

Interview: Richard Cotovsky on Abbie Hoffman Fest, Directing & Final Days of Mary-Arrchie

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CHICAGO – In founding and being an artistic director of a theater company for over 30 years, Richard Cotovsky of Mary-Arrchie Co. has a few stories to tell. In Part Two of an interview with the “Godfather of Chicago Storefront Theater” Cotovsky talks about the annual Abbie Hoffman Died for our Sins Festival, and the various acts of producing memorable stage productions.

Rich Cotovsky is a lifelong Chicagoan, growing up and currently living in the Rogers Park neighborhood. He was a founding member of Mary-Arrchie Co. – an amalgamation of parent’s names from one of his early acting students – and has served as its Artistic Director since it began in 1986. His award-winning theatre company has served up gritty and memorable productions for 30 years, but their current show, “American Buffalo” – which features Cotovsky in a lead role – will be their final show. The building that houses the space the company has had since the late 1980s, the Angel Island theatre at the Broadway/Sheridan intersection, is slated to be torn down later this year. After 30 years and over 100 productions, Rich Cotovsky knew it was time to move on.



L to R: Carlo Garcia (Director of ‘American Buffalo’), Richard Cotovsky and actor/producer Michael Sanow
Photo credit: [MaryArrchie.com](#)

On the opening night of “American Buffalo” last month, the cast was called outside the theater for a surprise honor. The block of Sheridan Road in Chicago that contains the Angel Island theatre (700 W.) will forever be known as “Richard Cotovsky Way.” As I’ve always said, “I never knew Royko, I never knew Kupcinet, I never knew Bozo. But I know the Chicago legend Rich Cotovsky.”

HollywoodChicago.com: One of your most memorable roles, and a portrayal that had a very long run, was as Arthur Przbyszewski in

‘Superior Donuts,’ by playwright Tracy Letts. In my review, I said I thought the part was written for you. What did you honor your ‘Chicago-ness’ in that essential Chicago character?

Richard Cotovsky: Well, I don’t want to mince any words, but that character WAS written for me. [laughs] That made it easy. Tracy Letts will tell you that himself.

HollywoodChicago.com: I didn’t know that, that’s as grand a legacy as can ever be...

Cotovsky: I didn’t so much as honor it, as it was me. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: What directorial effort is closest to your soul in the way it came together and how did it evolve you as both a director and performer? Does being a director make you a better actor, and vice versa?

Cotovsky: I don’t know if ‘better’ is the right term, or that it necessarily works that way. It was early in our history, but ‘The Resistible Rise Of Arturo Ui’ [Season 7, 1992-93] was a gigantic effort and included co-director Jeff Beck, who was also the musical director and set up our ‘Commedia dell’arte’ as part of it. It was a cast of 28 people in that small space, yet it was vibrant, alive and electric – it really was something else.

HollywoodChicago.com: You began the Abbie Hoffman Died for Our Sins Festival in 1989, the year Hoffman past away, and will do the final one in 2016. What element of Hoffman and his demise inspired the festival’s beginnings, and what famous names have graced the festival over the years?

Cotovsky: Abbie Hoffman’s inspiration was, in a sense, inadvertent. I wanted to do something to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Woodstock at the time, and it just happened that Abbie died the same year. Hoffman was always an inspiration to me, for his activism and execution of that activism, and any of his books will give you a guide and a map to creating almost anything, if you apply it to what it is you want to do.

One and one came together...Abbie Hoffman had something to do with Woodstock. He was there, he was an uninvited guest, and of course was kicked off stage by Pete Townsend. But he also organized help tents and had the only printing press to spread news around – there were no Kinkos then. [laughs] The person that named the Fest, Kerry Reid, suggested we call it ‘Abbie Hoffman Died for Our Sins,’ which rang true for me.



Preston Tate and Richard Cotovsky in the Mary-Arrchie Co. Production of ‘Superior Donuts’

Photo credit: MaryArrchie.com

HollywoodChicago.com: Any ‘famous names’ that have done the Fest over the years, besides me?

Cotovsky: Michael Shannon is one, Tracy Letts is another. The Upright Citizens Brigade did a couple years, with Matt Besser, Matt Walsh, Adam McKay and Horatio Sanz.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since the neighborhood has changed so much around Angel Island Theatre, and Richard Cotovsky Way, what are some stories that characterize the neighborhood when you first got there, and recently in its gentrification?

Cotovsky: Early on when we there, a shooting took place right in front of the theater. It was a drive by, and it happened after a show. As far as

a symbol to now, that's pretty simple, the closing of the Hotel Chateau [formerly a 'Single Room Housing' unit]. That was a perfect 'sewing up of a wound.'

HollywoodChicago.com: What single moment in the history of Mary-Arrchie, in what show, keeps coming back to you as the most memorable in your 30 seasons?

Cotovsky: We've had so many good shows, and I guess most recently our production of 'The Glass Menagerie' keeps coming up. I'm not going to say that was the only highlight, necessarily, my earlier reference to 'The Resistible Rise Of Arturo Ui' put us on the map, it was a leap to another level of theater. I look at Mary-Arrchie in terms of eras, in another era the play 'Tracers' was huge for us. It's impossible to nail just one thing.

HollywoodChicago.com: You once had a ongoing children's play, which lasted about nine years. What was the story behind that circumstance?

Cotovsky: It had to do with an Illinois Arts Council grant. That was the first bit of funding we had. We asked for 500 dollars to do 'A Child's Christmas in Wales' and 'The Little Match Girl.' simultaneously. [laughs] The guy who proposed this project disappeared! So we never did those productions, but we did get the 500 dollar grant to do a children's program.

So I had to create a children's show, because we wanted the money – and it was, interestingly enough, the first project at the Angel Island theatre space. We did the show, an adaptation of Grimm's Fairy Tales. It was hardcore Grimm – nothing was sanitized – and it was called 'The Mary-Arrchie Kid's Show.' It was well-received, and so I applied to do it through Urban Gateways in Chicago. They funded it for nine years. It finally ended because we wouldn't change it, I even used the original props to the end. But it provided paid work for a lot of actors, and became a major part of our budget.

HollywoodChicago.com: Now you actually wrote one play that was produced on the Mary-Arrchie stage. What was the origin of that, and the title?



Rich Cotovsky as Abbie Hoffman
Photo credit: MaryArrchie.com

Cotovsky: I wrote the play based on my day job as a pharmacist, 'Prescribed, But Not Refillable.' I wrote it in 1985, but I never got it to a point of production. It's basically about a guy who is a pharmacist, and doesn't really want to do it, but he has a desire to be a rock star. I played Jerry, the lead character. I had a director, Patrick Kerwin – who was a great theater artist and an inspiration to me – who really wanted to do the play in 1992. So we get it going, but suddenly Patrick disappeared.

HollywoodChicago.com: [Laughs] A lot of people disappear in your stories.

Cotovsky: He wanted me to act in it, even though I didn't want to. So then he disappears, and I'm directing it as well. And I don't even want to do the mother f**ker. [laughs] Now he's gone and I had to pick it up.

But then Patrick reappeared, which is part of his shtick. He straightened it out, after I had twisted it. Originally, I wanted it to be three acts, but it ended up as one act, with three scenes. The problem was transition between the scenes. Patrick figured out that I should tell real stories of the profession in between the scenes. That was the key, it brilliantly sewed everything together.

HollywoodChicago.com: What do what to do in what is left of your performing career after this is all wrapped up, and how will that define the old saying, "don't look back"?

Cotovsky: I'm not going to look back. 'Don't look back, something might be gaining on you.' I don't have anything specific in mind. I want to do what comes my way. No plans, no idea, I believe in things happening organically. Right now the plan is to wrap things up - we've got one more Abbie Hoffman Fest to put together - whatever happens after that is unknown. I'm not going to push anything beyond passive behavior. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: If there was to be a grave marker at the Angel Island theater site after it goes away, what would you want it to read?

Cotovsky: 'I didn't know there would be a quiz?'

HollywoodChicago.com: [Laughs] That's great.

Cotovsky: No, I said that in reference to the question. [laughs] Maybe I'll just hang around my [Richard Cotovsky] 'Way' and tell people 'We used to do theater here.'

But if it has to be written in stone, here's one...'The Truth Hurts.'

[CLICK HERE](#) [18] for Part One of the Richard Cotovsky interview, where he talks about the final production of the Mary-Arrchie Co., "American Buffalo."

[CLICK HERE](#) [19] for the HollywoodChicago.com review of "American Buffalo."

Mary-Arrchie Theatre Co. Presents Their Final Production, "American Buffalo" Thursday through Sunday from January 28th through March 6th, 2016, at Angel Island Theatre, 735 West Sheridan in Chicago. For more information, including purchasing tickets, [click here](#). [20] Written by David Mamet. Directed by Carlo Lorenzo Garcia.



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [22]

Writer, Editorial Coordinator

HollywoodChicago.com

pat@hollywoodchicago.com [21]

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