Fighting Over Fifty

Meditations on not getting down about getting gray

By Randy Messersmith

As an Advanced Actor Combatant with 26 years experience, studying off and on with Society of American Fight Directors and other martial arts disciplines, I vividly remember the beginning of my stage combat journey. In 1989, I attended my first NSCW in Las Vegas. I was 28 years old. Since then, I have experienced two knee surgeries, a broken thumb, osteoarthritis in the joints, corrective lenses, and a few extra pounds to carry around. At present, I am on sabbatical from my position as Theatre Arts Director and Residential Faculty at Scottsdale Community College in Arizona, taking the opportunity at the ripe old age of 54 to “take a break” and attend the 2015 National Stage Combat Workshop (NSCW) at the North Carolina School for the Arts.

In The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, author Stephen R. Covey tells a story of a man who was walking through a forest who came across a frustrated lumberjack. The lumberjack was trying to cut
Mental Health

When I attended my first NSCW I was young, thin, and in relatively good shape from navigating the New York City life where I had been living since 1985. In high school, I played almost every sport: football, track, basketball, cross-country running, and swimming, all while participating as a member of the drama club. I thought I was immortal. Although the grueling schedule at NSCW, including 8-10 hours of fighting each day six days a week for three weeks took its toll, there still seemed to be plenty of time for alcohol consumption and late nights on the weekends and maybe even a weeknight or two.

Flash forward 26 years. I anticipate my approach to this NSCW will be wildly different, at least from a mental strategy. My goal is not only to survive the grueling schedule, but to thrive. For stage combat practitioners of any age there are four mental hurdles that I think we need to be aware of as we pursue this intrepid journey of practicing the Art of the Sword. The art of theatrical violence can be a very physically demanding discipline, but it is equally mentally demanding. Avoiding some of the pitfalls that sabotage the enjoyment
of the journey, or even cause you to give up the practice, must be avoided at all costs.

First, resist the allure of the pinnacle, thinking “I’ve got this,” or “I have arrived.” Those of us who have had several years (or decades) of experience may feel at times that even though we still have more to learn, that perhaps an instructor is moving too slow or that too much time is being spent on basic techniques. We forget that the musician practices the scales repeatedly before she plays the concerto, and she does it every time. It creates muscle memory and dexterity. I remember receiving my 1st degree black belt in 2003 after ten years of study. I was incredibly proud of the achievement. I was 42—the oldest member of the dojo at the time. But as I was tying on my new belt with my name embroidered on it, I had an epiphany. I had mistakenly made the black belt the goal, the culmination and final curtain. I realized that the black belt was just the beginning of the journey. While having a goal and striving to achieve it gives me energy and purpose, I always try to remember the importance of mini-successes and failures along the way. This is something I share with my students all the time—the best learning takes place outside of our familiar comfort zones.

Second, it is important not to judge oneself too harshly. Watch out for statements of self-doubt, such as, “What am I doing here?” This is a young person’s profession!” While there is a certain amount of harsh truth to the reality of the young person’s game, it is important to remember that there are opportunities in the industry that are available to older actors with up-to-date skill sets. Fight Masters work professionally with film actors or opera singers that have little to no training of any kind, and it is a welcome relief when a seasoned performer is cast in a play or a film that can safely handle a prop weapon.

Third, while there might not be as many roles out there in film and theatre for the “AARP/SAFD” actor, they do exist, and directors are looking for trained combatants to fill them. I was recently cast in Southwest Shakespeare Company’s Blood Royal, a condensed version of the Henry VI trilogy, which had as many as thirteen individual fight scenes and over twenty-three moments of choreographed violence. I was involved in several of the scenes as the Duke of York, but because of my training I was asked by the fight director to throw on a tunic and appear as a soldier in several more. In the last three years, I have been in several productions that required staged violence of some kind, and I was cast because of my continual training. Age did not play as large a factor as I thought, because I kept up on my technique.

Equivocation by Bill Cain at Southwest Shakespeare Company, 2015

DEVON CHRISTOPHER ADAMS
Finally, the last mental hurdle we encounter is to be accepting of our physical limitations that may have eroded our elasticity, stolen our speed and dexterity like a thief in the night, and created that beautiful snap-crackle-pop in our knee and ankle joints when we lunge. But it is imperative that we also celebrate our strength of will. This is my favorite definition about the difference between an amateur and a professional: an amateur artist performs well when they feel like it; a professional artist performs well whether they feel like it or not. It is this reliance on years of training and technique that pulls you through a performance in front of an audience when your bones are aching, your voice is hoarse, and you have just finished the eighth performance of the week. It is how the ballet dancer performs on pointe on her broken ankle, the Broadway musical theatre artist sings past her laryngitis, and how the professional fight combatant executes choreography with precision and excellent partnering skills, enduring bruises, sore muscles, creaky joints, and mental exhaustion.

One of the advantages that we of the Silver Hair clan might have over some of our younger and more athletic members of the SAFD fight family is our willingness to risk, to fail, and to be OK with failing. We just don’t care what people think of us (at least, not as much as we used to). Our experience allows us to be able to work with a variety of fighters from the novice to the advanced and to meet them at their skill level without frustration. We are better partners than when we started because we are more relaxed, but mentally tougher. We work smarter, not harder. We conserve energy. We take naps. We can remain mindful of some of these mental booby traps and avoid them by constantly working on the basics, seeking training in a variety of weapons styles and disciplines, constantly exploring new and innovative ways in fight choreography, and accepting and loving our current physical machine with all of its worn parts and mileage. In order for this machine to continue to be efficient and effective, we must first look at how to repair it and to keep it in good working order.

**Physical Health**

*From Younger Next Year,* by Chris Crowley and Henry S. Lodge, M.D. (2004)

Nature balances growth with decay by setting your body up with an innate tendency toward decay. The signals are not powerful, but they are continuous, they never stop and they get a little stronger each year. Whatever you call it, in our fortieth and fiftieth our bodies switch into a “default to decay” mode, and the free ride of youth is over. In the absence of signals to grow, your body and brain decay, and you “age.” So how do we keep ourselves from decaying? By changing the signals we send to our bodies. The keys to overriding the decay code are daily exercise, emotional commitment, reasonable nutrition and a real engagement with living. But it starts with exercise. (p.22)

The authors of this book advocate for some form of exercise at least six days a week. Not three days, thirty minutes a day, which may be the accepted minimum to maintain fitness for those under fifty years of age, but six days a week to help override the decay code and actually increase strength and stamina. If we look at the definition above, attendance at the NSCW and training in all forms of theatrical swordplay and martial arts disciplines contributes to all of the keys to overriding the decay code.

Another recommendation by the authors is for those of us over forty or fifty to do strength training at least twice a week (p. 155). Muscles atrophy as they get older, and it is never more important to hit the gym and lift those weights than it is as we age. Hate weight lifting? Too bad. The goal is not to audition for the Hulk. Cardio training, while very important, is not sufficient to override the decay code, even if you are in great shape from running or swimming. Lifting is therefore required to keep our muscles from getting “sloppy.”

Then there is pain. It’s a reality and there’s no avoiding it. After three weeks at NSCW (or any workshop of length), the younger participants who may not have been in the greatest shape to begin with start to get stronger, whereas those of us with the older joints and muscles start to feel the effects of the ten-hour days. The recovery time for sore muscles is longer for older combatants, but there are things you can do to accelerate the process. Drink protein shakes containing almond milk, hemp protein, peanut butter, bananas and L-Glutamine, which counteract the hit your muscle-skeletal system takes after a hard day inflicting imaginary wounds and swinging about cold steel. The L-Glutamine, an amino acid, helps to speed up the recovery process by re-synthesizing carbohydrates, and helps to replace the glycogen reserves that have been depleted after a hard workout or a mass battle scene.

One of my absolute essential tools to assist in the recovery of sore muscles and to break down the lacitc acid that has collected in them each day is a foam roller, the sort you can purchase from almost any department store, sports store or yoga studio. Foam rolling constitutes what is known as Self-Myofascial Release (SMR), and targets tired and overworked muscles and improves function, flexibility, and reduces injuries. If you are not using these in addition to your stretching regimen, I highly suggest you get one and stick it in your fight bag.

Another reality with which fighters of all ages contend are injuries. Not including surgeries, which are meant to help yet can create secondary problems, we all must handle our physical challenges. These include osteoarthritis, torn ligaments, knee, neck, back, and elbow pain, and general physical limitations based on one’s body type. My personal bane is what I lovingly refer to as my “Hamlet Thumb.” On an opening night of *Hamlet,* the actor playing Laertes missed his target in the final duel and tore three of the ligaments and tendons in my right thumb with his rapier. Since there was no understudy, I performed the remaining three weeks of performances with my hand wrapped.

Twenty-six years later, in rapier and dagger classes, I am not so gently reminded of my Hamlet Thumb by the constant throbbing of arthritis every time I perform a beat parry, or any parry for that matter. Accidents happen, of course, and there are many stories like this in our profession. The thing to remember is to be kind to yourself as you continue to study this demanding and rewarding art form. Accept your physical limitations, whatever they may be, with grace, dignity, pride, and with a grateful heart. I’m not advocating stopping training, or hanging up the sword in the face of injury. It’s a matter of balance—keep working, but respect that the body changes as we age.

Food is fuel for living, and in our case, fighting. It is as the adage goes: “You are what you eat.” I know this means that I cannot eat the same foods that I did in my twenties and have the same amount of energy or stamina. Nor do I want to eat the same foods that I ate when I was younger. While a discussion of diet and nutrition could encompass another article entirely, and I am not a professional nutritionist, I think it is important to remember that older combatants have different nutritional needs than our younger counterparts. Some of us have different metabolisms that burn fuel at a slower pace. Our bodies are complex machines that require the right combination of fuels to keep them running at peak efficiency.

I have found the switch to a plant-based diet of nutrient-dense whole foods to have considerably increased my energy levels.
This can include substituting hemp protein for whey protein, and eliminating all dairy products and animal proteins (with the exception of salmon). In my own physical experience, I no longer have stomach pain or digestion issues, and I am no longer on any medications. I don’t feel sluggish after meals, and I don’t have to rely on caffeine in the afternoons to keep my energy level up during a ten-hour day of fighting or rehearsing for a production. I don’t intend to brag, or to suggest everyone go and change his or her diet. I do say this—listen to your body. Only you can decide what kind of fuel to put in the tank before you run out of gas. The Art of the Sword is not a sprint for the actor, but an endurance race. We would do well to make sure we have made smart choices to get us to the finish line.

**Spiritual Health**

Thus far I’ve addressed the mental and physical challenges when navigating the aging process in the study of theatrical swordplay. I believe there is a deeper meaning that goes to the heart of why we practice this art form, and continue to practice it for many years. I would like to conclude by contemplating some of the deeper questions asked at the beginning of this article. Are we ever really done earning our stripes? Should we want to be? This discussion puts me in mind of a cartoon in *The New Yorker* magazine years ago. It depicted two Zen monks, one young and one old, who were sitting on the floor, cross-legged. The young monk is looking quizzically at the older monk, who has turned toward him to say: “Nothing happens next. This is it.”

When we take on a task it is only natural that we desire some kind of result for our efforts. When we practice the art of mindfulness, we do not mean practice in the sense of rehearsing to get better and better so that a performance will go as well as possible. In my view, mindfulness simply means a mental state whereby we are continually present with experience, and without judgment. Jon Kabat-Zinn, in his book, *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, describes it this way:

> Mindfulness practice means we commit fully in each moment to being present. There is no “performance.” There is just this moment. We are not trying to improve or get anywhere else. We are not even running after special insights or visions. Rather, we are simply inviting ourselves to interface with this moment in full awareness, with the intention to embody as best we can an orientation of calmness, mindfulness, and equanimity right here and right now. (p. 22)
In Theatre there is a term—the illusion of the first time. A performance must give the audience the feeling of discovery. It asks actor combatants to fully commit in each moment to “being present.” It is mindfulness. Our fight mentors have spent years and years training their minds, bodies and spirits in this pursuit. We aspire to the mental agility, the physical strength and flexibility, and the awareness of the deeper connections to humanity that the continued study of this art form brings. I find that practicing meditation for even five minutes a day helps to cultivate an appreciation for the present moment. It protects me from taking my life for granted, and my abilities as a given. Here is a simple 5-minute meditation practice:

Turn off the ringer on your phone. Set the timer for 5 minutes, so you won’t be tempted to worry about missing appointments. Or, use calming music selections of 5 minutes in length if you prefer.

Sit in a comfortable position for you. Close your eyes and relax, and take a few deep breaths from your diaphragm to release the tension from your body.

Clear your mind of thoughts. When thoughts do enter your mind, gently acknowledge them and let them go, returning your focus to the present moment again.

Don’t worry about “doing it right.” This actually makes meditation more stressful. Thoughts may often enter your head; the process of redirecting your focus to the present moment is where the benefit comes.

We breathe naturally, preferably through the nostrils, without attempting to control our breath, and we try to become aware of the sensation of the breath as it enters and leaves the nostrils. This sensation is our object of meditation. We should try to concentrate on it to the exclusion of everything else.

Meditation can be used for short-term calming and long-term resilience. For best results, try fitting in longer sessions of 20 minutes twice a week and then you will be more practiced with meditation in general, then these 5-minute sessions will have more of an impact when you need them.

As a professional educator with 26 years experience, I have come to the realization that one of the reasons I find such joy in the study of theatrical violence is it allows me to be reborn daily in a new role. I am no longer the teacher, the giver, or the professor of wisdom. I am the student again. I have a passion for learning, and it is a path that I am on that will only end when that worthy opponent called time defeats me. It is about the journey, which at its core is not about trying to improve myself or get anywhere. It is to do this one thing simply for its own sake.

Epilogue
Two weeks have passed since the close of the 2015 NSCW. With elbow and knee braces, I stand victorious. My partner (also an AARP/SAFD combatant) and I received a Best Scene Award for our Quarterstaff fight. More importantly than any accolade, the mental, physical and spiritual lessons I received will last a lifetime. It has been said that there is no learning without reflection. As I look back on my experiences at the NSCW in the comfort of my own home, two things become painfully clear (pun intended).

First, the physical demands of the workshop far exceeded my preparations. By the third week my knees and right elbow were screaming at me to stop. At one point, my elbow would not allow me to pick up an aluminum broadsword, let alone one of steel. Instead of pushing through the pain (as I would have done when I was younger) and perhaps damaging myself further, I took a step back and sat out some classes and came back stronger in two days. I took great comfort in seeing I was not alone, as elbow and knee braces appeared on the younger participants as well. Also, Epsom salts will now be included in my fight bag along with the foam roller.

Second, I had an epiphany. As I mentioned, my fight partner at NSCW for knife and quarterstaff was about my age. The final morning of testing I was so sore I limped into warm ups to see him wrapping his ankle, which had become painfully swollen. While I was wrapping my elbow, we looked at each other and smiled. We knew two things: that adrenaline is a magical elixir of pain removal in performance, and that we had something going for us that our younger combatants did not. Age. Experience. The acting of the fight would be far more important than the physical fight itself.

We would just act as if we weren’t in pain. We received Recommended Passes in both weapons.

I also discovered the meaning of momentum; with every workshop, class, certification test, book or article read, I am filled with more joy, determination and rejuvenation to relish the productive struggle for years to come.

The saw is sharp; bring on the trees.

Works Cited


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