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- » [Bad-Ass Burlesque](#)
- » [Finding Yurika](#)
- » [go with the flow](#)
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Violent Illusions

by *Kay Daly*

[Trained To Kill](#) | [The Technique](#) | [Conscientious](#) | [Throw A Punch](#) | [Take It Like A Man](#)

Ever battled zombies at a barbecue gone awry? Or helped Xena the Warrior Princess vanquish the evil sorceress Alti? For Geoff Coates, it's all in a day's work.

As fight director for **Chicago's Defiant Theatre**, Geoff is a master at staging a punch that looks so real it makes the audience squirm. He turns ordinary actors into medieval swordsmen, and engineers huge free-for-alls that only look like they're out of control. Yet despite the fact that he can "imagine a million ways to kill an actor," Geoff is not a violent guy. He passionately believes in the paradox of his craft: in staging violence, he keeps actors safe and teaches his audiences not to bear arms.

Trained to Kill

For Geoff, the passion for creating theatrical illusion was a birthright. His father, a drama professor and conscientious objector who was discharged from the Air Force, raised his son in the theater. Geoff grew up appearing in his father's productions at the local community college.

Geoff continued his theatrical training at Peoria's Bradley University, but within two years, he had run through all the school's theater courses, so he transferred to Columbia College in Chicago. It turned out to be a brilliant move. "Columbia College had so many theater courses; I was in school for five years, and I still didn't get the chance to take them all," Geoff recalls.

It was there that he found his true calling. "When I got to stage combat, I found a field that connected all the things I'd been trying to do all of my life." Geoff also found a mentor: David Woolley, one of 13 "Fight Masters" certified by the **Society of American Fight Directors (SAFD)**, the largest governing body for stage combat in the U.S. Geoff took two stage combat courses with Woolley, and served as his teaching assistant for a year.

In Woolley's courses, Geoff learned more than just how to throw a punch or wield a quarterstaff. "It's not just about being a fighter," Geoff explains, "You also have to be a good actor. There are a lot of people who can pick up a sword and look really cool, but if you can't act and pull off a realistic, fully realized character, it's no good."

Since graduation, Geoff has worked as an actor, fight director, and even as an armorer, tending to the prop weapons of Chicago Shakespeare Theater [www.chicagoshakes.com/]. Three years ago, he joined the company of Defiant Theatre, where he both stages and takes the punches as fight director and actor.

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The Technique

As a fight director, Geoff adheres to this mantra: "I keep actors safe and happy." He explains, "You can't have the actors actually hitting each other. If your show runs 24 performances and you get hit in the face 24 times, you will not survive and you will not be a good actor anymore because your face will be swollen up."

The trick is to create the illusion of violence. Like a magician who gets you to look away while he pulls a rabbit out of a hat, Geoff redirects the audience's attention. In that split-second, the illusion takes place so you think a rabbit has magically appeared or, in Geoff's case, that an actor has just been treated to a knuckle sandwich.

To create that effect requires careful planning and lots of practice. According to Geoff, every minute of stage fighting requires about five hours of rehearsal. So clearly, a fight director has to make very efficient use of his rehearsal time. For Geoff, that means planning his fights in advance. Before meeting with the actors, he draws out his fights on paper. Dividing the page into columns (one for each combatant), he records each actor's moves. Attacks are described in shorthand (e.g., "diagonal thrust"), while arrows between the columns indicate who is attacking and who is defending.

But it's not simply a matter of filling stage time or creating spectacle. In his work, Geoff always strives to maintain a sense of realism. This includes bearing in mind what effect his choreographed blows would have. "If a character gets hurt in move 7, he has to be able to retain that wound through the rest of the sequence; he can't just shake it off." It's also about building an arc for the story and the characters. According to Geoff, the fighters have to have clear motivations that make sense in the story, or the audience will get bored or confused.

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The Conscientious Choreographer

As the son of a conscientious objector who left the military because of his belief in pacifism, Geoff may seem like a paradox -- or at least like he's suffering from an extended case of adolescent rebellion. But if you ask Geoff about his commitment to staging realistic, spectacular fights, you soon see that he's as much the son of a pacifist as he is the son of a theater professor.

"I often get asked if I'm glorifying violence," he admits. "My response is from Hamlet in his speech to the players. He said 'You have to hold as to a mirror up to reality.'" Theater exists, he explains, to show what really happens in the world, and we live in a violent world. "As long as there are two people on this planet who want the same rock, there will be violence."

Beyond the lesson taught by the fights, there's a deeper sense in which staged violence reveals Geoff's own pacifism. By staging fights, Geoff controls the act of being out of control. "One of the abiding principles of martial arts is that they teach you not to fight," Geoff explains. "They teach you how to fight as a last resort."

Like the martial artist, Geoff contains violence, and by controlling it, robs it of its sting. In the fight director's hands, a punishing blow is evoked and, at the same time, nullified and tamed. By creating his violent illusions, Geoff vanquishes the martial forces he controls to create a peaceful world on stage.


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The John Wayne Jab

With Halloween coming, what better way to scare your friends than by faking a punch? Geoff offers step-by-step instructions on how to master a jab like the Duke himself.

Throwing a punch

Step 1: Assume the position

Stand face to face with your victim. The audience should be on the same side as your punching arm. (If not, they'll see the illusion and you'll be booed and pelted with rotten fruit).

Take a wide stance, with the foot opposite your punching arm slightly forward. Bend your knees, and sink down a bit to lower your center of gravity. You should leave plenty of space between you and your victim, about 6 to 8 inches.

Hold your fists up; your punching arm should be angled back, your non-punching arm farther forward (this will be easy if you've positioned your feet as described above). Do not clench your fists completely; pretend you are clutching a roll of quarters. This will make your fists look mightier.

Keep your chest up and your back straight; your arms should be at a bit of distance from your body, but still bent.

Step 2: Breathe

When people get in a fight, they forget to breathe. Remember Geoff's warning: "If you don't breathe, you will die."

Step 3: Prep for the punch

Put both your hands on your victim's shoulders. Make eye contact. Do NOT proceed until you have made eye contact. This is a safety measure to ensure that your victim is ready to take your punishing blow.

Step 4: Go in for the kill

Caution: This is the hard part, because a lot of things have to happen at once. Try this very slowly several times before throwing your whole heart into it.

As you reach back with fist to start your jab (grasping that roll of quarters, of course), step to the side with your opposite foot. Your other hand is still on the victim's shoulder. As you step, roll this hand over so your palm is facing you, and shift your eyes to stare at your own palm. (Wherever you are looking is where your fist will go, so do NOT maintain eye contact at this point. Stare at your palm).

Now punch straight at your palm, still safely located on your victim's shoulder. Just as your fist is about to hit, open it so that you slap your own palm with the palm of your punching hand. This creates the sound of the punch, which fight directors call the "knap." (Since impact onstage is always faked, the sound has to be created through some other means: either the assailant hits himself; the victim hits himself; or some mysterious offstage personage creates the sound.)

Step 5: Aftermath

Once you've landed your punch (or slap) on your own palm, immediately curl your punching hand into a fist again so that the audience will see a fist when your hand sails past your victim's head. Let your fist follow through, then swing back immediately for your next punch. You're ready to cause some more fake pain!

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Taking a punch

Step 1: The prep

Relax as you would if you were doing the hitting. If you wear glasses, remove them now.

Step 2: Taking the punch

Your assailant is allegedly hitting you on the cheek. If contact were made, your face would take the force of the blow, and turn along with the punch. You can create this illusion by snapping your head in the direction of the punch, then immediately snap back to center. (But don't snap too hard; it can hurt.)

During the punch, you can add effects to make it look more realistic:

Hair acting -- If you have a bushy mane, toss it as you snap your head. This will give you more visual bang for your buck.

Anguished cries -- The audience will believe it more if you respond with a sound. A blow to the center of your body causes a low sound (a lingering "Oof!"); an injury to the extremities causes higher yelps (a short "Ah!"). A jab to the cheek should produce a short, medium-pitched "Oh!" Make this sound when the punch would land.

Step 3: Aftermath

Right after the blow, you need to show the audience where you were hurt. The specificity of your pain makes it seem more real, and helps sell the illusion. So do what people really do when they get hit: they hold the injured part of the body. Caress your poor injured cheek.

Mustering the appropriate emotional response also helps to make the effect hit home. Take your pick: anger, shock, fear, stoic resignation. It's all good.

Two final tips:

Geoff warns that it's going to sting a little bit, especially if you're the one creating the knap. It's like football: it'll hurt, but you'll have fun.

The audience sees only the "before" and the "after"; the "during" goes too fast. So make sure your "before" and "after" are very specific.

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