

## The Only Available Door

The late sixties were times when young art students, who graduated with hopes of creating a budding art and design studio, loved to choose "funky" names for their businesses. I was no exception. I got together with another eight graduate students and rented a fourth floor loft on 74 York Street in the heart of downtown Toronto. We called our budding art and design studio, "The Only Available Door" graphic studio. Across the street the ominous black tower (one of two towers) of the Toronto Dominion Bank Centre was under construction. It's famous architect, Mies van der Rohe. Perhaps it was youthful enthusiasm or simply ignorance of competition and other business matters that made us think we were "*the only available door*," the only place we believed where Toronto's advertising establishment could buy the latest and greatest of commercial design, and fit to stand in the shadow of a modern TD Centre.

There we stood, posing for our first of many publicity photographs in Marketing Magazine, a publication committed to the advertising industry in Canada. Side by side we all stood on a fire escape some four stories up from the ground just behind our building. Our famous OCA yearbook posters had been hastily taped to the old brick wall behind us, and together with a large sign that said "The Only Available Door," the press photograph was complete. Holding on to the metal railings of that fire escape were Rod Brandt, Ken Boyd, Alec Toth, Stanley Marshall, and I. The black and white photograph along with a major press release made it into the June 7, 1968, issue of Marketing Magazine, the industry's bible. We were full-time artists in our studio business, with four additional part-time artists, who did not appear in the photograph. All of us were survivors of the 1968, OCA yearbook team.

I had made a bold claim in that article.

"We graduated on Friday," I said, "spent the weekend cleaning up this loft, and on Monday, out we went with our portfolios, looking for business."

The fourth floor loft on 74 York Street had been vacant for some time, and pigeons had entered through broken windows to make frequent use of the interior. It took major elbow grease and twenty gallons of white paint to clean and cover the entire loft, a space occupying some two thousand square feet. The front area of the studio was our "commercial" space, complete with a number of large drafting tables, a work table, storage space, a client meeting area, and three of the grandest windows overlooking York Street and downtown Toronto. At the corner stood the old Metropole Hotel and across the street was the most incredible Montreal corned-beef-on-rye place we could have ever imagined. The back of our studio space was for fine arts, especially drawing. One night a week, we all stayed to enjoy fellowship and life drawing. Sometimes we came on weekends to paint together. The back of the studio also served to keep our drawing skills fine-tuned as well as to continue building on our foundation of fine art, especially important now that we had entered the world of commercial art. George Pastic, an art director at McCann-Erickson's infamous Group X was very generous in his praise of our group.

"This group has a strong bent of creativity - they're fresh in their approaches to everything, perhaps they're even a bit rebellious. Whatever it is, they have a quality of excitement in their work that makes it excellent."

These were flattering words, but we soon discovered that actually getting advertising design assignments and contracts was a lot more difficult than we thought. We were not *the only available door* in town. There were many other design studios and freelance designers and good ones as well. We spent days and weeks talking about a major breakthrough, hoping to maintain

our confidence while our pens remained silent and our drawing tables collected dust. Within a few weeks after our much publicized beginning, five artists left the studio to make a better living elsewhere. Then came our first contract. A commission to design a poster for *The Camp Boulderwood Fund*, a local fundraising effort for a summer camp I cannot remember. The price tag for our commission was twenty-five dollars. We were so eager to do the work we must have given our client a thousand dollars' worth of ideas. If only we could have billed him for that much. A few weeks later, however, came the major break we had hoped for. It came again from George Pastic, our friendly art director at Group X, who had been so kind with words in our first press release. Group X was a trendy design group within the large national advertising agency of McCann-Erickson. George Pastic asked us to design a complete corporate and retail image for a very upscale fashion and accessory store in the Bloor and University area. The place was called *The English Sheepskin Shoppe*. One can only imagine our enthusiasm, and George was not disappointed. We were successful in creating a wonderful image that did much to promote sales for the clothing retailer. Our designs were printed on everything in the store: shopping bags, wrapping paper, gift boxes, tags, brochures, stationery, a sign outside the store, and more. *The English Sheepskin Shoppe* was soon followed by a number of design projects that ranged from retail to manufacturing, including all the super-graphics for *El Zorro*, a large downtown nightclub. Studio work, however, was not enough to sustain the lives of four artists. Alec Toth, Ken Boyd, and I, were married and our wives were looking forward to some sort of income from the studio. Alec had children as well. We were all desperate to make a living. After rent, utilities and supplies, there was very little left over to divide between the four of us. In the spring of 1969, just about a year after we began, Alec and Ken left as well for jobs elsewhere. That left Rod Brandt and I to continue the journey together.

To help make the change less painful, we changed the name to OAD Studios, borrowing the initials of our original name, but making the studio sound a whole lot more traditional and less pretentious. We vacated our huge fourth-floor loft and settled into a comfortable and reasonably new commercial townhouse on Clarence Square, just a few blocks from downtown and a stone's throw from Cooper & Beatty Typesetters, one of our major suppliers. It was a timely and profitable change. No longer the young upstarts fresh out of college, we were determined to be more business-minded. It worked. The number of assignments began to increase. When Alice and I decided it was time to draw an actual salary, especially since our first child Jeffrey was expected to make his grand entrance in a few months, both Rod and I made the switch from unpaid workers to paid staff. The change went smoother than we had anticipated. No sooner had we settled into our jobs as paid artists, when the next major change shook our lives. Clarence Square was a small and beautiful commercial area tucked between the rumbling railroad yards of Canadian Pacific Railways and King Street, just east of Spadina Avenue. The square had many trees that filled our day with green leaves, gentle breezes, and filtered sunlight. It was a quiet square. Our studio was spacious and comfortable and with only the two of us there, it made for long productive days as we designed our way through a variety of advertising assignments. Spring was followed by summer and OAD Studios continued to design away the hours creating newspaper ads for Toronto's major dailies, magazine ads, package designs, corporate brochures, annual reports, and covers for record albums (the big ones of the 1960's and 70's). Record albums were a unique aspect of the business we sort of "fell into" because next door was a record producer. He had a number of associates who were agents and promoters for a rapidly growing music industry in Toronto. These were the days of rock-and-roll. Bands sprang up overnight to fill the vacancies in a string of coffeehouses and clubs throughout the city. I met

so many musicians and bands, from folk to rock; from solo artists to large bands, I cannot begin to remember their names. Our policy was cash up front as the future of each band was as unpredictable as the clubs they played. It was a lot of fun and we created some very special graphics. Summer on Clarence Square turned into fall. It turned out to be a spectacular autumn season that year with more than a change of colours in the trees to mark the season.

The next change that was about to shake us resulted in the end of OAD Studios.

My life was about to take one of the most dramatic turns ever, not in the form of a natural progression of business success and growth, but through unlikely circumstances that were perhaps the most unusual reasons for this turn of events.

It happened just before our son Jeffrey was born in November of 1969.

The circumstances were unlikely because they involved a former partner in the studio and a fellow art college graduate. The two were the last artists who had left us in the spring of that year. Both had gotten good jobs in the city and in advertising.

One was now working at a major advertising agency. He had quickly risen to the position of art director, a position that necessitated farming work out to outside designers. Most large advertising agencies contracted their design work out to large and small studios in town. Sometimes an art director could increase his income by developing a personal list of clients and doing the work himself, outside of the agency. It was called "moonlighting." He moonlighted. When he couldn't manage the clandestine workload, we became his source for all the artwork he needed to satisfy his personal clients. The layouts and designs we did for him for newspaper and magazine ads, generated hundreds of dollars for our studio. The work was steady and the pay was very good.

One day, he came to the studio and handed Rod and I a major contract for advertising design work for Esso. Typical of moonlighting, however, the work was not directly for Esso. It was for another small creative boutique in Toronto who were one of his personal clients, and whose name was Folio Productions. Folio had had been contracted by Imperial Oil of Canada to create promotional work for Esso, the Canadian petroleum giant. I had never heard of Folio Productions, even though Esso was a household name. But the creative boutique was his personal client. We dealt only with our former partner and not with Folio Productions. We were what had been known as a "third party" in a verbal contract. This time, however, our work amounted to thousands of dollars and we were grateful to the former partner for the opportunity to prove our worth to such a major client. One day, during a rush to get everything done, we were asked to deliver our designs directly to Folio Productions, rather than to our former partner's home. There simply was not enough time to deliver our work the usual way. It had been a rush order. I made the delivery myself. We were thrilled to receive nothing but praise from the people at Folio Productions. They loved our work. After that special delivery, we returned to our former partner's more familiar clandestine operations of home deliveries of our design work, including more designs for Folio Productions *and* Esso. Eagerly we submitted our invoices, on time and on budget. Soon it would be payday and a big one it promised to be. Things couldn't be better. Our invoice policy was standard industry practice - net thirty days. For dependable clients we sometimes stretched our invoice policy to sixty days.

Thirty days came and went.

Then months passed, and we had not been paid for our work for Esso. Invoices added up to thousands of dollars. Thirty days stretched to sixty to eighty and to one hundred and twenty days - four months and no pay. Constant phone calls to the former partner assured us that as soon as Folio Productions paid him, we would be paid. Little did we know that moonlighting was not

always the most reliable way of getting paid on time or getting paid at all. Time passed but no money. I couldn't understand the delay. After all, Esso was a reputable account who would not permit such indiscretions as late payment to tarnish their image, would they?

Finally, I got upset and decided to take charge.

He said had not been paid and apologized for leaving us dangling in the middle.

"Who did these people at Folio think they were anyways?" I rambled.

I got on the phone and asked for the president of Folio Productions. I was put in touch with Mr. Joe Hatt-Cook. I spoke to him in firm words asking him why he was holding up payment and could he possibly be more business-like and understand our urgent need for funds. One can imagine my humbling and embarrassing silence when Mr. Hatt-Cook said the man, our former partner, had been paid months ago. I was furious realizing we had been had, but not by Joe Hatt-Cook or Folio Productions. Our former partner had betrayed us. My conversation with Mr. Hatt-Cook froze in silent time. The phone went quiet. I thought as fast as I could for an appropriate reply. I swallowed hard and offered a genuine apology. Then I did something that surprised both me and Rod, who was listening to my phone call. I decided to cut out the middle man. I was no longer obliged to remain loyal to our former partner and his personal list of clients. Whether his moonlighting would expose him, I didn't care. Without hesitating I made my telephone pitch to Mr. Hatt-Cook himself.

"Look," I said, "you love our work. Your client Esso is happy. I sincerely apologize for what I said because the matter is not between OAD Studios and Folio Productions. It is between us and that once-upon-a-time friend. So how about we cut out this middleman and deal directly with each other? Might even save some money or more for both of us. I'll come over to show you our entire portfolio, if that's alright with you?"

His answer was a polite, but "sure, come on over."

I phoned our former partner and told him what he had brought upon himself. Folio Productions was now fair game and we were determined to get the client. He was not too happy but couldn't do much about it for fear of being exposed for his moonlighting at the agency where he worked. An art director who was caught moonlighting was immediately fired. He promised to pay the outstanding invoices and he did. But I had made up my mind about Folio Productions.

I got on the subway and headed for Toronto's fabled Yorkville Avenue, where Joe Hatt-Cook had his offices. When I reached the address of Folio Productions my heart began to beat rapidly. This was show-time, or should I say showdown time? Joe Hatt-Cook was a warm and courteous man. Before long, our previous telephone encounter was forgotten as we poured over the large portfolio I had brought along. Within minutes of meeting each other we both knew it was a dream come true. I was missing a senior partner with established connections in the professional advertising world. Joe was that person. Joe was missing a dedicated and creative art director graphic designer who could work fast and efficiently, and who had a keen sense of business management and a strong work ethic. I was that person. To test the potential of a future working relationship, we decided to tackle a major project together. Joe had been contracted to produce the upcoming sales meeting for Imperial Oil. That contract had come from the biggest agency in town. Things couldn't have gone better. Everything in the multi-thousand dollar project went smooth. Everyone got paid on time. Then Joe Hatt-Cook introduced me to his business partner Fiona McCall, whose specific talent and contribution to Folio Productions was publicity and public relations. Together they approached me and offered me a partnership in Folio Productions. It sounded too good to be true.

"Without Rod?" I asked.

"Without Rod," they said.

They needed one art director not two. They wanted an equal working partner and not just another employee. Joe and I had already had many discussions about a future advertising agency and a top-of-the-line creative shop. I was not convinced Rod would fit in anyways, plus the opportunity was a dream-come-true for Alice and I, and soon-to-be Jeffrey. Nevertheless, it was a tough decision. Rod and I had gotten along well and he was a good partner. However, it was I who did all the hustling for work and all the business presentations. I knew Rod still lived at home with his parents and his overhead expenses were small. Our split would not be a financial disaster for Rod. But, I was married and expecting our first child just weeks away. This was an opportunity I could not miss. It pained me to tell Rod that we would have to part. He was not only a wonderful partner he was a quality human being, and a good designer. Needless to say, he was very upset and decided he would not carry on the name and work of OAD Studios on his own. Nevertheless we wished each other well. We shut the studio down, divided all the equipment and supplies, and parted. I agreed to finish the lease on our premises so that Rod could leave without any financial pressures. I said he could approach as many of our OAD clients as he wished. I would not compete for our former clients as the work that lay ahead of me at Folio Productions was more than enough. I never saw Rod again.

Joe and I spent the next year working on many projects. We became an inseparable creative team. He was the writer and I was the designer (although later he taught me the skills of writing advertising copy). We worked together on all creative projects and success followed upon success. Days and weeks slipped into months. Alice gave birth to Jeffrey Lyon Verstraete, on November 7, 1969, and I was a happy man. My annual personal income doubled. Joe, Fiona, and I, were wonderful partners. On November 15, 1970, an official announcement of our partnership ran in Marketing Magazine and the Financial Post. Soon after we decided to change our business name to Folio Advertising Agency Ltd., and we became a major contender in the Toronto world of advertising agencies, yet a favourite "boutique" shop for the big agencies and everything was clean and above-board. We were never a threat to the bigger agencies should we decide to "steal" their accounts. So dependable was our work and business practices we became involved in major projects for some of the biggest name in industry and government. If I listed them all, I'd be accused of bragging.

Even before formal partnership papers were signed, I took up temporary space on Yorkville Avenue in addition to my space on Clarence Square. Then I fell headlong into one of the most visible projects of my career. Fiona McCall had landed the publicity and promotion contract for the rock musical HAIR, which was about to make its debut at Toronto's Royal Alexandra Theatre. Soon it became obvious that the space at Clarence Square was no longer suitable. I needed to be on Yorkville and with Joe and Fiona, every day. But commuting through downtown Toronto was a nuisance and the Yorkville offices were too small. However, until we moved to our new space in another town house on Nicolas Street, I had no choice but to spend valuable time commuting between Clarence Square and Yorkville Avenue, and at the same time try to keep up with the work load of HAIR. Somehow I managed. One creative assignment for HAIR was my introduction to the power of publicity. Many cast members of HAIR came to our Yorkville offices to be interviewed for publicity stories, press photography, and other related public relations assignments. One bright and creative day, Fiona masterminded the idea that one particular aspect of the musical HAIR could possibly generate immense publicity.

The musical had a small nude scene.

By today's standards that scene of nudity was nothing, but by the standards of Toronto theatre in those days, it was everything. The nude moment in the production, even though highly anticipated by the audience, was a very brief frontal topless-only part when two actors stood motionless in a barrage of strobe lighting. One would have to be very attentive and on time to catch the brief glimpse of a bare breast. Nevertheless, it was the stuff media died for.

Fiona had arranged for a major press conference and gala affair at the O'Keefe Centre, the other big theatre in Toronto. She had "leaked" to the press (she was good at that) that there might be nudity at the gala and press conference, because she had invited the lead actors from HAIR to make an unexpected appearance. The whole media event would take place in the grand foyer of the O'Keefe Centre. The day of the event arrived with lots of buzz and expectation in the air. Rumours of nudity swirled. The lobby was filled with black-tied men and gowned women. Diamonds and gold sparkled everywhere. The *who's who* of Toronto's theatre world was there, as were the media. Fiona had arranged that at a strategic moment during the festivities, the two lead actors from HAIR, a male and female, would slowly descend down the grand circular staircase that curved into the lobby. They would be dressed in long black and hooded robes, giving the place a gothic air of mystery. As the assembled guests did not know who these black figures were, the mystery would intensify as the two descended down the stairs while music from HAIR's *"Age of Aquarius"* filled the lobby. The press however, had been warned to be ready as soon as the music started. They were ready. The plan was that suddenly and with great fanfare, the actors would stop on the stairs and in plain sight of everyone throw off their robes, revealing totally nude bodies underneath. It would be the biggest media event in Toronto's theatrical history and I was in the middle of the action. What the guests and media did not know was that I had spent nearly the entire day body-painting both actors. I painted long swirling lines, Paisley designs and other graphics, in vibrant day-glow fluorescent colours over their entire bodies. Each colour was carefully applied over a tight-fitting bodystocking in such a way, that the designs masked obvious body parts such as breasts and genitals, yet the paint meticulously followed the contours of male and female anatomy. The nudity of the actors was in fact an illusion created in paint and I was the "master" artist. Everything was colorfully hinted-at, but nothing was actually visible. All nudity was carefully and artistically hidden in the overall effect of my life-size paintings. But the effect was electric. The artwork was real and magnificent, if I may say so.

When the moment came, the crowd literally gasped as the two actors, with great gesture and drama, threw their robes on to the stairs. The sounds of *"Age of Aquarius"* flooded the foyer and came rolling down the stairs. There they stood, male and female figures, fully "naked" and totally covered in bright psychedelic colours over every square inch of their bodies. Necks turned. Eyes strained. Cameras whirred. Flashes popped and shutters vibrated. Before the audience could discover the actors were not really nude, both actors picked up their robes and with flair and pomp, robed themselves as they turned around and climbed back up the stairs. The whole event was a huge success. I was a celebrity. We had dazzled everyone and offended none. We made it big on the front pages of all the Toronto dailies. HAIR went on to become a smashing success.

The end of OAD studios and my new partnership in Folio Productions, now Folio Advertising Agency Limited, marked the beginning of an exciting roller-coaster ride of creativity. Many years lay ahead with numerous adventures in marketing and advertising. I became Executive Vice-President of Folio Advertising Agency Limited, a journey that would last fifteen years. In fact, not only did Joe and I become close friends, we drew straws each year as to who would be President of the agency. Neither of us cared too much about titles and

thought the matter rather humorous. After all, we were a successful team and that's what mattered. Joe drew President and after a year we decided we'd keep it that way. I was content with my title as Executive VP whose functions were primarily creative director and general manager of the agency. In time we would have over twenty-five employees, own a beautiful building in downtown Toronto and an office in Ottawa as well.