

Names

Hitting it big

Boston's Alessandro Nivola takes center stage in 'The Art of Self-Defense' and the 'Sopranos' prequel movie

Alessandro Nivola's about to break big, but the Boston-born actor's no overnight success.

Instead, his buzzy upcoming roles — as a screw-loose sensei in the dark comedy "The Art of Self-Defense" (now in theaters) and a mobster in **David Chase's** anticipated "Sopranos" prequel movie (out next year) — arrive after more than two decades spent toiling in Hollywood.

Across his career, the 47-year-old has played a paleontologist ("Jurassic Park III"), a pedophilic New York governor ("You Were Never Really Here"), real-life civil rights attorney John Doar ("Selma"), and just about every other kind of colorful character you can imagine in between.

"I've always wanted to convince people I was someone else than myself," said Nivola by phone. "The more different one role was from the one I'd just finished, the more attractive it was to me."

So when "The Art of Self-Defense" writer-director **Riley Stearns** needed someone to fill the role of a messianic karate master capable of boring through someone's skull with his index finger, Nivola never exactly questioned whether he was up to the task.

"I've played comically nefarious characters in the past, but this was maybe the first time I've had a leading role in a movie that was an out-and-

out comedy," he said. "That alone was a thrill."

Cast by Stearns just a few days before shooting was set to begin back in 2017, Nivola found himself diving directly into the larger-than-life character, who's known simply as Sensei.

"I dropped my bag in my hotel room and literally 30 seconds later there was a knock at the door," he recalled. "There was our stunt coordinator, **Mindy [Kelly]**, who pushed her way in and told me to kick my legs up in the air."

The challenges of the role were mental as well as physical, especially in scenes Nivola shared with **Jesse Eisenberg**, who stars as a neurotic accountant who joins Sensei's dojo after being attacked by a motorcycle gang.

"Sensei's always monologuing and speechifying, and there's an insane amount of dialogue to learn that has to be word-perfect," explained Nivola. "You want to be many things at once as an actor, as much as possible. That's what makes characters interesting."

The actor spoke to the Globe a week after wrapping another project: "The Many Saints of Newark," a feature-length prequel to **David Chase's** acclaimed HBO crime saga "The Sopranos." Chase returned to co-write the movie with **Lawrence Konner**.

The film's three-month shoot took

place six months after Nivola first learned he'd been cast as Dickie Moltisanti, a charismatic made man who falls in love with his father's younger bride, an Italian immigrant, against the backdrop of the 1960s Newark riots. Moltisanti, meanwhile, is tasked with mentoring a young Tony Soprano (**Michael Gandolfini**, son of the late James).

At the center of a massively anticipated movie for the first time in his career, Nivola cleared his schedule in order to fully get inside Dickie's head.

"It's really been the better part of a year that I've been monomaniacally obsessed with the world of that film

and the life of that character," he said.

Nivola doesn't think he would have landed the part were it not for his Italian heritage. "My name has been the biggest obstacle to my career that you could imagine," he explained. "But finally, my biggest role came about — in large part, I'm convinced — because of my name."

"It's just ironic, for me, because I've spent my whole life trying to explain my name, spell it, correct people's pronunciation, dispel confusion about where I'm from and whether I'm American," said the actor. "And finally, this great role came along where everyone associated with the project knew how to say it. It was a big relief."

Nivola's father was an Italian immigrant; he died a year and a half ago, right after Nivola came off filming another big project: "Disobedience," with **Rachel Weisz** and **Rachel McAdams**. It's "bittersweet" that Nivola's father won't get to see his "Sopranos" character, said the actor. "Out of all the roles I've done, that's the one he'd have the most to say about," he said. But Nivola thinks he did his old man proud by digging deep into his roots to play the part.

"I really got to draw on a lot of my father's experiences and my own personal history in ways I've never been able to before," he said. "I could finally embrace that part of my identity."

ISAAC FELDBERG



Alessandro Nivola stars as Sensei in "The Art of Self-Defense."

Ben Mezrich is making 'Billions' for Showtime

Ben Mezrich's making "Billions" these days — literally.

The Boston-born, Harvard-educated author has joined the writers' room of Showtime's hit drama series; he'll serve as a consulting producer on its upcoming fifth season.

Starting this week, Mezrich (inset) will travel between Boston and New York to consult on the series, a drama set in the cutthroat world of New York finance that stars **Paul Giamatti** and **Damian Lewis**. Mezrich will be working directly with showrunner — and Tufts graduate — **Brian Koppelman**; he'll also spend time on set once shooting starts.

"I'm psyched to be working with the smartest people in TV," said Mezrich in a statement to the Globe. "I've been a huge fan of [co-creators] Brian Koppelman and **David Levien** since 'Rounders,' I love 'Billions,' and I'm taking the Acela straight to Hollywood."



A prolific writer best known for his book "The Accidental Billionaires" (famously adapted into "The Social Network" by screenwriter **Aaron Sorkin**, who's of no relation to "Billions" co-creator **Andrew**

Ross Sorkin), Mezrich's made his name crafting nonfiction bestsellers about young people racing to make technological breakthroughs, sometimes cutting legal and ethical corners in the process. His latest, "Bitcoin Billionaires," was published in May and catches up with **Cameron** and **Tyler Winklevoss** after their damaging legal battle with Facebook founder **Mark Zuckerberg**, following their bid to make a fortune in cryptocurrency.

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HILARY SCOTT

'Brightness of Light' premieres at Tanglewood

It was an eventful Saturday evening at Tanglewood, as world-renowned soprano **Renee Fleming** and baritone **Rod Gilfry** joined forces with conductor **Andris Nelsons**, leading the Boston Symphony Orchestra, in the world premiere of "The Brightness of Light," composer **Kevin Puts's** musical setting of letters between artist **Georgia O'Keeffe** and her husband, photographer **Alfred Stieglitz**. The composition was co-commissioned by the BSO. Pictured (from left) are Fleming, Gilfry, Nelsons, Puts, and theatrical projection designer **Wendall K. Harrington**, whose projections of handwritten letters, photos by Stieglitz, and paintings by O'Keeffe appeared throughout the performance.

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'NOS4A2' renewed for season 2 at AMC

AMC is sinking its teeth into more "NOS4A2."

Adapted from **Joe Hill's** 2013 novel, the horror series has delivered strong ratings for the network since its June 2 premiere; news of its renewal, for a 10-episode second season, broke out of San Diego on Saturday, during the show's Comic-Con panel.

"NOS4A2," which shot its first season in Rhode Island, centers on Vic McQueen (**Ashleigh Cummings**) a teen from Haverhill who discovers she can traverse time and space in search of lost objects. This ability arouses the interest of Charlie Manx (**Zachary Quinto**), an immortal being who abducts children in

order to feed off their souls.

Hill, who grew up in Bangor, Maine, is known for setting stories around New England; he has this — along with a time-tested love of horror — in common with his famous father, author **Stephen King**.

"I am so excited for the opportunity to bring the rest of Joe Hill's amazing novel to television. Joe's imagination is unparalleled," said Billerica-bred showrunner **Jami O'Brien** in a statement. "I love the characters and the world, and our colleagues at AMC have been wonderful partners. I'm grateful to be playing in the 'NOS4A2' sandbox."

ISAAC FELDBERG

'Ugly Delicious' chef cooking up new Netflix series

Netflix is ordering up a new series from **David Chang**, acclaimed chef behind the Momofuku restaurant empire. Chang — who brought his fried chicken joint Fuku to Boston's Seaport District last fall — previously starred in "Ugly Delicious" for the streaming platform.

Chang's new series, "Breakfast, Lunch & Dinner," will feature the James Beard Award-winning chef and a celebrity guest exploring a new city in each episode, taking in as much of its cuisine and culture as possible over the course of three square meals. Between bites, they'll discuss life, cultural issues and their own relationships with food.

"There's something about traveling with someone that opens you up," said Chang in an official statement. "Being away from all the craziness of daily life, you spend long days together in an unfamiliar place with nothing to do but wander the street, share meals, and talk. That's what 'BLD' is all about — learning more about ourselves, our friends, and the people we encounter out in the world. Plus, of course, the ridiculously delicious meals we share."

As with "Ugly Delicious" (the second season of which he recently completed shooting), Chang will team with documentarian **Morgan Neville** on the new series, with both serving as executive-producers. It's expected to arrive on Netflix this fall. "Breakfast, Lunch & Dinner" isn't the chef's only upcoming TV venture; Chang also recently sold another food-centric docu-series, entitled "Family Style," to Hulu, for him to star in opposite **Chrissy Teigen**.

ISAAC FELDBERG

McDonough donates \$10m to Worcester Art Museum

By **Isaac Feldberg**
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

The Worcester Art Museum announced Sunday that it has received a \$10 million donation from the C. Jean & Myles McDonough Charitable Foundation — the largest gift of its kind in the museum's history.

The donation, intended to strengthen WAM's existing operations and endowments while fostering its future ambitions, comes less than four years after the Foundation's \$4 million endowment of the museum's directorship, consequently named for the McDonoughs. And for Jean McDonough, it marks the most sizable show of support yet for an in-

stitution she's championed throughout her life. "The Worcester Art Museum is a tremendous resource for culture and education for people throughout New England, and an institution greatly deserving all of our support," said Neil McDonough, Jean McDonough's son, in a statement.

"My mother hopes [her gift] will both support today's operational needs of the museum as well as help endow its future," he continued by phone. "And even more importantly, it may incite others to support WAM or other cultural institutions in our community."

After moving to Worcester in 1960, Jean and her late husband

Myles McDonough — founder of pressure-sensitive adhesives manufacturer FLEXcon — made their mark as devoted patrons of the city's educational and cultural organizations.

At the time, Worcester was built on manufacturing wealth; as the economy shifted, support for the arts dwindled, and the momentum of local museums threatened to stall. Jean's continued dedication to the Worcester Art Museum throughout those decades — first as a member and docent, then as a member of its Board of Trustees — is considered by Matthias Waschek, the museum's C. Jean and Myles McDonough Director, to have played a key role in ensuring

its survival. More recently, amid the much-heralded Worcester Renaissance, the Worcester Art Museum has re-emerged as a cultural center; Waschek referred to the McDonoughs as "pioneers in our renaissance" who've helped the museum move forward with its mission.

"Jean is a philanthropist extraordinaire," said Waschek. "She cares deeply about the Worcester Art Museum and what we can do for the city, but she also cares deeply for Worcester."

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NORM EGGERT PHOTOGRAPHY

Jean McDonough