

On Being a Fight Captain

I'm here to muse a bit on what I think it means to be an effective Fight Captain (hereafter called FC). I hope to give insight into tools and behaviors that have worked for my colleagues and me. By no means am I a "master" of the position, but I'm starting to get a pretty clear idea of what kind of person can fill that role and what they should be able to accomplish.

Also, I curse a lot. I apologize if some of that slips past my editor.

First, who can be the FC? I venture to say, anybody that will be in the room for every performance. An ensemble member, a stage manager, the light board operator, a swing, a stagehand, you get it. It is advisable to not assign the duty to a performer that is in the majority of the fights- we need an outside eye, or someone that can easily step out of the violence without leaving a gaping hole in the choreography.

Because of this, it's likely that the FC will not be the "best fighter;" you'll see this performer in all the fights, sometimes as several different soldiers. Kristin Storla, an Atlanta based director of violence and intimacy, says she seeks an inquisitive captain that pursues deeper understanding. Jason Tate, who has designed the violence of numerous productions, looks for someone with an "eye for movement." He values an individual that can communicate effectively; understand storytelling and intention; and give notes that promote clarity as well as safety to *maintain* the work rather than *fix* it.

As I get input from colleagues and friends, I see a pretty common theme for the ideal FC: an ego-free collaborator, not a showboat that thinks they can "make it better." In my college years, Tiza Garland gave me my base of knowledge in movement work. One of the most valuable lessons I picked up from her: don't be a dick. Ego has no place in this industry. Has this lesson stuck? I mean, I like to believe so; I think about it often and it influences my professional behavior. Atlanta based performer and teaching artist Gabi Anderson finds relief and comfort when the appointed FC is known for patience and commitment to quality. Not all performers can be Errol Flynn or Mike Chin.

After a fight director slams some choreography on an ensemble it might be up to the FC to polish or refresh. That asks for a driven work ethic and “we can do that” attitude.

Now, let's rattle off the responsibilities of an FC. The FC needs to be familiar with all sequences of violence in a production- a slap, a push, a feature fight, a fall, a threat, etc. How familiar? That depends. Stage manager Lilly Baxely says maybe not completely, but close. When I am an FC, I prefer to know the fights inside and out to be able to answer any and all questions about choreography and intention. Oh look, there's that damn word again: “Intention.” Weird.

Some productions might require some paperwork early in the process: documentation of weapon and property assignments, notation/recording of choreography, sketches of body traffic on a plot of the stage, etc. You might say, “That's the stage management's job!” And I would respond with, “They have enough tracks to remember, including yours, so pick up a damn pencil and help them out!” It has been advantageous to have as much information as possible available in my back pocket. It is unprofessional and a waste of time to forget, or worse, deflect responsibility to someone else. Notes and documentation can benefit you even after a production close. They are your portfolio. They are your journal. Go back and reference them often. See how much you've grown and learned since *Romeo and Juliet* in 2014. Mark Guinn reminds us that we're all students in this industry, “forever learning.”

The FC will often be responsible for the maintenance of the weapons and props, so it's useful to be educated on the difference between care of steel and aluminum; how to file down burrs; how to identify a snapped tang; and any other pertinent knowledge. The more you can offer, the more you will be trusted with authority and responsibility.

I don't want to rank the responsibilities of an FC, but the fight call might be one of the most important and daunting. A fight call takes place before every show in order to run through all instances of violence and wake up the muscle memory of the performers. The FC will commonly ask for a sequence at half-speed, then again at something close to performance speed. Repeat this for each sequence in the production. As the actors work through this, the FC keeps an acute focus on specificity

and targets, *and* a soft focus to be aware of potential danger and stage pictures. There might be 15 people in one instance of combat. The FC still needs to be able to hold the command of the room and respect of the company while addressing forgotten choreography and dangerous behavior. The fight call is also the opportunity to make any changes necessary due to, let's say, an injury or a re-cast. If the Fight Director or Action Coordinator isn't around, this falls to the FC.

You'll get different behavior from different Fight Directors after a show has opened. One Fight Director I talked to says "now it's your show, make sure no one dies." Another says "watch ¹Billy's high cuts and don't f*ck up my choreography." Tate wants to be kept in the loop throughout and notified of ANY occurrence that necessitates change. This way, he can come in and see the situation through a "broader lens" and as someone that will not be influenced by a company of people that he has to work with every day. However, like many other FDs, he is willing to grant authority of change to a trustworthy FC with evident problem-solving skills and good instinct; someone not afraid to say "I don't know, but I'll find out." A good goal as an FC is to strive to instill this kind of trust in your Fight Directors.

I know I'm on the border of being pedantic here. "Why such a long essay? It's just Captaining..." And you're right! It might be a trivial role in the production, but it is a role that has served as a really nice stepping stone in my career path to a Fight Choreographer. I've put a lot of thought into how to do it well, and I still might not quite be there. So I'll continue to explore- Where could I use more knowledge? How can I better serve my Fight Directors, company, and community? What's my next step? I judge these are useful questions for all of us. Let's learn from each other, co-elevate, and cultivate this rich artistic community we have. Forever learning!

¹ Name changed to protect actor's ego