

The Proverbial Poke in the Eye

By Anne Choe, OPERA America

(This article originally appeared in OPERA America's Singer Career Network newsletter, *Voices*, Volume 8. Number 2. Winter 2006)



Brian Davis as the Civismte de Valvert and Plácido Domingo in the title role of The Metropolitan Opera's 2006 production of Alfano's *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Photo by Ken Howard and courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera.

If you're one of the many singers with an office "day job," the mundane hazards of your workplace include eye fatigue and carpal tunnel syndrome. But once you step into a rehearsal room or onto a stage, you're just as likely to be confronted by a colleague who says, "We'll fight to the end at the point of the knife! I welcome the challenge to draw my knife!"

Many opera singers will have the pleasure of being contracted for a role that involves a fight scene. For some singers, the idea of simultaneously singing and swinging a sword instills dread in their hearts. Either of these activities is daunting individually, and the combination can create great potential for disaster. Fortunately, there are a number of factors that can make fight scenes much easier to digest, such as safety, comfort levels, and preparation.

A fight scene should contribute to the story, engage and excite the audience, and ensure the safety of everyone involved. Safety should always be in the forefront of everyone's mind. Although this seems as if it would be common sense, it is always helpful to review safety measures at the beginning the rehearsal process. Take note of where medical help can be found in the event of an accident, and know whom you should contact within the company, be it the company manager or human resources. It is also a good idea to warm up your body before any physical activity, just like it is a good idea to warm up your voice before singing.

When you get to your first rehearsal with a fight director, it is important to inform him or her of any medical problems you may have (such as asthma, a bad back, injuries). It can



The Metropolitan Opera's 2006 production of Alfano's *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Photo by Ken Howard and courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera.

also be helpful to inform the fight director of insecurities you may be experiencing, either physically or vocally. A singer who is confident is easier to work with, and most fight directors are willing to alter the staging to optimize your strengths.

A fight director's primary responsibility is to the music and to the story. For Rick Sordelet, who teaches at the Yale School of Drama and who recently served as fight director for *Cyrano de Bergerac* at the Metropolitan Opera, "There are a few major points to consider when preparing a fight. First, the fight director needs to embrace the director's vision for the production, and then take into account the available physical space in regard to the sets and costumes. Finally, it's very important to understand the physical abilities and comfort levels of the singers." Most fight directors make you a priority; as Sordelet indicates, "Singing comes first. I work with what I have in order to make the director's vision a reality."

Fight directors will tailor the fight scene to each singer's capabilities. B.H. Barry, who has been working with singers at the Metropolitan Opera for over 20 years, will give direction in musical terms to maintain consistency of movement for the particular scene. He also stays sensitive to what each performer can do under pressure. The movements are designed with the performer in mind, not the athlete. Ideally, it is an organic process in which the singers and fight director work together to arrive at a staging that is comfortable for all.

If you are contracted for a role that requires a fight scene, keep an open mind and be willing to step outside of your

comfort zone to try new things (safely, of course). Even the most experienced singers who have done countless fight scenes do best when they approach each scene as a student. You should always be on time to any rehearsal or call. Fight calls are often very short, and any tardiness can throw off the entire rehearsal. Rehearsal time for fight scenes is sometimes limited, and advance preparation allows for a smoother process. Sordelet recommends core strengthening exercises such as yoga or Pilates in preparation for a fight scene. It is also helpful to work with Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method (see article on page 14), or something similar that educates the body to move freely.

A class or workshop in stage combat is the best preparation for a fight scene, especially in the absence of a fight director. Workshops give singers a chance to develop many of the skills required without the pressure of performance. If you can practice fight choreography while singing, it assists in determining the thresholds of aerobic wind and singing wind. If you know you will be singing a role that involves a fight scene, you should try moving while singing (walking up and down stairs, for example). If nothing else, you will gain confidence with the movements of your own body. To learn more about fight direction and workshops or classes, please go to www.safd.org for information.

Opera is thrilling in and of itself, and fight scenes add panache to the performance. This is especially so if the scene is convincing and well executed. It is the obligation of every person involved with a performance to create an experience for the audience. Developing fight skills instills confidence and adds to your ability to be an integral part of the experience. And let's face it, it's just cool. ♦