

Men of the Sand

By
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.....In peace there's nothing so becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility.
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger,
Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favored rage.
Then lend the eye a terrible aspect,
Let it pry through the portage of the head
Like the brass cannon. Let the brow o'erwhelm it
As fearfully as a galled rock
O'erhang and jutty his confounded base,
Swilled with the wild and wasteful ocean.
Now set the teeth and stretch the nostrils wide,
Hold hard the breath, and bend up every spirit
To his full height.....
William Shakespeare, Henry V

Life and death moments refined to poetic elements are inspiring. What is it in a man that transforms his tranquil self in to one who willingly risks death? Can you see it? What form does it take? I carried Shakespeare's words to the Callejon to find out for myself.

My passion for history led me to the ancient arena in search of these men, the type of men who were capable of facing death on the sand. The centuries did not destroy their legacy, but the men – I was sure were gone. Without them, there were only ruins, faded ghosts of past courage and misunderstanding of purpose behind the lessons of the sand.

The strength to not fear death and seek an honorable passing were lessons of the ancient arenas. If the Roman era could be viewed as the "Old Testament", then the modern Bullfight could be accepted as its "New Testament" - where Man's struggle against the natural world and his place above the beast in Gods eyes as the new lesson.

Similarities in past and modern arenas are abundant. Architecturally by design, but what of the modern men of the sand and the public? I had seen the Renaissance era paintings depicting the worst traits of the public. What would I discover? Would I find horrid crowds stuffing fat faces while their eyes burned with blood lust and voices calling out for death? Others, openly indifferent to the magnitude of events before them, callously chatting as depicted in the Renaissance paintings? What I found were people doing what people do, socializing, eating, drinking and all that accompanies life when people attend an event. If there is alcohol, one must acknowledge the drunk. They have always been and can bring ugliness to any event.

The “indifference” I found was of no malicious root. In all great and grand moments, some people around events will continue to live their lives - not hanging on every moment of another’s. The Renaissance paintings turn out to be anti-arena propaganda. Using people’s natural social behavior to depict them heartless as to the personal point of view of the painter is merely a pathetic attempt to direct perception. The modern equivalents still practiced with blind vigor by today’s activists.

The men, did they still exist? The honorable warrior who fought with flesh and steel? He indeed lives. He stepped from the ancient sands in Homer’s Iliad to Rome’s Coliseum in to Shakespeare’s Henry V and onto the sands of the Plaza’s in our world today. What I witnessed in the Callejon of these men answered my questions of the transformation possible. Men rising to face death, while maintaining visible strength and fearlessness, teaching the public the lessons of the “New Testament”. Hemingway wrote over seventy-five years ago, that to see anything killed by a sword was a rare thing indeed. I would add, in 2007, it is historically amazing it continues. The sword - steel wielded by flesh into flesh, one life surviving against overwhelming odds.

I found the last play in this theater of history in a circle of sand in Mexico. What I witnessed from the Callejon of these men answered my questions of the transformations possible in Men rising to face death, while maintaining visible strength and fearlessness. The honorable warrior who fights with flesh and steel teaching the lessons of the arena were not just words of the past. I sought my ancient heroes from my vantage place in the Callejon, and in the eyes of the Matadors I found them.

The Man draws the steel from the leather, turning towards the beast as the sword slips from its sheath. Mere moments ago he was graceful and artistic - now I witness the transformation. The moment comes; he must imitate the action of the tiger. The sinews do stiffen and the blood rises. The fair nature departs, replaced by hard favored rage. The eyes, they have a great and terrible aspect, burning through the head like a cannon. The teeth are set and nostrils wide. With collective held breath and every spirit bent up to It’s full height, he risks all to carry on the tradition and lessons of the men of the sand.

The End