

# Abuse on the Job

Written by

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*Written in consultation with J. Allen Suddeth*

I am an actor. I studied The Method at The Lee Strasberg Institute in New York, and learned many valuable skills. Breaking someone's humerus bone into pieces during a rehearsal for a play was not one of them. Let me explain.

I recently talked with Carole Swann, an actor currently recovering from a violent accident, which resulted in a broken humerus bone, incurred while rehearsing a play. When I asked exactly what happened during that fateful rehearsal, Carole described how, while rehearsing a scene, the actor she was working with twisted her arm. The actor is also the Artistic Director of the theatre company. Carole describes how everyone in the room heard her bones snap and she had to be rushed off to the emergency room.

That's right, her bone was audibly snapping in a rehearsal for a play.

This was the first "on their feet" rehearsal of the fight scene, and the last one for Carole. She has been out of commission for several months, her arm in a complex sling, recovering from surgery, out of pocket scores of thousands of dollars. She was unable to do basic things such as washing dishes, tying her shoes... the list goes on and on.

She explained to me in our recent interview that this Artistic Director doesn't "believe" in professionally choreographed stage combat because, "it doesn't look authentic." This is an extremely dangerous misconception. Professionals who've trained in stage combat and seen stage combat done well know you can make a scene scary to the audience and not painful to the actors.

Carole says, "You know in most areas of work in the world it would be so completely unacceptable to be doing such unsafe things in the work place, right? But why is it that with theatre it's not taken that seriously?" Excellent question.

It's not just theatre, film actors also engage in what Carole calls "improvised violence". I was recently listening to a radio program on a very well respected radio station about staged violence in film gone awry. The host was talking to actor Y about actor X (a very famous wealthy actor), let's call him the scene partner. The actor said that while he was doing a scene with the partner, when they were at a very intense moment where the partner really thought he was that character, he was so in the moment and connected to his character that he actually smacked the actor repeatedly, for many takes. This move was unplanned and the actor was not pleased. The actor told the radio host that the slaps were hard... and hurt... a lot. No one on set yelled stop, or cut. Finally the actor had enough and halted the whole shebang... probably to go get some ice. He explained to the radio host that his partner was doing "The Method".



As I mentioned earlier, I'm trained in the Method at The Lee Strasberg Institute and I'm tired of this false perception of the Method. I'm alarmed that people use it as an excuse to explain actors completely losing self-control. It has happened once in my classes at Strasberg, where a classmate completely lost self control during rehearsal and slapped her partner during an improv. The partner was shocked, but just kept going with the scene. We were all stunned, including the two actors on stage. Afterwards our teacher explained that was not all right. We hadn't had any stage combat training yet, as it was our first semester there. Still common sense should tell you, it's not all right to smack someone in the face when you have a surge of anger. In fact, had my classmate redirected that urge to slap into a non violent choice in the scene, but just as passionate, I'm quite sure the audience and her fellow actor would have been more moved, and less terrified of the actor.



In what other job is it acceptable to be terrified of a fellow coworker because you fear they might smack you?

It wouldn't be all right to slap a co-worker, much less break their arm, if we were in an office space; it would be classified as harassment or abuse. Granted, the theatre is not an office space, nor a courtroom, nor a library, and although we might have a play set in such locations, the rules are not the same. At any given moment in a play or movie, someone might shout in the library, or stand up on their desk at work, and announce their long repressed love of ... their boss. That's one of the reasons we, the audience and

actors, love drama. It offers a safe space to see people bursting through societal norms and patterns, and allows us to explore our frustrations and passions. It allows us to see them spoken and fought out loud in a safe space.

The theatre can actually be one of the safest places for the audience and actors to play in our modern age of increased restrictions on certain liberties. Did you know that in Manhattan, you cannot dance in most public places including your local bar? It's actually against the law. Through theatre we, both the audience and the actors, can explore our dissenting thoughts, beliefs and behaviors without fear. Whether it is to watch someone losing themselves in a beautiful dance, or finding themselves in a compelling soliloquy we can experience it safely. It can be a forum for safe play and for freedom of speech. The one thing it must never be is a place where we watch a theatre of actual violence.

As much as actors and directors want to create a feeling of reality on stage, it is not in fact reality. We are putting on a show.

I remember my stage combat teacher at Strasberg, Fight Master J. Allen Suddeth would say to us, "It's a Bachelor of FINE Arts you're getting".

That's exactly it, actors are artists, FINE artists, and stage combat requires a high level of precision and art. At Strasberg we learn to use our five senses to create a sensory reality on stage that feeds the scene, but we are always aware of the act. We are bringing the character to life for the audience, not trying to become the character, not living the characters life. That would be called schizophrenia, not acting. Yes, we want the audience to believe in the stories we tell, but we are artists not the librarians, lawyers, or murderers we play. There's a lot of pressure to be believable, which is vital and certainly I'm not advocating 'bad acting'. But the actor's vitality is equally important. It is not ok to sacrifice the mental and physical health of an actor for a role on stage or in film. It is disturbing to see how many times such a sacrifice has been made.

Allen Suddeth sent me stories he's been collecting over the years of accidents that have happened due to faulty preparation or complete lack of preparation. A few of the most horrible examples; in Utah, a high school student was shot and killed off stage at a production of Oklahoma. Actor Rosie Perez was recently in the news suing NBC for injuries sustained while filming a popular TV show. A young actress had her neck broken while playing "dead" on stage, when a fellow actor stepped on her head. These are only a few examples of accidents that happen "under the radar" of the Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA), or Actors Equity Association (AEA).

I've talked to colleagues about stories such as these, and they usually have a story to share about a time they were injured on set. How about you, reader, do you have a story? Several?

Not all stage combat stories are horrific, some are more educational. I recently worked on the set of "Men in Black-3", and Will Smith was wielding a gun around set – no spoiler here. Before we shot the scene, he held the gun up in the air and vocally projected so that everyone: extras, crew, and director could hear him saying: "Empty weapon on set! Empty weapon on set". I was startled, and surprised, but it was educational to see such caution coming from any actor, much less a super star.

Indeed, education doesn't stop once you leave college, and I've begun to recognize the value of my stage combat education even more upon graduating. One of the first things I learned with Allen Suddeth was to rehearse a fight scene in slow motion, and make sure both parties know exactly what will happen. You use a series of checks and signals to engage your fight partner and safely execute the staged fight. As you rehearse over time the fight gets faster, and even more precision with specific signaling. Had the Artistic Director who allowed Carole's broken arm to happen gone through these procedures, I'm certain the rehearsal would have turned out differently. To think these checks and signals make the fight look fake, would indicate you've never seen stage combat done well. If you know what you're doing, be it hand to hand combat, whip, gun, sword, or quarterstaff, you can effectively make the audience cringe. You can also keep your actors out of the hospital.

In addition to seeking out stage combat training, when you're on a set, you have the right to stand up for your personal safety. This is especially important when Equity and a fight director aren't in the picture. Carole used to be Equity, but it was hindering the quantity of jobs she could take on in the area where she lived, so she left. As a non-Equity actor there is no guaranteed, written-in protection, and Carole comments on the safety benefits of being part of Equity: "Equity has these rules, and an Equity production would hopefully never do any stage combat without a fight director. Outside of that, I guess it just comes down to actors standing up for themselves."

Carole was involved in a situation where the theatre was non-Equity, and didn't engage with a fight director. In an Equity theatre that would be in direct violation of the Equity rules- Here's one regulation The LORT rule book stipulates on Stage Fighting/ Stunts- "All stage fights will be staged with on-site consultation by a qualified professional (i.e., someone with expertise in stage combat and, where appropriate, weaponry and/or martial arts)."

AEA and the Society of American Fight Directors (SAFD) are organizations created to promote a healthy safe standard of work for actors. When there are so many examples of people in Equity getting injured, and worst case scenario killed, it's clear that these regulations are at most guidelines. The sad reality is that many times the people in charge, such as the Artistic Director



Carole worked with, don't incorporate the protective measures into day to day practice, whether they are Equity or not. As a result, Carole is now pursuing legal action because her medical bills from the accident are too high to pay off on her own.

When dealing with misinformed colleagues, it's so important to preserve some sense of your own personal morals, and health. Do not be afraid to speak out! Do not be shy to reach out, and stand up for yourself in an unsafe work environment whether you are Equity or non- Equity. If you're Equity, please know your rights! The following is an excellent site to find a local teacher/fight director: <http://www.safd.org/region>. The services of this website are accessible to Equity and non-Equity alike.

The divide between the actor and the characters they play is so precious, and so difficult to navigate, but so vital. I am still coming to my own understanding of how much to give to a character and how much I cannot give because it is too much a part of me. Like my dignity. So insist on choreographing a slap, or choreographing an arm twist which might trash your arm, do please. Allen Suddeth has taught me well.

Lillian Rodriguez is a recent graduate of New York University, receiving a BFA (with honors in theatre). While at NYU she received a Recommended Pass in Unarmed stage combat, as well as a Basic Pass in Broadsword. She has a Black Belt in Tae Kwon Do, and also studies Tai Chi. She was one of two in her graduating class to receive the "Outstanding Achievement in Studio- The Lee Strasberg Theatre & Film Institute" award from the NYU Department of Drama. You can check out more of her writing and acting here- <http://www.lillianrodriguez.com>

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