



GoodHealth

Hollywood gave me a real pain in the back... but a £250 machine put me out of my misery

BY RUFUS SEWELL



Unmasking the pain: Rufus Sewell, who suffered back pain on the film set of *The Legend Of Zorro*, with co-star Catherine Zeta-Jones

ACTOR Rufus Sewell, who stars in the new Hollywood film *The Legend Of Zorro*, has a health problem at odds with his dashing screen image. The 37-year-old actor suffers agonising lower back pain — a condition that affects millions of Britons. Here, he tells HILARY FREEMAN the cause of his problem — and about the machine that keeps it in check

RUFUS SEWELL is standing on top of a moving train, sword in hand, fighting his nemesis, Antonio Banderas, for his life. As the train speeds through the Mexican desert, the two jump from carriage to carriage in a choreographed display of swordsmanship.

This is the climax of the Hollywood film *The Legend Of Zorro*, out in Britain's cinemas this week.

It is thanks to the magic of the silver screen that this scene looks effortless. For, in reality, Sewell is suffering from lower back pain.

Unsurprisingly, two months of training to perfect his sword-fighting and horse riding skills, followed by four months of filming action scenes — often for up to 16 hours a day — took their toll.

'It's not all about stuntmen and special effects,' says Sewell, who plays Armand, the villain of the piece who spars with Zorro (Banderas) for the love of Elena (Catherine Zeta-Jones). 'Antonio and I really were on top of a moving train, fighting for hours. A five-minute scene can take two weeks to film.'

Rufus realised he had injured himself after a gruelling explosion scene. 'The train is supposed to be full of nitroglycerine,' he explains. 'There's supposed to be a huge explosion and I had to throw myself on the ground in reaction to it.'

'If you want it to look like a genuine fall, you have to knock yourself about a bit. You can't look like you're trying to be careful, or it shows.'

'But the next day I noticed that I had a constant pain in the small of my back. It got worse as the day went on.'

Although few — if any — of us can say we've injured our backs like Rufus, fencing with masked men on moving trains, the lower back pain he suffered is actually very common.

Lower back pain, also known as lumbago, affects four out of five people at some time in their lives and 40 per cent is thought to be genetic.

In most cases it lasts between a few days and a few weeks, but it can last longer and recur. Lower back pain affects the bottom five vertebrae,

which bear the entire weight of the upper body and are constantly under stress — especially when carrying or lifting heavy objects, bending or twisting.

LUMBAGO can arise quickly and be severe (called acute back pain), or develop over time (termed chronic back pain). In most cases, the back heals itself, but in severe cases medical advice should be sought.

'It's a nationwide problem and it can depend on your lifestyle,' says Eddie Joseph, Sewell's personal trainer. 'Many people find their back goes after years of sitting too long at a desk. But with Rufus, as with anyone with an active job, the problem came on quickly.'

'Leaning forward all day — whether at a desk or to sword-fight — means that the force of gravity pulls the head downward. The natural response is to tense up the neck muscles, which pushes the back out and leads to lower back pain.'

'If, like Rufus, you constantly do vigorous exercise without proper relaxation and stretching, you will end up with escalated back pain.'

John Vanhegan, a consultant orthopaedic surgeon in London's Harley Street, explains how this condition develops.

'This type of back pain is commonly called mechanical back pain,' he says. 'It's caused by the wearing out of bones, muscles and discs through use, rather than by

nerve damage (which is known as neurogenic back pain).

'The muscles in the back support the discs in the spine which lie between the vertebrae and act as shock absorbers to protect the spine. When the muscles become tired, they no longer support the discs correctly and the ligaments are overstretched. The back is thrown out of line, leading to pain.'

Sewell did not see a doctor for his back pain. 'On an action movie set, there's this macho attitude where

you don't feel you can complain,' he says. 'There were stuntmen standing next to me with broken hands and arms, saying: "It's just a scratch, mate." So you don't want to look like a softie.'

Instead, he took his trainer's advice to try Backlife, a machine which was developed by scientists in Israel to treat lower back pain.

The machine works on the same principle as a recognised medical procedure known as continuous passive movement (CPM).

Research has found that when damaged joints are passively moved, the injury heals more quickly and effectively, with less swelling.

CPM machines are being used in hospitals to treat knee injuries.

Backlife — the first such device to treat the spine — gives a gentle and repeated circular movement of the pelvis, relieving pressure on the vertebrae while massaging the spine and relaxing the muscles.

It is effective for those who have

a slipped disc or trapped nerve. A clinical study in Israel of 68 patients with lower back pain who used Backlife found that 80 per cent of them enjoyed effective relief from chronic pain after just six 12-minute treatments.

According to CPM expert Professor Eyal Lederman of the General Osteopathic Council: 'Backlife is very gentle, requires no medical supervision and there is very little chance of patients suffering adverse reactions. It is extremely helpful as a supplement in the management of back problems.'

Sewell used Backlife the recommended three times a day. 'I felt like it centred my back, putting everything into place. I would lie down to use it, and at first I couldn't get the small of my back to touch the floor. By the end of the 12-minute session I could.'

'It seemed to help my posture and stance, which stopped me from hurting my back more. I know that without it the pain would have got worse and could have incapacitated me.'

Sewell's back problem wasn't his only injury on set. 'I got a full-on kick in the nose from Catherine Zeta-Jones, too. She was supposed to knock a knife out of my hand — but she mislicked.'

'She has a hell of a kick on her. It brought tears to my eyes.'

The Backlife CPM costs £250 and is available direct from UK supplier AbiMax Ltd. For information and UK stockists, tel 08700 770177 or visit www.backlife.com

Ten easy steps to treat backache

MILD TO MODERATE PAIN:

1. Take over-the-counter painkillers. But be cautious. A recent study in the *Journal Of Hypertension* found that regular use of common-brand pain relievers such as ibuprofen may cause high blood pressure.

2. See an osteopath or chiropractor for manipulation of the spine and exercises. You will require between two and six sessions, at a cost of £25 or more per session.

3. Try acupuncture, in which very thin needles are inserted under the skin. Pain relief can result from the release of endorphins, the body's own pain-relieving chemicals. Costs £25-£40 per treatment.

MODERATE TO SEVERE PAIN:

4. See your GP, who may prescribe stronger anti-inflammatory painkillers than can be bought over the counter. Non-steroid anti-inflammatories can have side effects, including GI ulcers (BMJ 1997). The *Journal of the American Medical Association* linked the drug Vioxx to blood clots, heart attacks and strokes.

5. Your GP may also prescribe a muscle relaxant such as diazepam, to be taken for a short period to reduce muscle spasms.

6. Have physiotherapy. A physiotherapist can design an exercise programme to improve your flexibility, strengthen your back and improve your posture. Costs £35-£50 per treatment.

7. Take oral steroids, which may be prescribed during episodes of pain. These reduce inflammation in the spine. Oral steroids are intended for use for short periods of time (one or two weeks).

8. Have steroid injections, which can reduce pain and inflammation.

9. Have an epidural. Corticosteroid drugs can be injected into the spine and are used in the treatment of sciatica. The effects will last a few months.

10. Have surgery — usually the last resort and only in the most severe cases. Back operations include spinal fusion and the removal of disc material that is compressing nerves.