

Hed's Up!

Bay Street Theatre is back with *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*

By Anna Chandler

THERE'S A new Hedwig in town.

Actor, writer, and casting director Chad Darnell is ready to seize the stage and bring all the glory of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* to life at Club One.

Savannah's own Christopher Blair sizzled in the role for several local productions over the years. Starring as the iconic genderqueer glam rocker has been a dream of Darnell's, and he is excited to follow in Blair's high-heeled footsteps.

"I'm thrilled that Travis [Coles of Club One and The Bay Street Theatre] agreed to produce the show again," Darnell says.

"That role is synonymous with Chris Blair! So before I asked Travis, I went to Chris and asked for his blessing. He was very sweet and said, 'Hedwig is for everybody.' But I was very nervous! When you fill a role in a town...there's an ownership there. I was really thrilled that he was very sweet about it, I'm such a big fan of him."



Photo by Adriana Iris Boatwright
Chad Darnell

Since it debuted in 1998 as an Off-Broadway musical, John Cameron Mitchell's *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* has been inspiring individuals and shaping pop culture forever. Hedwig has lived through a botched sex change (the "angry inch" itself), a move from East Berlin to America, and heartbreak at the hands of Tommy (Cecilia Tran Arango returns to the role).

Now, Hedwig's channeling it all into fronting a rock 'n' roll band, The Angry Inch, and touring in search of love and beyond.

The show transformed rock opera as an art form, and the film version (adapted, directed by, and starring Mitchell) is a cult classic. Darnell first experienced *Hedwig* in its 2001 film iteration while living in L.A. A devoted Mitchell fan already, he was captivated by the film and longed to see the production on Broadway.

"The tour and the movie are completely different monsters," he notes. "It's literally a one-man performance in the show, and the movie has a lot more time and space."

Darnell finally caught the touring production in Atlanta and left the show full of inspiration and motivation.

A Club One regular since the downtown destination's very early days, Darnell knew he wanted to become Hedwig on that stage and that stage alone.

"I've been going to Club One since the early '90s," Darnell recounts.

"When we were doing *The Gingerbread Man* in town, the Robert Altman film, Cale, who was managing the Club at the time, brought me in to talk Lady Chablis into auditioning for *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. I had to go in and convince her! Here we are, 20 years later, and it's

exciting to be performing on the stage Chablis performed on. Club One is such a place of community here in Savannah. When hurricanes are happening, they're open for people during a Category Five!"

Darnell's Hedwig honors the character's creator and original star, John Cameron Mitchell, while also nodding to the raw spirit of Courtney Love, the punk stylization of Green Day's Billie Joe Armstrong, and stars Uma Thurman and Heidi Klum.

"I saw Uma Thurman in *The Parisian Woman*, and there's something about watching her in interviews, the way she talks and laughs in her eyes and her breathiness," he says. "She's got this weird, American stylized accent."

But to become Hedwig requires more than acting chops—Darnell's been relentlessly exercising and building endurance to showcase the rock star's indefatigable spirit and capture those iconic performances.

"So, I'm 45 years old, I'm not young, and when this started seven months ago, I was 185 pounds," he says. "The first thing I knew I had to do was get physically in shape for this. By the end of the show, I'm nearly naked. I've been living in Fitness on Broughton, barre classes, yoga classes. It's not just the aesthetic of losing 25 pounds—it's the stamina, and literally the flexibility."

It's a rigorous process, but Darnell was ready for a challenge, and Hedwig is inarguably the biggest challenge he's ever taken on as an actor.

Even *Hedwig's* creator took a long break from acting after starring in the leading role.

"John Cameron Mitchell quit acting for years after doing Hedwig because it was so exhausting," Darnell says.

“It’s the hardest role I’ve ever done. There’s no fourth wall, everything lives and breathes within the audience, and it’s a different show every night. No two shows will be the same, and I just wanted to do it for that reason. I’m not getting any younger, and it’s an incredible role.”



Photo by Adriana Iris Boatwright

Cecilia Tran Arango

The Bay Street Theatre’s production is directed by Valerie America Lavelle with musical direction by Robert Cottle. There are only two actors in the entire performance: Darnell and Arango.

Darnell says it’s been an honor to star opposite Arango’s Tommy.

“I’m a huge fan of her,” he gushes. “We’re doing the more traditional version. It’s just the two of us and the band onstage.”

As it ages, the show only seems to grow in popularity, and there’s still something inherently revolutionary in its message and music.

“[Mitchell] wrote this in ’97, ’98, and the message about sexual identity is even stronger now,” Darnell says.

“It wasn’t something we were really talking about then. As Mitchell says, Hedwig identifies as genderqueer because the operation was against his will and he doesn’t identify as a man or woman. That’s really interesting to explore, because we don’t have that many conversations about the genderqueer community.

“I hear trans people talk about the show, and there are a number of people I’ve talk to who don’t like it because of the way it portrays trans people. I get why they’d say that, but realize, it’s a character who’s genderqueer...there’s a lot going on in this.”

Whether you can sing every number from the production in your sleep or if you’ve never even heard of Hedwig, Darnell insists the production will speak to folks from all walks of life.

“No matter where you are in your life, there’s a message for you in this show,” he says.

“Whether you’re letting go of a relationship, loving yourself, healing a relationship with someone you might have hurt, dealing with your parents, dealing with your past...there’s something in there for everyone.”

He also hopes that his stepping into a dream role will inspire audience members to take a risk and become their own heroes. It’s a mentality that’s straight out of Hedwig’s ideology.

“If you’re not getting opportunities as an actor, you need to make it work for yourself,” he says.

“That’s why I did Hedwig: Nobody was going to cast me, so I went out and made it work for myself. It’s excruciating pressure, but I’m really, really excited.”



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