

Expertly Crafted Violence: Fight Choreographer Chris Cardoni on staging swordplay



When the curtain rises this weekend on Attleboro Community Theatre's production of Paul Rudnick's *I Hate Hamlet*, the highlight of the night — as with many productions of the play that have come before it — promises to be the swashbuckling swordfight between the ghost of John Barrymore and a young television star who he is coaching to take on the role of Hamlet. Yes, you read that correctly — the ghost of legendary stage actor Barrymore crosses swords in an extended duel set within his old apartment, now occupied by the young TV star. Exciting stuff and it's a make-or-break scene to end the first act on a high note. It is also a notorious scene within theater lore, as it is the very moment that saw star Evan Handler up and quit the show when British actor Nicol Williamson went off script and struck Handler with his sword — right across the backside (playwright Rudnick's ribald retelling of the story for the *New Yorker* is still online today, and is very much worth the read in his spilling of every delicious drop of tea about the show's initial Broadway run).

While stage antics as dramatic as an actor smacking another with a sword on purpose are very rare, it is in the interest of every director of stage violence to enlist the help of a trained fight choreographer in order to make the fight as believable — and as safe — as possible. Director James Sulanowski turned to noted fight choreographer Chris Cardoni to teach his actors the basics needed to wield their swords convincingly for the scene without actual danger or injury.

Cardoni, a member of the Society of American Fight Directors since 1999, designs fight choreography for theater as well as for film and video. He is trained in everything from unarmed stage combat to quarterstaff, broadsword, rapier & dagger, boxing ... the list of his skills goes on and on. Cardoni's day job may be in marketing, but his avocation for the past 20 years has been theater and fight direction.

He explains it best on his website, cjfights.com. "I'm not a martial artist. I'm not a stunt man," the site introduction reads. "I'm not an expert fencer or boxer, or a crack shot. Except for a smattering here and

there, I have little experience with real fighting. I'm a theater guy, an actor and director...sometimes for money but mostly for love."

Marilyn Busch (Motif): How did you get started choreographing stage violence?

Chris Cardoni: I had always been interested in sword-fighting and the fight scenes in TV and movies, but had never had a chance to really study it until about 20 years ago, when I started doing sport fencing at the Boston Fencing Club. They offered a workshop in stage combat, and I decided I loved it.

MB: What's your advice to directors and actors in regard to the need for violence design in the theater?

CC: If you think you need one, you need one. If you're not sure you need one, you need one. Even if there's only a single push or slap or fall or struggle, you need one. I have a motto on the front page of my website: "There's no moment in any play, comedic or dramatic, that's worth an actor getting hurt."

MB: Do you run into people that think they can just "wing it" acting in a scene without choreographing the violence?

CC: All the time! It comes from ignorance or ego or bravado or a combination of those things. You cannot wing it; someone will get hurt.

MB: When you were a kid, what did you want to be in "when you grew up"?

CC: I think I was always an actor inside, because I wanted to be many different people. My older brother was into theater, so I was. I don't recall which show was my actual first — probably *Story Theatre*, for which I designed the set. I was 14 (about 46 years ago). I've been an actor, director, set designer, make-up artist and a few other things, a little bit professionally but mostly as an amateur.

MB: Who are you inspired by and who are the leaders in your field?

CC: I'm constantly inspired by everyone in the Society of American Fight Directors, a terrific organization. Some of my teachers are well-respected in the stage combat community and the SAFD: Robert Walsh, Ted Hewlett, Rob Najarian, Adam McLean. L. Stacy Eddy, who runs Bay State Fencers in Somerville, introduced me to stage combat and gave me my first choreography referral. I've been inspired by the great Hollywood fight directors, two of whom we've lost recently, William Hobbs and Bob Anderson. A partial list of the films they worked on includes the *Star Wars* series, the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Rob Roy* with Liam Neeson, *The Duelists*, *The Three Musketeers*, *Game of Thrones*, *The Princess Bride*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Romeo and Juliet* — on and on.

MB: What advice would you have for someone wanting to follow in your footsteps?

CC: Join the SAFD and participate in as much of their training as you have time and resources to do.

MB: What's a "dream" show that you would love to work on?

CC: I've been fortunate to do a fair amount of Shakespeare (*Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, "the Scottish play"). I'd love to do any of those again — I've been in the mood for a full-scale R&J.

MB: What are the five things you can't live without?

CC: Coffee, red wine, books, my swords, my love and life partner Melissa.

This is the fourth production of *I Hate Hamlet* Chris has choreographed, and he has played the role of Barrymore twice. Attleboro Community Theatre presents *I Hate Hamlet*, written by Paul Rudnick and directed by James Sulanowski with Dave Almeida, Ben Christie, Rebecca Christie, Alicia Harris, Stephen Hug and Elizabeth Parent. Performances will be held for three weekends, May 3-19 at the Ezekiel Bates Masonic Lodge, 71 North Main Street, Attleboro. Friday, Saturday performances are at 8pm, and Sunday matinees are at 2pm. Tickets at the door and online at attleborocommunitytheatre.com.