

A Republican in the arts

Sunday, June 25, 2006
MARC MOHAN

They say that politics is showbiz for ugly people, but it might be truer that showbiz is politics for liberal people. At least in the popular consciousness, creative types often tilt unapologetically leftward. This disregards the success of such conservatives as Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Ron Silver, but then again, no one ever accused them of being especially creative.

The notion of a "Republican cultural creative" might seem contradictory at best and schizophrenic at worst, but that's exactly how ex-Portlander Gary D. Cole bills himself on the front cover of his memoir, "Artless." And yet, in the course of relating his unique odyssey through the halls of power and the theater spaces of Stumptown, he proves that such a beast can and does exist, challenging preconceptions held by both the left and the right.

In 2003, Cole, after several years laboring in the disparate trenches of Portland's theater world and its Republican political circles, was offered the position of deputy chairman for grants and awards at the National Endowment for the Arts. Long story short: The offer was abruptly withdrawn because of the risque nature of some of his theater work, which he had been upfront about during the application process. To Cole, this betrayal confirmed his worst suspicions about the nature of the Bush administration and the intolerant bent of the Republican Party in recent years.

It's this event that prompted Cole to write a memoir, but after an appearance in the book's first chapter, the matter is dropped for a couple hundred pages. Instead, Cole spins the fairly fascinating story of how he came to be this mythical chimera, a Republican in the arts. It starts in Berkeley, Calif., in 1980, where he sees Jimmy Carter as "a nice, well-meaning man who was hopelessly out of his depth dealing with an international crisis in Iran and an economy wracked by gasoline shocks . . ." (Sound familiar?)

After graduating from Stanford Law School, where his love of stagecraft also flourished, Cole took a job in the CIA and had a peripheral contact with the Iran/Contra scandal, then segued into a prosperous legal career. In 1990, he and his wife moved to Portland, where his dual-track life continued. "Artless" moves

back and forth between Cole's efforts to stage plays through the newly established CoHo Productions, his efforts on behalf of Republican candidates and his legal work.

Local theater buffs will find plenty of familiar turf here, as Cole's ambitions expand to include a company, StageDirect, formed to make and market quality video presentations of live theater. Meanwhile, CoHo churned out several Drammy Award-winning productions. Political animals will get an insider's view as Cole meets Bob Packwood (an eventual bridge partner), Gordon Smith and Craig Berkman.

Throughout, Cole makes it clear that he sees himself as "a Gordon Smith Republican . . . smart, sophisticated, open-minded, and religious without being dogmatic." He decries the rising influence of Christian fundamentalism on the party, while still insisting that it's the proper place for someone who believes that the arts function best with a minimum of government interference or support. Believing that George W. Bush, like his father, was relatively free from the influence of the far right, Cole signed on as the finance chair in Oregon for the 2000 campaign.

The rest, in essence, is history. When two of StageDirect's productions, one gay-themed, the other with an unprintable title, proved to apparently be enough to torpedo Cole's opportunity to serve an administration he had worked to put in place, his disillusionment is manifest. To his (and his book's) credit, this is not an angry screed but rather a sad realization that the party he believed in was no longer his, taken over by Christian zealots whose actions have more than a whiff of anti-Semitism to the Jewish Cole.

It would be a shame if "Artless" was tagged as yet another Bush-bashing book and lumped in with the hundreds of others. While it's valuable as a look at one Republican's disappointment at his party's hijacking, it's even more useful as an example to those on both sides of the cultural divide that individuals can be much more complex than mere ideology allows.

Marc Mohan regularly reviews movies and books for The Oregonian.

© 2006 The Oregonian. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.