

Firearm Safety: Crime Lab Ballistics Expert Weighs In On Rust Film Prop Mishap

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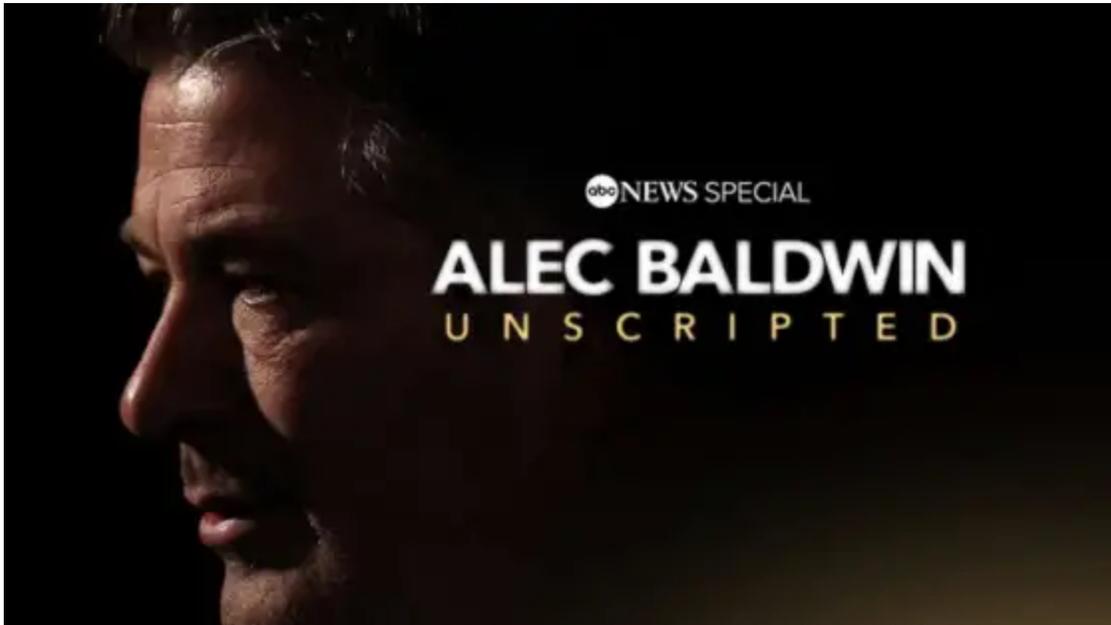
January 12, 2022



On October 21st, 2021, filming his latest movie, *Rust*, Alec Baldwin fired a prop gun containing live ammunition, unbeknownst to him, which ended Director of Photography Halyna Hutchins's life and injured Director Joel Souza. A Santa Fe Sheriff's Office spokesperson claimed a search warrant was issued, and the investigation is ongoing. On the day of the event, Baldwin published a statement expressing his grief and disbelief over the situation. Although fully cooperating with the police, on December 2nd, 2021, he revealed in an interview with ABC News' George Stephanopoulos, "Someone is responsible for what happened, and I can't say who that is, but I know it's not me." Considering how identical incidents have occurred in the past, like the passing of Bruce Lee's son, Brandon Lee, this devastating accident raises questions about firearm safety protocols within the entertainment industry and perhaps more suitable working conditions for members of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE). This blog post will address these issues with insight from Expert.com Member and Crime Lab Ballistics Expert, Mr. Francis T. "Jay" Jarvis.

The sequence of events leading up to the accidental death of Halyna Hutchins involved three people. According to Fox News, "Armorer Hannah Gutierrez Reed placed the prop gun outside of the church set location on a cart with other prop guns due to the coronavirus

restrictions. The next person to handle it was assistant Director Dave Halls, who handed it off to Baldwin, announcing that it was a “cold gun,” a term used to indicate to those on-set that the firearm was not loaded and therefore safe to handle.” The article also highlighted how Director Joel Souza was confused about the presence of ammunition on set in the first place. According to Mr. Jarvis, “An armorer or a movie production would be responsible to make sure no live ammunition is permitted on-set, only blanks. It should be very easy to tell the difference between the two types of ammunition.” Unfortunately, there were existing gun safety problems for the Rust crew even before the fatal tragedy.

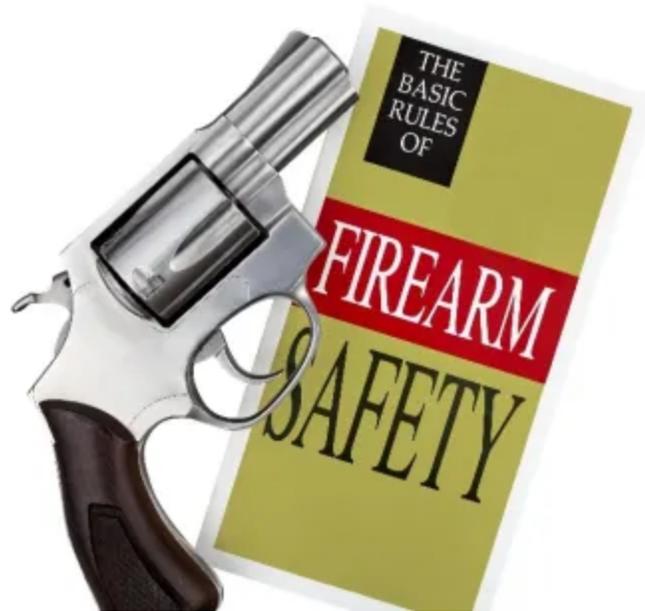


(Photo Credit: ABC News)

According to the [LA Times](#), safety regulations were not thoroughly enforced on set. Before the significant incident resulting in Hutchins’ death, Baldwin’s stunt-double fired two rounds by mistake after being notified the gun lacked bullets. A witness told the Times, “There should have been an investigation into what happened. There were no safety meetings. There was no assurance that it wouldn’t happen again. All they wanted to do was rush, rush, rush.” Before the tragic incident occurred, a cinematographer and various camera crew members protested against their working conditions by walking off the set. “The camera operators and their assistants were frustrated by the conditions surrounding the low-budget film, including complaints about long hours, long commutes, and waiting for their paychecks....,” a statement from the Times. Rust Movie Productions reassured the public that safety is the utmost priority. Although they were unaware of formal complaints, internal investigations with the Santa Fe [Police Department](#) have already begun, according to upper management.

On December 16th, 2021, Detective Alexandria Hancock obtained a warrant to search Baldwin’s cellphone. Three weeks have passed, and Baldwin has yet to comply, inconsistent with his original promise to cooperate with Santa Fe Police. According to [New York Times](#), he

filmed a video of himself and posted it on Instagram on January 8th, 2022, stating, “Someone from another state can’t come to you and say, ‘Give me your phone. They can’t just go through your phone and take, you know, your photos or your love letters to your wife or what have you.’” His legal team speculates two reasons for Baldwin’s lack of cooperation. He may be worried about possible incriminating evidence, or he wants his conversations to stay private ([New York Post](#)). The Santa Fe Police Department is now working with the Suffolk County Sheriff’s Office in New York to retrieve Baldwin’s cellphone from his residence.



Mr. Jarvis explains the root of this preventable tragedy stems from inadequate safety measures for crew members and cast. He adds, “It sounds like a training issue, not a budget issue. There is no cost involved in following the number one safety rule as it applies to firearms. No live ammunition on the set. Teach people the difference between live ammunition and blanks. Teach people how to check a firearm to see if it is loaded.” As the investigation continues, only time will tell who is responsible for this tragedy. What is certain is the production company must ensure suitable working conditions for all cast and crew members, including the armorer, whose job is to manage all gun props diligently. However, the number one safety rule Jarvis references, the measure that would have prevented protests, injuries, and the loss of an innocent person’s life, is to “NEVER point a gun at anyone unless you intend to shoot them. Even if the gun is safe, you should NEVER do this.”