

ARTLESS: THE ODYSSEY OF A REPUBLICAN CULTURAL CREATIVE

by Gary D. Cole

Remember that supposed truism that all American theatre artists are liberals? Here's a news flash: It's not true. For those who find the idea of a Republican cultural creative morally repugnant, even oxymoronic, meet Gary D. Cole. His unforgettably honest and eye-opening memoir, *Artless*, is an engrossing encounter with how the other half, if you will, creates, thinks, lives, and loves.

Without rhetoric or apology, Cole presents himself as what he is: a Republican, more moderate than his party at present, who has pursued acting, writing plays, and producing in addition to his work as an attorney, first for the CIA, later in private practice. It wasn't about moonlighting: When Cole discovered his love of acting in college, he kept at it; when he succumbed to the playwriting bug, he wrote a play and didn't rest until he saw it produced. He did it, by the way, after leaving the Beltway for Oregon, where he ultimately gave up a lucrative law-firm position—and growing stature in state Republican politics—to create a commercial theatre-producing outfit that also sold recorded versions of its shows on the Internet.

Cole's story is about struggling to reconcile disparate worlds: how his CIA colleagues couldn't fathom his performing sideline; how his GOP colleagues flummoxed him by adopting extreme right-wing positions that contradicted, he felt, bedrock conservative philosophy. Still, Cole played the game well enough to be offered, early in President Bush's second term, a plum job at the National Endowment for the Arts, where he would oversee the disbursement of more than \$16 million annually. At last this maverick artist, this compassionate conservative, had reached the mountaintop, right? But then there's the climax: Back in Oregon, Cole mounted Jeff Goode's play *Poona the Fuckdog*, and its title alone was enough for the Karl Rove-driven White House to derail Cole's NEA employment before his name could go on an office door. A stunning read, *Artless* is not a plea for sympathy, even as his party effectively fails him at a critical moment.

There's much art in *Artless*, whether Cole is recalling his youth as a nonpracticing Jew in the Midwest or pondering his current job running the nonprofit Theater of the American South in rural Wilson, N.C. He's also the kind of man I'd vote for. Not because he favors the arts, not because his values fit perfectly with my own, but because unpretentious self-reflection in American politics is a rare commodity nowadays. It's as rare as telling the truth.

Reviewed by Leonard Jacobs