

MOVIES

The photography of *Chad Vader Episode 6* *From Mayor Dave to Didgu.com, the series pushes forward*

Kristian Knutsen on Friday 02/16/2007 03:02:17.

A highlight of the brand new episode of the [Chad Vader](#) saga -- released this evening on Friday, Feb. 16 -- is the appearance of Madison mayor Dave Cieslewicz. "His office contacted us in the fall and told us he was a big fan," says series producer Courtney Collins. "They were wondering if there would be a spot for him in the next episode."

In fact, there was a spot for Mayor Dave, though hizzoner wasn't able to make it to a shoot until recently. "The shoots for episodes four and five didn't work with his schedule, but six ended up working out," says Collins. "He has a speaking role," she continues, "and serves as one among a series of new bosses for Chad in the episode."

"This past month, I got the chance to be involved in the latest episode of an Internet video sensation," says Cieslewicz in a press release sent out by Blame Society in anticipation of this latest chapter. Indeed, it is a savvy move on the part of high-tech job-touting mayor as he runs for reelection.

"This episode was the best one yet," Cieslewicz continues, "and I am sure that the popularity of this program will continue to skyrocket."

The fame of *Chad Vader* certainly is blasting into space, with growing international media attention for the series and an increasing number of open doors for its creators, Matt Sloan and Aaron Yonda of [Blame Society Productions](#). Since releasing the opening chapter of in July 2006, their saga about Darth Vader's hapless sibling has become a symbol for the rise of online video. In fact, Sloan estimated at the end of January that all five episodes have been viewed online about 9.5 million times, give or take. Throw in the myriad copies of the series scattered throughout the ether, and the growing attention over the last couple of weeks, and that tally has easily passed the 10 million mark. Impressive, most impressive.

This cameo appearance by Mayor Cieslewicz at his office is only one among many new elements in this new release, with everything from a telemarketing office to a [cab](#) in Chad's employment mix. "There are also a lot of new faces in this episode," says Collins.

In fact, there are more locations in it than any previous episode, she explains, a sign of the growing scope of the production as Sloan, Yonda, and their collaborator [Tona Williams](#) set about their filmmaking work on a full-time basis.

Creating the look of the series

Making sure everything looked right at the numerous locations was a primary task for Williams, who works as the director of photography and art director for the *Chad Vader* series. A freelance filmmaker and web designer, she has many years of experience as a visual artist, working with everything from printing to painting to sculpture, along with a background in preparing costumes and props for the stage. It was at a Strollers Theatre production where she met Matt Sloan in 2000; they were married in 2004.

Williams, 35, has been making films for years, with her work through Bigbite Productions focusing on documentaries that investigate environmental sustainability and community building. She also helped launch the Wis-Kino short filmmaking group in 2002 (and co-organized it through last year), and has been working with Sloan and Yonda at Blame Society Productions over the same period.

Working with Williams, Sloan and Yonda and the rest of the crew is [John Urban](#), the assistant director and lighting director for *Chad Vader*. A commercial still photographer for 22 years, he started shooting commercial digital video a few years ago, and recently had a short film script of his shot in Los Angeles. He is also the host of [The Urban Theater](#), a Madison music performance and interview program that airs on MyMadison TV 14 and WISC.

"I talked with Matt and Aaron at a Wis-Kino gathering, and told them if they ever wanted help on anything, I would love to work with them," says the 41-year-old photographer. "They mentioned they had a thing called *Chad Vader* coming up and they might need some help on that. The rest is history."

Through their work as the director of photography and assistant director, Williams and Urban are responsible for helping guide the look of the series. An interview with each about the photography of *Vader* follows below, along with a high-quality video of Episode 6.

The Daily Page: What does a typical shoot entail for you?

Williams: There's preparation for the shoot, and then the shoot itself. In preparation, I coordinate with Courtney Collins to make sure we have all the crew we need lined up.

I also work with Aaron, Matt, and Courtney to assemble props. Before the first shoot in the *Chad Vader* series, I created the Empire Market logo and made special nametags, aprons, and grocery bags. The aprons were done *The Sound of Music*-style; since I couldn't find just the right type of green grocery store aprons on short notice, I ended up buying thrift store curtains and sewing them myself. So you could say our productions really have that down-home personal touch!

In terms of camera work, I just need to make sure I know generally what the shots will entail beforehand so I can plan for any special

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equipment. For *Chad Vader*, sometimes I have the full script in advance of the shoot and sometimes I don't -- but I at least talk through it with Matt or Aaron.

The shoot itself depends on location.

When we're somewhere with easy access and a large variety of shots, like the Willy Street Co-op or the radio station (where some of episode six was filmed), I'll bring all our standard camera and sound equipment, and assistant director John Urban will bring a full set of lights. For me, that includes one main camera, a backup camera, two shotgun microphones, backup mics, boom pole, supports, and a few bags of various other pieces of equipment.

For something more on-the-fly, like a recent taxi cab scene that we shot outdoors in the snow, we had only one camera and a microphone with a pistol grip zeppelin windscreen. (I like to call it "old fuzzy" because it looks like a small animal). Since space was so limited on that shoot -- it was well below freezing and we couldn't have anyone outside for long -- we could only bring the four people who would fit in the cab. This ended up being me, Matt (who was directing) and Aaron and Brad Knight (who were on camera). We were lucky that it was overcast that day, so we could get away with not doing anything special for lighting.

Once we're on the set and before we begin shooting, John and I will walk through all the shots with Matt and Aaron. For *Chad Vader*, they usually have a very clear idea already about what they want to see, so first I'll have them show me, and then I'll make suggestions if I have anything to add. Then Doug Chapin and the rest of our crew will work with John to set up the lights and monitor, and I'll get suited up in my camera belt and support.

I often use a monopod stabilizer so that I can go handheld for long periods of time. My favorite style of shooting is handheld, because it makes it easier to bring subtle movement into each shot. This probably has something to do with my documentary filmmaking experience, where I'm often in the field by myself or with one other person, shooting everything just as it happens. With documentaries, I enjoy following the action intuitively, just trusting that I'll be able to stay with the subject and that the final shot will look good.

We usually prefer to do single-camera shoots, repeating each scene from several angles until we have good coverage. Aaron, Matt, and John are able to see what each take looks like in the monitor, so we keep doing it until we all think we got what we needed. Our sound person (usually Kathy Fischer) will tell us if we got clean sound too, which is absolutely crucial. When shooting on location (as we usually do) that can be one of the trickiest things, because it can be hard to control outside noise. We're lucky to have such a great crew to work with regularly!

Urban: I'm the guy with the van and all the lighting gear! Doug Chapin, second assistant director and myself unload the gear and set everything up. Then we meet with Matt Sloan to discuss what happens in the first scene and in what order we'll shoot the shots. Next step is to talk with our director of photography, Tona Williams, to coordinate where she'll be shooting from and make sure all of our gear is out of the shot.

During rehearsal, Doug and I will tweak the lights and check the monitor to see if our lighting is "good to go". Once we start shooting, I "change hats" and become the assistant director. My job while we are actually shooting is to watch the monitor with Matt and Aaron. I do watch the actors, but I'm mostly looking at the shot itself to see if there is anything wrong, or anything in the shot that shouldn't be there.

From time to time, I will suggest ideas to Matt or Aaron and sometimes they'll say great and add it to the scene and sometimes they'll just stare at me and wonder what's wrong!

Which episode was the most difficult to shoot so far?

Urban: Actually, the episodes aren't that difficult to shoot and that is because Matt, Aaron, Courtney and Tona are so well organized. They really do their homework and have all the pieces in place before we get to the shoot.

That being said, there was the day recently when Tona was gone and I ran camera for the dumpster scene in Episode 6. We were outside, and it was below zero, and I couldn't feel my fingers. That was a little difficult!

Williams: I suppose *Chad Vader* Episode 6 was the most difficult to shoot so far, and that's because we had more locations for this one than any of the others. A couple of them were outdoors, and it was very cold. I wouldn't actually say that *Chad Vader* is a difficult show to create, though, as far as filmmaking goes. Each episode has its own creative challenges (such as working with a dog, working in the snow, standing on ice while filming, making apples/snow globes/flowers move with transparent string, getting the light just right on Chad's helmet and so on), but in the end it has always come together remarkably smoothly.

As my list suggests, the trickiest things are probably special effects, harsh weather conditions, and working with animals. In Episode 4, we got to work with Skyler from Blue Dog Training. He was an absolutely sweet and well-trained dog, but the poor little guy got scared by Chad Vader's costume, so it made it hard to do very many takes of some of his shots with Chad, because sometimes he would start running the other way before the camera even started to roll!

What are the easiest and the most difficult elements of photographing this series?

Williams: This series isn't any more difficult than average to photograph. It's most challenging to get good footage when we can only do one or two takes, though, or when we can do multiple takes with many elements that need to be timed perfectly for it to work.

Some prime examples are shots where Chad is using the Force: the apple in the title sequence of Episode 1, the flowers in Episode 1, the snow globe in Episode 5. The crew did a great job making those work, and very patiently repeated the effect over and over for multiple takes.

The chase scene with Skyler was fun – but challenging – because it was just he and I, with me running after him all around the store with the camera. Since I had to run as fast as I could to keep up with him, I couldn't see what my shot looked like at all. It was pure faith. And Skyler got more and more spooked by the camera as I kept running after him, so that only made him run faster!

Camera work keeps a person in good shape. I recommend it. I also recommend yoga for staying in shape for camera work – the ability to control your breath and stand absolutely still is key.

Urban: The most difficult part of shooting the series for me is, not always having the time to light the shot as well as I'd like to. The folks at the Willy Street Co-op have been amazing in giving us access to the store, but we can't stay there *all* night when we're shooting. So, sometimes I'd like to spend another 20 minutes lighting the scene, but we have to get going to finish before the sun comes up. It's the same deal at Café Montmartre. They were kind enough to let us shoot there, but they open at 3:30, and of course we needed to be out by then. I could tweak light for a scene for an hour, but we don't always have the time.

How does your work influence the final look of the episode?

Williams: I see my primary role as supporting Aaron and Matt by helping their vision for each episode come through as clearly as possible. I'm able to help by paying attention to visual details that might be difficult for a director to keep track of when working with the minutiae of the script, acting, overall storyline and myriad of other production elements.

Urban: Well, with what I said before about time constraints, I still think that Doug and I do a decent job of lighting the episodes. Combined with Tona's excellent camera work, I'm very proud of the look of the series. It's nice to see so many comments about the series on YouTube that discuss how the production levels are high and that *Chad Vader* "looks" very professional. Not bad for our limited time schedule and a next to nothing budget.

How is this experience helping you with your other photography and filmmaking work?

Urban: The best part of all of this is getting to know the Blame Society crew. All great people, all very talented and it looks like we will be working on more projects together in the future.

Williams: I'm making tons of connections with folks who have been participating in the production as cast and crew, as well as people who have seen our work and want to collaborate with us based on that. It's great fun! Also, John Urban and I have begun to work together on other projects since joining forces on *Chad Vader* – we're all a fantastic team.

Are you planning on trying anything new in upcoming episodes?

Urban: Nothing planned on my end. I show up with the lights and point them in the right direction. Hopefully.

Williams: We have nothing in particular planned, but we'll take the script and have as much fun with it as possible!

It's much easier to see the work put into the series by Williams, Urban and the rest of the crew now that they're working with Didgu.com, a less-than-two-months-old online video company based in Madison. Originally conceptualized about a year ago, the company's goal is to provide a high-quality online viewing experience; the site displays clips in crisp Quicktime and provides files ready for display as handheld video and in time, for screening on a TV.

Watch for yourself.

With the global premiere of this sixth episode of the saga wrapped-up, the team at Blame Society Productions remains extremely busy. Sloan and Yonda will be appearing on VH1's [40 Greatest Internet Superstars](#), which debuts on Friday, Apr. 6. The show will feature clips from *Vader*, along with Sloan and Yonda discussing their brethren Internet notables; their comments were shot at the beginning of January. Then there's a brand new Blame Society series -- *Morning Radio Mysteries* -- which they plan on submitting to the [month-old](#) "Department of Acceptable Media" at VH1. And, of course, production of *Chad Vader* Episode 7 is set to begin shortly.

"Things are looking really promising," wrote Sloan while making Episode 6. "It's a good time to be young and unemployed and ready to shake up the world."

