



## Swashbuckling: A Step-by-Step Guide to the Art of Stage Combat & Theatrical Swordplay - Revised & Updated E

By Richard Lane

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(Limelight). The ultimate guide to stage fighting technique and basic swordplay, this book covers everything an actor must do to give a dynamic and convincing performance as a stage combatant. "[This book] is more than a manual... A necessity! Richard Lane's concepts are vital...'Why' and 'When' are explained and make 'How' easier to understand and execute...Read this, pay heed and you will avoid sin and suffering...I raise my sword on high and salute you, Richard. Well done!" Oscar F. Kolombatovich, former Fencing Master, Metropolitan Opera, New York, and Executive Secretary, Historical Fencing Society

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### Editorial Review

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The performing arts today have never been more physical. Audiences demand realism--or at least the illusion of reality--in opera, plays, and film. Indeed, theatrical violence is even more demanding on stage since there is no "take two." Sooner or later, all performers face the challenge of their first stage fight; how you rise to that occasion will help determine the applause you win. Welcome to Theatrical Swashbuckling

Until the last few decades, actors and directors had little guidance for arranging safe (or even convincing) stage fights. Matinee idols and tenors, too vain or out-of-shape to work up a sweat, simply shuffled through a few stock moves, waved their swords, and recited their lines. More athletic performers relied on the techniques of sport fencing to liven-up their fights--making them more entertaining, to be sure, but more dangerous as well. Unfortunately, even the best were as faithful to historical fighting styles as Ben Hur driving a Buick. Well into this century, stage combat was viewed as a separate skill, like stunt work, that had little to do with acting and much more to do with keeping an audience from getting restless until the "real" drama--the dialogue--could resume.

In modern theater, however, that nineteenth century taste for melodrama--grand gestures and grandiose productions--has given way to an appetite for truth. Even in stage combat, the theatrical gesture is out; the genuine gesture is in.

Just as conflict is the essence of drama, so is combat the epitome of conflict. When two characters fight on stage, the conflict that has motivated them in the story rises even beyond words. What before was left to dialogue, stage direction, and the actor's voice inflection now becomes the province of pure motion. Audiences, too, become more focused in a fight, and more critical of what they see.

Some experts believe that Shakespeare's audiences, living as they did in the heyday of dueling, were connoisseurs of stage combat. However, even in our own era of graphic violence on film and TV, how many of us have ever seen--in person, up close and personal--an actual gunfight; let alone enough of them to become experts in their technique? In fact, those of us who are experts in human violence--police officers, military combat veterans, and so on--often criticize Hollywood's action films as being "too slick," their staged violence "too pat and well rehearsed" and their hero's opponents "too cooperative" to mimic real life. As a result, we performers and directors are left with the same challenge Shakespeare faced: how can we stage violence that looks authentic and serves the story--and keeps the actors safe--even if cast and audience have never been closer to a real weapon, duel, or brawl, than the show on last week's playbill?

### A Sword Is More than a Prop

One way actors can make historical stage combat more convincing is to "get inside" the fight, just as they get inside their character. In Western culture, the sword has always been a symbol of rank, status, and privilege--not to mention the indomitable human spirit. To the ancient Greeks, a sword given to a mortal man by the gods (such as the sword Perseus used to slay the Gorgon) made that man a hero--someone fit for great, mythological tasks. To the Celts, the magic sword *caladbolg* (called "Excalibur" in Arthurian legend), forged on the Isle of Avalon, became the symbol of an entire nation. Later, this special relationship between the weapon and its wielder was reflected in the names heroes gave their favorite swords, such as Orlando's *Durindana* (said to have been forged for Hector) and Rodrigo de Vivar's (El Cid's) companion broadswords,

Tizona and Calzona. Even Elizabethan duelists (whose rapiers clashing against their small, round shields, called bucklers, gave birth to the term swashbuckling), saw themselves not as rowdy thugs but an elite whose swordplay set them apart from others. Since many of these swordbearers' stories have been preserved in dramatic form, modern actors have become, in a very real sense, custodians for our Western warrior heritage.

### The Magic of Modern Swashbuckling

Something happens when you pick up a sword: Your smile becomes a little wider, your step a little jauntier. The hilt fits naturally into your hand--and that's not by accident. Most swords were designed to roughly double the reach of the human arm. Even two-handed broadswords and the Elizabethan's outrageous rapier--over five-and-a-half feet of tapered steel--were, in essence, little more than extensions of the "knife edge" flattened hand.

Now notice the weapon's "heft." See how its weight is distributed from tip to pommel, as well as the shape of the hilt and blade. These aren't dull museum statistics: they are the very soul of the sword. They reveal its designer's intentions and the wielder's capabilities in a fight--even the social values of its historical era.

What historians have always known and directors and performers are only now discovering: that the sword shapes the swordfighters, announces their time and place, and symbolizes their values, fears, and aspirations. Knowing these differences and how to use them to reveal the truth inside the character at that character's moment of truth, is the best and highest test of any performer.

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