

# Atwater world

*"Fixin' to Die" explores the Faustian life of a political henchman*

**T**HROUGHOUT THE EIGHTIES, Republican operative Lee Atwater was the political Left's worst nightmare, as he helped Ronald Reagan and George Bush claw their way to victory over the carcasses of Walter Mondal and Michael Dukakis. But when Atwater was diagnosed with brain cancer in 1991 and given only months to live, the hard-boiled campaigner found a kinder, gentler edge. In a Life magazine interview shortly before his demise, Atwater allowed that he had perhaps been too mean to too many (once, when asked about Dukakis, he said he would "strip the bark off that little bastard"). At the end, Atwater preached a humanistic political doctrine, even saying he wished the Bush '88 campaign had used a little white guy in its controversial prison-furlough ad, instead of big, black Willie Horton.

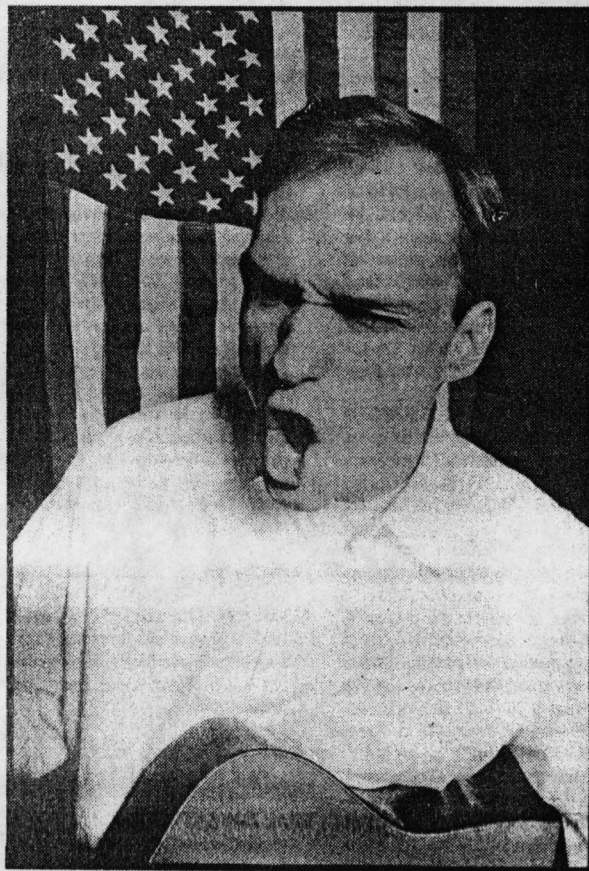
Thus, the newly ambiguous Atwater became, at his expiration, a complex political figure and ripe content for a play. "Fixin' to Die," a one-man show by Robert Myers, is the result; the piece has its Chicago premiere at Pegasus Players next Tuesday, with Brian Stepanek as Atwater. Gary Griffin directs.

Myers called last weekend from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, where the play was performed in front of an invited

audience of politicians and such noted cultural commentators as Frank Rich and John Simon. The play has received decent notices for productions in Washington, D.C., and South Carolina; and Myers has finished a version of the script that will be made into an HBO movie this year. A commercial run of the play, based on Atwater's published and recorded words, is expected back inside the Beltway this fall; it's an ideal piece for a presidential election year.

"It's difficult to know whether Atwater simply understood how cynical people were getting about politics in the 1980s, or if he actually made people cynical above and beyond what they already were," Myers says. "His trying to make a genuine gesture at the end of his life was a very Faustian moment."

**SONG REMAINS THE SAME: BRIAN STEPANEK GIVES VOICE TO BUSH POLITICAL OPERATIVE LEE ATWATER**



Jennifer Girard Photography

The Right, of late, has implied that Atwater made no deathbed deviations from the Republican creed ("There's an ongoing attempt," says Myers, "to put the clown back in the box"), but the once seemingly diabolic Atwater nonetheless left a rich and complex legacy. "I'm no Oliver Stone," Myers notes. "I wanted the play to reflect the historical reality of the man."

