

[by Mark Jacobs]  
PHOTO BY KEENA SUH

## \* Riposte

**H**aving taken a stab at modern fencing (pun intended), which I chronicled in the January 2009 issue, I thought I'd delve further into this intriguing martial way. As much as I enjoyed sport fencing, I wanted to find someone who still knew the old, practical applications of the Western sword.

Of course, no one fights with swords anymore, so it's natural that true combative applications for fencing would have fallen by the wayside. Still, many Asian arts are based on preserving the use of such obsolete weapons in an uncorrupted form. Surely, there must be masters who've kept this traditional knowledge alive in the West? Sadly, no.

While there are a number of enthusiasts for traditional Western martial arts who've sought to "reconstruct" older styles of European swordsmanship by studying ancient fencing manuals, that's a long way from actually learning at the hands of a qualified teacher. If you don't believe it, try learning an entire martial art merely from reading books about it. Unfortunately, there are no more legitimate instructors passing down these ancient combat techniques. Except for maybe Ramon Martinez ...

Approaching the dilapidated walk-up apartment building on Manhattan's less than fashionable Lower East Side makes me think more of fending off rats than rapiers. Can the last true maestro of traditional fencing really be found here? But entering the small first-floor dance studio where the Martinez Academy of Arms conducts its evening classes is like being transported back to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century *salles*, the fashionable fencing schools that catered to the European aristocracy. Although there's no militaristic discipline, the sense of elegant formality is instantly apparent. Rather than hyperactive children or violence-prone adults, one finds a more genteel, professional crowd carefully going about the basic movements of the sword.

Martinez, 54, was born in the South Bronx and grew up watching Zorro on television. Always harboring a desire to be a fencer, he wandered into a Manhattan fencing school run by Frederick Rohdes. A German immigrant, Rohdes had learned older



*Ramon Martinez (right) demonstrates the exact placement of the blade on a parry from the German school of rapier fighting while Jeannette Acosta-Martinez explains the technique to another student.*

fencing forms—now referred to as historical and classical fencing—in Europe.

"Rohdes was a 19<sup>th</sup>-century person living in the 20<sup>th</sup> century," Martinez said. "He was a strict traditionalist who never thought of fencing as a sport."

A fanatic for what was then called "physical culture," Rohdes mastered the German, French and Italian styles of fencing, in addition to studying *savate* and judo. The type of fencing he passed on to Martinez, the only student he ever certified as a maestro, bears only a slight resemblance to modern sport fencing. Although many of the movements are similar, the intent is quite different.

As the students at Martinez's academy battle each other, they often seem to be

going half speed as if intensity is lacking. But there's a reason for this, Martinez explained.

"You can't just throw yourself at an opponent the way they do in Olympic fencing," he said. "In a real duel, that would be suicidal. It doesn't do you any good to kill your opponent if he also kills you."

The fencing taught in the French and Italian schools, which most closely resembles modern fencing, seems highly formalized because that's how duels were conducted. There were rules—such as no striking with the free hand—that had to be followed as a matter of honor, which was typically why duels were fought.

But contained within many of those systems was an element of self-defense.

Although it was de-emphasized over the centuries as European cities became safer and fewer people walked the streets with swords, even among 19<sup>th</sup>-century masters, the skills were still taught. Indeed, watching Martinez demonstrate elements of the German style using a long sword, similar in appearance to a light, double-edged broadsword, can make you think you're watching a demonstration of old-fashioned *kali*. Traps, knees, disarms and strikes with the pommel are all part of the action.

"Some of this can be used for self-defense, and maestro Martinez will occasionally show us how to apply movements empty-handed or with a cane," said Sagar Krishnaraj, an instructor at the academy. "But I didn't really come here for self-defense; that's just an added benefit."

So if the traditional fencing taught at the academy isn't really about self-defense and can't be categorized as a sport, what is it? Perhaps, more than anything else, this Western fighting science is a martial art. While using that term to describe a Western style is abhorrent to many practitioners of the Asian arts, it seems appropriate.

"There's a philosophy and a spiritual element here that's overlooked in modern fencing," Martinez said. "It's really about learning to control yourself and your mind. If you can't control yourself, how could you ever control an opponent in combat?"

Having been raised in one of the roughest areas of New York, Martinez is familiar with real combat. He's seen people stabbed on the streets, which perhaps gives him a bit of insight into what blade fighting is all about. Although his legitimacy is questioned by certain "experts" in the historical fencing community, Martinez is highly regarded for his knowledge of the sword by those who've trained with him. That includes martial arts luminaries like Dan Inosanto.

Even in the martial arts, traditional Western swordsmanship is a niche within a niche. Martinez and the few people he's certified to teach have the whole field to themselves, and they're striving to sustain an art that shaped Western society for 1,000 years.

Martinez admitted to being a living fossil, someone out of step with the mainstream. "I'm a remnant of another age," he said.

While it might not have been a better age, it's one that's still worth remembering. ✂

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