

https://www.postandcourier.com/features/hogan-in-back-to-back-productions-pure-theatre-lavishes-love-on-local-wordsmiths/article_4f47bddc-77f8-11ee-929c-3fb706b781fb.html

SUBSCRIBER EXCLUSIVE

Hogan: In back-to-back productions, Pure Theatre lavishes love on local wordsmiths

BY MAURA HOGAN MHOGAN@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

OCT 31, 2023



"Atwater" is the world premiere of Charleston playwright Fred Thompson. The work careers through the life (and afterlife) of Lee Atwater, the GOP political strategist who spent his formative years in Aiken and Columbia. David Mandel/Pure Theatre/Provided

In its two-plus decades, Pure Theater has demonstrated time and again its commitment to new writing. Its current offerings are no exception — and particularly meaningful in how closely they hit home, focusing on local talent.

In one recent week alone, the company mounted two works powered by original ways with words.

Bookish gatherings are outsize in Charleston in the coming weeks, among them Charleston Literary Festival and YALLFest. Pure takes those words, and ups the game with lights and action.

“Atwater,” the rollicking second production of their 2023-24 season is the world premiere of Charleston playwright Fred Thompson. The production is directed by Sharon Graci and runs at Cannon Street Arts Center through Nov. 18 (with simulcasts performances available along the way, as well).

The antic, edgy work careers through the life (and afterlife) of Lee Atwater, the GOP political strategist who spent his formative years in Aiken and Columbia, and rose to fame for his racial fear-mongering tactics.



CHARLESTON SCENE

Hogan: Time-traveling to 1960s Saigon with a famed author (✓), and Barbie, too)

BY MAURA HOGAN MHOGAN@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

Article link copied to clipboard

Atwater’s standout, oh-no-he-didn’t strategy were the Willie Horton ads he created while campaign manager for George H.W. Bush, leveled with extreme aggression against Democrat nominee Michael Dukakis. Adding a bit of contemporary context are details like his past partners — the likes of present-day Trump-backing players Roger Stone and Paul Manafort.

Atwater is brought to life by Brannen Daugherty, topped off with an Atwater-styled coif, fully realizing the garrulous, once cocksure strategist who finds himself at a moral crossroads of divinity and damnation. We meet him at pearly gates presided over by Saint Peter, as portrayed with fittingly authoritative heaven cred (and effective gender-blind casting) by Joy Vandervort Cobb.



"Atwater" is the world premiere of Charleston playwright Fred Thompson. The work careers through the life (and afterlife) of Lee Atwater, the GOP political strategist who spent his formative years in Aiken and Columbia. David Mandel/Pure Theatre/Provided

It's judgment day, and Peter weighs the so-framed difficult decision on Atwater's possible release from purgatory to heaven, Atwater's biography is fed to us piecemeal — the dates of his birth and death, fine points of his resume and known personality traits, too — and the factors that come together to make him "the godfather of the current American political culture."

At the same time, Atwater is forever lured by Satan, as realized by an impishly menacing Camille Lowman. Because, as Peter plainly spells it out, the strategist indulged in a "prideful, egotistic life, unremitting intentional, joyous invocation of a torrent of lying, greed, covetousness, envy, taking pleasure at other's distress, unfettered ambition."

So Atwater, it would seem, has some explaining to do. And he's one bad decision away eternal damnation, accessible through elevator doors that open to a glowing red box on Richard Heffner's simple, service set.

But this work is more charged satire than morality play, and the evening merrily, madly spins out in a slim 90 minutes.



"Atwater" is the world premiere of Charleston playwright Fred Thompson. The work careers through the life (and afterlife) of Lee Atwater, the GOP political strategist who spent his formative years in Aiken and Columbia. David Mandel/Pure Theatre/Provided

It's a clipped, readily digestible foray into a son of South Carolina who laid the groundwork for what is now standard operating procedure in politics today. There's the special sauce in American culture of its homegrown roots, which are regularly traced back to this state, and vividly so with a no-holds-barred live production.

Forget the French adage “Cherchez la femme,” or “Look for the woman,” when it comes to finding the source of shenanigans. As Thompson delights in pointing out through his spirited stage play, “Cherchez the South Carolinian” may prove more apt.



FEATURES

Hogan: Charleston audiences get a ‘Clue’ with vim, vigor and candlestick

BY MAURA HOGAN MHOGAN@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

If the character Atwater can read like a particularly testosterone-powered proposition, Pure also offered ballast on Oct. 24. That’s when it joined fierce female forces with @HotInCharleston, the online community commandeered by writer Kerri Devine, to together champion a swell of local writerly talent gathered under one gender.

The showcase was “Midlife Monologues,” which ran two performances over a single evening that represented women of every decade and generation. In monologues, songs and even a live painting, they offered candid — at times comedic and other times raw — insights on the singular, often bracing plight of feminine transitions, in particular those hovering around menopause.



Kerri Devine, essayist and Founder of @HotInCharleston, a midlife community. Green Cat Photography/Provided

Absorbing cross-disciplinary program joined Charleston women including vocal artists, painters, poets and journalists, who serenaded, recited, reeled and quipped, lifting the veil on seldom-spoken truths of the female variety.

Local writer Stephanie Hunt raged against getting “ma’amed,” equating it to getting maimed. Devine delivered a self-deprecating confession on menopausal moments in a Hobby Lobby. Charleston poet laureate Asiah Mae trained her charisma on her poem “Becoming,” while essayist Cinelle Barnes mined the pains and pressures of a “recovering good girl.” The uterus was center stage, with Vandervort Cobb reciting poet Barbara Hagerty’s deftly penned “Requiem for My Uterus.” Barbie got play through another work read by Graci.

A highlight was a work by Melissa Falcon-Field, “The Snoop Dog,” that sends up her mother’s nosy inclinations while revealing the maternal fears behind them, seamlessly guiding the audience from chuckles to pathos.

Bookended musical performances by Jasmine Commerce and Sorelle serenaded audience members, who were also treated to a live painting session with Anne Darby Parker capturing the female form in real time on stage, prompting poses from her model, her daughter Amelia Parker.

The two productions differed significantly, but together illustrated that Charleston artists have plenty to say, and some impressive skill in saying it, too, with ongoing encouragement of Pure. And to all I say, “Write on.”



CHARLESTON SCENE

Hogan: NYC auction house now in Charleston displaying thousand-to-million-dollar art

BY MAURA HOGAN MHOGAN@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

Follow Maura Hogan on Twitter at [@msmaurahogan](#).

MORE INFORMATION

Hogan: Charleston Literary Fest Q&A with Martin Puchner, a ‘Culture’ vulture

Classical Happenings: A noteworthy November for Charleston

Hogan: My beautifully bookish fall abides — on a coming Friday with Mitch Albom

Hogan: For a convergence of contemporary Southern artists, head soon to Lake City

MAURA HOGAN

Maura Hogan is the arts critic at The Post and Courier. She has previously written about arts, culture and lifestyle for The New York Times, Gourmet, Garden & Gun, among other publications.

Article link copied to clipboard