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Performing, on stage



Graphic by Paul Ollswang

Samurai drama by the sword

Fight director Chris Villa hones 'Rashomon'

"Rashomon," a Samurai play of lust, truth, and the sword, opened at the Hult Center's Soren Theatre last night. It plays through the weekend, and again, November 16-19 at 8:30 p.m.

Much of the play's vitality owes itself to the drama which builds through precise, intense sword-fighting scenes that recall the rape of a Samurai woman and the subsequent murder of her husband from four divergent viewpoints of the main characters.

The man behind much of this precision is choreographer Christopher Villa. Villa, who presently makes his home in Ashland, has had much experience in choreographing combat sequences, having to his credit several seasons with the Shakespearean Festival in Ashland and experience working with some of the premier fight directors in the world. His role in "Rashomon" has been one of combining martial arts with combat techniques, principally the arts of parry and attack, and footwork.

Villa notes that "the play is not often done, being difficult technically because the actors have rather heavy fights, and demands are placed upon them requiring discipline and training." The actors learned to be Samurai, which, according to Villa, involves "very graceful and controlled movement." It also involves certain safety factors, most notably avoiding eye-contact and fencing out of hitting distance. Thus,

says Villa, "moment by moment they (the actors) must know exactly what's happening." To accomplish this, Villa's rehearsals have been, by his own admission, "exhausting."

Assisting Villa has been Dana Fredsti, a karate student whom Villa met by chance at a Renaissance Fair in 1980. Fredsti, a Brown Belt in the discipline, has gone through rigorous training sequences with the actors in preparation for the combat scenes. Villa said these rehearsals have been responsible for promoting camaraderie between the actors, a factor he believes is important to his work. He sees the importance of "everyone supporting everyone else to be the best they can be."

Throughout the consuming rehearsal schedule, Villa viewed himself as a teacher, digressing into many areas. Through his efforts, Japanese history, philosophy, and self-therapy (that is, keeping emotions under control) have been taught. His primary job, he said, is to "evoke emotions in the audience." The actors are his "tools" in this process.

With all Villa's intense direction and the actors' arduous fine-tuning, the audience should be able to enjoy the results of the weeks of discipline, concentration, and mutual support.

Jill Homan

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