

Illinois chemist snagged briefly by movie industry

On a pleasant fall day in 1994, Ken Suslick of the School of Chemical Sciences, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, got a message from someone claiming to be a Hollywood director. He recalls thinking, "Yeah, right!" as he dialed the number. But the man was in fact Gene Serdena, set director of a 20th Century Fox movie that eventually would be titled "Chain Reaction." Their conversation landed Suslick briefly in the movie business, and he describes his adventures in the March 20 issue of *Inside Illinois*, a weekly for faculty and staff.

The flick concerns a Nobel Laureate and his graduate student. They had discovered the use of sonoluminescence to produce unlimited amounts of hydrogen from water catalytically (which Suslick implies is not thermodynamically plausible). Serdena had learned of the professor's work on sonoluminescence and other chemical effects of high-intensity ultrasound and wanted to see what his laboratories actually looked like. Thus the set director and an assistant drove from Chicago with video and still cameras and, says Suslick, proceeded to "shoot everything that didn't move."

A week later, Serdena called and wanted to rent equipment from the labs to use on his sets. Suslick told him that wouldn't work—he and his colleagues were using the stuff more or less regularly—but then realized that the director didn't need equipment that worked, it only had to *look* like it worked. Ideal for that was a vast storage area in the basement of the Roger Adams Laboratory on the Illinois campus. It was full of old laboratory equipment too good to discard when it wound up there, but outmoded by the mid-1990s. Back came Serdena's assistant, who photographed the dickens out of the storeroom.

Serdena called about 48 hours later, Suslick says, enraptured with the cavern full of chemical equipment. The university cannot sell equipment, no matter how useless, without wading through raging rivers of red tape. It can, however, declare useless equipment surplus and simply take it off the books. That done, nobody cares whether the stuff goes into a truck or a dumpster. Suslick, with the help of the office business manager, made the arrangements, which included a \$10,000 donation from 20th Century Fox to the school. And, he says, "I didn't even ask a finder's fee." The film company, he adds, forthwith dispatched a moving van and a crew

of four, who spent a full day "hauling away junk that we've been wondering how to get rid of for years."

When "Chain Reaction" opened last fall, Suslick shut down the lab and took the whole crew to the first matinee. They agreed later that the best part of the movie was the labs, "which were only slightly hokey."