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SWEAT

Teaching the Art of Surviving the Duel

By Corey Kilgannon

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IT was a perfectly peaceful late summer evening in downtown Manhattan, but a few steps off the sidewalk on Broome Street, two swordsmen tilted heavy Spanish rapiers at each other. Each keenly focused on the other's three-foot-long steel blade. After a circular, predatory dance, they clashed, laying into each other with a great clanking as furious overhead chops led to slices toward the torso.

This is the scene three nights each week in a modest, first-floor dance rehearsal studio where the Martínez Academy of Arms holds group classes for about two dozen regular students.

The academy is one of a few remaining places in the world where a nearly extinct tradition of European swordsmanship is studied and passed down from master to student, said its founder, Ramón Martínez, 57. Mr. Martínez — everyone calls him Maestro — holds a title esteemed among fencers: master of arms. His academy teaches styles and traditions for more than 20 weapons including the rapier, the dagger, the wooden cane and the military saber.

“We’re preserving something here that is very rare,” Mr. Martínez said. “These are techniques that have vanished from modern fencing systems, and many styles are not even practiced anymore in the countries where they originated.”

Mr. Martínez says the traditional styles he teaches are a martial art rooted in dueling tradition. Unlike modern, Olympic-style fencing, which emphasizes athleticism and dramatic lunges, his academy's fencing focuses on an economy of movement, with a less-catlike stance, he said. Its style is more cagey and defensive, like the style one might adopt in a real duel with real swords and real lives at stake.

“We’re not teaching a game,” Mr. Martínez 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.”



At his academy in Manhattan, Mr. Martínez said he was preserving “very rare” traditions. Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

On Wednesday evening, students trickled into the studio, with its wooden floor and large wall mirrors. They unpacked fantastic-looking weapons: heavy long swords, stealthy daggers and other, more ornate pieces that looked like something out of “The Three Musketeers.” Then they hung their weapons from on a big iron radiator whose slots fit the swords nicely.

The students were put through drills of synchronized footwork by Mr. Martínez's wife, Jeannette Acosta-Martínez, also a master of arms. They trained with wooden canes made of ash saplings, and then took up their swords, whose points are blunted with rubber. The students and teachers wear padded vests and protective headgear, but the action is vigorous, and the sword clashes are forceful and fast.

Mr. Martínez had just finished drilling some students in the use of the late-19th-century dueling sword. He wore a heavy black tunic of buffalo hide and a protective collar that rode up under his conquistador-style beard.

A staff instructor, Jared Kirby, 36, and Ms. Acosta-Martínez took out heavy steel Spanish rapiers, each more than a yard long, and practiced the subtle techniques of controlling an opponent's blade. Then, with northern Italian dueling sabers, Mr. Kirby defended himself with a series of lightning-quick parries and offered a snapping riposte: a return stab to Ms. Acosta-Martínez's chest. Mr. Martínez supervised carefully.

“These are forms that have evolved for more than 500 years,” said Mr. Martínez, who keeps a huge library of old texts and treatises on dueling and swordsmanship.

He can also hold forth on the old swashbuckling movies in which stars often performed their own fights. Forget the sword work of Errol Flynn, he said. Treat yourself to some Douglas Fairbanks Sr. or, better yet, Basil Rathbone, who shows his blade prowess against Tyrone Power in the 1940 film “The Mark of Zorro.”

The son of Puerto Rican-born parents, Mr. Martínez grew up in the South Bronx, where he says he saw his share of switchblade stabbings. “It’s a vulgar weapon, and these guys didn’t know defense,” he said.



Idle swords hang on a radiator. Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

He began fencing as a teenager, and studied with Frederick Rohdes, a master who studied under the great Marcel Cabijos and made his students spar blindfolded at his longtime academy on East 86th Street in Manhattan.

Now, Mr. Martínez passes that knowledge down to his students and instructors. Mr. Kirby said his interest in fencing was ignited by watching a duel in the film “The Princess Bride.” He promptly moved from Minnesota to study the long sword in Scotland, where he saw Mr. Martínez present a Spanish rapier workshop. “He was the only person in the world I knew of who was teaching it,” Mr. Kirby recalled. “I immediately moved to New York to study with him, and I’ve been here ever since.”

Twelve years into his apprenticeship, Mr. Kirby is now an expert in the Spanish and Italian rapiers, and works as a film and theater consultant, training actors and arranging dueling scenes. He also teaches a college course in the northern Italian dueling sword and the French foil.

During the recent class, he and a student, a film producer named Ben Miller, took out massive long swords and began swinging and blocking, creating a clank and clash of steel that sounded fearsome, even for a drill.

The fencers began and ended each drill and scrimmage with a traditional salute and handshake. “Someone is lending you their body, to help your art,” Mr. Kirby said. “You never want to take that for granted.”

Classes convene on Monday, Wednesday and Friday evenings. Beginners are welcome to take the first session free and to borrow equipment. After that, the cost is \$30 a class, which runs for several hours.

A longtime student, Keena Suh, a Manhattan architect, said she enjoyed the mental and physical discipline that the classes imparted. “I wasn’t an athlete, but one day I walked in here 10 years ago and I knew immediately — it was visceral — that this was something I would not find anywhere else,” she said. “It’s meditative and has taught me to focus on doing one thing perfectly, and keeping composure. People might think this is a wild and aggressive activity, but it’s the opposite.”

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