

USC booed for rejecting play

Arts circles support rendition of Atwater's political life, times

By JEFFREY DAY
Staff Writer

Theater professionals and educators have been nearly unanimous in saying that a USC official was dead wrong to bar the production of a play about the late Lee Atwater.

Jim Thigpen, director of Columbia's Trustus theater, called the university's decision "kind of scary" and "a crying shame."

"It makes people uncomfortable, but since when does

art — good art — just make people comfortable?" Thigpen said.

Keith Davis, acting dean of humanities and social sciences, characterized the play, "Fixin' To Die: Inside the Mind of Lee Atwater," as inappropriate for a school that has named a fellowship for the former political adviser to President Bush.

"It paints what one might say is a savage portrait of Lee Atwater which many people might see as unfair," Davis said.

The play will be produced by the College of Charleston this week.

See Atwater, 5A

Atwater

From 1A

"I believe the play is fairly balanced and benign," said Ed McGuire, dean of the College of Charleston's arts school. "I also don't think a university ought to take the position of not producing a play because it is savage."

Atwater, a Columbia native who died in 1991 at the age of 40, was known for his gloves-off political style. The play touches on many of Atwater's most controversial tactics and those of which he was accused. Among them:

- It repeats his threat to "scrape the bark off that little bastard," a reference to Democratic presidential candidate Michael Dukakis.

- It uses Atwater's observation that a candidate who had undergone electroconvulsive therapy had "been hooked up to jumper cables."

- It refers to anti-Semitic campaigning that took place in a congressional race and mentions allegations that House Speaker Tom Foley was homosexual. Atwater denied being behind either of those attacks.

- It mentions Atwater's actual campaign for a high school government office in which he promised to give free beer to students.

- It implies that Atwater wanted to downplay white supremacist David Duke's ties to the Ku Klux Klan and Nazis because "we don't want to cut ourselves off from his constituency."

- It portrays Atwater as planting a rumor that Republican presidential candidate John Connally's campaign was trying to "buy the black vote."

- It recounts, toward the end of the play, that Atwater is "hooked up to jumper cables."

"By saying it is 'savage,' the dean doesn't speak to whether the play is good or bad," said producer Beegie Truesdale, a Democratic party activist. "Atwater was a controversial character, but there's nothing in the play that hasn't been in The State newspaper."

"I certainly don't agree that it's negative," said the playwright, Robert Myers, in a telephone interview from New York. "It isn't ideological. . . . It paints a very complicated life so it is a complicated work. What made Lee Atwater an interesting theatrical character is that he is full of contradictions."

"When it was produced in New York, some people came expecting it to hold Lee Atwater's feet to the fire, to hold him responsible for everything bad that happened in politics during the '80s. They came away



Atwater



McIntosh

with a very different opinion," he said.

The one-man play starring Bruce McIntosh was performed to generally positive reviews in Los Angeles and New York. Truesdale, a native of South Carolina and a former executive director of the National Association of Democratic State Chairmen, wanted to have the play produced in Columbia. She talked to several theaters, but the only feasible location was USC's Longstreet Theatre.

"I'm most disappointed because that's (Columbia is) where Lee lived, and that should be the place we do it," Truesdale said.

"I think the university made a mistake," said Thigpen, whose theater was considered for a production of the play. "The primary arm of free thinking should be the university, the main university in the state."

Columbia's Workshop Theatre also discussed producing the play, but didn't have the right time slot for it.

"We really wanted to do it," said Billy DuBose, Workshop business manager, who described the play as "in your face" but not savage. "I think it's as tough as Lee Atwater's politics."

USC theater department Chairman Thorne Compton, a supporter of the play, said that given enough time, those who wanted it at USC could have prevailed.

"A lot of people were asked to make a lot of decisions very quickly," he said. "It was not rejected out of hand."

Scott Sanders, director of the South Carolina Arts Commission, said she saw nothing wrong with the university's action.

Davis said one of the university's concerns was the impact on Atwater's family. Atwater's widow, Sally, said she knew the play existed but had not read it and couldn't comment on it.

Playwright Myers currently is working on a Home Box Office movie on Atwater.

The play will be performed Wednesday through Sept. 12 at the College of Charleston's Simons Center for the Arts.