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Meet Tony Schiena, the world's most highly trained covert operative



Real-life Rambo Tony Schiena CREDIT: ANTOINE VERGLAS

A balmy Tuesday afternoon on the south bank of the Thames. Outside Shakespeare's Globe, drenched in sunshine for the first time in weeks, flocks of tourists and school groups bustle this way and that. Amid them all I am stationary, waiting to meet Tony Schiena, a man routinely described as "the world's most highly trained covert operative." It's a lofty epithet, yet as if to prove the claim with an immediate demonstration, I can't seem to find him anywhere.

Accepting it may have been a poor decision to meet a former spy 'beside' a building which is nominally circular, I take to desperately scrutinising every passing male for signs of hidden intelligence – newspaper held close to the face, large gabardine coat, that sort of thing. After a while, an email arrives. It's from Schiena's publicist (yes in New York, who explains that his taxi is merely stuck in traffic from Stansted Airport. He'll be there shortly, she says, and will find me inside, in the theatre's café.



"I'm 41 years old. I've done a lot," says Tony Schiena CREDIT: ANTOINE VERGLAS

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Schiena appears ten minutes later. He's dressed in a well-cut navy suit with a white, open collar shirt, and swooshes into the foyer looking like a Hollywood mogul's idea of an action hero: 6ft 3in, tanned, three-days' stubble and armed with precisely the sort of handshake you'd expect of somebody who could kill you at any moment of his choosing.

If Schiena already sounds an implausible character, his [CV](#) is something else entirely. It reads like the preposterous backstory of a troubled video game protagonist. To condense: having spent much of his youth in the 1990s working with the intelligence services in his native South Africa – a time in which he was embedded for long periods in paramilitary groups – Schiena has gone on to turn himself into a world-renowned expert on private security and combat operations, acting as consultant for everybody from the New York Police Department to the French Foreign Legion, the Afghanistan National Army to the Mongolian Quick Reaction Force.

"I only get exhausted when I'm doing things that don't matter"

Tony Schiena

He has trained the [Kurdish Peshmerga](#) commanders in counter-insurgency tactics against Isil, advised the US Marine Corp in

Iraq, and been made a Lieutenant Colonel by the Hungarian National Guard.

And in addition to all that? At the age of 25 Schiena retired undefeated as a [World Heavyweight Karate Champion](#), currently plays a central role in the fight against human trafficking, used to supply doormen to west London clubs, and has a burgeoning career as an movie star.

As he sits before me in the Globe, then, hands placed together in prayer position, eyes meeting mine and staying there, an urgent matter needs to be cleared up: is Tony Schiena a real person?



 **Tony Schiena**
@TonySchiena

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Schiena laughs, thankfully, then holds his hands up in faux mercy.

“Look, I’m 41 years old. I’ve done a lot,” he says, speaking in South African accent corrupted by ceaseless travel. “But I don’t sit still. Take this past week for example. I attended a conference in Lahore discussing security issues in Pakistan, then I went to Dubai to work from my satellite office, then I went to Rome to speak in the Vatican’s inner sanctum. I won’t sleep tonight, either, as I’m going back to Italy tomorrow. And on Sunday I’m in Los Angeles [where he lives]. That’s the reason my resumé looks like that, I don’t really stop.”

It sounds completely knackered, I say.

“I only get exhausted when I’m doing things that don’t matter. And I make use of the time I have in places. I’m going to my house and see some family in Italy for two days’ rest next week, but even then I’ll be catching up on reading, because I have a lot to absorb again” Schiena says. “Whenever I stop somewhere I put everything out at a table and think: what have I done, what needs to be done, what do I need to focus on next? That’s the way I operate. As long as I utilise my time effectively, I don’t run out of energy.”

There must be coffee involved, at least?

“Oh, yeah, lots. I actually drink this special blend of coffee that has no toxins, then add grass-fed butter and MCT oil, an enhanced coconut oil. I have that in the morning, then I work out.”

So there we are.



In many ways Schiena is an old-fashioned mercenary, quite literally a gun for hire. He and his company, MOSAIC (Multi Operational Security Agency Intelligence Company), an international band of former elite military or intelligence personnel including ex-CIA, MI6, SAS and US Navy Seals, are available for anybody (within reason, and for a price) around the world requiring a very particular set of skills.

“We’ll do private security in hostile places, counter-terrorism training, technology – whatever is necessary right now,” Schiena says. “It’s a crazy world when it comes to terrorism. And now everyone’s all over

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Schiena meeting US Major General Jeff Hammond in Iraq CREDIT: COURTESY OF TONY SCHIENA

On the day Schiena and I meet, the airport and metro in Brussels are attacked by three co-ordinated suicide bombings, killing 32 innocent bystanders. Schiena wasn't shocked to hear the news. Incidents like that are only going to become more common, he says, and we need to be doing more to try and stop it happening in Britain.

"Terrorism's here to stay. Even if Isil goes away, something else will mushroom up. Look at London. I deal with Scotland Yard on various issues, and I know is a very surveilled city, in terms of technology, but that's not enough," says Schiena, who as recently as last year was on the frontline in Iraq, contracted to work for the Kurdish special forces against the threat of Islamic State.

"What you need is more ground intelligence. I don't mean a police state, but really you cannot expect intelligence officers to act effectively when there is such a small number of them compared to the city's population."



Schiena has occasionally shown his experience on the big screen, appearing in various films and television dramas CREDIT: MICHELLE GABE/RUBENSTEIN PR

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The ideal, he says, is that the Londoners – or everyone, for that matter – are trained to operate in what Schiena calls ‘Condition Yellow’, a condition of heightened awareness, alert to potential threats.

“When every individual is trained to a point, they’re all walking round in condition yellow. They walk around going, ‘Why is that guy sweating? Why is he wearing a bulky jacket?’ I’m not saying we need conscription, but it forces people to be on the look out.”



Schiena on the frontlines against Isis with the heads of Kurdish Intelligence CREDIT: COURTESY OF TONY SCHIENA

When Schiena lived in London, three years ago, he and his British fiancée attended [Notting Hill carnival](#). On the District Line coming home, a Boombox caught Schiena’s eye. It was left with nobody around.

“I couldn’t take my eyes off it, so when people moving around and the doors opened, I made a decision in that split-second to yank my fiancée off the train,” he remembers. “I actually hurt her shoulder and arm, so she was pretty mad with me, and it wasn’t a bomb. But what if it was? It’s better to be safe than sorry.”

As he says this, a group of extras from the Globe’s matinee performance of [The Tempest](#) – in full Jacobean costume – walk past us. Schiena’s eyes flit towards them, narrowing.

“That’s interesting,” he says, flatly.

“I broke both my ankles [in karate]. I fought once more and got a broken nose in the process. I thought there and then, ‘I’m done’.”

Tony Schiena

Much of Schiena’s intensity and discipline is thanks to his formative years learning karate in South Africa. When he was recruited into the the world of intelligence straight from college by what he calls a “no man’s land of different agencies”, he was immediately embedded in right wing terrorist groups hoping to bring down the government. Having [learned martial arts as a child](#) and by then, the mid-90s, already a karate champion, he felt ready.

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“They placed me in a position where they could use me and I could report back. I was an 18-year old kid and didn’t know any better, but karate, the traditional Japanese form as opposed to the American variety, gave me a specific mindset,” he says. “I attribute a lot to it, psychologically.”

Schiena continued to compete in the sport at the highest level (including captaining the US team to gold at the World Karate Championships in 2002, after moving to Los Angeles) until he was 25, shortly before his probable peak, when a training injury forced his early retirement, undefeated.



“I came off something at quite a height in practice, and luckily broke my fall, otherwise I’d have snapped both my femur. As it was I broke both my ankles. I fought once more, though, with my ankles strapped up, but got a broken nose in the process. I thought there and then, ‘I’m done’. For a while I felt I had to prove myself, in UFC or something, but in life you sometimes just have to turn the page and move on.”

Schiena exited his time undercover “almost as quickly as [he] entered”, helping avert a civil war in the process, but says those formative skills he learned are the same that help him survive today, and the same he built on when he entered the world of private security after leaving South Africa. They’ve even given him something of a movie career: Schiena currently has [12 full acting credits to his name](#), including 2010’s *Locked Down*, with Vinnie Jones, and *Darc*, an upcoming action thriller he helped write and produce.

But we don’t have time for that, nor MOSAIC’s non-profit initiative, [IC30](#), which pairs with law enforcement organisations around the world to counter human trafficking, nor any more Notting Hill carnival stories.



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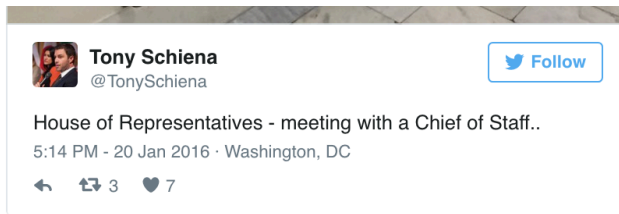
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Instead, Schiena, checking his phone for the time, realises he is extremely late. He has eight interviews today, as well as a dinner with [British former mercenary Simon Mann](#) this evening, before a flight first thing in the morning.

Is there anything left for him to do, I wonder?

“I’m very lucky that I’ve accomplished a lot of things I wanted,” he says. “In sport I did what I wanted. I made the film I wanted to make. MOSAIC is a small and a very focused entity, but there’s always bigger and better things to do. We have plans.”

But one day, I say, you’ll surely retire.

“No, that’s not going to happen.” he says, balking at the very idea. “Slow down, maybe. But as long as I’ve got my health, I’ll keep going.”

And with that, Tony Schiena’s off. Probably to save the world.

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