

Tom Valeo

# Organic chemistry

*Experimental theatre still has a home on Clark Street*

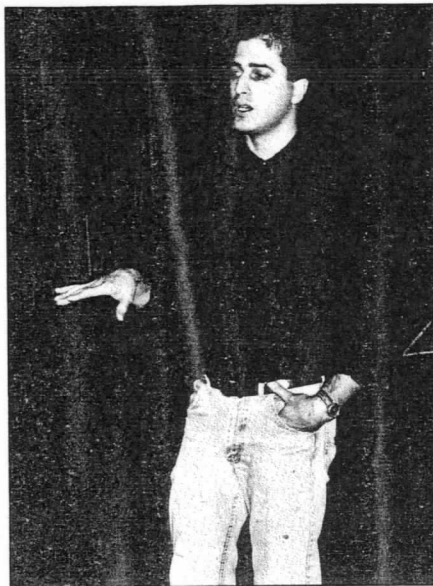
I started to get seriously nervous when the ushers chained the doors behind us. Until then, they had been merely rude: barking at us to stand in a straight line outside the theatre, glowering at those who disobeyed. Since they were all big and well-muscled, no one got too sassy, but resentment had grown. Now, with the doors locked, the tension was palpable. We were ready to participate in *The Game Show*.

This was a play created and directed by an anonymous University of Wisconsin theatre student, Stuart Gordon. The performance was free, which wasn't unusual, since this was Madison and it was 1968. The format was simple: A lone actor did a satirical impersonation of Monty Hall, host of a TV show called *Let's Make a Deal*. The actor selected members of the audience to come up onstage with him, and then he made fun of them. He mocked the way they looked, and the way they talked. And like the real Monty Hall, he offered prizes if they would make fools of themselves by singing or making faces.

Soon everyone in the audience was praying the same prayer: Please, don't let me be next. When audience members balked at going onstage, ushers dragged them out of their seats, forcing them to participate. With each contestant, the level of humiliation escalated. Finally, our host told a girl to take off her clothes, and when she resisted, the ushers rushed onto the stage and ripped off her blouse. As she screamed hysterically, audience members stood up and attacked the ushers, and the melee brought the show to a halt. That's when we learned that the contestants were all actors, and that we had spoiled our host's final speech—about how we were all contemptible sheep willing to let anything happen to others, as long as we were spared.

I have seen hundreds of plays since *The Game Show*, but none evoked such a gut-wrenching response. Stuart Gordon's ingenious effort made me appreciate the power of bold, audacious "experimental" theatre, while his subsequent career demonstrated the inherent contradiction in such efforts. If a company is truly innovative and experimental, it probably won't develop the broad support it needs to survive. But if it survives, it becomes an institution with a board of directors and a big budget—elements that can tame even the wildest vision.

As the artistic director of the Organic Theatre, which he founded in 1969, Gordon experienced both elements of this contradic-



Tom Riccio

tion. Devoted to original work, he gathered an ensemble around himself and staged more than 30 plays. There were imaginative adaptations of such disparate works as the *Odyssey* of Homer and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s sci-fi novel *The Sirens of Titan*. There were new plays, such as *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, by David Mamet, who, in 1974, was virtually unknown. There were even commercial hits, such as the long-running *Warp!*, which the company took to New York in 1973. Through it all, the troupe stood stubbornly on the brink of bankruptcy, prepared to jump rather than compromise the artistic freedom Gordon had always demanded. By the time *E/R Emergency Room* opened in 1982, the Organic was financially dead on its feet. Despite mediocre reviews, the show stayed open because there was no money to mount another. When *E/R* closed, so would the theatre.

But something unexpected happened. The comedy, set in the emergency room of a Chicago hospital, began to attract an audience of doctors and nurses. They sent their friends, and word of mouth kept the seats filled. Soon, the company had a full-blown hit on its hands, and a budget surplus of more than \$100,000.

Like sex hormones hitting the bloodstream of an adolescent, the money sent the Organic hurtling fitfully toward maturity, but at a great cost in innocence, imagination, and charm. The board of directors, unaccustomed

to black ink, came to life and imposed a vigilant watch over the ledger. Gordon had to beg for funds. "I felt sad that the Organic had struggled for so many years, and then, after *E/R*, the board wanted to play it safe," he said. "For theatre people, one hit show out of four is good, but to the business people on the board, we were losing money three times out of four. I told them it's like an oil company that doesn't want to search for oil any more. For a theatre to stop producing is death."

The end came when Gordon proposed that the Organic make a film based on H. P. Lovecraft's tale *Re-animator*. Gordon envisioned a company similar to Ingmar Bergman's in Sweden—they would do plays part of the year, and make films or TV dramas the rest of the time.

His proposal was rejected. "We didn't want to do it," said Don Liebenritt, former chairman of the board. "Stuart had goals, but he didn't seem to be able to explain to us the means to those goals. And I thought it was important to establish the Organic as an institution, not as Stuart Gordon."

So Gordon left. He went to Los Angeles, signed a contract with Empire Pictures, and directed *Re-animator*, a grotesque but hilarious film about a graduate student who develops a solution that brings corpses screaming back to life. It was an underground hit at the 1985 Cannes Film Festival, and Gordon was signed to do more horror films.

Meanwhile, his hand-picked successor, Tom Riccio, was left with a theatre once again low on funds. The success of *E/R* drove away many benefactors, who assumed that the Organic had plenty of cash even though three consecutive bombs had quickly drained the surplus. And Riccio made the financial situation worse by staging his own play, *Rubber City*, a chaotic work about the last day in the life of an Elvis impersonator. The cast of characters included John F. Kennedy; a talking dog; and Marilyn Monroe, who was played by Riccio's wife.

While some may criticize his judgment as a playwright, a director, or a casting agent, Riccio has proved to be a brilliant administrator. He has built a strong foundation beneath the Organic without transforming the theatre into an institution that discourages innovation and risk.

At the heart of his vision is the Greenhouse, a collective of six small theatre groups and 100 individuals interested in the type of