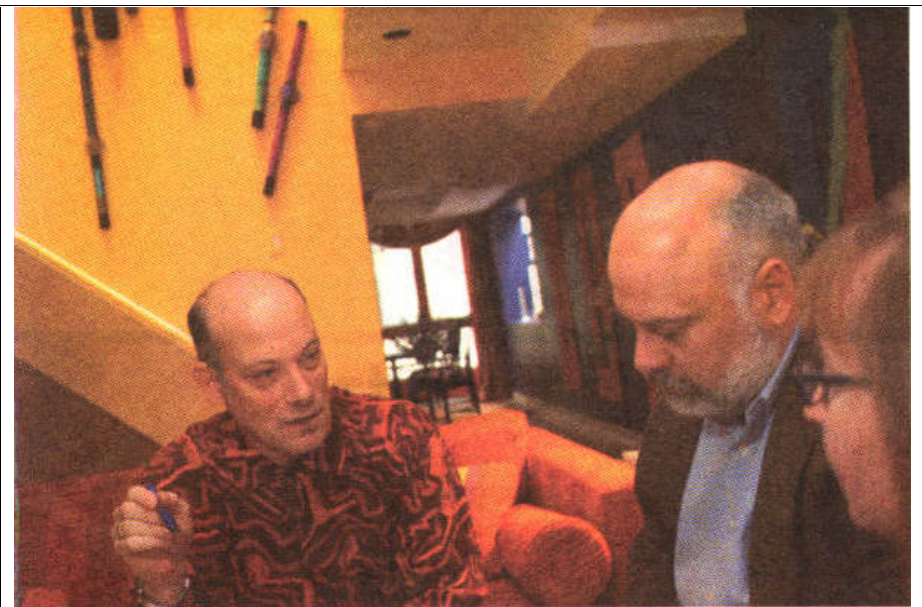




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Tresser (left) with Kevin Lampe and Kitty Kurth

Nemesis vs. Politics as Usual

Gadfly, former actor, and superhero model Tom Tresser is back, calling on the creative class to claim their piece of the pie.

By Deanna Isaacs
Before anyone heard of Richard Florida or *The Rise of the Creative Class*, before any local universities had cultural policy centers like the ones humming along now at the University of Chicago and Columbia College, former actor and producer Tom Tresser was waging a war on dark forces that had come out of nowhere to enslave the soul of American art. Like the comic-book superhero named after him, Tresser leaped into the fray when the likes of Jesse Helms and Pat Robertson were attacking artists and the NEA and made it his business “to understand who these people were and what they were doing,” he says. When he saw that his enemies wanted to “pulverize the barrier between church and state,” he gave up

his job as managing director of Pegasus Players and spent the next three years trying to galvanize the art world. Major arts leaders encouraged him privately, he says, but none of them would publicly endorse his efforts. Disillusioned, he turned away, and a decade passed before he heard the call to battle again. Now he’s back, ready to fight the good fight, and he wants to recruit you.

Tom Tresser, the square-jawed, blond comic-book hero, was created in 1979, when Tom Tresser, the meeker, balder actor, was working at the Merrimack Valley Theatre in Manchester, New Hampshire, and rooming with writer Cary Burkett. Burkett got an assignment from DC Comics to create a new character and came up with Nemesis, a master of martial arts and disguise, who needed a daytime alias. Burkett’s Tom Tresser became a mild-

mannered, Shakespeare-quoting former FBI agent with a contact in London named Michael Boches after Tresser’s real-life brother. When Nemesis wrapped up a job, he’d drop a bullet on the scales of justice and push a button on his collar that turned him back into the unassuming Tresser. The character ran for several years in the early 80s and had another multiyear run when another friend of Tresser’s got a DC gig writing *Suicide Squad* and resurrected him. He still has his fans. When the occasional “Are you the real Nemesis?” e-mail arrives, Tresser says, he replies, “Yes, but I’m retired now.”

A New York native who studied sociology and urban planning, Tresser moved here in 1980. He helped found Old Town’s itinerant Free Shakespeare Company and

spent five years at Pegasus before his battles in the first round of the culture wars. In 1990 a MacArthur Foundation grant sent him to six American cities to “see what artists were doing to empower themselves,” as he puts it, “with the idea of coming back to Chicago and establishing a center for cultural policy at Roosevelt University,” where he later taught as an adjunct. Tresser found, for example, that in San Francisco, where the arts are supported by a hotel tax, the Arts Democratic Club had enough clout to interview candidates looking for its endorsement. “I was astonished,” he says. “I tried to imagine such a meeting in Chicago with aldermanic candidates.” The center at Roosevelt never materialized, but Tresser founded an

organization, Greater Chicago Citizens for the Arts, which for the next few years registered voters, held gallery events, and served as his soapbox for warning about the conservative agenda. During that time, he admits, he “pissed some people off” and gave a few the impression he’s opposed to religion (not true, he says). Then he gave up on politicizing the arts community. After that Tresser headed up marketing and arts programming for Peoples Housing, a nonprofit in Rogers Park. When it folded at the end of ’95 he consulted with the Chicago Park District, helping develop a model for turning field houses into cultural centers. He spent a few years in the private sector, including some time at the ubiquitous failed Internet start-up, and now has his own marketing firm, Passionate Strategies, where he is “chief experience officer” and promises to “turn customers into fans”; an offshoot, Passionate Productions, stages corporate events. It’s been tough in this economy, Tresser says, and after Florida came along with his block buster making a case for the financial impact of creative workers, it occurred to him that the time was finally ripe for the campaign he’d tried to mount more than a decade earlier. “In the last election everyone was talking about values voting,” he says. “Why not point out the value of creativity? And why not get artists to run for local office?”

According to Tresser, 32 percent of the Illinois labor force are what Florida calls creative workers, and he argues that they’d make great candidates: no one knows better than artists how to challenge authority and stretch a dollar, and if you can produce theater you can run a political campaign, he says. He’s ready to help, putting his experience on the campaigns of Howard Dean and Carol Moseley Braun, among others, at your service. Tresser won a seat as a community rep on his Lincoln Park local school council last spring and now has launched a new organization, the Creative America Project (www.creativeamerica.us) to prep candidates and teach artists how to work for social change. On January 22 Creative America will hold its first training event, an all-day session at Bailiwick Repertory led by PR pros Kitty Kurth and Kevin Lampe. The cost is \$20.06 -- a nod to the next elections.

Most artists I know can’t find enough time after their day jobs to do their art. (Tresser hasn’t stepped on a stage since 1987.) But since Florida’s definition of creative workers includes scientists, librarians, and just about anybody who’s ever leaned on a copy machine, there must be somebody among them willing to put up with the sloppy, time-eating process of democracy.. Tresser would like to drop this bullet on the scale.

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