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Reclaiming the Blade

By John Clements

When men were to
take up arms,
the predominant object
was the sword.
'Cause when I have done
sword fights in movies,
I've always thought about:
What are they for?
Often these things were
right at the point of history.
They're such a part
of our cultural heritage.
The Medieval
and Renaissance blade,
a profound
and beautiful object
handcrafted by
master artisans of old.
It is designed to kill.
The truth of the sword
has been shrouded in antiquity
and the Renaissance martial arts
that brought it into being
are long forgotten.
The ancient practitioners
lent us all that they knew
through their manuscripts.
As gunslingers
of the Renaissance
they were the western heroes
with swords.
They lived and died by them.
Yet today, their history
remains cloaked
under a shadow of legend.
Before the invention
of gunpowder,
the sword was
the weapon of the time.
The sword probably has not
been a relevant weapon
for at least 200 years.
To think that a pommel,
a handgrip, a crossbar, a blade,

a very simple object
could hold such sway
over thousands of years
of human evolution.
These objects have really
controlled our history
and where we are today.
Swords have been used
throughout history
to defend people and land,
to build nations
and to protect kingdoms
from tyranny.
From 1st century wars
against Rome
to the Viking
and Norman conquests,
sword and steel have
changed the fate of kingdoms,
the map of Europe and ultimately
the timeline of world history.
Their essential role
in preserving freedom and honor
goes back far into
the dim mists of history.
The connection between
sword and freedom
may perhaps find its
origin within the customs
of the Germanic
and Celtic tribes.
Here, being armed with a sword
was not only a right
but also a duty
of all free men.
In fact, the ceremony
for giving freedom to a slave
required that
the former slave
be presented with
the armament of a free man.
Many British kings chose to
trust their subjects with arms
and to supplement the militia

in times of need
rather than abolish it.
The idea of a free militia
versus a financed army
presents an interesting concept
that is reflected
in many of our modern films.
The sword is as relevant today
as a symbol
as it was in ages past,
being found within statues,
civic emblems, and insignia
both ancient and modern.
It has been an ancient symbol
for words spoken in truth,
for purity, justice
and the spirit of God.
The iconic power of the sword
is everywhere within our culture
from literature to
popular entertainment and
nowhere is it more celebrated
than in the modern cinema.
There's a definite symbolism
that's part and parcel
of every story
containing a sword.
The sword combines
power, authority,
and the threat of impending
violence all in a prop,
which might be hanging
off somebody's side
until the moment
they draw it.
I think there's something
more intimate about
2 guys going at it
with swords.
To fight someone with a sword
as opposed to shooting someone
with a gun, I think
it takes more courage.
It's conflict at its most raw

where you've got 2 characters
looking at each other eye to eye
engaging at that level.
And the stakes are higher
it could go either way.
You are right there in the end
and the sword, in many ways,
is an extension
of that character's arm
so it's really
a sharpened fist.
It suddenly is a realm
of myth, of legend,
of heroes, of adventures.
That would explain to a large
degree the popularity of swords.
They're, you know,
an integral part of it.
Our technology has progressed
far beyond needing the sword
as an object of personal
defense, and while
it's still irrelevant, don't
you think it's interesting
the extent to which
we seem to still have
the image of the sword,
the concept of the sword,
the symbolic importance
of the sword.
I mean, it's hard to
turn on the television
or go to the cinema,
it seems,
without still being
surrounded by swords.
Our stories and movies contain
the kind of morality and justice
that we only wish we could
find in the real world.
I've had the honor really--
I have to say it like that--
of working with Bob Anderson
as my swordmaster.

In all of the fights that
I did on film as a coach,
and indeed as a modern fencer,
has undoubtedly been
my life, swordplay.

Others who have worked
with him feel like I do,
that you always want to give
100% to live up to
the choreography
that he comes up with.

Even his presence,
just him walking on the set,
suddenly you have to pick
up your game a bit, you know.

The first time I met
Bob Anderson was actually
on the set of

"Lord of the Rings."

He turns around and
introduces himself and says,
"Well, I'm going to show you
a few things that might
save your life today, mate."

And so he proceeded to show
me some basic blocking
and thrusting and
cutting moves with the sword.

And the guy who came after him
to show me some more says,

"Oh, do you realize
who that was?"

And I was like,

"No, I don't."

"Well, that's

Bob Anderson.

"He, you know, he used
to train Errol Flynn
and you know, has worked for
years in the industry."

And I said, "Oh really,
is that so?"

Why don't you give up?

You can see

I'm a better swordsman
Errol Flynn was a very
talented, athletic actor
who could do anything
if he set his mind to it.
And that's why he became
a swordsman, I think,
is because the parts that
were getting the publicity
in those days--
sword fighting and stuff--
fighting at the end,
and you know,
Douglas Fairbanks stuff
as it was called in those days.
Then he said,
"Oh, and he was Darth Vader."
He was actually in
Darth Vader's costume
actually doing all
the light saber work.
And I was like...
that sort of struck
a resonance with me, you know.
Oh, Darth Vader, yes.
It's just a cloak and a helmet
that I was underneath it all.
I did choreograph the fights.
I did 3 of those.
It was good work for me.
It became the weapon of choice
in that series of films.
Indeed even, it seems
when somebody's making
a science-fiction movie
and off in space
they can't seem to escape
from the sword.
I wonder why that is?
What is it?
It's your father's
light saber.
This is a weapon
of a Jedi knight.

Not as clumsy or random
as a blaster.
An elegant weapon
for a more civilized age.
To go into the future and
then think about laser swords,
that's brilliant.
Suddenly "Star Wars"
is not just a sci-fi movie,
it's also a modern version
of a hero legend.
"The Princess Bride"
was one of the best fights
and everybody tells me
it was one of the best fights
I've choreographed.
You seem like
a decent fellow.
I hate to kill you.
You seem like
a decent fellow.
I hate to die.
They learned to fight
with left and right hands.
Then why are you smiling?
Because I know something
you don't know.
And what is that?
I am not left-handed.
And then they do it again
when the other guy changes
to his right hand.
I'm not left-handed either.
Johnny is about as good
as you can get.
He can transform what
he learns from someone like me
into a character.
You know what you are doing,
I'll give you that.
Excellent form,
but how's your footwork?
Viggo came running in
from Los Angeles

and I stuck a sword in
his hand and he had to fight
20 stuntmen in almost
the same day as he arrived.
When all the stunties
with their swords at
the other end of the room
and Viggo was standing there
like looking around

like:

And then all of a sudden
they just charged Viggo
and they're like running towards
him and he's just like...
had his sword up.

Apparently,
that was his initiation.

He didn't run away,
so I think Bob was like:

Okay, I think I can
work with this guy.

He had a lot to learn.

He did, I thought he
did extremely well.

You know, it was hard work
to prepare the fights
and demanding
physically at times.

But it was mostly fun
and it was sort of like
a boyhood dream come true.

You know, I got to
really do it for real.

There were real enemies,
it was a real sword.

It's important that the people
you're working with trust you
and you trust them and you
effectively work out the sort of
highly-detailed choreography
weeks and weeks in advance
of when you actually get
to do it on the set.

And then really the tough thing becomes about stamina. Especially when you are wearing armor and leather and weighed down by all that sort of stuff. I thought it was some of the best choreography I had seen in this type of movie. A lot of the stuff the stunt men put together themselves. And they did a very good job of it. He is much more than a swordmaster, and I think that directors have been well pleased with his collaboration. A sort of a regal refined cultured kind of a gentlemen in the midst of all this chaos. It was an honor to work for him and I learned a lot. Not just about sword fighting but just about being a man, about being a gentleman, about how to deal with people and a respect for the weapon. The swords were very well done, very attractive. John Howe's designs were superb. I really enjoyed getting involved with "The Lord of the Rings" swords because it was always a question of paring it down and making the blades slimmer and making it shorter, making it more real, even though we are not talking about real swords. The actor may turn up a year,

a year and half
after you first started
designing that weapon.
It's therefore a great thing
when you finally present
the weapon to the actor.
I really enjoyed working
with Richard Taylor
and all the people at
the Weta Workshop because they,
like Bob Anderson,
were sticklers for detail.
The attention to detail that
these guys devoted to items
that may not necessarily
be visible to the camera,
at least not on first viewing,
but they're there.
As an actor it was wonderful
to have those kind of props to
you know, really help transport
you to that time and place.
I liken our effects workshop as
are all other effects workshops
around the world, to be similar
to an artisan's studio
of the years past.
This is a gathering
of an eclectic group
of craftspeople working
across an amazing array
of different artistic skills
coming together.
It's a really exciting
thing to be part of that.
As a designer you can
draw your heart out.
You can draw hundreds, hundreds
of designs that you love
but if the man making them
doesn't understand then there's,
you know, it's--
everyone's disappointed.
We're incredibly fortunate to

have a fellow named Peter Lyon,
who was the metal worker,
the swordsmith on the movie.
And he's someone who understands
what weapons and armor are
and he did these
amazing blades.
The forging techniques I use
are some ways they're similar
and some ways they're different
from the old techniques.
With sword blades I'll start
with a bar of spring steel.
Usually, I'll cut and grind that
and then if necessary, forge it.
We use bronze, wood, leather,
and various other materials
that were used in period.
The main difference really,
is that today
with mass production
and steel foundries and so on,
that we can get things to
a much more consistent standard.
And essentially they're a lot
easier to get and work with.
The style of the sword,
the level of decoration,
the aging on it, they all
tell you a bit about
whether this character
is a new person,
whether they're
an old warrior.
It's a really
lovely experience
when the actors begin
to take ownership of them.
Bob very much encouraged you
to be familiar with this weapon,
which in some cases
is your livelihood.
Yes, it's only a movie, but,
the more you can feel like

it's not a movie,
the better the movie.
Actors on the stage
also demonstrate swordplay
through real-time
fight choreography.
Doing it on the stage
is so very difficult.
They have to
remember every blow.
On the films you can take
a part of the fight,
film it, do it once, twice,
15 times if necessary.
You get one chance on stage.
But you've got to be really good
to be a good stage swordfighter.
When you've gone to the cut,
and it comes in with a thrust,
you turn, and your hand is
stopped here and as you do it,
you transfer that
all in one fast move.
You try to hit him
on the head
with the cross part
of your sword.
Now if he hangs on to his
sword you pull him down
and you hit him under
the chin with the pommel.
But he knows that,
what he does is he lets go.
Then I go to hit him,
he has the advantage now
and that's why
you see them in the manuals.
The thing that we call
a glissar, which means to glide,
is which leads you
straight at his belly.
In the 18th century the move
still comes into swordplay.
We attack each other's chest,

he comes back,
I stretch him on the lunge, and
the glissar could disarm him.
So there is the same movement
over a period of 200 years
with different weapons
it still has the same intention.
All those moves,
you're trying to find out
what the other one's doing.
Now you can do the glissar
and then they all join together.
It's eye contact,
it's distance, it's balance,
it's timing
and it's intent.
I was looking at Andy's eyes,
I can see everything
that his body's doing but I
can also see Dad standing there
and I can see 180 degrees
in front of me.
Again the arm goes first,
the reality obviously
the arm plunge down
or through the throat.
See, there won't be a second
performance so we keep the arm,
shoulder, the body looking
as though it's going towards
the throat but at the last
moment we turn the point.
And to make it real,
he then defends and turns away.
'Cause I don't trust him.
I feel that I might get hit
so I then use the dagger
to make sure that the sword
has actually missed me.
You cut, and you hit him,
and you take his intestines out.
You hope.
The reason I don't hit him
is because as I cut him,

my elbow is pulling
the sword back into me.
The skill that that
needs is just as great
as the skill of killing
him is, of course,
sometimes the difference
of about 2 inches.
The point of choreography
in a play or a movie
is to forward the story.
If it does that
it is successful.
It's not designed to
actually show a real fight,
it's designed to show
something exciting with swords.
There's an undeniable
romanticism attached to it all.
And there's even
the grittier films, I think,
tend to steer clear
of much of the mechanics
of what a sword does
to a human body.
And it has to look
good on the screen.
I think, you know, I honestly
believe that a real fight
would be very short, sharp.
It's not just
a piece of art,
though it can be
appreciated that way.
It's not just
a piece of history
because they were used
for a purpose.
It is an ancient weapon that was
used to gain or lose kingdoms.
There's always been fighting.
There's never been a time
when there hasn't been
personal combat.

People are interested in combat
and cared about combat
from the highest
to the lowest in the land;
kings, and princes, emperors.
A sword as a weapon
is something that pretty much
everyone would have owned
it in the Anglian Period,
anyone being an adult male.
So, from top to bottom
of society
personal combat
was important.
Few subjects have received
such unfortunate neglect by
historians than the
martial arts of western Europe
although ancient kings
and nobles gave the blade
great credence
during their time,
often modern academics
fail to clearly write about
the reality of the blade,
defining its practice
as something apart from
its actual use.
It's quite a popular subject,
the history of dueling.
And you look at these books
and one thing they
never mentioned is the fighting.
You know, you'd think that this
was the *raison d'etre* of a duel.
But the one thing
they never mentioned
was techniques of combat.
It's a subject that
has been ignored
for the most part
for centuries.
Probably the world's foremost
scholar on historical fencing,

Dr. Sidney Anglo,
broke open the subject.
He said, "Hey historians,
you've missed the boat."
I'm sure that
a lot of historians
still find it kind of
not a proper subject.
That it isn't something
that historians
should be writing about.
Which, of course is foolish.
Think it's perhaps
not a very nice thing,
you know, these people
cutting each other to pieces
and running each other
through and so forth,
and often killing
each other, and
if they didn't kill each other
they often maimed each other.
Originally fencing meant
simply the art of defense;
the noble science of defense.
We have lots of records of
there being fencing schools
all over the place and we also
have records of people
complaining about
fencing schools and
the noise and the violence
that they engendered.
This changed bit by bit into the
late 16th and 17th century when
they became more fashionable for
nobles to go to these schools
and to learn how to fence.
Yet today, there are too few
historians that fully understand
the significant role
of medieval masters.
And so to a large extent much
of their history is lost to us.

The sobering death toll of the First World War spoke plainly the truth that the romance of war was officially lost in time. The one-on-one dueling spirit of the sword could not prevail under the shadow of automatic machine gunfire with its gruesome wake of millions who were all too soon forgotten. With the increased use of firearms during the turn of the century the slow erasure of classical sword fighting from public consciousness seemed almost inevitable. Fortunately the romance of swordplay remained in the hearts of early filmmakers who kept it alive through imagination and fantasy. But would the lost art of sword defense every truly be reborn? It was a change from battlefield techniques and fighting skills for judicial combat and for private duel and for street level self-defense to essentially gentlemen having private affairs of honor, identical swords; single sword against single sword. Most duels back in the day were not to the death; they were just to first blood. During the 1700s you had guns beginning to supplant the sword as the choice weapon for dueling and in the mid-1800s fencing

became more and more a sport.
People started, you know,
playing the game
instead of training
to actually duel.
The term fencing today is
primarily synonymous with
the collegiate and Olympic sport
of epee, foil, and saber.
Now it's based on
hooking yourself up
into an electric circuit
and depressing tips.
You can just slip it in
anywhere, as long as you
slip it in on target,
then it's a good touch for you.
Fencing became
more and more a sport
and there's a lot of aspects
of fencing that are fun.
Anybody who wants to learn how
to use a sword should go into
fencing because it teaches you
the handling of the weapon.
I like the honor aspect
and the dueling history
that goes along with it.
Modern fencing has retained
a lot of the values
of Renaissance fencing
in the way we always salute
before and after our bouts.
The thing that I like about
fencing is that it allows me
to do a physical
but also a mental sport.
It's much more a thinking game
than it is a physical game
despite the fact that it's a
tremendously athletic endeavor.
Tips of fencing blades
go as fast as 135 miles an hour.
Fencers have very quick

reflexes, a lot of leg strength.
You have to deal with someone
attacking you before you can go.
And fencing is straight
forward and back.

They're used to people
reacting to their moves
in a particular sort of ways.
There's a whole language of
this very highly refined sport.
It's not real, though.

And it's been 200 or 300 years
of evolution away from
people nicking one another
or cutting one another
or killing one another
with swords.

There are very specific
penalties for brutality and
hitting a little bit too hard
and if the referee in control
of the bout, if they thought it
was with malicious intent
or too hard or anything like
that you can get penalized,
docked points,
thrown out of the tournament.
You will see coups, flicks,
where the electric connection
on the end will score but if
you had a point you're making
a little bitty nick where as the
classical fencer will stick you.
I can get my rapier
and leverage him there
and come in here
and put it into him.

I was sparring with some friends
who were fencers and as
he lunged I slapped the blade
aside with my left hand
and extended my right
and stabbed him.
And he said,

"You can't do that."
And I said,
"But I just did."
I can engage it and
take it out this way.
Then he said,
"But that's illegal."
And I said, "I'm not
interested in legalities,
I'm trying to kill you."
They have no problem
grabbing you by the waist
and knocking you
to the ground
and beating you over
the head with their sword.
He does a lunge at me, I would
kick that leg out from him
and I'm gonna
half sword my rapier.
This wouldn't occur
to a fencer.
Fencing masters,
my fencing coaches would say,
"Well yeah,
you can't do that;
"You can't grab his leg,
you can't kick him,
you can't trip him,
you can't push him."
People weren't dumb
in the 1100s.
They had their own styles
or whatever
but they were
much more all encompassing
in terms of combat than
this kind of fencing is.
We don't think of
this as fighting.
There's a lot of aspects
of fencing that are fun,
but you can't take their rules
and things too seriously

because they just don't work
in a straight fight.
The evolution of fencing
is rather simple.
Historical swordplay
transitioned to
classical fencing upon
the advent of the gun.
Over the past century,
sport, or Olympic fencing
was developed from
classical fencing.
Modern sport fencing is not
necessarily an advancement of
historical European martial arts
but rather a pruning down
from older more inclusive
fighting systems.
In time, proper decorum
and stylized posture
came to replace
combat utility.
By the 19th century, fighting
men no longer needed to learn
and use diverse arms and armor
and had fewer occasions
to employ such skills.
Not surprisingly, what was
not modified and adapted
from the wider craft
consequently withered and died.
As they pursued
a far more specialized form
of gentlemanly fencing,
directed towards duels of honor
with single identical swords,
they came to dismiss
and sometimes even ridicule
older fencing skills.
At the same time, fencing
became more sport-focused
and in the 19th century it
increasingly lost its military
or self-defense value.

Those who continued to duel
did so under less and less
lethal terms.

The popular myth of crude
and clumsy medieval swords
slowly evolving into more
superior thrusting swords
began to surface
at this time.

Ancient European
martial arts
were now officially
lost in time.

If you look at our society
there are a large number
of subcultures from reenactment,
from Revolutionary War
to even reenactment
of World War 11.

It's interesting in that
it puts the human being
back in to where he should be;
into the middle of it.

It's an interesting way
to study history
and it's a lot more fun than
sitting there with a book.

This is an epee blade.
This is what we originally
started using for fencing
in the SCA.

It's the same type of blade
that's used in strip fencing
that you would see
at the colleges.

The strip fencing
is more of a sport.

It's not really dedicated to
the medieval martial arts
of the sword.

What I have here looks
more like a real sword.

It's heavier but it is
still designed to be safe,

to bend without breaking.
It has more of the weight of
a real medieval sword, so we can
start to use the techniques
as they would have been used
in the Middle Ages with
a proper weighted weapon.
Well, it's
a wide spectrum of things;
it goes from people
dressed as Orchs
to very serious people
who weave their own cloth.
There is an individual
fulfillment that
the individual becomes somebody
more than just a small cog
in a large plastic machine.
Historical reenactment folks
have got their own culture
and it's an amazing thing.
It's a great to be in but
it's a whole gestalt for them.
It's a whole lifestyle
for them.
What we do is to create
a persona, each of us who joins.
My name is Greg Prevost
in the real world.
In the SCA, I'm known as
Janos of Kitmendown,
which is Welsh
and it's hard to spell.
You create the clothing,
the equipment for that person
and you become that
person at the events.
I take the name
Achbar Ivanalli.
That name actually derives
from Andalusian Spain
so it's Moorish.
And my title in the SCA
is King currently.

But I'm also a knight
in the SCA.
Once you get knighted
you are knighted for life
so it's like a lifetime
achievement award.
This is a very
family-oriented society.
Everyone's welcome.
I have 4 children and
all of them have been to
their first event when they
were weeks or months old.
My oldest son is 11 now
and I'm starting to
teach him how to fence.
We don't chop each
other in this sport.
There's a thrust and
there's a draw cut.
Every kingdom is ruled
by a king and queen.
They are chosen by combat.
When all the fighters come
forward and they have
a best 2-out-of-3
elimination tournament.
You call the wound as accurately
as you can what it would have
done to you if it had
been a real sword.
For instance, if you get hit
a legal blow to your leg,
you then have to drop your knees
and fight from the ground
which compromises your
mobility quite a bit.
Your opponent has the option of
being chivalrous and also taking
the same handicap so that
the match continues to be equal
but he doesn't have to.
It's on his honor.
If he does agree,

takes up that handicap,
then he is lauded by the
audience for his chivalry.
If I get hit with a solid blow
that would have been killing
with a real sword,
I will act out that death.
We don't say that
we are dead,
we say we are
disinclined to continue.
People see us fight
from a distance
at first they think of
Medieval Times,
strictly for the entertainment
of people watching.
The SCA's completely different.
It's an actual sport.
We're competing.
Every blow thrown out there
is thrown with real force.
We don't know who, when we
step on the field, will win
and we don't know
who will be the next king
until the last blow
is thrown in the tournament.
It's just a different spin off
of the same basic history.
The creative part is we take the
best parts of the Middle Ages
and we try to recreate them;
the beauty, the pageantry.
We leave behind
the plague and the death.
I think that reenactment
is an interesting and valid,
I feel like, approach to--
approach to history,
it can be a very rich, rich,
rich source of information.
It's also a little
bit dangerous,

because reenactment is
now becoming a part of
history itself which
troubles me quite a bit.
When you take a pipe and you
wrap it with some padding and
you whack on one another that's
no different from reality than
we who fence with electronic
gear that lets us know
whether or not a touch
would have happened.
If the swords were
actually sharp,
most of these guys really
wouldn't be doing this.
And I wouldn't be either.
There are many martial arts
within the Asian culture.
Out of China you have
manta style, tiger style,
eagle style, wing tsun.
From Korea, you have taekwondo,
kongsoodo, soobahkdo,
kwonbup, taekyun, hapkido,
yudo, gumdo, gumsool.
Out of Japan you have the very
familiar karate, judo, kendo.
Out of the Philippines
you have escrima or arnis.
Out of Thailand
you have mui thai.
Out of Burma
you have bando
and I'm sure there are
many, many others.
When you hit a target area,
you have to say
where you're hitting;
so, "head," "wrist," "side."
Hua-mo-ah!
Just coming in and hitting
is not considered a point.
I have to have

proper etiquette.

I have to make
a pronounced step.

I have to hit the proper part
of my sword which is in between
this leather piece
and this leather piece.

Ah-oo!

I have to either go
forward or backward.

Hua!

My body, my mind, and my sword
have to be all in unison.

The idea is you're becoming
one with your weapon.

In the '70s and the '80s,
movies increased our interest
in Asian martial arts.

Hey, wouldn't
a fly-swatter be easier.

Man who catch fly with
chopstick, accomplish anything.

Today when people hear
the term martial arts
they immediately bring to mind
fighting arts from the East
such as karate and taekwondo.

There's a more esoteric concept
to kill someone efficiently
that is more than just
killing someone and that,
in my opinion, is absent within
the Western swording styles
as opposed to Eastern.

In many respects you can say
the West had the same attitude
that the Japanese had
but we handled it differently.

So there's nothing really
different in these things.

We have a tendency
to forget that the West
had their own tradition
of martial arts as well.

European fighting skills
tend to sort of get relegated
to something that was very
sort of crude and basic,
which it wasn't.
What's funny is they
don't seem to remember
that the human body's
the same the world over.
And it depends on
how your body moves
and that's governed
by body mechanics.
It's somewhat amusing to have
a dbute of the oriental
martial arts glancing through
a European manual on,
say wrestling,
or hand-to-hand combat and say,
"Oh wow, this is done
almost like the Japanese."
Things from Asia and Japan
are viewed as being sort of
pinnacle of fighting skills
and as skillful as they were,
we were just as skillful here.
But what we did was
we forgot about them.
As you're comparing the 2,
look how quickly the West
seized on the firearm
and made great use of it.
Whereas in Japan it was used
for a brief period of time until
once the Tokugawa Shogunate was
established, they were banned
because this would destroy
the social culture.
When a peasant could blast
a samurai from 50 yards away,
it was unthinkable.
Martial arts from the East
of very hierarchical
being orally transmitted

from one person to the next.
Pretty much, it was
a heredity thing
because you had to be
born a samurai.
So it was essentially father
to son, master to disciple.
When of course the big
difference is the schools
and some of the oriental schools
continued to flourish.
How far they're teaching
exactly the same sorts of things
they taught in the past,
is only anybody's guess.
You remember the game where you
whisper and then you whisper
to the next, by the time
it gets to the end
this thought
is all different.
Eastern martial arts have a long
and continuous history where
in the West martial arts,
with the sword in particular,
died down a lot after
the Renaissance.
As the gun improved
the sword was relegated
and became
less and less important.
People stopped training
and teaching in the old arts.
There was no necessity, no need
to learn those things anymore.
So we have essentially a break
in the history of the sword
in the Western world.
What was the sword,
and how was it used?
Before practical
swordplay developed
into a gentlemen's ritual
of single dueling,

masters of defense
flourished across Europe.
Many of the surviving
manuscripts detailing
their combative systems remained
largely obscure for centuries,
until now.

Today historical fencing
studies are on the rise
and an unprecedented revival of
these extinct combative systems
is now underway.

The West had its own
martial arts tradition
exactly as the Orient did,
exactly the same.

There's been a renaissance,
so to speak,
in the study of the sword
offering us a lot of insight
that had been lost in
the several hundred years
since the sword was truly
relevant to combat.

The work of people in making
very accurate recreations
of the sword in terms of form
as well as the manner in which
they would handle, and then
those martial artists
who are taking these
accurate recreations,
moving them in space,
and working out
what was possible
and what isn't possible.

All across Europe, the Americas
and around the world
historical European fight clubs
have emerged with the desire
to study the original
combative systems of both Europe
and the ancient world.

They have set out to practice

with a different kind of energy
and intensity separate from
the reenactment
and sport fencing groups.
We're trying to discover
something that's always
been there and has been
forgotten and it's a lot of work
to obviously, to try to
understand what was lost.
It's a part of
our history in Europe
and I think that's
very important.
This is actually
our history.
This is actually
how we fought.
Historical European
martial arts is the study
of Europe's traditional
fighting systems.
I'm doing this because
I had previously studied
Asian martial arts and I
wanted to study martial arts
related to my own culture
and the place that I'm from.
Martial arts from Japan
or China or southeast Asia,
as valid as they are,
I wanted something
that was from
my culture and for me.
I came from a long background of
doing martial arts so I wanted
to see how modern arts compared
to the old arts and it seems
that their standard was every
bit as complicated as ours,
and possibly more so.
If you look at modern sport
fencing and kendo, and the like,
they've actually become

simplified versions
of these great complex systems,
which are actually brutal.
It's our past, it's
part of our culture actually.
Today historical European
martial arts groups
are reclaiming the ancient
fighting techniques
and studying the diversity
of arms and armor.
For me I think the sword
is like what it was
in the medieval time.
What matters is the man
on the other side.
The difference between
the medieval sword
and the Japanese sword
is that the Japanese
put their soul into the sword.
In medieval time,
what matters was
to put the other man
into the sword.
There's no such thing
as just a sword.
It's a weapon
for killing people
and I'm learning how
to do it efficiently.
To me the sword is...
cool.
For centuries these
ancient fighting skills
have not been practiced.
Historical fencing students
are now learning to reconstruct
martial arts that have
been until now, extinct.
We're having to try
and rediscover
what the fight masters
of the time were thinking

and how they formulated their techniques and how they evolved. So there's quite a strong academic side to it in the western martial arts. We're essentially resurrecting this from books. Just as European scholars wrote down every other art and science, the science of defense was also documented and recorded. Many of the old fighting manuals and treaties that were written during the 15th and 16th centuries have recently been rediscovered and are now being studied worldwide. We focus on mainly German manuals but also Italian manuals, 15th century and 16th century. My personal favorite is Talhoffer. For the most part the Italian books, the German books and the Spanish books on the fighting arts have been forgotten, hidden in old libraries and monasteries in old archives and universities. Unfortunately, very little research had been done on them. For the most part, they had not been looked at for hundreds of years. Today these old texts are once again being systematically studied and the ancient fighting skills are being reborn. In the text the old masters actually request

that the students study
the source literature
and in one instance they ask
that they add to the text,
bringing their own ideas
to it and expanding upon it.
These arts existed in various
forms because they evolved
together hand in hand with
the societies that created them.
There's nothing equivalent to
that in any of the other world's
traditional martial arts.
They don't have the volumes
of technical literature
that we have.

This is our western tradition.
A lot of people learn martial
arts from people who learned it
from somebody else so often
times it's many generations
removed from someone
with real combat experience.
These books, they're
written by the source.

There's a play in
Wallerstein, specifically,
where the caption
says something like:

The swordsmen have captured
each others' swords.

I thought how that would
never happen in a fight
and I that following week
I was in a bind with a guy who
spun out and we were standing
just like the play showed,
and so that,
all of a sudden,
becomes like a direct
link back to that time.

How did they communicate their
systems to absent third party?
This is combination of words and

images where you have a kind of notation where you can almost read the movements like we'd read in music. It combines a ground plan, where your feet go, a representation of how you hold the weapon. You can see the relationship between the swords, horizontally as well as vertically because it casts a shadow and, of course, scores of postures, the overall attempt to convey what the author wants his student to understand. This is the source literature. This is what's going to tell us how they did it back then and this is how we should be doing it again today. When one looks at books on arms and armor, the incredible detail and diversity of design in such weaponry is apparent. Therefore, it stands to reason that there should be an equally sophisticated manner of using such weapons. I was inspired by the works of a gentleman named Ewart Oakeshott. Oakeshott was considered the world's leading authority on European swords, on medieval swords in particular. Most academics look on them as quaint curiosities, but they have no real concept of what that sword was used for or even how it was used.

Ewart made it into
what it was.
These were weapons
made for young men
to kill other young men;
a real weapon
used by real people.
The typology of the sword
that Ewart Oakeshott devised
included a classification
for all historical blades.
Oakshott's classifications
unlocked the mythical doors that
had obscured the true history
of European martial combat.
I think if you look at any
Anglo Saxon blades, for example,
or Viking blades, ordinary
warriors might have a long knife
and a spear and a shield,
but they don't have the sword.
There are very few swords
in comparison to the number
of axes or spears.
Spearheads and axes
a blacksmith can make.
You have to be a swordsmith
to get the technology
to be able
to make a sword.
I feel a real connection
to the ancient smiths
because I like doing it with
the tools that they had,
with the fuel that they had,
with just clay and water
and a hand hammer
and charcoal.
I have a modern shop, too.
I've got air hammers and
gas forgers and electric kilns
which I used for experimentation
and making sure that
what I think is happening

the ancient way
is actually happening
with some modern tests.
What really affects
me is the chemistry.
Say, "Well how do
they make stuff
from iron sand,
from dirt, basically?"
It's kind of magic.
The more I learned about
it the more I realized
there's different ways
that different cultures
did it so
I had to try that.
I don't like just
reading about it
and putting a book
on the shelf.
I want to do it until I
get it right which causes
a whole lot of sleepless
nights and a lot of work
and a lot of
trial and error.
I feel that a collector
like myself does at least have
some utility to those attempting
to rediscover the sword.
I can provide a swordsmith
such as Paul the opportunity
to make very careful
measurements so that
some of the original swords
which have survived--
rediscovering the way
in which they were put together
to give great performance even
with materials and techniques
that are primitive by today's
technological standards.
Well, sometimes
there is a debate going:

Is the Japanese sword better?
Or the Chinese sword?
Or the Chinese taught
the Japanese their techniques,
so basically it's just
a refined Chinese sword.
Well, no the European
swords are better--
no whoots,
Indian-type blades are better.
I've been working a lot of these
traditions and I'm finding
more similarities of how
they solved their problems
than I am finding differences.
But they have different
ways of doing them,
different ways to stack them.
Some of them using twists
some of them didn't use
twisted steel.
But they solved the problems
in a very similar fashion.
And that really intrigued me.
I figured out some things
that were wrong in books,
things that weren't
written in books,
and other things that I feel are
right by actually doing them
and trying them and testing
the swords and breaking swords,
analyzing things.
I enjoyed getting
primary knowledge.
Definitely people who smelt
their own steel and test
their own blades
and make all things--
Where I feel the connection is
sitting back there with the fire
going and pumping the bellows
with everything quiet
and just me and

forging that blade.

In 2006 a suitcase in the attic of a well-loved and deceased archaeologist was literally saved from history's dust bin.

The treasure inside:

a sword, 13 centuries old.

Since then the sword has been tested extensively

by the Royal Armouries and the Bamburgh Research Project in a effort to

unlock the secrets of this rare object's hidden past.

This is one of the most significant swords found by Brian Hope-Taylor in his 1960s excavation.

It remained in his possession up until his death in 2001 at which point it came back to the castle.

When you hold it today it has an almost mystical quality to it.

It looks like a corroded lump of metal but in its glory this would have been an awe inspiring sight.

The x-rays revealed it to be an extraordinarily sophisticated piece of technology.

It proved to be an incredibly important weapon.

One of the most important weapons,

I think it's fair to say, ever found in Britain.

It's actually composed at its central core of 6 strands of iron which are worked and twisted and welded together.

On the edge of that is added

a steel 7th element,
if you like, in a technique
called Patton welding.
An iron core with
a forge-welded steel edge,
so you get the flex
and strength of the iron
with the extreme
cutting power of the steel.
Which is incredibly tough and
quite springy and flexible,
so it won't break
very easily.
You'd rather have a sword
softer, take a set,
take a bend, than break.
Because a broken sword in
your hand during a battle,
you're done.
I wouldn't want to be the smith
that the customer came back to
with his brother's broken
sword in his hand going,
"Hey, why did you make
this so brittle?"
If a warrior would go
into battle with a sword
that was excessively
hard and brittle
the battle for him could be
very short indeed.
There's only a handful
like this in the world,
probably 4 or 5
in the entire world.
Experts we've talked to in
the British Museum
of the Royal Armouries
don't know of a single example
of a 6 stranded sword
prior to this one being
identified which does suggest
that they are--
something of this

technological sophistication
is staggeringly rare.
If you were actually have looked
in the home of a medieval
warrior or a warrior in another
culture of a century or 2 ago,
often the sword would've really,
you know, represented
the most technologically
advanced item in the house.
It represents the epitome of
technology of weapons technology
of its age.
It is, I suppose in
a modern analogy,
something like
a stealth fighter.
The one thing I can say with
certainty is that it's very,
very difficult to
make one of these.
You wouldn't let a smith who
knew the secrets of making
a sword like this
wander about.
They would have been kept
closely guarded by the king.
The information
would have been
an incredibly
jealously guarded secret.
The process is very
long and very arduous
and requires an incredible
level of skill.
He would have had
a mastery of metals.
He would have known exactly
when to take it from the fire,
which bits to forge, how hard
to hit it, when to hit it,
more importantly
when not to hit it.
One single blow can shatter

a blade like this easily
if it's at
the wrong temperature.
Literally tens of thousands of
hammer blows have to be right.
When you manufacture a blade
like this you don't just
make it, you live it,
and you dream about it
and you think about it
every single moment.
It would often reflect
the very best craftsmanship
and some of the best applied
art of that culture.
I generally try to see how all
the pieces were put together
because Patton welding is
quite a complicated process.
That would have been translated
into a 3-D reconstruction
in the computer of how it
was put together.
There is a cleanliness of
line and an economy of weight
to make it efficient, durable,
as light as possible.
I'm continually impressed
to no end of how beautiful
all these objects are.
High-end warriors and kings
who can do what they want
with precious metals
and precious stones.
The idea that they don't need
to because the sword itself
is so precious,
I think, speaks volumes.
There must have been quite a lot
of thought on the part of
the regular soldier to actually
preserve the blade from damage.
Simply to employ a person of
the caliber of the individual

who made this would
have cost a fortune,
would have cost
an absolute fortune.
If you look at old swords you
can tell which ones have had to
be used to parry
or bone break.
You can tell
bone breaks, too.
It's actually notched and
chipped along both sides which
does suggest that it has been
used repeatedly in battle.
A sword of this quality would
have been owned by someone
who was incredibly important.
It was probably owned by one
of the kings of Northumbria,
possibly by several of
them which does suggest
200 or 300 years of use.
So it may of well
been an heirloom of
the Northumbrian Royal House,
passed down from generations
basically from
one king to another.
A sword like this, I think,
would have inspired
absolute terror.
When you're in battle and you
see a sword of this quality
coming towards you, you would
know immediately that the person
who wielded a sword like this
was someone who had spent
their entire life training
to be a warrior,
who lived their
life by the sword.
Contrary to popular notions,
the medieval long sword
is surprisingly light, weighing

an average of only 3 pounds
and capable of
blindingly fast attacks.
Sword combatants use both
footwork and the ability to
manipulate timing and distance
to enhance the swords cutting
and thrusting capabilities.
One of the primary principles
of swordplay is to attack
and defend at the same time
where every attack contains
and defense and every defense
contains a counter attack.
Picking up a sharp implement
and cutting someone,
you know you can teach
that very quickly,
however the strategy
behind it--when to attack,
when not attack--that is
a very mental pursuit.
The subtle movements,
the deceptions, the trickery,
where I look over here, move
and strike someplace else.
When you start fencing
with medieval swords,
then you discover that
there is more to it
than actually using
just the blade.
There's different angles
and lots of things that
it's not obvious for the normal
person in using the sword.
Levering with the sword to
try to disarm the other guy,
bashing with the cross, pommel.
Historically European
martial artists believe that
it is important to study
and practice the techniques
with great energy

and intensity.

From the manuals we
can see the diversity
of the ancient masters' skills.

They studied

2 weapon combinations:

sword with shields,
swords with buckler,
and swords with daggers.

Often they considered
unarmored and well as
armored fighting,
mounted as well as on foot.

Generally the ancient masters
always integrated armed
and unarmed skills,
never practicing fencing
without also including grappling
and wrestling techniques.

Most of these combats
probably ended on the ground.

When he's down on the ground
and I'm using all my weight
to shove my sword through him,
then I can penetrate.

In order to
comprehend the sword,
you need to comprehend all
the techniques surrounding
the actual use of swords.

Contrary to what you see at
Ren fairs and what you see
in Hollywood movies,
armored fighting is not about
using the edge of the sword.
It's not gonna penetrate that
breast plate or that plate leg
armor so they have to come up
with another way of defeating
a man in armor and that method
is primarily half swording.

The manuals are full
of this technique.

I grab my own blade and I

use it as a thrusting weapon.
I can shorten the blade by doing
this and make it much stiffer
so I have accuracy and enough
strike to penetrate his armor.
I have to thrust it in,
and put some weight behind it
and really drive it.
Fencing does not allow you
to use the left hand
and I have heard people
tell you or say that
the left hand
is for balance.
It has nothing to
do with balance.
We're constantly
using this hand,
so if he makes an attack--
if I have to I'll use elbow,
forearm,
anything I need to.
Now in classical fencing
or dueling manuals
you see slapping the blade
as a constant thing.
In fact, you will see that most
of the time with the left hand
up here in a position to slap.
He makes a thrust
and I have to get to here,
I'm gonna disarm him.
You have to do freeplay,
you have to do
an intense amount
of mock combat.
You have to do it with as
realistic a way as possible.
Today we do a lot
of sitting.
You know we sit in
front of our computers.
We sit in front of
our televisions.

We sit on the way to work,
then we get to work and we sit.
Then we go home and we sit again
and then we're laying down.
In the medieval renaissance
eras people didn't.
They did a lot of walking
and a lot of riding
and a lot of running.
I think we have no idea how much
like rawhide these people must
have been back in, you know,
5 or 6 centuries ago.
I think we're very soft
nowadays despite our efforts
to remain,
you know, fit.
I was a sword nut at 12, so me
and one of my friends went out.
We immediately went
"bang, bang, bang,"
started fencing with them.
And after it was over with,
I had 2 hacksaws because
you know it just
ruins the edge.
Well I was shocked and upset
because this wasn't what
happened in the movies.
Movie combat is really a curious
undertaking because it's
not very realistic, generally.
It doesn't portray how
the historical weaponry
actually performs and handles.
It's one of my favorite themes
actually that that metallic
noise that a sword makes
coming out of a scabbard
which makes no sense.
Swords don't make a noise
when they come out, you know.
It's, life as a fantasy.
It doesn't reflect the way

human beings actually behave
in violent,
personal armed combat.
Mainly when you see
movies nowadays,
they always focus
on techniques
even in moves displaying
medieval Europe.
They always focus on Asian
techniques and et cetera,
and that's not our way,
so to speak.
Western martial arts,
you know, that's, you know,
whether it be English,
Italian, French, Spanish,
there are specifics to those
styles and those weapons
that are ignored in most
of the movies these days.
It's like a huge pot of soup
with many, many ingredients.
You know they're
hybrids, really.
They're not true to western
martial arts, I wouldn't say,
for the most part because
they're mixing in elements
of Asian martial arts that
have no place there,
really if you want
to be realistic.
So you have a little bit
kung fu, and a little bit of,
you know, a little
bit of everything.
Most of the time a lot of
these movies are very good.
The problem that I have with
it is that a lot of people
in the audience think this
is the way you use a sword.
It's purely for entertainment;

this is true.
But it certainly
makes my job harder.

We teach people:

sword's not going to cut through
a guy with plate armor;
no you can't cut through--
cut a Z in somebody's chest.

But you can do
other things and they're
even more interesting
because they're real.

Many who study classical fencing
and European martial arts
believe that if you give the
audience more realism combined
with credible performances then
they will enjoy and embrace it.

I think that now there's
a generation of moviegoers and
readers who are ready for that,
and they're asking for that.
Classical fences and historical
European martial artists
and scholars have now shown
that there is a wonderful craft
out there that has been lost but
that can now be made
to exist again.

There have, recently there
are some movies that have been
focusing a little bit on
European martial arts.

Good examples of films that
feature combat based on specific
historical swordsmanship include
"Rob Roy," "Gladiator,"
"Troy," "Kingdom of Heaven"
and "Alatriste."

In some few cases people are
more in tune and do a better job
of researching and being true
to the style of the period.

As I said,
Bob does this very well.
For example,
in "Alatriste,"
they're not what Bob would call
sword-slapping scenes, you know.
His goal is always
credibility, naturalism,
fights the way they would be
and the reason that people are
careful going in and they're,
once they commit they commit
fully is because even
a small wound in those times--
infection and you could
die just from that.
You're going in to kill and
it's over with very quickly.
They were violent, you know,
shockingly violent at times
and there were very real,
dangerous consequences
to mixing it up with swords.
In many regards it is to the
high fantasy of film that we are
indebted for today's resurgence
of western martial arts.
Movies have inspired many
talented individuals
to take up the sword
in an effort
to rediscover
its true martial significance.
The resurgence of authentic
European martial arts has been
growing exponentially over time.
Over the years it has actually
become influential in cinema.
Historical European martial
arts are neither reenactment
nor sport fencing.
They're in a category
all of their own.
This fresh approach to training

takes history into account
striving to improve both its
practice and authenticity.
Our lives don't depend
on this craft.
Nobody's going to challenge us
to a duel at the mall
with a rapier.
Nobody's going to ambush
us in the parking lot
with a bastard sword,
so we have to have
alternative reasons for
why we're doing this.
We do this, I think,
because it needs to be done.
And hopefully it will increase
everyone's understanding
and awareness of how
European warfare was conducted.
They will be appreciated for
as effective and as elegant
and as useful as anything the
rest of the world has to offer.
All these things
that have been forgotten
needs to be found again.
In an age where truth
seems so far from us,
symbol of the sword
shines bright.
The journey it takes to
become good with your blade,
to become good with your sword,
that takes a lot of time,
a lot of effort, and
that changes a person,
matures a person.
Obviously in the process
it is going to teach you
to become a better man.
We hope to be--who knows--
someday a better swordsman,
maybe even mildly

average swordsman.
It would be more than
I would ever expect.
What story can
an ancient sword tell us?
I can't say I really
understand the sword as of yet,
but hopefully one day
I will be there.
Eventually, I would like
my studies to take me to
the great heights
of beating my instructor--
the first woman
to ever do so.
Sword fighting is kind of
different and looked like
good fun and I've been a couple
of times and it is good fun.
While those who train today
have only begun to scratch
the surface, they are slowly
beginning to lift the shadow.
You know, it's all
those dreams that
you really can't have any
more 'cause you've grown up.
People are often looking
backwards in time to see
whereabouts we've come from.
Even in the '50s,
progress was happening.
People were looking forward
and now we've reached a point,
I think, where we're
looking all around,
trying to find meaning
to what's happening.
People need to feel that sense
of identity with their past
and their history.
There's nothing
richer than history.
History is, you know,

history is, all of us
over thousands of years.
I've been doing martial
arts for over 20 years now.
I've noticed my body changing
and I'm getting older and things
are a little bit
more difficult.
However, I don't
give up on that.
I train myself harder so it
becomes very, very mental.
Your body goes away, but your
mind should stay sharp.
So I get a bit more gray
and a little more stooped.
As long as I can
swing a hammer,
I'm just going to
keep doing this.
Within the sword lies the power
both to protect and to rule.
It can be used for great
evil or for great good;
to control a people or stop
the hordes of a tyrant;
to break the rightful will of a
nation or to set the truth free
and every man a king
over his own fate.
A good swordsman does not take
lightly unsheathing his sword.
If your sword is out, it means
that you intend to use it.
It's a pity, really, that we
couldn't fight with rapiers
today rather than guns.
It's a pity that gunpowder
was invented, in my mind,
because we would probably
still be fighting with rapiers.
And I'd be good at it.