**Oxygen** mixes elements of art, science

Barbara Wolff

The issues of this afternoon will be the science of the UW-Madison production of "Oxygen." Brian Nehls, University Theatre’s stage manager and a master of fine art and science, will be in charge of the day’s endeavor. He confides to Carl Djerassi, one of the playwrights. Together, they will formulate a master plan to see how to best represent the work on stage.

Djerassi made his name as a chemist and inventor of the oral contraceptive. However, he has donated the last 15 years to literature. With Nobel laureate Rudolf Hoffmann, Djerassi has written this second installment of an intended trilogy developed from his science-in-fiction genre. "Oxygen," his second play, is based on research from 19 years ago, "Oxygen" has been produced around the world, and Djerassi is in Madison for a few days to lend his insight to "Oxygen" rehearsals here.

The drama takes place in the 18th and 21st centuries. The historical leg of this journey follows the original scientists—Joseph Priestley, Antoine Lavoisier and Carl Wilhelm Scheele—into Stockholm. Their goal is to discover which of the atoms actually disovered oxygen. The scientific deliberations linger for more than 200 years, as a present-day Nobel panel also convened to award a "Nobel" prize to one of the scientists.

Right now, however, the attention of all the University Theatre productions will be upon using any projected images. "We'll, will you have issues, then?" he inquires, referring to a specific scientific phenomenon.

At the mention of sunlight, the talk meanders into containing. "We’re discovered, through research we did on 18th century paintings (for the Dihtomés Museum of Art) that Turkish soaps were very popular under the sun. We thought we'd use those—you see them when we go to the commons store," says Selvaraj.

While Selvaraj and Djerassi discuss the costumes, Proboll deftly checks costume details from a podium to make sure for a cardboard model of the set. The action will range over several levels, with a laboratory table front and center.

"We have installed doors so that actors from one period will be able to vanish out of the action," he explains. "That will increase the fluid movement between the two different eras."

Djerassi etudes the model for the quite awhile. "This is a very, very ambitious set," he says at last. Proboll is clearly pleased. Such a rare opportunity for students to collaborate with a renowned playwright becomes a study not only in theater theory and practice, but also in communication, in the lead organization and articulation of ideas, in the description of intent, and in the logic and conviction of a persuasive argument. From the most casual observer can write a synopsis of expectations and the unfolding of new intellectual dimensions as the discussion goes on.

Proboll sums up his experience: "With every production I learn something new. It’s one of the best experiences."

"In this case, I’ll never look at science the same way again."

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**Oxygen tickets, symposium, displays**

Tickets

"Oxygen" by Carl Djerassi and Rudolf Hoffmann will be performed at 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, March 28-29, and 2:30 and 7:30 at Mitchell Theatre, Vilas Hall, 2100 Linden Ave., Madison. Tickets are $10. For tickets, call 262-4488 or go on-line from the Wisconsin Memorial Union Web site, www.msu.wisc.edu. Tickets are $10. For tickets, call 262-4488 or go on-line from the Wisconsin Memorial Union Web site, www.msu.wisc.edu.

Symposium

The University Theatre production of "Oxygen" will be accompanied by a free public symposium on Saturday, March 28, meeting with the science and applications of the oxygen discovery, and the cultural climate in which it took place. For speakers, subjects and highlights, see http://www.front.org.