

SORDELET ON BROADWAY

When a Broadway producer wants somebody slapped, kicked, stabbed, shot, or thrown overboard - they call Rick Sordelet.

by Robert Cabell

Rick Sordelet is one of the busiest guys on Broadway. He's the Fight Director for *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, *Titanic*, *Beauty & The Beast* and *The Lion King*. After a quick brush-up rehearsal backstage at the Minskoff Theatre for the swashbuckling finale in the hit musical *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, I sat down for a quiet Italian dinner with Rick Sordelet, his wife, actress Kathleen Kelly and three children, Kaelan, 11, Christian, 9, and Collin, 3. So kids, what do you think about your dad making a living as a stage fight director? Kaelan, the eldest of the clan said, "I think it's really, really, really cool. I don't know anybody else's dad who does anything like it. I don't know anybody else who gets to see so many Broadway shows and stuff like that as I do, so it's been really, really nice." Did your dad teach you how to fight fair with your brothers? "Yes he did." What's your favorite move as a fighter? "Headlock, cross-kick and knee sweep." "That's dirty fighting," her brother Christian shouts across the table. So Christian, what is your favorite thing in stage fighting? "Swords, daggers, my favorite sword is a rapier." "Christian was my assistant fight director on *I Hate Hamlet*," proud Papa Rick announced. "I'm starting to work early," his son beamed proudly. "I did this thing with the phone," the wide-eyed youth of nine explained, "I had this great idea that the ghost of Barrymore should slash through the phone cord when the other character was on the phone - so we loosened the connection so their wasn't too much tension on the cord so when they sliced through, it would just fall and not whip back and hurt somebody." Then Colin, the littlest Sordelet proclaimed, "I have lots of swords in my playroom!"

How has it been balancing a family life with three kids and two professionals in the theatre? "Kathleen has been very generous in her situation working with me on how we do this. She has the same degree I do, she's a brilliant actress, but we have a strong commitment to the kids and we work really hard to be there for them when they get home from school." We bought a five-bedroom Victorian House. It's a great big house, fenced in yard, swing set, dog, cat, beautiful city with a great school system." OK, what I want to know is how does a scholar, actor, writer, director and college professor make so much money from fighting? "By using all of those things that you described. My training started as an actor. I have an MFA from William Espers school at Rutgers University, and I think it was my ability to approach the work from an actors' viewpoint using the skills of an actor/writer/director to stage it in a way that is character motivated. I don't pre-arrange the fights. I did that in the beginning till I learned I could service the directors vision better by listening to the actors and shaping that." How often does it happen that you work with a director that wants you to do some-

thing that really isn't safe? How do you tell them 'this is really not a good idea'? "Most of the directors I've worked with have been really great about understanding the safety element. They will understand from a common sense point of view that you might be able to pull something risky off once or twice, but not eight times a week. The odds catch up, something happens and you're in trouble."

As a family man, what are the advantages to earning a living as a stage fight director in the theatre industry? "Making a living as a fight director helped me to teach our kids not to fight. To show them, if they want to solve their problems they need to talk it out. During the Gulf War, I began to question what I was doing for a living, if I was promoting violence in a violent society. But in *Beauty and the Beast*, Gaston didn't profit from his violence. The Beast was not willingly violent. He was pushed into it and yet in the moment of violence he chooses to be human. To be in on that show from the beginning was a fascinating experience. Rob Roth is a director who truly earned his wings. That is when Katzenberg and Eisner were still together. When they did come to rehearsals, their notes were very succinct and to the point, but that show was, and is, Rob Roth's show. I've been part of *Pimpernel* since the beginning too. In *Scarlet Pimpernel* we're dealing with courage and self-sacrifice with a big, heroic, romantic sword fight at the end. We're doing well at the box office. The people know what they want to see and they open up their checkbooks for this one. *Lion King* was a situation where I came into the show in New York, after they had already done a production in Minneapolis, and basically did a lot of clean-up. In *Titanic* the thing I'm proudest of is the spirit of safety I instilled in the company. Everybody knows we had a lot of problems during previews, technical glitches, a lot of growing pains. Producer Michael David stood there with all the Dodgers behind him and said, 'Stick with us. We are aware of where the problems are, we're working on it, stay with us, and we will get through this together.' Five Tonys later, there we are." Aside from theatre, you've done a lot of other things, the Super Bowl half-time show, action sequences for the Star Wars CD-Rom games for George Lucas, Disney Cruise ships— "Disney's Broadway at Sea. They've

assembled a wonderful crew to create these hour long shows. They've written a barge and chariot version of *Hercules* that is hysterical. They have another show called *The Voyage of the Ghost Ship*. Not only are we sword fighting as pirates but as ghost pirates, so we're flying all over the set and it's really exciting. Tell me about the CD-Rom you did for George Lucas. "I did one of the new *Star Wars* out in LA called 'First Jedi'; it's the second CD-Rom in a series. All state-of-the-art equipment against the blue-screen doing the light saber battles using a lot of the equipment from the original film. The light sabers turned out to be phosphorescent

assembled a wonderful crew to create these hour long shows. They've written a barge and chariot version of *Hercules* that is hysterical. They have another show called *The Voyage of the Ghost Ship*. Not only are we sword fighting as pirates but as ghost pirates, so we're flying all over the set and it's really exciting. Tell me about the CD-Rom you did for George Lucas. "I did one of the new *Star Wars* out in LA called 'First Jedi'; it's the second CD-Rom in a series. All state-of-the-art equipment against the blue-screen doing the light saber battles using a lot of the equipment from the original film. The light sabers turned out to be phosphorescent

painted broomsticks so the computer guys could track the weapons. So in the studio you're having this great battle but all you can hear is this wooden sounding whack, whack! It's during post-production they add all the great sounds."

When you did the Super Bowl half-time entertainment show, that was a big break. What was it like doing such a big show in such a short amount of time with all those people in the middle of all that mayhem? "This was the *Indiana Jones* Super Bowl back in '95 when San Diego played San Francisco. It was an amazing experience to have over 3 billion people see your work live. We had 12 minutes to do the show and the best part of it was the planning. We had over 800 people assembling the show in only four minutes. We had another 700 extras dancing on the field with Patti LaBelle, Tony Bennett and Tito Puente while the Miami Sound Machine was singing. Of course the number one objective was in promoting this new *Indiana Jones* ride in Disneyland. So the director, Jay Smith, got us all together in June and we worked solidly for six months to plan how we could put this 12 minute show together. A lot of folks get a kick out of knocking Disney, but there is not another company on this planet that could have pulled that off. Nobody does entertainment better than they do."

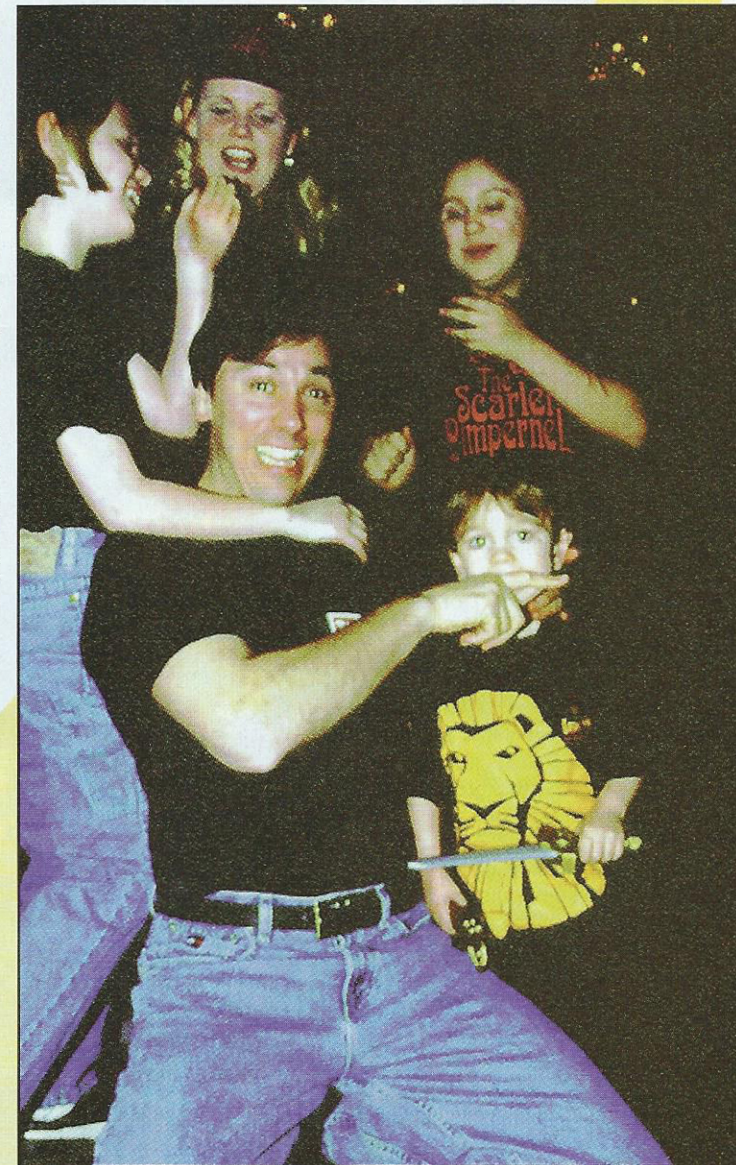
Aside from all the stage fights, you've done a lot of writing. You've had a few stagings and productions of one of your shows that was very successful. "George Street Playhouse produced my *Buried Treasure* and it got great reviews and was a tremendous success. Jim Vagias at American Stage Company had done a series of readings to develop the piece and it had also had a reading of *Naked Angeles* here in New York. The play is about the courage of the human spirit in the face of death. On a personal level I had watched two very close friends of mine go through AIDS-related deaths and an eleven year-old boy named Nathan Chapman died of cancer, and they all died approximately at the same time. Part of the grieving process came through writing *Buried Treasure*. I still get people who call me or the director Joe Mancuso to talk about the play who say 'That play really changed my life' or 'I called my brother who I haven't spoke to in 10 years because we had a falling out and that play made me realize how time is very short'. It was a great feeling as a playwright, that something I wrote and collaborated on with a great director and two terrific actors Bill Doyle and Chris Mixon could move people."

What are you working on now? "I'm in rehearsals for *Wait Until Dark* with Quentin Tarantino, Marisa Tomei and

Stephen Lang, two Oscar winners and a Tony nominee, really strong actors. I'm amazed that people keep asking me 'Quentin Tarantino? Can he really act?' - and of course he can. He acts beautifully. This is a great role for him and he brings a lot to the table. And Leonard Foglia is a really strong director.

Besides all these Broadway shows and musicals, you also do a lot of Shakespeare, too? "Yes, right now I'm doing *Richard II* with the Pearl Theatre. It's one of my favorite theatre companies to work with. It's this little jewel of classic theatre that just has such heart. Shep Sobal, the Artistic Director has a tremendous eye for the classics. I really love working there, it's a vacation. I've done 27 productions of *Romeo & Juliet* alone.

Since you're immersed in so much theatre, can you give me your favorite Shakespeare quote? Kaelan: "To be or not to be," the inner conflict in it. The person versus himself. When I first saw it, I was only five and then it was the only part of the play I got." Christian: "The same one. It has a lot into it and I liked the way it is said." Kathleen: "All the world's a stage and we are but players." And finally, Rick: "Well I'm very fond of the quote from *Henry VI*, 'The first thing we do is kill all the lawyers'. I just got back from doing a production of that in Washington; every night they said that line the audience when nuts! But actually my favorite Shakespeare quote is, 'She doth hang upon the night like a jewel from an



When Rick isn't fighting at work, he's playing at home with his family (clockwise from left) Christian, 11, wife Kathleen Kelly, Kaelan, 11, and Collin, 3.

Ethiopes ear.' It's from *Romeo and Juliet* when Romeo first sees her, it's the moment we've experienced. To look at somebody across a room and have your heart seize up in your throat. That's what happened to me the first time I saw my wife. I knew I was going to marry her. It just took me a year to get a date. And she did 'hang upon the night like a jewel from an Ethiopes ear'. I'm the luckiest guy in the world. I feel so fortunate to be a part of the Broadway community. Technically you have more shows on Broadway than any other director. "I try to keep my feet firmly on the ground and you know what, I don't believe my own press. If anything keeps me grounded it's my family. After all the work and shows and events, when I get home, I have to change a diaper, empty the garbage and take the dog for a walk."