

Preface to the Dramatists Play Service published edition of *Daisy* by Sean Devine

Sean Devine has written a powerful play about a remarkable moment in history—a moment so decisive that one 30-second television commercial could determine the direction of a country. To this day, that commercial, the “Daisy” spot, is studied, argued over, and talked about 53 years after it aired—just once.

The play is *Daisy*.

One of the play’s central characters is a man named Tony Schwartz. I knew the real Tony.

Tony Schwartz was a genius.

And yes, that word gets thrown around a lot. As the joke goes, “If your hairdresser is a genius, where does that leave Mozart?”

But Tony was a genius. There was always a sense, when you were with him, of the questions and theories that were swirling around in his mind. It felt as if some floodgate was barely holding back the ideas and puzzles that delighted him. And they would spill out with wonderful energy.

Tony was human. He could be irascible. He could be impatient with those who refused to listen or who didn’t want to understand. He was turning communications theory upside down. And there were a lot of people who didn’t like that. But Tony was also as gentle a soul as anyone I’ve ever met.

Tony was agoraphobic. As far as Tony was concerned, in a perfect world, he would never have stepped outside his house or, at the very least left the familiarity of his own New York City neighborhood. Anywhere beyond that, there were dragons.

He would walk. He literally invented the portable tape recorder so he could walk through his neighborhood, recording all of its sounds— its reality—and his.

I had bragging rights to say I’d actually walked down a city street with Tony. We left his house and walked two blocks. And then we7 walked back. I can remember every step. And Tony would have too. He was listening. He was always listening.

I remember Tony once admonished me for believing the rumor that he had never left Manhattan. “I left once,” he said to me. Then he added, “I won’t do THAT again.” And I’m pretty sure he didn’t.

In 1964, the team from DDB in charge of advertising for President Lyndon Johnson’s election campaign came to Tony’s home and studio in Hell’s Kitchen. They were seeking Tony’s help. Some didn’t think they needed it.

Tony gave them a brilliant idea and a road map to create what is now considered the most powerful political ad ever made.

There have always been differences over who did what to produce that ad. But if anyone could do a DNA test on the “Daisy” ad, Tony Schwartz’s DNA is all over it. The use of a child’s voice; the innocent and hesitant count of the daisy petals, turning into the ominous male voice’s countdown, and most of all, the use of Tony’s unique theory, the Responsive Chord.

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The “Daisy” ad played just one time, yet its effect on the Goldwater campaign was devastating. It touched a true chord in the American public that was already there. It elicited a response against Goldwater’s admitted potential use of nuclear weapons in the Vietnam war, without needing to mention Goldwater’s name.

Tony’s Responsive Chord theory held that the message of any commercial is created by the audience, not the commercial itself. In the “Daisy” commercial, presidential candidate Barry Goldwater is never mentioned. Tony told me that if Goldwater’s name been spoken the spot would have not worked. Instead, Tony understood the audience would create the message themselves and fill in the name.

In his play Daisy, Sean Devine has pulled off something that seems effortless, but in fact is extremely rare and hard to do. Devine has created characters that actually existed in history. That’s never easy, and hard to do well. Yet these characters come to life, ring true, and make us want to hear more.

It’s history. We know how it all turns out. Yet this playwright makes us want to find out how it all turns out. That’s a bit of magic. And why we go to the theatre. And why we read plays.

Each time I read the play and come across one of Tony’s lines, I say to myself, “Yes. That’s Tony. That’s exactly what Tony would say and how he would sound.” And that’s not at all easy to accomplish.

I’m grateful and honored to have this opportunity to give back something of what Tony meant to me. I’m proud of my reputation for having trained a great number of the next generation of Democratic media consultants, and that is due to what Tony did for me, and how he taught me.

Have fun. It’s a good story.

—Joe Slade White
East Aurora, New York
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