



Interview with Daisy playwright Sean Devine

As a Canadian, what triggered your interest in the American 1964 Presidential election and the Daisy ad?

This play represents the intersection of so many things that I'm curious about. As a Canadian, it's hard not to be intrigued about America. You're the giant that we live next to. And although we share much in common, we are quite different.

I've always been curious about the theatrical and manipulative nature of politics and elections. There's something noble about crafting an ideal that we can cast our votes for. But when you begin to see how much science goes into designing every element of that ideal, into designing and packing the charismatic figurehead at the forefront of that ideal, it starts to feel less genuine. It's storytelling, at the highest level.

DAISY was born from working my way through a bibliography back in 2003. I was doing a lot of reading about campaigns, and the role of political advisors. I was reading about Karl Rove, an advisor to President George W. Bush. I was not a fan of Karl Rove, but had a fearful respect for how influential persons like he could become. I found this book called "The Duping of the American Voter" which was about dishonesty and deception in political advertising. There was a chapter on the 1964 election, and how the "Daisy Girl" ad played a central role in helping LBJ advance his plans to get elected and covertly escalate his plans for military action in Vietnam.

Then I learned about Tony Schwartz, the agoraphobic media guru who had helped create the "Daisy Girl" ad. Tony became a central character in the play, and I eventually met him and became close to his family. But it was Tony's own book "The Responsive Chord" that finally pushed me to write the play. This book changed the nature of politics and advertising, as it laid out Tony's revolutionary "resonance principle" about how advertising can trigger voter actions using fears and beliefs that already exist in the voter. When I learned that "The Responsive Chord" was on the Favorite Books List of none other than Karl Rove, that was it. There was something inherently dangerous in here, and I had to write a play about it.

How do you think this "attack" type of advertising influences the public in daily life decisions and receiving information other than elections?

I've got contrasting opinions on that. "Daisy Girl" represented a new kind of advertising that not only harnessed Tony Schwartz's "resonance principle", but ushered in the Creative Revolution in advertising, led by the Doyle Dane Bernbach ad agency depicted in the play. Everything changed, and everyone in advertising took notice: in commerce as well as in politics.

People who wanted to sell their product or get their person elected began to realize just how much psychology was involved in influencing the decision-making process. With so much at stake, there was so much to be learned. A current trend in this field is "behavioral insights", which is a practice employed by governments to steer human behaviour through the power of suggestion, rather than heavy-handed laws. People can be "nudged" to make better choices while maintain the semblance of freedom of choice.

And so, the optimist in me hopes that this creative psychology can be used to help steer society in positive ways, since individuals frequently have a way of mucking it up.

My inner cynic sees things differently. I think "attack" ads and all the negative messaging we see in our political processes has left such a sour taste that our trust in public institutions has eroded and we've dis-engaged from the process entirely.

But my personal optimism-versus-cynicism battle swings on a pendulum. And if the world has been in a bleak place for a while, I see signs of us coming out of it in a better way.

Do you think “attack” ads can serve a beneficial purpose in some situations?

Yes, certainly. But what’s beneficial is completely subjective. And we can only know if an ad has been beneficial once the consequences of the ad’s impact are fully realized. Recent attack ads like the one created by Project Liberty on President Trump’s response to COVID will likely have an impact on voting him out of office, but not all Americans will see that as beneficial. And if Trump is beaten and his supporters feel that he was “attacked” out of office, get ready for the consequences.

When an ad’s sole purpose is to elicit a negative impression about a person, thing, or issue, then it helps if society is generally in agreement about how we feel about that subject. Tony Schwartz created a very subtle and universally-acclaimed “attack” ad which was an anti-smoking message aimed at making parents who smoke feel guilty about the risks their children were subjected to. That ad served a clearly beneficial purpose. When we are not in general agreement on how we as a society feel about the person, thing, or issue, then the ad that attacks that figure will cause mobilization in some, and dangerous defensiveness in others. That’s precisely the case in politics.

Do you think “attack” ads actually change people’s minds?

Rarely, if ever. But I don’t believe that “attack” ads are meant to change minds. They’re meant to mobilize action. The percentage of voters whose minds are changed over the course of any election is quite slim. The greatest challenge of any campaign is to get your voters to show up and cast a ballot. That’s what ads are good at. They’re brief, expertly-crafted messages whose purpose is to get you off your butt on election day.

That said, I do believe in the power of campaigns to shift voters’ positions, and to change minds. But this comes from other mechanisms. It comes from platforms. It comes from listening to candidates and their surrogates. It comes from talking to friends and neighbors. It comes from debates. It comes over time.

What do you hope the audience takes from this production?

Honestly, because of all that’s happened and changed with COVID-19, it’s hard for me to answer this question in terms of my play. Rather, I’m thinking about the experience of simply gathering in a theatre again. There’s been so much discussion lately about how theatre must fundamentally change due to the pandemic. And while I respect the conversation, I rebel against it. The essential nature of what theatre is and how it functions has hardly changed in the more than 2,500 years since the Ancient Greeks.

What does it mean when we sit in a room with our fellow citizens and react collectively to a story being told about our current political state? When we laugh in unison, or recoil together in shock. It means that we may have found consensus. It means that we can leave the building on common ground. But what happens when we don’t share the same reactions? It means that we can have these different positions, we can exist on different poles, but we can also share space together in a respectful manner. We can sit elbow-elbow and have different opinions on who’s the hero and who’s the villain, and that it’s okay.