

THE COMPLETE TEXT: Moisés Kaufman's *Gross Indecency*

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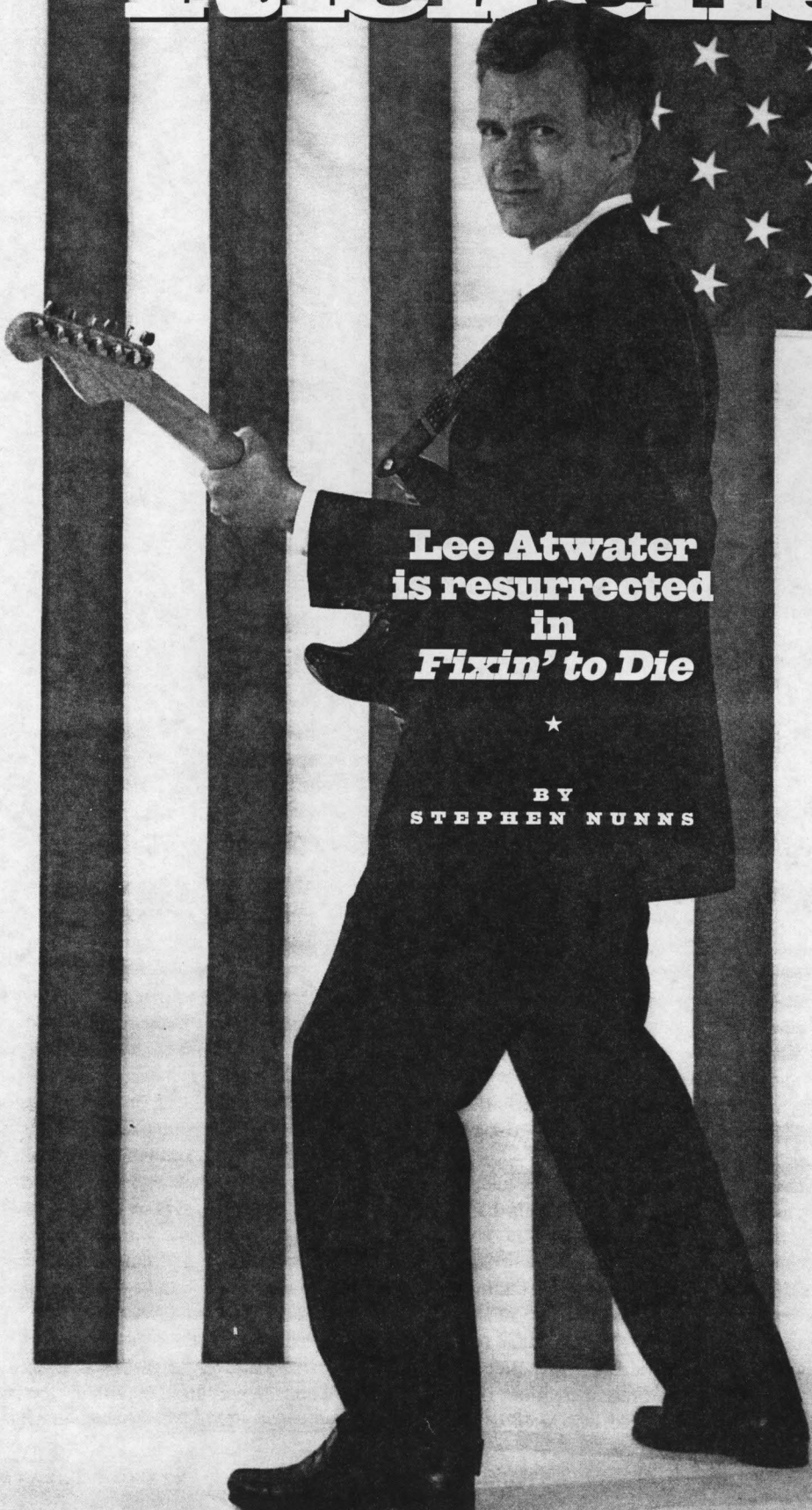
Gross Indecency
at Off-Broadway's
Minetta Lane
Theatre, and (inset)
South Africa's
Pieter-Dirk Uys as
Evita Bezuidenhout
at BAM



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The Rise and Fall
of a
**Rock
& Roll
Richelieu**



**Lee Atwater
is resurrected
in
*Fixin' to Die***

★

BY
STEPHEN NUNNS

The truth isn't pretty:
Bruce McIntosh as Atwater.

I'm sorry about many things I did," says the character from his hospital bed. "You reach a point where you don't hate anyone. You love everyone. Honestly."

Wait a minute. Is this Lee Atwater? The controversial former campaign manager for Ronald Reagan and George Bush and chairman of the Republican National Committee? The prince of sleaze? The man singularly responsible for the Republican pre-revolution?

Well, yes, at least according to *Lee Atwater: Fixin' to Die*, Robert Myers's sharp-witted one-person play based on the life of the RNC bigwig who died of a brain tumor in 1990 at the age of 40.

In case you don't remember, it was Atwater who came up with the idea of luring young, disgruntled, middle-class whites away from the Democrats. He did it by revitalizing the party of Lincoln and giving it a new, cranked-up, MTV-influenced image. Though he denied it, Atwater was largely responsible for how modern presidential campaigns are run. He used the media (the Bush campaign's infamous race-baiting Willie Horton television ad against Michael Dukakis was the strategist's idea) and attacked his work with irreverence and a rock-and-roll ferocity—which was only appropriate, considering he was a mean electric guitar player, known to jam occasionally with the likes of B.B. King and the Rolling Stones' Ron Wood. Colorful figures such as Dick Morris, James Carville and Ed Rollins might never have been possible without Atwater.

Fixin' to Die is a fact-filled, 75-minute romp through Atwater's personal and political life, from his days peddling porn movies in college, to the pinnacle of his profession when he took over the chairmanship of the RNC, to his nasty, painful death and recantation of his aggressive pit-bull techniques. Bruce McIntosh, in the

title role, turns in an alternately hilarious and horrifying performance that's part P.T. Barnum, part Buford Pusser and part Machiavelli. (Not surprisingly, *The Prince* was one of Atwater's favorite books.)

All of the classic moments are there: Atwater showing Reagan a John Cougar Mellencamp video; Atwater directing the Horton ad; Atwater coming up with Bush's "Read my lips: No new taxes" mantra ("The ironic thing is," he says, "Bush literally didn't have any lips"); Atwater calling Dukakis "a card-carrying member of the ACLU" and threatening to "strip the bark off the little bastard" and see what's underneath. And Atwater's wrath isn't relegated to his Democratic opponents. "Dan Quayle proved that 'bimbo's' not a gender-specific term," he says at one point in the play. In another he speculates that Bush must have a lover. "Barbara Bush is nice and everything," Atwater says, "but it must be like sleeping with your mother." Kitty Dukakis, on the other hand, is an attractive woman with "a nice figure." "But that's what happens when you're a speed freak for 20 years," he muses.

The truth isn't always pretty; and it's usually not very simple either. Even portrayed with warts and all, the Lee Atwater of *Fixin' to Die* is a complex, sympathetic and—dare we say it?—likable character. Partisan Dems who come to the theatre looking for a vilification of the GOP bad boy will be disappointed. "The reaction from audiences is always extraordinary," says McIntosh. "I'm constantly surprised."

The show, directed by veteran actor and Sondheim librettist George Furth, has been touring in a kind of reverse Sherman's March since 1992, when it first opened the Tamarind Theatre in Los Angeles. From there, it went on to play packed houses at the College of Charleston (after the University of South Carolina

nixed it, claiming it was a savage portrait of "a distinguished alumnus"), and the Spoleto Festival, as well as the Church Street Theatre in Washington, D.C. and the Kennedy Center for International Relations at Harvard. Finally, it played a limited run Off-Broadway last month.

"In the South," says McIntosh, "audiences have been adoring." This, in spite of the fact that the portrayal of Atwater in *Fixin' to Die* shows him

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to be at best complex and at worst racist. "There's been a sense of 'one of our southern boys made good,'" the actor continues, "but in D.C., things were different. I remember one night when a bunch of RNC guys—a whole row of men in blue suits—came to the show with this serious attitude, like 'We're gonna make sure our boy doesn't get slammed.' But after it was all over, they were coming up to us asking if we would be willing to do it as a Republican fundraiser." (For the record, they weren't.)

"On the other hand," McIntosh continues, "I've had a number of Democrats come backstage and get very angry. They think he comes off too glamorous—too charming. But that's the way he was. Even in the midst of an election, Atwater's enemies could be charmed."

Ihat kind of ambiguous audience reaction would make most playwrights gnash their teeth, but not *Fixin' to Die's* Myers. Even though his politics lean way to the left of Atwater's—"I grew up under apartheid in Atlanta," he says—the playwright recognizes that for this kind of fact-based theatre to really succeed, the key is not to try to convert the

audience, but to challenge—and, perhaps unfortunately, solidify—each member's personal prejudices. "I've learned that there's a kind of dialogue takes place between the audience and the performer," Myers says, "and it has its own very specific dynamic."

"It's a little like the movie *Patton*," he continues. "A lot of people who loved him went to see it and said, 'Yeah, that's him.' Meanwhile, other people who believed he was a despi-

cable character thought it was an accurate portrayal as well."

For his part, McIntosh thinks that the complexity is a necessary part of the process. "Look, this is important," he says. "It's not nostalgia." And it may make an audience uncomfortable. He points to a moment in the play when a worried Atwater tries to distance himself and his party from white supremacist David Duke, who in the late '80s joined the Republicans and claimed that the two main hurdles for conservatives in American politics were welfare and affirmative action. "Now look what's happened. Clinton's dismantled welfare. Affirmative action's going to the Supreme Court. These issues have become mainstream politics."

Folks who were close to Atwater (including his mother and his personal physician) as well as a number of Beltway insiders (everyone from George Stephanopolis to Ed Rollins) have seen the show and deemed it a realistic and fair portrayal. But if Atwater was still alive, what would he think? "I don't know," says McIntosh, "but I'll tell you one thing. If Atwater was still around, George Bush would have been re-elected. And I bet there'd be a Republican in the White House as we speak." **AT**