

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.

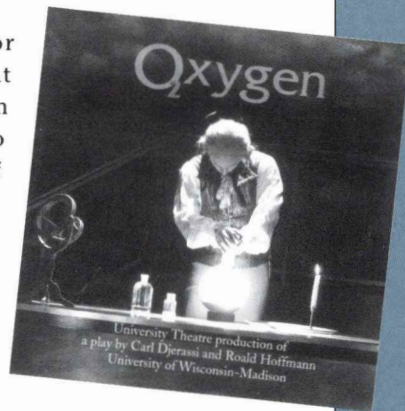
The play was written by Carl Djerassi, a chemistry professor at Stanford who first synthesized the birth control pill, and Roald Hoffmann, a chemistry professor at Cornell and recipient of the 1981 Nobel Prize. The plot revolves around an ingenious proposition: What if a 21st-century Nobel committee decided to reward 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 Shakhshiri, 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,” Shakhshiri 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