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# Fencing exhibition will bring a slice of New Orleans history to life

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By Mary Rickard Special to The Advocate

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Photo provided by Martinez Academy of Arms—Using Italian foils, Keena Suh, left, executes a time thrust, or simultaneius parry and t

If the year were 1815 instead of 2015, the political disagreement over the size of Orleans

Parish Prison might be more quickly settled with a duel pitting Sheriff Marlin Gusman against Mayor Mitch Landrieu. Officers and gentlemen of similar rank and social position often took up rapiers, swords or sabers to settle scores 150 years ago, when New Orleans was one of the most prominent fencing and dueling spots in the world.

By 1847, dueling had been outlawed in every state, but fencing – the art and science of personal defense primarily using swords – has been preserved as a martial art by the Martinez Academy of Arms in New York. The academy will stage a Grand Fencing Exhibition from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 20, at Kingsley House, 1600 Constance St., New Orleans. Historic fencing, similar to the techniques practiced in 19th-century New Orleans, will be demonstrated in the first presentation of its kind here in more than 100 years. The event is open to the public, free of charge.

Maestros Ramon Martinez and Jeannette Acosta-Martinez chose New Orleans as the location because of the city's former reputation as a dueling capital, Ramon

Martinez said. During the early part of the 19th century, several fencing academies, or “salles d’escrime,” were located along Exchange Alley between Iberville and St. Louis streets.

“Learning to fight with a sword was still an important part of an aristocratic male upbringing,” Williams Research Center assistant Robert Ticknor wrote in an Advocate column, “Dueling and the Code of Honor.”

Sixteen fencers from New York, Florida, California and Washington state will compete, using a variety of antique weapons.

“For students, it is a way to demonstrate their virtuosity,” said Ramon Martinez, whose academy is one of very few schools in the world teaching the ancient tradition. In homage to the city’s history, fencing assaults will focus on 19th-century weapons, but demonstrations also will include a 17th-century Italian rapier, French foil, Italian foil, wooden cane, dagger and dueling saber. Participants wear masks, padded vests and protective headgear to prevent injuries.

Keena Suh, an architect, has studied fencing 14 years with the Martinezes and teaches fencing using a French foil, a training tool.

“It is beautiful because it is the epitome of efficiency and style,” she said.

Her three-hour fencing classes are meditative experiences that force her to stay present and focused.

Ramon and Jeannette Martinez specialize in the 16th- and 17th-century Spanish school of rapier fencing, called “La Verdadera Destreza.” Unlike the Olympic sport, classical fencing emphasizes economy of movement rather than dramatic lunges. Scoring relies on judges who assign points based on specific criteria, including composure, sangfroid, posture, body language, precision, timing, tactics, strategy and execution, Jeannette Martinez said.

“We’re teaching them to duel as if their lives depended on it. The object is not to rack up points, but to survive the duel,” Ramon Martinez told the New York Times in “Teaching the Art of Surviving the Duel.”

“It’s a great way to show the roots of fencing,

where somebody's preparing to go into a fight," said Jonathan Cohen, of the New Orleans Fencers Club.

Growing up in the South Bronx, Ramon Martinez was inspired by the 1940 film "The Mark of Zorro " as well as the "Zorro" television show. As a teenager, he began studying European fencing with Maitre d'Armes Frederick Rohdes, a German immigrant. After training 10 years, Martinez became his protégé and, eventually, a fencing master.

In the modern era, classical fencing preserves the tradition of fencing as a cultured accomplishment, as a path of physical, spiritual and moral growth, and, most important, as a martial art, according to the Martinez Academy.

Free tickets are available through [eventbrite.com](https://www.eventbrite.com).

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