

# Introduction

Thank you very much for hosting me. It is a pleasure to be able to share with you on Destreza.

I will start by apologising twice. The first for my English. I read English without any problem but it is not usual for me to speak it. I am not able to think in English, I think in French and then I translate. That's why I have taken notes and I will keep them to speak with you.

I'm going to apologise a second time. Practicing Destreza, and talking about Destreza, requires subtlety. I'm not always sure to be subtle enough to do it in French and I'm sure that I'm not able to do it in English. If sometimes I seem peremptory in my presentation, it is because of because of my level in English.

My speech will talk about the importance of theory in destreza in particular and in fencing in general. I will develop four points: 1) I will talk a about my background in fencing, 2) I will explain what is my vision of Destreza is in the 21st century, 3) I will explain why theory is so important to me, and 4) I will end with a catalogue of what I think is essential to know in order to practice rapier fencing well.

## **My background**

I think fencing had a place somewhere in my head very early, but I discovered it late, at the age of 30, in 2006. I practiced Olympic fencing for one year but the D'Artagnan in me was not satisfied. Then I practiced French and Italian rapier for two years in

associations close to home. Once again, without really being able to explain why, I was not satisfied. Even if it is a retrospective analysis, I think that for me, it was too much like Olympic fencing with rapiers. I discovered Verdadera Destreza on a Saturday afternoon in 2009 at the 10th Fisas meeting in Verbania in northern Italy. Master Alberto Bompreszi was leading a workshop there, built from the compendio of Ettenhard. The demonstration he gave us was breathtaking. His fencing was fluid, elegant and efficient, he fought without force or aggressiveness. I immediately said to myself "I want to know how to do that". Even so, the definition of "that" remains to be clarified. Alberto Bompreszi's workshop was scheduled twice during the weekend. The second was scheduled for Sunday morning at 8.30 am, after the long and very drunken Gala evening. If my memory is right, we were 8 at the workshop including Alberto and four of his students. I had, so to speak, a two-hour private lesson during which I was able to take notes and ask all questions I wanted. It was from this basis that I started working on Destreza. Then, as I couldn't have access to a master, I had to manage on my own. I started by translating Ettenhard, because it was the treatise master Bompreszi was working on at that time. This arduous work was completed eight months later. Now I like Ettenhard very much, I find his treatise rich and fascinating, it simply sets out the principles of the Destreza, but it cannot by itself explain all the complexity of the system. Moreover, this work is quite conceptual, it contains just a few techniques. Today, I will not advise the beginner I was to read it first. Indeed, Ettenhard's translation brought me more questions than answers, I would have needed a master to guide me and explain it to me. So, I resumed my research in order to find the treatise that would allow me to understand the Destreza alone, and without help. The internet brought me to Don

Francisco Lorenz de Rada, I don't really remember how. All I remember is that I was in Ottawa when I took the decision to translate it. It was a choice that quickly became clear to me. With its 1500 folios in three volumes, it is the most complete treatise of Destreza ever written. Only Nueva ciencia maybe compared to it. Rada did this exhaustive work 130 years after Carranza, in 1705, and could draw on the works of Pachecco, Ettenhard or Guerra de la Vega which preceded him. Finally, unlike Pachecco, whose work is often difficult to read, understand and interpret, Rada's writing is clear, his descriptions are precise and he has a didactic thought. This work, begun in 2011, was completed two years later. Then I went from one extreme to the other, I now had at my disposal, hundreds of pages of theory, more than a hundred exercises, thirty-two atajos and nearly seventy techniques. What was I going to do with all this? Like many people I think, I fell into the trap of technique, I was working on lists of techniques, quarter-circle thrust under the arm, estocada sagita, estrechar general, cross line general, weakness general on/under strength ... without ever being able to use them, nor become a better fencer. It was at that moment that I understood that I was not doing the "that" I wanted to be able to do like Alberto Bompreszi and that I had not clearly defined the "that". I realised that I wanted to be able to fight with a rapier, like Pirate Robert and Inigo Montoya did in Princess Bride. Or, to say it more seriously, to be able to master rapier fencing. Being aware of this made me realise two things: Destreza would only be a means for me to achieve this and that I would have to define, also on a philosophical level, how I wanted to approach/practice the Destreza in our modern context.

## **How to practice Destreza nowadays?**

There is a strong continuity in the philosophy, the definition of concepts and the technical description from one Destreza treatise to another. The "great quarrel" between the disciples of Carranza and those of Pachecco is, first of all, a question of discipline. It pitted the Grand Master of Madrid against the Andalusian masters of arms, but not because of their conception of the Destreza. Certainly, this continuity, which is real, can be nuanced. Viedma has six general techniques where the others only have four. The number of dignity of techniques, as well as their definition, varies according to the authors. But these conceptual or technical divergences remain marginal and secondary.

The Spanish treaties have a great unity of content and are also very comprehensive. They explain fencing in a scientific and systemic way, whereas others only describe a catalogue of techniques and "bottes secrètes" (a French expression for secret deadly techniques). Capo Ferro is, in my modest opinion, a good example. Nueva ciencia and its 650 folios, or Nobleza de la Espada and its 1500 folios, explain all aspects of fencing and have, to my knowledge, no equivalent. This completeness is accompanied by very accurate descriptions. In Nobleza de la espada, Rada modelled space and time to explain precisely where to place the feet, arm, weapon, hand and shoulders for 70 techniques. Thus, the Diestros of the 21st century are fortunate to have a complete theoretical, practical and philosophical corpus, precise and stable over time, and from one author to another. However, these treatises, which have spared us the question of interpreting the sources, have also distracted us from a fundamental question: how can we use Destreza in our historical, technical and societal context?

The Destreza is a theory of fencing born in Spain at the end of the 16th century which maybe apply to all weapons with a blade. The content of the treatises can be divided into three main parts: theory, practical theory and philosophy. Theory is the set of concepts that enable the understanding and the analysis of fencing ... The first vertical plane, the medio de proporción, the strong and the weak, are examples of concepts composing this theory. The theory is timeless and adapts to all contexts and all periods. The first vertical plane is defined as the plane perpendicular to the ground that connects the spinal columns of the fighters. This definition, which has not changed since the 17th century, was true even before it was formulated and will still be true in a thousand years. The theory arouses little debate among the Diestros. Admittedly, disagreements sometimes arise, on certain marginal points, but there is a rather global consensus on the definition of the concepts that make up the theory.

Practical theory, in the words of Master Alberto Bompreszi, consists of the movements and techniques contained in the treatises. It is theory because the techniques are described under conditions that today would be called experience. Indeed, in his explanations, Rada starts from the principle that the fighters have the same size, the same strength, the same speed, the same weapon... All these conditions are never met in combat, but they allow us to train with clear explanations, leaving little space for interpretation. However, this theory is "practical" because, contrary to the "pure" theory, it is worked on with the weapon in hand. But now, a question arises: should/can this practical theory be adapted to our times? And if so, how? Of course, I'm not questioning the importance of the source, but we must be able to take a step back from it because sources are not

“rules of fist”. Remember that according to Pachecco, you have to have brown, short hair to be a good Diestro (Grandeza).

Our historical, societal and technical context is not the Spanish Golden Age. We wear passive protections, shoes suitable for sports practice and we fight on flat and non-sliding floors. Above all, we do not die in combat. So why not modify this practical theory to adapt it to our times? Rada did it. He developed his Destreza 70 years after Pachecco, in a technical context that has changed. Whereas Pachecco used military weapons, probably side swords with short, heavy blades, Rada used "taza" rapiers with long, light blades. He modified practical theory to accommodate this change. He generalised the use of the medio proporcional defined by Alvarro Guerra de la Vega and developed the atajos from below. The atajos from below, inefficient and dangerous at the time of Pachecco, because of the shape of the hilt and the weight of the blades, became essential. They allow to follow the opponent's blade if it becomes free during an atajo while protecting the hand (thanks to the taza). The Destreza teaches us how to fight effectively and it is with this why Rada modified the practical theory, to fight more effectively in his technical and historical context. If he did it, why not us? But then, in that case, why not integrate the “Olympic fencing arrow” (translate from a French expression) into our arsenal of technique? It is effective and adapted to our technical and historical context. Can we consider the “Olympic fencing arrow” as a Destreza technique, and by extension, can we not consider Olympic fencing as today's Destreza? Isn't Olympic fencing the most suitable form of fencing for our times? If I am deliberately provocative in these last remarks, it is because I wish to understand how to adapt practical theory without distorting it. In which cases will a technique keep its original form and in

which cases will it be adapted? Effectiveness seems to be the most relevant evaluation criterion. Effective techniques are kept in their original form, others are adapted. But the objective evaluation of this criterion is problematic because, in order to determine whether a technique described four hundred years ago by Pacchecco is still effective today, a very high level of knowledge and mastery of the Destreza is required. Just few people have this level and I, personally, haven't reach it. Effectiveness does not only rely on technical criteria; it depends of the context in which it is used. In other words, a technique does not have the same effectiveness according to the fencers and the weapon. This is why, rather than evaluating techniques according to their effectiveness, a criterion which is questionable, I propose to do otherwise. But before explaining the method, I would like to speak about the philosophy of the Destreza as we have done for theory and practical theory.

The philosophy of the Destreza includes all the behaviours and attitudes to adopt before, during and after a fight. This philosophy, even more than practical theory, is intimately linked to the context of its birth. The Spanish Golden Age is a violent period in which quarrels can quickly end in bloodshed. Society set up legal and moral limits in order to avoid excesses. The goal is to prevent swordsmen from slitting their throats at the slightest affront. The Destreza provides a moral framework for fighting, channels the violence and educates the hidalgos. It is opposed to violent and deadly fencing where only victory counts. Destreza proposes a self-defence fencing where the response is proportional to the aggression. It is respectful of human life and finds its fulfilment in the movimiento de conclusion, a disarmament that neutralises the opponent without killing him. Destreza reconciles the Christian

prohibition to kill with the worldly obligation to fight. This philosophy, known to most of today's Diestros, is too often considered as history or folklore. It is neglected when it is not simply ignored in our way of fighting. Again, why not? Our modern context is not the Spanish Golden Age, honours no longer have the same meaning and fights end with a fake death. However, I think that our error in the way we approach the Destreza lies more in the abandonment of philosophy than in all the technical transformations. This philosophy is the essence of the Destreza, its DNA, which gives it meaning. Today, and this is not a value judgement, many people practise combat sports to release the tension and violence of everyday life, to evacuate the aggressiveness accumulated during the day. Of course, this violence is socially acceptable and takes place in a framework designed to avoid excesses and injuries, but it involves ego, force, aggressiveness to achieve victory. In my humble opinion, this ego struggle to win is incompatible with the Destreza. By adopting these behaviours, I don't think we are more than Olympic fencers with rapiers. The Destreza conveys humanist values that are still relevant today. The Destreza should not only make better fencers, it should make better people.

Here is now my answer to the question about the Olympic fencing arrow? The Olympic fencing arrow was developed to hit the opponent, as quickly as possible, to score a point. As it is contrary to the philosophy of the Destreza, I do not think it should be added to our arsenal.

I have now explained my objective, what I want to achieve and my position in relation to the Destreza and its current use. I am going to propose a few ways to achieve this.



## Learning the theory

Pure theory is the grammar that allows you to master the language of fencing. As it is not possible to make a correct sentence in English or French without knowing English or French grammar, it is not possible to make correct “phrase d’arme” (a French expression translated “weapon sentence”) without mastering fencing grammar. You can learn sentences by heart (techniques) but these phrases are only of interest if they are used in the appropriate context. To be clear, I don't believe that one should learn theory by heart like students have to learn solfège in France before they have even touched a musical instrument. But, from the very beginning of fencing practice, Diestras and Diestros have to learn the main concepts of Destreza as soon as they discover its: the first vertical plane, the medio de proporcion, the atajo ... I know that some people think that you have to practice first and then learn the theory, I think that both have to be worked on at the same time, they feed each other. Understanding theory improves practice and practice improves understanding of theory.

There are many advantages to learning theory. The Destreza is a scientific fencing, Destreza is more than a series of recipes (the techniques) to be applied in a more or less empirical way. It is based, as everyone knows, on geometry and mathematical demonstration, but I don't think its scientific character is here. In fact, the masters have developed tools - planes, medios, angle ... – that allow the analysis of fencing. It is because Destreza is scientific that the Diestro will win even if he is older, smaller, weaker or slower than his opponent. If the opponent is stronger, he uses the lever of his weapon by placing the strong of his blade on his weak, if the opponent is

faster, the Diestro/a will force him to make larger movements than his own, if the opponent is taller, the Diestro will keep his weapon out of the lateral defensive planes in order to approach safely. That's why raison as to raise over passion.

Our long-term memory has two modules: a semantic module and a lexical module. The semantic module retains the meaning of words and concepts. For example, we all know the game of chess. It is a game played by two people, there are black and white squares, you have to catch the opponent's king... Of course, this concept is more developed in Magnus Larson's mind than in your or mine. But the "game of chess" concept is present in our semantic memory. The second module is lexical memory, but it does not interest us today. Learning pure theory allows the assimilation of concepts beyond their simple technical description. A beginner learns atajo 1, for him the concept of atajo is limited to the technical execution of atajo 1. He knows how to do the gesture without taking care of distance or contact. Then he learns the other atajos from the right angle and uses them in combat. Thus, his representation of the atajo is enriched until he is able to approach it conceptually. He will know that the atajo gives him control of the first vertical plane and of his opponent's weapon, he will have a point of superior force contact on his opponent's weapon, with section 3 of his blade against section two of his opponent's blade with his true edge from above or the false edge from below ... Thus, he will be able to place an atajo regardless of his position or that of his opponent because he understands the concept of atajo and not only the technique of atajo.

This integration into semantic memory helps to relieve cognitive tension. The main difficulty of fencing is to manage a complex system in constant change. Knowing

theory reduces cognitive tension by relying on simple and universal principles. In my teaching, I explain very early on the first vertical plane. I want students to know how to locate and control it. In order to control the first vertical plane, the forward foot must point towards the opponent. Then, we distinguish four situations: At the medio de proporción, if one of the fighters is in the right-angle position, he controls the first vertical plane. If the weapon of one of the fighters is in the first vertical plane and the other is not, then he controls the first vertical plane. If the weapons of both combatants are in the first vertical plane, the one who is stronger in the opposition of the blades controls the first vertical plane. Finally, if neither weapon is in the first vertical plane; it is the one between the opposing weapon and the first vertical plane that controls the plane. I approach this notion first because I want the students learn to recognise the situations in which they control the plane. Then I want them to know how to take control of the plane when they have lost it, because controlling the plane is a sine qua non condition before carrying out a technique. Here is an anecdote that happened to me and probably happened to other Diestros in their early days. Once when I was fighting against someone who was adopting a low guard, Italian guard to say it simply, I was trying to do an atajo 1 to take control of his weapon before doing the shoulder thrust. Every time I tried to grab the opponent's weapon, he does a liberation and attacked me to the kidney. This mistake, which is quite classic among the Diestros beginners, comes from the fact that our understanding of the shoulder thrust from atajo 1 is just technical. We only see the gestures without understanding the theory around which it was built. This sequence, atajo 1 and shoulder thrust, is only necessary if my opponent is in a right-angle position at the medio de proporción and because controls the first vertical

plane. If the opponent is in low guard, he does not control the plane, so the atajo is useless because I can only control it by placing myself in a right-angle position and attacking him directly at the shoulder or at the elbow bleed.

How to set up this work? The pupils fight (with prohibition to hit the opponent). They try, one after the other, to take control of the first vertical plane. Then we use the video. Today, everyone can film with their phone. It is then simple to watch and analyse short sequences of fights, to make stops, to locate the first vertical plane, to know in which situation you are (1 to 4), to see the choices you make in priority and those you never make. If the students work in groups of three (two fighting and one filming), it is simple to make a real-time analysis of a situation or progress. Feedback is very quick and it is possible to correct errors practically in real time. I make a small parenthesis on the video, each time I find that I am fighting badly, I ask someone to film a small sequence and in general, the viewing allows me to solve my problem very quickly. Then, and this is the most important thing in my humble opinion, when students work like this, they don't think in terms of technique, but in terms of situations. They learn to recognise situations where they control the plane and situations where the opponent controls the plane. Their minds are freed from the technique and they are from the very beginning in the analysis and observation that will later allow them to use a technique.

We proceed in the same way with the lateral defensive plans. The defensive planes are the planes perpendicular to the ground, which join the centre of the opponent's hilt to the shoulders of the Diestro. Their use is based on two simple rules: 1) the point of the opponent's sword must never be inside these planes 2) the hilt of the Diestro's sword must never be outside these planes. In the first exercise, the

students work in pairs. One holds a large rubber band in his sword hand which is placed around the other's shoulders. Then they move around. This makes it possible to materialise these planes and see how they move. In a second exercise, the students fight for control of the first vertical plane while trying to apply the rules governing the use of lateral defensive planes. Again, we use the video to analyse.

This way of working (around de first vertical plane and the defensive planes) gives them time, time to think and time to act. If the Diestro controls the first vertical plane, he knows that the opponent will only be able to attack him in two actions. He will first have to take the control of the plane before attacking. So, if the Diestro controls the plane, he knows that his opponent's next move will be "non-threatening", and therefore he can devote time to observation and decision making. Thus, the more he assimilates the theory, the quicker and more relevant are his understanding and analytical capacity. Assimilation of the medios (de proporción and proporcional) allows to manage distance and angles, the control of the plane allows to create time, the assimilation of the atajo allows to control the opponent's blade. Concepts together to form a fencing analysis capacity based on the three essential principles of fencing tiempo, distancia and agregación, time, distance and contact. In this way, the diestro gradually learns to read fencing, to make the best use of a given situation. Where a beginner Diestro sees nothing, a confirmed Diestro immediately identifies the medio he is standing in, he knows the lines where he can attack and those where he is threatened. He gains lots of speed because he understands at first glance the options available to him and his opponent. I believe that you can identify a confirmed Diestro from a beginner Diestro in a simple way. The beginner Diestro starts the fight with the technique he will try to do in his

mind, whereas the confirmed Diestro does the technique that is best suited to a given situation and then names the technique he has just performed.

When the students work this way, in dynamic exercises in which they try to apply a theoretical notion (and not a gesture), build in their semantic memory a catalogue of combat situations. Thus, when we work in a more classical way on the technique, to make an atajo, from above or below, or a diversion or a transfer, they link these gestures to combat situations they have already encountered, and they will be able to reuse its later.

This need to conceptualise comes, I think, from magic. In a previous life, before being a teacher and fencer, I lived several years as a professional magician. Magicians have this in common with fencers, that they hope to find the trick that is truly magical, much like fencers hope to find the “botte secrete”, the secret technique that will make you invincible because with this “botte secrete” you will kill the opponent every time. Rather than working in depth on the theory of fencing, which is a long and difficult job, one learns catalogues of techniques without ever really mastering one. I learn a technique, I try to use it in combat, it doesn't work - "I don't understand, because I've worked on it for at least ten minutes" -, we quickly deduce that the technique is not good and we learn another one which, we imagine, will be more deadly and devastating than the previous one. Whereas magicians are always "working a trick" without ever having a single one completed, fencers are always working on new techniques without ever really mastering one. My friend Robin Truchon is a good fencer. Anyone who has ever fought against him has had the feeling of oppression that you feel when faced with a fencer who controls your weapon all the time. However, by his own admission, he only uses three techniques:

shoulder thrust from atajo 1, quarter circle shoulder thrust from atajo 3 and the general of weakness under strength from atajo 4. It is not much, but it is enough to kill anyone. On the other hand, he knows at all times which medio he is in, he controls the first vertical plane at all times, he uses the lever of the weapon to be strong and attacks at the right moment.

### **Interest for the teacher**

This approach, which places theory on the same level as practice in learning fencing, is very interesting for the teacher. It simplifies the analysis of practice by using only criterions: time, distance and contact. All mistakes made are all the result of an error in time, distance or contact. When a gesture or technique is badly performed, there are two ways of correcting it: the technical way or the conceptual way. The technical way is to correct the bad execution of the gesture, the conceptual way is to correct the misunderstanding of fencing. Let's take a simple example, when a fencer performs a thrust, the arm must be extended when the impact happens. The master-at-arms can correct the gesture technical mistake as often as he wishes. Until the conceptual error is resolved, the student will not be able to do the technique correctly. If the arm is bent, this is either due to an error of timing - he moves his body before having placed the arm at the right angle - or an error of distance - he extends the arm at the right moment, but takes too big a step. If the master explains this, the student knows the source of his error and enriches his understanding of fencing.

I always teach fencing with groups of very heterogeneous levels. By working on the theory as I explained above, the students, in groups of three, are quickly

autonomous and able to correct each other. This speeds up their progress and leaves me time to deal with other students who have other needs.

### **What seems essential to me**

What follows is essentially a catalogue of what I consider to be essential:

#### At the theoretical level:

Everything that allows positioning in space (pyramids, lines, particular planes), especially to facilitate teaching and to be able to make gestures in precise ways.

The first vertical plane, its definition, its location, how to control it. This is essential for the management of the fight. Allows you to know if you are in danger or not, to create time to observe and analyse.

The medio de proporcion and proporcional, to know their definition and to be able (practically) to know, where you are in relation to the opponent.

To know the atajo beyond its simple technical execution. To put it simply, to be able to do an atajo, whatever the position of the opponent's weapon.

To know the notions of time and timing, the time relationship between several actions.



The theory of defence, that is to say: the lateral defensive plans and the way to use its (keep the opponent's point outside these plans, keep the guard of my weapon inside these plans). Next, knowing how to protect myself in the appropriate manner: if the attack threatens the area above the shoulders, I protect myself with the hilt of my weapon, if the attack threatens the area between the shoulders and the navel, I defend myself with the forte of my blade with either the high hand and the low point, or the low hand and the high point. Finally, if the attack threatens the area below the navel, I defend with the weak of my blade and the small pyramid to intercept the attack.

Knowing the basic strategy in Destreza, I must 1) control the first vertical plane, 2) control the weapon with an atajo, 3) attack. In defence, if the opponent controls the plane, I have to control it back, if he controls my weapon I can 1) transfer the atajo, 2) move backwards to put myself out of reach of the opponent's attack 3) Doing a diversion.

At the level of the fundamentals (everything that is necessary for fencing but not sufficient)

Knowing how to breathe, the Spanish masters speak little about it (pachecco, it seems in Grandeza de la Espada) but good breathing is essential. Most beginner Diestros fight anaerobically. It is not possible to analyse a combat situation if the brain is not properly oxygenated. I insist a lot on this aspect which is often neglected when it is not simply ignored.

The direction of the gaze.

Knowing how to move (movement of the body weight) with particular attention to the circular step (the one that allows you to reach the medio proporcional).

Four positions: the right angle, the inferior right angle (default position during the fight) and the position at the medio proporcional).

### At the practical level

Atajos 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, atajos 6 and 7 being, in my experience, very little used. The

liberation (but the work is of little importance, in this case it is more a question of explaining when to use it, as the fighters often misuse it. The use of liberation is often a default choice rather than a considered strategic option).

Transfer, diversion and inclusion

These four gestures and the atajo represent more than 95% of the phrases of arms, their mastery is essential.

Some techniques: from the atajo 1, shoulder thrust, quarter circle thrust under the arm, general weakness under strength, the concluding movement. From atajo 2: the cross line general and the general of weakness on strength. From atajo 3: the

general of weakness on strength, the general of estrechar, the quarter-circle thrust to the shoulder and the sagittarius thrust. From atajo 4: the cross-line general, the general of weakness under strength. And that's already a lot.

## Conclusion

As I said, this is only my opinion, on how to work and progress in rapier fencing. I fell (and they think it too) that my students progress quickly and understand fencing much better since I have integrated all this work on theory into my teaching. This has considerably reduced our cognitive tension in combat, we have gained in fluidity, speed and subtlety.

And now, the answer to the question that you are all asking. Will I be able to beat pirate Robert or Inigo Montoya? The answer is clearly no, but I think I could hold up a few assaults.