

THEATRE

WHAT THE HECK IS EVOTECK?

BY MARY ANN GROVES

Every Friday afternoon for the past two months, Rick Moser parked his firewood delivery truck and headed toward a small theatre in Buckhead. Attorney Sharon Rowen left her office on Peachtree around 6:30, driving toward the same destination. Most Fridays, Shauna Lauren arrived at the theatre early to warm up, having changed her nurse's uniform for tights. John Klonoski ran late several times — his last class at Georgia State University let out just an hour before he was due onstage.

What all four have in common is Evoteck, self-billed as "the world's most dangerous theatre" and located at 3078 Roswell Rd. in the most unusual-looking storefront in Buckhead. Moser, Rowen, Lauren and Klonoski had to arrive in time to play the roles of musician, director, dancer and actor in the theatre's production of "Bullets, Bandoliers and Brassieres." And Fridays are notoriously harried at Evoteck. Almost without exception, the performers, technical crew and lobby personnel hold down "9 to 5" jobs, so an 8:30 p.m. curtain keeps everyone on their toes. One night during the run of "Bullets," a last-minute change resulted in director Sharon Rowen filling in for a key actor.

"It was fun stepping into the part, after being concerned about how the whole thing looked for so long," says Rowen, who acted in three productions before directing the show. When asked whether the part had an understudy, she shrugs. "We usually

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don't officially have them, but everyone is flexible."

Elastic may be a better word to describe Evoteck and the 80 original members of this performing company (which has since increased its membership to around 150). The company's ability to expand to include its members' ideas and desires to experiment is cited by them as the main reason this diverse group of students, artists and professional people willingly spend most of their free evenings and weekends at the theatre.

During its seventeen-month existence, Evoteck has presented music concerts, gallery shows, and video screenings, as well as premiering ten original plays and a comedy revue. As is often the case, the company's more avant-garde efforts have sometimes been the target of humor and criticism.

"When people have never heard something before, there are no safe connections, no associations that can be made," comments Rick Moser. "Anything really new is going to meet resistance." But "anything really new" seems welcome at Evoteck, the only Atlanta theatre to consistently produce all original, locally-written scripts. Most shows have also had original musical scores.

"Evoteck grew out of our commitment not to repeat things we'd seen and heard before," says Ben Harubin, an artist who designs sets for Evoteck and who wrote the script of the company's current production, *Fred the Egyptian: Into the Quark Enigma*. "We try not to even repeat things that we've done. That's the most challenging and difficult aspect of this theatre — and the most fun."

Where does all this new work come from? "We had quite a backlog when we started," says Jon Marcus, a

member of the program committee which functions as an informal board of directors. Noting that most of the people behind the project had been friends for years, Marcus says members of the group had previously co-authored books and short stories, and had collectively produced two series for local public television. "But much of what we'd written was prose, without dialogue. Almost all of it required extensive revision."



EVOTECK MOTTO: "WHEN ENNUI STRIKES, STRIKE BACK."

The source material for Evoteck is almost as diverse as its members. *Fred the Egyptian* was inspired by Harubin's interest in Egyptian art. *The Tomorrow Show*, a spoof on television in the future, was based on a science fiction story by Marcus. *The Astro Pups: Journey To Alpha Nine*, was first created as a comic strip, and Fran Golden says she wrote *Private Eyes* because she always wanted to see her favorite fantasy, private detective Nicki Anvil, come to life.

Evoteck Theatre opened in November 1986 with *Evoteck Speaks For Itself*, a revue which included

comedy sketches and monologues originally written for the company's television series. "We were just getting our feet wet," says Paul Botelho, another member of the program committee. "We wanted to introduce ourselves to the neighborhood with a real variety of work." Rick Moser's synthesizer ensemble, Nectarine Nightmare, provided music and sound effects for the first show.

"What the heck is Evoteck?" was a big question in Buckhead at that time and *Evoteck Speaks* was an answer of sorts," Botelho continues, adding the most popular theory among neighboring businesses was that Evoteck would be a computer store. Two months of speculation preceded the opening. It took that much time for the company to repaint and renovate the abandoned storefront at the corner of W. Paces Ferry, construct a stage and purchase seating for an intimate theatre upstairs. Now the downstairs serves as a lobby and concession area; the hallways and

windows as an art gallery. "We finally got the word *theatre* in big letters up on the marquee," smiles Botelho. "But we still get calls saying, 'What are you, really?'"

"I guess we're a successful experiment," interjects Sharon Rowen. Another company member says her favorite answer to the question is, "We're not a what. Evoleck's a verb, posing as a noun and dressed up like people."

"It's been a real learning process for us and for our audiences," says Maureen Marcus, whose one-act play, *Universal Rehearsal*, was the company's second production. As the title implies, *Universal* explored the relationship between audience and performer. "That relationship was very much on our minds at the time. We wanted to present good theatre, but also to attract people who might not usually go to plays."

Marcus, an advertising copywriter whose hobby is dance, choreographed one dance and a "rap" for her show. It was during *Universal* that Evoleck developed its policy of continuing to present "works in progress," meaning scripts are continually revised, even after the opening — the "rap" was added two weeks into the show's run.

"It's great for the writer — to sit in the audience one night and work on dialogue with the actors and director the next day," says John Klonoski. "Of course, the actors are wondering, 'Is he ever going to finish this or what?'" he laughs. Evoleck's playbills now invite audiences to attend more than once because, "this play is being presented for the first time and is expected to undergo changes."

In a city where new theatres struggle to build an audience, Evoleck sold out most performances of its third play, *The Astro Pups: Journey to Alpha Nine*, a story about three sub-

atomic particles that come to life when a scientist notices them.

"Serendipitous," is what author Matt Rosenberger calls that production, during which Evoleck hit its stride, attracting favorable critical attention. "More fun than sub-atomic particles should have," was the way one critic described what ensued.

"We had two shows under our bells, the newness and curiosity about something different in town was a factor, and the subject matter of the play was exciting," speculates Rosenberger, a computer programmer who originally developed *The Astro Pups* as cartoon characters. Comic books were given out in lieu of programs during the *Pups*.

Scooler and the Shortwaves, a local band led by singer Scooler Smith, developed songs for the show and performed them live. Smith's pop-science lyrics ("At the same time you are here and gone, you have just become a tachyon." "Einstein's just another pretty face when you shift into hyperspace.") were a hit, and the Evoleck tradition of having live original music was born.



FRED THE EGYPTIAN SCOPING THE WEIRD.

Several other local bands, including Midnight Blues, are now affiliated with the theatre. "Somehow, we never felt that the shows were complete without music," explains Rick Moser, noting that the company has drawn both praise ("kinetically captivating") and criticism ("a battle of the bands") from reviewers for their practice of having at least one live band play for each show.

As the new kid on the block, Evoleck garnered its share of interest and attention from the media. Now that some of the newness has worn off, the theatre competes with a half dozen others occupying that grey area between "professional" and "avocational" theatre in a city with only a handful of performing arts critics.

Not surprisingly, the theatre has had extremely mixed reviews. *Bullets* and *The Astro Pups* were generally acclaimed. Fran Golden's script for *Private Eyes* was lauded for its originality ("a theatrical genre unto itself"), but at least two plays were roundly panned. The theatre is ordinarily praised for such artistic qualities as set, lighting and costume design, and, true to its name, has gained a reputation for a uniquely high-tech presentation style.

Is there an Evoleck philosophy? "Only that whatever you think you know might be incorrect," says one patron, adding, "You never know what to expect from them, but they always have a sense of humor about whatever it is."

The company is known for being adventuresome and unpredictable as well as funny. Most of their productions have drawn humor from sophisticated scientific speculation, but one show was a fairly late complete with tap-

dancing lions, and *Private Eyes* was a classic enough whodunit to satisfy mystery buffs. *Fred the Egyptian* partners ideas about science and philosophy with comedy that borders on slapstick at times. When asked to describe his play, Harubin jokes, "It's a lot like *Airport*, *European Vacation* and *No Exit*."

The theme of human expansion, whether portrayed as a fantastic scientific discovery, a childhood dream of magic, or an insoluble mystery, seems to be the common thread. The subject of time also recurs as a theme: *The Tomorrow Show* carried its audience into the future; the tachyonic *Astro Pups* traveled faster than light, and in the quarky *Fred*, a tourist plane is diverted from its vacation destination into a time/space warp.

Explains artist Harubin, "This show was constructed out of available materials. Consider what's most interesting and new out of all that's available now, and you see why I felt compelled to include ad hoc science and technology."

Adds Peter Kagel, who directed *Fred*: "At Evoleck, we're interested in the upper end of what's happening right now. We try to make the best possible use of what we see happening and to speculate about what might come next."

On a recent Friday night in Buckhead, strange music wailed from the Evoleck lobby, where contemporary classical ("atonal") compositions were being performed before the show. Sidewalk strollers enjoying the spring weather gathered around a video window display depicting Egyptian paintings and *Fred the Egyptian* in cartoon form, while an usher handed out "travel brochures" to potential patrons.

An early Evoleck playbill carried the motto: "When ennui strikes, strike back." The Atlantans behind this progressive theatre project seem to be successfully doing just that. **66**

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