



## Sword swallowing and other sideshow secrets revealed!

DISPATCHES

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(Photo: Ripley's Believe It or Not! Times Square)

In case it missed your calendar, take note that Saturday is World Sword Swallower's Day. Which means if you're in New York, you might want to hoof it over to Ripley's Believe It or Not! Odditorium at Times Square on West 42nd Street, where 25 or so professional (is there any other kind?) sword swallows plan to simultaneously ply their craft at 2:23 p.m.

The feat will be repeated at 15 other U.S. Ripley's Odditoriums. And it's free!

Veteran sword swallower and record-breaking light-bulb eater Todd Robbins will be leading the Times Square pack. He's been engaging in sideshow antics for many of his 54 years, ever since he learned some basics as a kid hanging out at a local magic shop in Long Beach, Calif.

Robbins is proficient in other sideshow staples – fire-eating, for example. And he estimates he's eaten 4,000 light bulbs in his time, earning a Ripley's world record for the feat. ("Tastes like chicken," he quips.) But sword swallowing is the "high water mark" of sideshow entertainment, in Robbins' opinion.

"Fire-eating is entry level. I could teach you how to do it in five minutes," he says. "But sword swallowing, you can't learn out of a book. You need a mentor-apprenticeship relationship. Because if you don't do it right, you can end up hurting yourself. Or worse."

The endeavor is both art and science, employing principles of anatomy and physics.

How does it work? First, you don't start with a sword (and yes, the swords are real, though they aren't sharp). You practice over and over with a wire hanger – preferably before breakfast – until, over time, the gag reflex becomes suppressed.

"Eventually, the gag reflex goes away and you're just poking at the muscle – the upper glottis – and it will open up and give you access to the throat," Robbins explains.

Still, proper alignment is critical to avoid lacerating the esophagus and other organs. Yes, it's dangerous – Don't try this at home! "Don't try this *anywhere*," he cautions – "but if it wasn't dangerous, no one would give a damn."

Robbins estimates there are only about 200 sword swallows worldwide. The longest sword swallowed was 33 inches by a practitioner who is taller than 7 feet. At 6-foot-4, Robbins works with swords up to 22 inches long.

He performed at the Coney Island sideshow in Brooklyn from 1992 to 2008 and founded a school of sideshow arts there that's still operating. These days, though, he's mainly working trade shows and corporate events.

Besides, sideshows are a relic of a bygone era. Only three permanent ones remain – Sideshows by the Seashore at Coney Island; the Venice Beach Freakshow in California (and now an AMC reality show); and the nation's last traveling freak show, fronted by octogenarian Ward Hall, featured at fairs primarily in the East.

Sideshow entertainers fall into three categories: so-called "working acts" (like guys who pound nails into their nose); self-made freaks (those with extreme tattoos or piercings); and people born with physical abnormalities (such as an armless woman who crochets with her feet), Robbins explains.

The demise of the freak show has less to do with the rise of disability rights or even a sense of political correctness than it does with basic economics, he believes. Elaborate thrill rides take up space on the midway. And though they're costly, they're cheaper to run than employing sideshow artists.

For those who find freak shows archaic and demeaning, Robbins retorts: It's not just about people gawking at people who are born different. They show how they've overcome the limitations of their bodies. It seems impossible. But if you know what you're doing, anything is possible."

World Sword Swallower's Day is a creation of the Sword Swallowers Association, which is co-sponsored by Ripley's Believe It or Not!