artists, and movers. Stage combat is an excellent tool for unlearning the physical socialization of gender-based discrimination for these students. Those who have been socialized as men will have the opportunity to explore a softer, connected, and partnered movement. Those who have been socialized as women have the opportunity to experiment with a more aggressive movement style and take up space. This effectively counteracts physical socialization and expands the range and capability of each student. It would be hugely beneficial for stage combat and movement courses to formally take this socialization into account so that all students can become as freely expressive artists as possible, regardless of gender identity.

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## **In Conversation with Maureen Yasko**

Interviewed by Aliya Hunter

*Maureen Yasko (she/her) is a fight and intimacy director and Certified Yoga Instructor based in Chicago. She is an associate artist with the previously mentioned theatre company, Babes With Blades. She is interested in subverting traditional gender dynamics within the fights she choreographs and is passionate about new play development at Babes With Blades. She is also a feminist and outspoken advocate of mental health awareness. The following interview with her was edited for clarity and concision.*

### **ALIYA HUNTER (she/her)**

First question: stage combat. What has your journey with it been like?

### **MAUREEN YASKO (she/her)**

I got my BA in Theater with a minor in Music from Georgia Southern University Armstrong Campus (formerly Armstrong Atlantic State University) in Savannah, GA. I was introduced to some basic stage combat in college, but my movement teacher didn't have a lot of experience in it. Before my last semester of college, I was hired for my first professional acting gig, an outdoor drama in northern Ohio. Outdoor Drama, as a genre, has a tendency to focus on early American history, and on the fight for the land within this country. Within those stories there's a lot of violence. So, I worked in these huge amphitheaters where there's huge battles on stage happening with black powder firearms, native weapons, sabers, cannons, horses, and all kinds of crazy stuff. The name of that show was *Johnny Appleseed* and it doesn't exist anymore; it was only around for two years. The part that I played, the character's family got massacred in this huge fight scene. And it ended with a hanging stunt that I got to do. The fight director for that production, Henry Layton, was a certified teacher with the SAFD at the time (he currently no longer is). He managed to put together an opportunity for us to train to become certified by the SAFD in three different weapons systems. So, we were performing in the show six nights a week, but during the daytime many of us were training to get certified in unarmed combat, quarterstaff, and rapier and dagger.

After that, my acting career kind of centered around stage combat for the most part, because I tended to seek out those opportunities. For instance, I worked at *Tecumseh!*, another outdoor drama in Ohio, for several years and continued to train. I also worked at the Pennsylvania Renaissance Fair. Then, I got an apprenticeship with the Atlanta Shakespeare Company and received more stage combat training. I've also had several opportunities to learn from and assist other teachers outside the SAFD and that's been really valuable in my development as a practitioner, teacher, and director.

When I moved to Chicago, I was already dabbling in assistant teaching and assistant fight directing. The fight community in Chicago is pretty big, but it's tight-knit. I became an ensemble member with Babes With Blades Theatre Company, which got my foot in the door with the fight community here. I started training with and assisting Chuck Coyl at the Actor's Gymnasium in Evanston, just north of Chicago. Chuck is a brilliant Fight Director and Teacher, who's a Fight Master with the SAFD. I was super lucky to get to assist him for many years.

When theatre started coming back after the pandemic, I decided that I wanted to step back into theatre as a fight director, intimacy director, and movement director who also acts rather than an actor who also fight directs. I was already kind of moving in this direction. I would say that before the pandemic I was pretty much pursuing both avenues of work with the same verve. So, it was becoming a member with the SAFD, landing combat heavy gigs, forming friendships and mentorships, and I'm continuing my journey from there. That's sort of it in a long-ish nutshell.

## AH

When you went to an acting program, you had movement training. Did you notice anything change about the way you moved or your movement practice when you started doing stage combat?

## MY

Absolutely. This is actually a fascination of mine and it has been for a while. So, I was a tomboy growing up and a multi-sport athlete. When I first started figure skating, I got a lot of criticism like: "You skate like a hockey player." I had to figure out how I could use my power, this strength that I'm interested in and that I have. How do I make this fiery thing more graceful? And what does that mean? I had to tell two different movement stories. At the time, I didn't look at it like that. I was like: "I guess I gotta be more like a figure skater." And then cut to working at *Johnny Appleseed* where I'm learning how to do these fights. And I'm being told: "Stop pointing your toe, you're too light, we need you to be more grounded, earthier." I had to re-harness my power in a different way. As a fight director and teacher, I love working with women and people with marginalized genders who are dancers or have been socialized to move a certain way in the world. For me, it was more of an understanding of movement disciplines. But, I also think that stage combat gave me an opportunity to harness a kind of power that I don't think women get to feel often.

I've always been interested in this juxtaposition between light movement and earthy movement and how varying movement qualities tell a particular story. I'm interested in helping performance artists become more well rounded movers and physical story-tellers. And that affects your acting training on the whole. The more that you're being forced, quote, unquote, to learn these different types of faculties within your body, it's only going to strengthen your craft as an actor. So, I also noticed more of a focus in my movement work, or in my work in general, that I don't think was

there before. I had to be focused on what's happening in the moment, in a way that my body wasn't able to do before.

It's kind of hard for me to separate because I was brought up in this very masculine household. I played basketball and all these other sports for a long time too, but I think from a movement point of view, I was constantly trying to prove my strength. I was constantly trying to prove that I can do whatever it is I'm doing. And the more I practiced stage combat, the more I didn't feel like I had to prove my strength and my presence as an actor. But, as a fight director, I do come up against a lot of sexism and shit like that.

**AH**

Really? Can you talk about that?

**MY**

I think it's beginning to change. But in the early days, for instance, when I first started dabbling in fight direction and fight and dance captaining, I would sometimes be in a show with a bunch of dudes who were performing stage combat. Even if I wasn't also fighting in said show, I had training. I did know what I was talking about, but they hadn't seen me fight. So, on one hand, I understand where they might be coming from, but if I was a dude, they wouldn't have to see me fight for me to gain their respect. There's an implicit assumption about men, like: "Well, he's a dude. Of course, he's a competent fighter." Whereas when a woman walks in, or I imagine a non-gender conforming person walks in, we have to prove ourselves to the people in the room. I do think it's changing now that more and more women are getting into the art. But, the old school folks are still working and still passing on this implicit bias.

**AH**

Do you feel like women or non-binary students or actors who have never done stage combat struggle to learn it more? I might be putting words in your mouth. But, is it potentially easier for a cis man to adopt a more aggressive physicality?

**MY**

Yeah, I have absolutely noticed that. I've assisted and taught at the Actor's Gym for a long time and we have all kinds of folks coming in there and from a younger generation, too. There's definitely women and gender non-conforming folks coming in. Regardless, even before I got there, I have zoned in on those folks because I know they're gonna have a hard time embodying that aggressive physicality. And not zoning in on them in a bad way. As someone who has had the experience of needing to be taught how to ground myself in that aggression, it's really important to me that other women and gender non-conforming people have someone who has their experience.

Women, for instance, don't generally have a concept of what it's like to throw a punch. Maybe it's the way that they were socialized, maybe they've never gotten in a fight. There's a lot of men who can pick up on it much faster because they're already socialized with that aggression. You could ask a lot of cis boys and men if they've been in a fight and they'd probably say yes. You ask a woman that and maybe a lot of them have nowadays (I have), but there's a lot who haven't.

And, I don't like the idea of needing to have had that violent experience to be able to perform it. You don't. But, I do notice that as women and gender non-conforming students progress in their training, they become more comfortable with performing violence. I think some hesitation comes from not being comfortable being aggressive or not wanting to hurt someone or not trusting the person partnered with them. I've seen it in the other direction as well. I've also seen men who are super aggressive; they're very choppy and stiff with their movements because it's all brute force for them. I have watched those men learn how to soften and connect to their movement, how to, quote unquote, put more feminine qualities to their physicality, as a result of needing to work with another person.

There's a nervous system thing involved, too. Your brain doesn't know the difference between performing a fight and being in a fight. A lot of women and gender non-conforming folks are not comfortable with being so activated, or with anger because they aren't socialized to embody themselves fully. It can sometimes be fairly easy for cis het white men to embody themselves, because they are allowed to take up space in the world. Having the opportunity to portray that fullness of emotion and physicality, and have your nervous system get used to that activation, is another key component to it becoming easier for women and gender non-conforming students. Some of the comfort comes from learning to be more grounded and truly in their bodies. Students will come in with one understanding of how their body moves, or no understanding or awareness of their body. (I'm so surprised by how many actors I meet who are only in tune with their neck up.) And, now they're in this movement practice, which is something most of them have never done before, and they don't have a concept of what it is. For example: swords. Most modern humans can theoretically guess how one might use a sword. But, most of us don't truly understand it until we do it. So, students and actors come in with one understanding and they walk out with a different understanding. If you continue doing that, you inevitably take on a more embodied presence.

**AH**

Do you think that's an advantage in acting training?

**MY**

I don't know. I do think that incorporating stage combat into acting training absolutely gives performers an advantage. The problem cis het men have is they don't have as much access to their emotions, in my judgment. I did the fights and intimacy for two productions of *Richard III*

last year, back to back. And in the first one, the woman who was playing Elizabeth took a while to embody the power and groundedness a queen needs. I'll note that she has little stage combat training. From a physicality perspective, women sometimes have a hard time being grounded. I think that's why it's so fascinating to audiences to watch women who *are* grounded in their power. I spent so much time growing up thinking that I was physically big only to get into the professional acting world and be told: "What are you talking about? You're tiny." People love to see fights where a gal beats up some big guy. People are very fascinated by the idea of a small woman having power in a way that they don't experience in the world. I wouldn't necessarily say only small women, either. I think it's just any woman.

I think that men can have a physical advantage in stage combat. I think men have an advantage in performing roles of power and they can at least understand the physicality of that. But, I wouldn't always say that cis het men are fully connected to their bodies, either. That said, a lot of them have an understanding of aggression and anger. They can usually embody that emotion, at least.

**AH**

Do you want to talk about Babes With Blades?

**MY**

I would love to. So, I got lucky; my first show in Chicago was the first thing I auditioned for and it was produced by Babes With Blades. We did an all-female Shakespeare show. We've since opened our Shakespeare productions to include both women and other marginalized gender identities. One of the things we do that I am super passionate about is a lot of script development work. We produce a lot of new plays. These new plays are often centered around underrepresented voices and identities using stage combat as a storytelling tool. We offer an opportunity to perform a type of physical storytelling that many marginalized identities aren't normally allowed to do. And, through our script development work, we're adding to the theatrical canon as a whole by telling stories that haven't been told. I love Babes' work.

**AH**

How do you highlight or skew away from gender power dynamics within fights with participants of multiple genders when you're fight directing?

**MY**

It has to do with what story I'm telling. Let's say I'm setting up a melee and we've got multiple genders onstage. The more traditional thing to do would be to put the women, trans, and gender non-conforming people in the back. First of all, to have an assumption that they can't do it? And then put them in the back? I absolutely don't do that. I'm way more interested in seeing someone be badass who hasn't had a chance to. But, for example, with stories of domestic violence,

highlighting the reality of those power dynamics can be important to the story. Subverting the dynamic within that physical story is also really fascinating to watch. I'm also just not interested in watching another bunch of cis het dudes pound on each other.

Within particular weapon systems as well, you can have fun highlighting masc versus femme characteristics of weapons and contrasting them. For example, the assumption that broadswords are heavy. In the fight world as a whole, people are always really interested in subverting the whole "big dude versus small chick" dynamic but I think we can get more creative than that. I keep trying to look at it from a physicality point of view.

**AH**

I wanted to circle back and talk about advantages again, with masculine folks having an advantage with socialization and physicality. Do you think this advantage extends to butch queer women, for example?

**MY**

Yes, sometimes. I do find that a lot of women who have been athletes can sometimes access that easier because of the idea of competition. But yeah, I have absolutely noticed some butch queer women have an easier time of it, but not all. I've also had some gender non-conforming students who are still trying to figure out how they move in their own body now that they have this different understanding of it. There's a shyness and I imagine it's not just from the concern about being accepted within this environment. I'm thinking of a couple of particular students right now. And I have watched one of them, who is gender non-conforming, become much more confident in their body movement but also in life, like during breaks and hanging out with the other students. They have this opportunity to experience power, or life and death, and these really intense fights and be choreographed to come out okay, sometimes the winner. It builds confidence.

**AH**

You mentioned earlier that cis men can have a disadvantage when learning stage combat because their movement might be very stiff and choppy or they don't know how to partner with someone. Do you think that's a pre-existing advantage that women have?

**MY**

I think that women and gender non-conforming folks have an advantage over cis men when it comes to cooperating with others. As far as movement is concerned, I've absolutely met women and gender non-conforming people who have that same issue where they think they can just muscle or force everything. But, they have more of a propensity to embody the care that is needed to work with someone else. I do think you're less likely to find women and gender non-conforming people who come in with this highly aggressive, super hyped-up mentality, like:

“I want to bash someone's head in!” I think they have an advantage in that they’re often not as aggressive.

**AH**

Maybe they're more aware of the space they take up.

**MY**

Yeah. Absolutely. Men can take up all the space that they want. We’re all, as women, taught to be as tiny as possible. And that's the thing that I was talking about earlier: we're not taught to embody ourselves. Because if we are not this way or that way or we're big, that's a problem. In women and gender non-conforming people, I definitely think that there's an awareness of how much space they take up, a want to not hurt someone or not wanting to be seen as aggressive. So in that way, not wanting to get into someone’s space can be an advantage. That can be a disadvantage too, because there are particular weapons where you absolutely need to get into someone's space. One of the reasons why I love this art so much is because it's one of the only places I've ever felt like I really belonged and could embody myself in a way that I've always wanted to.

**AH**

Any long or short term goals you have with your stage combat practice?

**MY**

I'm in this transitional space right now because I just got my teacher certification with the SAFD.

**AH**

Congratulations.

**MY**

Thank you. It was a long journey, but I’m thrilled. I've always had a goal to go to grad school, but I wanted to go out into the world and work for a while. And I’ve been steadily working, so grad school went on the back burner. I also wasn't sure if I wanted to go to grad school for acting or something else, but now I'm at this place where I really want to get a degree in movement direction. I want to teach stage combat and movement on the college level while continuing to pursue my career. I’m also wondering how I can continue my practice now that I am not, quote, unquote, required to be in classes as a student or as an assistant. I’m lucky that I have a lot of friends here that I can get together and work with. I want to get more intimacy direction training. That's something I've gotten into that has heavily affected my combat work and feel like it's heavily affected combat work in general, which is great.

Obviously, I want to keep teaching. I want to teach SAFD courses like the SPT but I'm really interested in teaching under-represented communities here in the city. One of the things with Babes with Blades that I advocated for is to have a week of fight training before we start any of our processes. In the past, there was a gatekeeping practice Babes with Blades had where if an actor didn't have any stage combat on their resume, they couldn't even audition. And because stage combat is predominantly practiced and taught by white people, that's a problem. And it's white because training is expensive. So, I was like: "Listen, if we want to continue to tell more diverse stories, we can't have this." We decided to start calling in anyone that we want to see, regardless of combat training, and then also give these actors an opportunity to walk away with some free training.