Oxygen Now on DVD

Oxygen seems an unlikely subject for a play, but in the able hands of two award-winning chemists-turned-playwrights, it became a theatrical success. Oxygen was performed in New York and in other cities as well as at the University Theatre at UW-Madison last year, and is now available on DVD.

The play was written by Carl Djerassi, a chemistry professor at Stanford who first synthesized the birth control pill, and Roald Hoffmann, a chemistry professor at Cornell and recipient of the 1981 Nobel Prize. The plot revolves around an ingenious proposition: What if a 21st-century Nobel committee decided to award a "retro" Nobel Prize to the 18th-century scientist who discovered oxygen? A simple question on the surface, but one fraught with controversy.

The three candidates proposed by members of the committee—Antoine Lavoisier, Joseph Priestley, and Karl Wilhelm Scheele—each contributed to the understanding of oxygen and its properties. Therein lies the rub. Questions about primacy, published findings, power, prestige, and actual proof rise to the surface as scenes alternate between the committee's deliberations and the 18th-century court of the king of Sweden as it considers the scientists' claims. One committee member sums up the argument well: "We still haven't agreed what being first means. Is it the initial discovery, the first publication, or full understanding?"

James F. Crow, a professor emeritus of genetics at UW-Madison and a Wisconsin Academy Fellow, finds the play to be realistic. "The question of who gets the credit is nothing new. The arguments back then are just as bitter as anything today," notes Crow, who is himself the recipient of numerous prizes and awards.

Bassam Shakhashiri, a chemistry professor at UW-Madison and director of the Wisconsin Initiative for Science Literacy, which sponsored a public symposium on oxygen in conjunction with the play, helped devise a set of experiments that were performed on stage by the actors. "We tried to reach out to people who normally wouldn't come to a theater production," Shakhashiri says. "In the audience I saw scientists, engineers, mathematicians, and people of mixed ages and backgrounds."

Whether you missed Oxygen or wish to see it again, Educational Innovations is offering the play on DVD with a study guide and other materials. Call 888/912-7474 or visit the website www.teachersource.com.

by Sarah Aldridge

A WRIGHTeous Confab

Wright scholars and enthusiasts, administrators of public Wright sites, and owners of Wright-designed buildings from around the country will gather at Monona Terrace in Madison from October 13 to 17 for the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy's annual conference. Since the inception of this national organization 15 years ago, no Wright-designed building has been demolished, a notable record of achievement following the tragic demolition of several of the architect's most significant buildings. This is the first time conservancy members will convene in Madison.

"Frank Lloyd Wright: On Home Ground" underscores the importance of Wisconsin in Wright's life. It is where Wright was born and buried, the state he always considered his home, and the state for which he produced designs for nearly 150 buildings. Of those, more than 30 were for the Madison area—and of the 11 constructed during his lifetime, eight of them, in addition to Monona Terrace, are still standing. Wright's unique relationship with Madison began in 1878 when he and his family moved there. He resided in Madison until he moved to Chicago to begin his architectural career in 1887. Thereafter, he returned often to Madison to visit friends and extended family and to secure commissions. From 1911 to 1959, the year he died, Wright's primary residence was Taliesin, located just 40 miles west of Madison. During that 48-year period Madisonians were in a unique position to observe Wright's career and public stature grow from that of an obscure local boy to an international celebrity.

The conference offers tours of Wright-designed buildings in the Madison area and Taliesin as well as Milwaukee and Delavan Lake. The keynote speaker is Robert Campbell, a Pulitzer Prize-winning architect and critic for the Boston Globe. Wright's personal photographer Pedro Guerrero will speak at a gala dinner and auction. To register, contact the conservancy office at 312/663-5500. For more information about volunteer or sponsorship opportunities, contact local cochairperson Heather Sabin at 608/261-4015.

by Heather Sabin