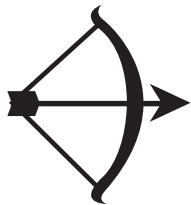




Archery in Theatre

BY RUTH COOPER-BROWN



When asked to write this article for *The Fight Master* we had just presented an Archery in Theatre day for our company, Rc-Annie Limited. You may think this is a rather strange topic for a stage combat class; surely the concept of using live archery in theatre is simply a bad idea. I too would have agreed until approached in 2010 by a Stage Manger who knew I had archery experience. She asked me to be the “expert” who would say “No” to a director wishing to shoot live arrows over the audiences’ heads! I dutifully did my bit and was surprised to be asked for a solution. So, I laid out the risks as I saw them and the training required. The next thing I know I am booked to do the job, and that’s how Archery in Theatre began in earnest for me. The Royal Shakespeare

Company’s production of *Dunsinane* was remounted again in 2011, which gave me the opportunity to firmly establish some of the training protocols.

There have been many theatre and film productions that include archery in some form. The appeal of using this 12,000 year old weapon is compelling but as with all theatrical violence there is always risk. Probably the most famous dramatic archer is Howard Hill who played ‘Owen the Welshman’ in *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, 1938. Howard had incredible skill and was actually able to shoot into the reinforced target areas on the chests of moving stunt and extras, who were paid \$150 an arrow! He also takes the credit for actually being able to shoot an apple off someone’s head. Thankfully this production didn’t require such remarkable skills.



Speaking as a dramatic violence professional, not an archer, my approach is always from that of safety and then aesthetics. In theatre, we use fake weaponry for two reasons: it is perceived to be safer and cheaper. With archery, you often have to use the real thing with adaptations, as the bows will still have to fire and the arrows fly. I also like to ensure that the directors fully understand how the media will interpret any “incident” that happens in their production. Not so long ago, in the UK, two well-known theatrical organizations experienced unfortunate accidents with Blank Firing Handguns. Our media grossly misrepresented these incidents as the actors having actually been shot. These episodes act as reminders that the media is happy to bend the truth into a sensational story at the expense of your reputation.

The best way to approach any such job is to begin by examining the hazards and inherent risks in whatever you are being asked to deliver. Firstly, I considered who is in danger: the actors, technicians, employees and audience. Aware that this is a potentially lethal weapon, my first consideration was, how to reduce and control

risk. So, to begin with we determined the location of the actors on stage when firing. We discussed making the set and key areas of the stage either arrow resistant or arrow receptive and considered ways to control access to the “danger areas” of the stage. As the set was quite raked, I could not afford any loose arrows, therefore every arrow had to hit a target and remain in place. We employed arrow catchers and traps, such as backstops made from straw and foam that would receive arrows on and offstage. To minimise ricochets and rebounds we actually had a wonderful tapestry screen purposefully built with a very dense foam inner to securely grip the arrows. We even added a small lip to the edge of the stage to stop and collect any rogue arrows: vital if you don’t want to hear claims of “audience member hit by arrow,” from a lone arrow lazily rolling off the edge of the stage onto their lap.

There are several ways that you can minimise the risks when using archery on stage, depending on the needs of your production, such as using Flu Flu’s (the renaissance fair favourite) with oversized fletchings to reduce the power of shot. Blunted arrows or rubber blunts (arrows with rubber stoppers) can be an effective option as can latex arrows, even using rigged nylon lines with custom arrows to ensure accuracy can be employed. Personally, I tend to rely on pointless but tapered (like a sharpened pencil) short arrows, which limits how far back they could be drawn. These combined with a child’s low powered bow help to take any real force out of the pull.

We also had to address the issue of whether we could actually shoot at other actors onstage as suggested in the script. Obviously one cannot aim at a person without, at the very least, face or head

protection, even with low powered bows. So, I approached this in the same manner as using a blank firing handgun on stage by never actually pointing at the “target person” but creating the illusion of targeting with angles. We also used a lot of full draws of un-notched arrows which looked very convincing to the audience but protected the on stage musicians and fellow actors while being “threatened” by a “drawn arrow.”

After the safety aspects have been addressed as much as is reasonably possible, I needed to fulfil the aesthetic of the script. To ensure consistency and safe shooting from the actors I created a simple training program. After we had gone through all the basics of how to shoot, I could focus on making the actors quick and precise. I was very aware of the pressure on these actors to be accurate as the script demanded targets to be hit in full view of the audience. Thankfully, they were a group of competitive young men, which made it easy to train them through a series of contests and games. I would push them with strict time restraints until they could draw from the quiver, notch, aim and fire reasonably accurately within five seconds. I would also add extra challenges such as obstructions, varying distances, heights, target size and firing within close proximity of each other. The incentives to succeed were simple: who ever lost bought the rest a round of drinks and the best archer of each session would win the (small plastic) trophy. The greatest incentive of all, of course, was the prospect of performing in front of a live audience. All of which culminated in producing confident archers, as nothing was ever going to be quite as demanding as those training sessions.

It was very important to me that the actors actually understand what they were doing. I wanted them to look as natural and comfortable with the bows as possible. Nothing stands out more on stage than a nervous actor fumbling with his props. A perfect demonstration of this was in rehearsal: a young actor had to “fake” notch an arrow and threaten another actor as he made his entrance. So, when we came to his bit for the first time (the young actors having not trained with the others) He found that couldn’t reach the arrow in his quiver and so after a short panicked battle he resorted to bending forward. An instant later, he stood in a sea of arrows with quiver and bow at his feet completely at a loss as to what had happened. I like my actors to be able to string the bow, name the parts, notch, fire, retrieve arrows and move with them as if its second nature – as it should be.

Whenever possible I encourage actors to wear hand and forearm protection particularly in rehearsals when they are repeatedly shooting. Obviously in performance they are hard to disguise, however, I know actors who have used sticky plasters instead of clumsy finger Tabs and had long padded sleeves instead of bracers. Of course it’s always a compromise, but as long as you are aware of the risks then informed decisions can be made. Another point not to be forgotten is a good thorough warm up and cool down, particularly of the neck, shoulders, arms and back.

Storage and transport of archery equipment is essentially common sense: always keep them securely locked away, out of sight and out of reach. Taking them abroad can be tricky as you may need a license, depending on where you are going. Sometimes they are classed as Sports equipment, which can also be a cost consideration. If in doubt, call Customs and Excise and they will explain the process.

I would like to stress that this advice is from my own research and professional experience and should be used as a guide to good working practices only. One other thing to add is to always have a paper trail, if you have to prove “good reason” for using weaponry. Having an ordered stack of paperwork is a good start. Finally, if you decide that you need live archery in your show then I strongly advise you to enlist an experienced action arranger to safely realise your vision. —