

Too risqué for Bush's NEA

This nationally known theater producer, who campaigned for George Bush in 2000, says an offer to help run the National Endowment for the Arts was rescinded by the Administration because his work—including a show about “ex-gays”—was politically unacceptable
by Gary Cole

I was about to start the perfect job. My twin passions were theater and Republican politics, so how could I top running the \$60 million annual grants program at the National Endowment for the Arts? I had spent over 20 years convincing disbelieving arts enthusiasts and GOP partisans alike that the soul of an artist and the heart of a Republican could exist within one person. Now I had the chance to play out this incongruous love triangle on a national stage.

I never imagined that it would end so abruptly.

I caught the theater bug in college, then I went on to act in eight plays while at Stanford Law School, followed by another four while an attorney at the Central Intelligence Agency. A minor role in the Iran-Contra scandal sparked an idea for a play that I completed while in private practice in Portland, Ore. I founded a nonprofit theater company that produced my play and over a dozen others, and I built an acclaimed new theater.

I ultimately left a successful Portland law practice to start a company that captured dynamic contemporary theater productions on digital video. That company, StageDirect, should have been my strongest credential for a senior position with the NEA. Instead, it proved to be my undoing at the hands of my former friends in the Bush administration.

My service to the Republican Party dates back to 1980 when I volunteered for George H.W. Bush. In Portland, I worked at the grassroots level on numerous campaigns before becoming an early backer of Gordon Smith, who succeeded fellow Oregon moderate Mark Hatfield in the U.S. Senate. My prowess as a fund-raiser for Senator Smith led to the post of finance chair for the Republican Victory 2000 effort in Oregon.

I recognized that this dual allegiance to the arts and the GOP was an odd relationship, but I saw no inconsistency. My Republicanism had a twisted genesis, ranging from rebellion against my bleeding heart mother to revulsion for the Democratic Daley machine hacks of my suburban Chicago boyhood to reverence for that first Republican president, Honest Abe.

But what really sold me on the GOP were two fundamental values: personal liberty and responsibility, which I have always considered to be at the heart of artistic creation. My home in the art world has been the small theater, where the actors are within an arm's length of the audience and every gesture is exposed for all to see. The artist has no choice but to accept responsibility for his work. Government's obligation is to offer the liberty that allows artists to create according to the dictates of their art and enjoy that freedom from government interference that is the rallying cry of all Republicans.

The mission of the theater company I founded, CoHo Productions, is grounded in liberty and responsibility. We invite theater artists to propose plays to us that they've written or longed to act in or direct. With CoHo I have demonstrated that not only was there no contradiction between my devotion to the arts and Republican politics, but that the two could flourish in tandem. And with StageDirect I have earned national media attention for bringing exciting new theater to a broader audience. So when the Bush administration offered me the deputy chairmanship for grants and awards at the NEA last year, I was ecstatic. No position could have better deployed the talents I'd spent the last 20 years developing.

Then, three days after the Administration extended the offer, they suddenly withdrew it, without explanation. I was told by my Oregon Republican contacts that the NEA pulled the offer because of two nationally acclaimed shows filmed by StageDirect—one dealing with the movement to convert gays and lesbians to heterosexuality and the other featuring a cartoon-type title character whose name included a four-letter word. These plays could hardly be characterized as beyond the pale, having been favorably reviewed by *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, but they apparently ventured outside the Administration's narrow realm of political acceptability.

I was stunned and sick. I had seen that a full-time arts commitment was certainly no prerequisite for a senior-level position in the Bush NEA. My primary NEA contacts were the director of the Office of Congressional and White House Liaison, Ann Guthrie Hingston, and the senior deputy chair, Eileen Mason, both of whom were longtime Washington apparatchiks, not professional arts people.

Too risqué for Bush's NEA, cont'd.

As I came to grips with having been thrown from the Washington train by Bush, I had the realization that the inclusive unifier I had campaigned for was actually the smug jackass so loathed by my colleagues in the arts. I had expected that a second President Bush would govern as an enlightened conservative, guided by a Texas populism that was tempered by his family's eastern establishment history. He would not pander to the right as his father had done because he would not need to, as he was one of them. Yet he would not hesitate to display the compassion that his campaign so ballyhooed, and yes, the sophistication that was his Ivy League heritage.

I appear to have made a slight political miscalculation. I neglected to anticipate that anything smacking of the culturally adventurous would be sacrificed by the Bush-Rove axis on the altar of the GOP base. In makeup, base is a bland substance applied to the skin that enables more daring colors to be presented above. But in this administration it has come to completely and utterly define the palette.

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