



Master of the staged punch

Wee Rae meets a specialist in fight choreography

On screen, a jab, punch and hook results in a broken nose and a bloodied face. But behind the scenes, as the cameras are rolling, that same action is done in slow motion, and the moves hardly leave a scratch.

Welcome to the world of fight choreography, which Mr Stuart Stephen Clifford is a part of.

With a third dan black belt in aikido and six wushu silver medals under his belt, the 50-year-old could be a martial arts instructor – and is in fact also an aikido instructor – but he found his passion in fight choreography instead.

His reason is simple. “In martial arts, the sensei (teacher) goes ‘sit down!’ and everyone sits down. But in fight choreography, (the actors) say ‘Huh? Why am I doing this?’, they won’t just follow your orders without any explanation, said Mr Clifford.

He prefers the informal and candid nature of the latter.

Last month, Mr Clifford conducted a stunt choreography workshop as part of the National Youth Film Awards conference.

Some 20 participants participated in the two-hour workshop, where they learnt different combinations of moves commonly used in fight scenes seen on TV, the stage or in the movies.

When he is not conducting workshops or hitting the dojo, Mr Clifford works as a freelance lecturer at Lasalle College of the Arts and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts. He teaches stage combat – another term for fight choreography – meant for theatre.

As a fight choreographer, the first thing Mr Clifford does when he receives a script is to find out where the fight scenes are, as well as the characters involved in them.

He then meets with the actors and speaks to the director to find out how closely he wants to stick to the script.

“Some directors go, ‘Oh, do whatever you want’, or some go, ‘I want you to do this, and then I want you to do that’,” said Mr Clifford. “So it (the choreography) depends very much on the director.”

He also revealed that, at times, his role may be minimal. He said that most actors normally have an idea of the moves they



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want to execute, and share their ideas with him.

“The actors are very good at sensing their creativity... because they’re in the character, they think along the lines of the storyline. Of course, that’s what I try to do as well, but sometimes (their ideas) are even better than what I’m thinking,” he said.

In such cases, Mr Clifford comes in only when the actors get stuck on their next move, or to “tie things together”, by coordinating the moves of one actor with that of another.

Another secret to creating the perfect fight scene is working the camera angles.

Cameras need to be skilfully angled to create the impression that a punch is landing on an actor’s face, when it is in fact, inches away from his face.

So Mr Clifford also has to let the filming crew know where the camera has to be positioned to give the illusion that the punch has connected.

However, executing a good move is only half the deed done. The other half comes from the actor’s reaction when he is being attacked.

To make the fights look realistic, actors have to give exaggerated expressions and movements to show the impact of the hits.

“It’s certainly a real skill. The difference is

that a lot of martial artists can do the kicking and punching, but not the reaction part,” said Mr Clifford.

He added that even the actors themselves may find it hard to put up a convincing act at times.

But all it takes from Mr Clifford is just some encouragement.

“Give it some passion!” he tells them.

“Then, they will get into character. It doesn’t take much. They’re into it, they want to be good,” he said.

Want to be a fight choreographer? You need to...

1. Know your work well to earn the confidence of the cast and crew.
2. Have charisma, as you must sell your ideas well and cooperate with directors and actors.
3. Be somewhat humorous. This puts the actors at ease.



motivated