



# SCREEN FIGHTING 101

## Hollywood Pros Reveal How You Can Go From Martial Artist to Movie Fighter!

by Patrick Vuong

**Y**ou've watched kung fu flicks all your life. You're a regular at your *dojo*, maybe even a black belt. Perhaps you've taken your lumps trying to re-enact those crazy parkour clips on YouTube. Does that mean you're ready for a career as a screen fighter, a performer who gets the pleasure of eating one of Tony Jaa's kicks?

Not necessarily.

The attributes you need to succeed in the martial arts/stunt world extend far beyond executing high-flying *wushu* kicks and graceful *aikido* rolls. In fact, you don't even need to be a master.

"That is the illusion that the actor's skill infuses into his or her role to make it convincing," stunt coordinator John Kreng says. "A screen fighter requires different skills than what we expect from a real-life martial artist."

### Prerequisites

Kreng knows what he's talking about. Aside from earning black belts in *tang soo do* and *te-katana jujitsu*, he's been a screen fighter and stunt coordinator for two decades. Recently, he penned *Fight Choreography: The Art of Non-Verbal Dialogue*, a comprehensive textbook about stage and screen combat. The book's 12 chapters explain the intangible aspects of movie fight scenes that a karate studio or acting class just can't teach you.

Kreng, who fought Jet Li three times as three different characters in 1989's *The Master*, says that even though the best stunt fighters usually aren't grandmasters, they must be capable in at least two martial arts.

"The more diverse your training, the better because you never know what will be asked of you," Kreng says. "Back in the 1970s and '80s, you were able to get away with being proficient in one style, but not today. The demands and expectations on a screen fighter and fight choreographer are much [higher] than back then."

So what are the best systems to learn for the silver screen? >>>

PHOTO BY JIM STEINFELDT

*Martial artists turned screen fighters can have a variety of on-screen roles, from thugs who get beat up by the heroes to stunt doubles who substitute for the stars when safety or skill is a concern. Here, in a scene from *Night of the Templar*, Peter Thomas doubles for David Carradine as Mary Christina Brown fires a kick at him.*

Ultimo Dragon poses to emphasize an emotional "beat" after dispatching David Chan Cordeiro. In movie production, actions that are never seen in martial arts training are frequently used for dramatic effect.

PHOTO BY JOHN KRENG



Arrive on set early with the fight choreography memorized and your stunt pads and gear in hand, Lew recommends.

"This is not like clocking in to work at a factory and walking through the doors at exactly 8 a.m.," he says. "Get to the set at least 15 minutes earlier than your call time—'on time' is late in my book. Sometimes the director might want a walk-through right at call time before you get into wardrobe and makeup. The stunt or fight coordinator would need you there ready to do this walk-through."

Prior to filming, the stunt coordinator will tell you what you'll do while you prep for the scene, Kreng says. Use this time to

## 5 Commandments for Screen-Fighting Rookies

Nothing screams "poseur" like an amateur who hasn't done his research. While that adage applies to almost all fields, it's especially true in the martial arts/stunt world of movies and television. If you want to become a screen fighter, follow the five guidelines that fight coordinator John Kreng has identified:

**Tell a Story.** In real life, a martial artist fights for self-preservation, but in films and on television, it's to entertain and advance the story through the combat. You have to show the audience your intent, struggle and reactions nonverbally.

**Learn New Moves.** A screen fighter needs more than a handful of techniques in his arsenal. "When real martial artists get their shot for a lead in a film, they get insecure and do what they know best," Kreng says. "It ends up being really boring after the first two fights. Each fight should be different and better than the one that preceded it. Having a trademark move from film to film is the mark of a huge ego. Bruce Lee never had a signature move, so why should you?"

**Telegraph.** Martial artists are taught to hide their intent and mask their moves. "In film, it is the complete opposite," Kreng says. "You have to throw a technique so the camera can see it in order for it to be effective." If the audience can't see your techniques, how will they know you're any good?

**Show Emotion.** Acting like an unfeeling robot will get you nowhere. "You can have the greatest martial artist in the world on-screen performing some of the most difficult techniques known to man," Kreng says, "but if he or she does not have any charisma or cannot communicate feelings and emotions while making it look natural, it's no good."

**Study Movie Physics.** Aspiring screen fighters must understand why ineffective self-defense moves can be dazzling on-screen. "The reason for throwing a technique [in movies] is much different than in real life," Kreng says. —P.V.

become a sponge.

"Keep a low profile and learn as much as possible by watching others," Kreng says. "If you are doubling an actor, you need to learn to imitate how the actor moves [while] walking, sitting, standing, etc."

There's a good chance you won't re-

ceive a screenplay to study, so Vitali offers some no-nonsense advice: "Keep your mouth shut at all times, stay out of the way of the busy crew and when your time comes, know where your mark is, perform your moves exactly as the coordinator wants [and] make the star shine with your

great reactions. Simple, isn't it?"

### Risks

The reality is that it's extremely difficult to break into Hollywood, Kreng says.

Think about it: Screen fighters regularly put their lives at risk. If you were in their



Screen fighting is nonverbal dialogue, says Fight Choreography author John Kreng. Here, David Carradine practices the language of action with co-star Mary Christina Brown in a sword-dueling scene that Kreng choreographed.

PHOTO BY JIM STEINFELD

formance with all the emotional content and truth of a real fight situation," says Lew, who staged the fight choreography for 2008's *Get Smart*. "I look for technical skills, but just as critical is seeing the martial spirit in your eyes and soul."

### Lingo

Even with a flawless demo reel, you can ruin your chance at nabbing that first stunt-fighting gig if you talk like a clueless amateur. A rookie screen fighter who doesn't know the difference between "centerline" and "crossing the line" is like a med student who doesn't know a scalpel from a stethoscope.

So here's a look at the basic stunt-fighting hierarchy, according to Kreng, starting at the top of the totem pole:

**Second-unit director:** The person in charge of filming action sequences; handles the technical aspects of lighting and setting up the action scenes with the stunt coordinator; often a former stunt coordinator.

**Stunt coordinator:** The person who

heads the stunt department; hires all stunt personnel and answers to the producer and director.

**Fight coordinator:** The person who comes onto a project when a stunt coordinator doesn't specialize in fight choreography or doesn't have time to set up the fights; also known as a fight choreographer.

**Screen fighter:** A specialized stunt performer who appears on-screen as an attacker or stunt double; different from a stuntman, who performs high falls or gets lit on fire, and from an actor who performs his own stunts.

### Graduation

If you've studied and trained hard, it's time to graduate to the "reel world." Unlike an actor who wants to be an action star, stunt performers don't have agents to get them roles. They have to chase after gigs themselves. The job hunt starts with having a solid résumé, an 8-by-10 head shot and a short demo DVD.



### First Gig

You've done it. You've beaten the odds and secured your first screen-fighting role. Now what?

PHOTO BY RON STRONG

Crafting a fight scene is a team effort, so there's little room for big egos, John Kreng (left) says. Here, he collaborates with Japanese pro-wrestler Ultimo Dragon and stunt-fighter David Chan Cordeiro for an on-screen battle in a short movie.

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Think about it: Screen fighters regularly put their lives at risk. If you were in their



shoes, would you want to work with a novice who had yet to pay his dues?

"Stunt coordinators have a regular set of stunt people they use all the time, and they would rather use someone they know as opposed to one they are not sure of," Kreng says.

He managed to parlay his nationally ranked karate-tournament record into a screen-fighting career, but it took Leong months of knocking on doors, handing out résumés and shaking hands before he got his first stunt role.

For stuntwoman April Weeden-Washington, the path to success was much longer—it took her 10 years to get her first big break. Since then, she's stunt-doubled for

PHOTO BY RON STRONG

*Sometimes on-screen brawls call for creativity, especially when a stunt performer is no longer available. Here, the makers of Ultimo Dragon's short movie needed close-up reaction shots of the Japanese wrestler eating a few kicks, but the other screen fighters had left for the day. To save time and maintain control, John Kreng slid his arm into a pair of jeans and his hand inside a shoe to simulate a kick.*

everyone from Halle Berry to Jennifer Lopez and is known for her precision driving, horseback riding and screen fighting.

"You have to believe in yourself, have a strong faith base and believe you can climb to the top of the mountain," Weeden-Washington says. "There wasn't a day that went by when I wasn't in a dojo or driving on the track."

A screen-fighting career is hard to obtain and perhaps even harder to maintain. The pay can be great—almost \$800 for a day's work is the minimum if you're a member of the Screen Actors Guild—but it's also sporadic. Plus, the hours are seldom nine to five; late-night filming, weekend shoots and commuting are constants, and they can wreak havoc on your personal life.

And let's not forget that a screen fighter's life—let alone his livelihood—is at risk any time he participates in a big scene. "For the money we get, [it's clear] we're doing it for the love," Weeden-Washington says. ✕

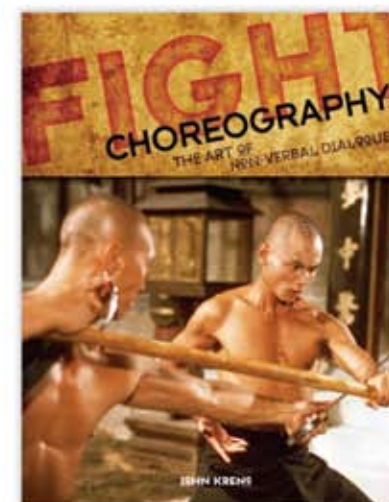
*About the author: Patrick Vuong is one of Black Belt's contributing editors. For more information about him or John Kreng, visit [www.blackbeltmag.com/archives/who/](http://www.blackbeltmag.com/archives/who/).*

"...you'll probably use this book until the spine breaks and the pages fall out."

—Monica DeLeeuw | Microfilmmaker.com

"...solidly lays down a path for anybody interested in learning the process of creating a simple or stylized fight scene for TV, film, stage and videogames."

—Dr. Craig Reid | Kung Fu Cinema.com



Creating a stage fight with a high level of clarity and entertainment value is a very complicated endeavor and requires skills that acting classes and martial arts schools cannot teach. *Fight Choreography: The Art of Non-Verbal Dialogue* helps filmmakers make sense of this art form and how they can use it to create their own styles of fights for a variety of projects, whether they be feature-length films, shorts, or television shows. The book is instructional, informative, and entertaining, and focuses on every important element involved in fight choreography, from basic philosophies, initial concept, and planning, to filming, editing, adding special effects, and sound mixing the final product. The book is not only an indispensable resource for filmmakers, but will also interest film buffs who want to learn how great fight sequences are made so they can better appreciate the action!

### About the Author

Author John Kreng has been studying martial arts since 1973 and holds black belts in Tang Soo Do and Te Katana Jujitsu. As a stuntman, fight choreographer, and/or stunt coordinator he has worked with Jet Li, Tsui Hark, Steven Spielberg, and Yuen Cheung Yen. His love of martial arts/action films led him to become a contributing editor for several martial arts and film review magazines.

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