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Theater

'Lee Atwater': Red Hot And Politics

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A terrific subject, a terrific actor and a terrific presentation come combustibly together in "Fixin' to Die: A Visit to the Mind of Lee Atwater," playing a limited run at the Church Street Theater. Bruce McIntosh gives a live-wire performance as the self-described "Grand Old Party Animal" in Robert Myers's play—really a series of lit-by-lightning flashes of Atwater's impressive, depressing, very American career—and George Furth has directed with unobtrusive intelligence and crack timing.

The show starts with Atwater zipping up



Bruce McIntosh as Lee Atwater: A smug frat boy with a breezy brilliance.

his fly at a fraternity party featuring a stag film, and there's a lot of the smug frat boy in McIntosh's characterization (not accidentally, he occasionally made me think of another example of the type, David Letterman). This Atwater is proud of his shallow jerkiness, smirking as he delivers lines such as "The most important thing is honesty. Once you can fake that, you got it made." The most repellent thing about him is his

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■ **ALSO PLAYING:** Stage Guild's howling good "Tale of the Wolf."

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Portrait Of Lee Atwater

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slick expediency—he gives a sense of not caring what master he serves as long as he can have fun. Politically brilliant, he's morally opaque. When the Willie Horton affair has a backlash he didn't foresee, his response isn't an awakening of racial sympathy but the nauseatingly practical "Looking back, we should have used a white guy."

Yet Myers gives credit to the boy wonder's political genius. Born in Atlanta, Atwater knows that though the conventional '80s wisdom is that the South is becoming more like the rest of the country, the truth is that "The rest of the country was becoming more like the South." About his sense that the white working class was waiting to fall into Republican hands, he says, "This was all just a hunch," and you believe it—Atwater didn't slog through research and analysis, he surfed on instinct.

Myers and McIntosh bring out all the charisma and seductiveness of Atwater's breezy brilliance. The guy's vital, he's fun, he ups the ante in a gathering just by entering the room. And he has his virtues. He isn't a snob, for example. His sense of the needs of the white working class, ignored and despised by the educated elites that ran the Democratic Party, came from being one of them and proud of it. The Atwater of "Fixin' to Die" is respectful of his ruling-class boss, Bush, but he isn't really impressed by him, and he's driven nuts by the vacuous, over-privileged Dan Quayle, "living proof that the term 'bimbo' is not gender-specific."

He also had a strange, rather alarming innocence. Cynical as his use of Horton as a symbol for crimi-

nality run amok was, he seems never quite to have "gotten it" on the sensitivities of race. In the play, as in life, he bewilderingly cites his admiration of black musicians as proof he isn't a racist, and the scary thing is that he's not being cynical—he truly doesn't understand how far off the mark he is. Myers shows the label haunting Atwater's career: At the end of his life, looking over his mistakes, he is still protesting his lack of racism.

As Atwater sickens (he died at 40 of a brain tumor), McIntosh subtly lowers his performance energy. His progression toward death is a growing stillness. (Furth's only directorial slip is the image of a luridly green-lit Atwater convulsing; it's as if a moment from a cheap horror film had intruded into this austere production.)

McIntosh not only brings Atwater to crackling life, he also plays a variety of working-class people black and white, as well as David Duke, whom he depicts as a disturbingly bland, buttoned-up Nazi. Reagan, Bush, Dukakis and other notables are played—oh, how appropriately—by cardboard cutouts, whom McIntosh handles with the grace of Fred Astaire dancing with a coat rack. Michael Stepowany has designed a minimalist set—a white chair, lectern and counter against a black background. McIntosh provides all the color.

It would have been very easy either to sentimentalize Atwater or to take cheap shots at him. But "Fixin' to Die" is cool and detached about—though fascinated by—its subject and willing just to let him roll; any moral judgments are strictly up to the audience. The result is an exhilarating, appalling look at the game of politics as played by a man with a killer instinct.

Fixin' to Die: A Visit to the Mind of Lee Atwater, by Robert Myers. Directed by George Furth. Set and lights, Michael Stepowany. With the voices of Donna Sponster and Kevin McCarthy. At the Church Street Theater through Nov. 5.