

DAVID COPLEY RIP

David Copley was by no means a friend of mine and it's safe to say we disagreed about any number of things politically, though we never discussed that very much when we worked together. Hearing of his death, Tuesday evening 11/20 in a car accident that it seems was likely preceded by a heart attack, I was moved enough to put some thoughts down as a remembrance of this very strange and terribly shy man.

In 1996, San Diego hosted the Republican Convention (nominating Dole and Kemp to run against Clinton's reelection - that seems such a distant memory now...). It was the tradition for the main newspaper of the town to host a party for all the of various press organizations coming to town for the convention, and as David was, along with his mother, the head of Copley Newspapers, who owned the Union-Tribune, David was in charge of the party. I got a call from Alan Levey, former managing director of La Jolla Playhouse, who was essentially producing the party for David - they were planning an enormous fireworks display with the Grucci family, over the bay near the Embarcadero, they asked if I might be willing to help put a 20-minute medley together. Putting together a 20-minute firework/musical medley for the press party at the Republican Convention - well, that's not a gig I get asked to do very often (haven't been asked since, interestingly), so I said I'd be happy to meet with David.

The Grucci's wanted to use their usual favorites - lots of STAR WARS, CLOSE ENCOUNTERS, and some Sousa etc. David was hoping to make it more unusual and eclectic. Alan told me David would be open to any ideas I might have, and not to be thrown by his shyness. I knew David was a very generous donor to the playhouse and every other major arts organization in town - the Copley name was and still is omnipresent (Copley Symphony Hall, et al). I met Alan and David at the Copley office in La Jolla. David was obese. He chain-smoked. He shook my hand tentatively and spoke quietly. His shyness was almost painful to experience; he was clearly sort of terrified of me (and it is weird, in a word, to sense that a conservative multi-millionaire Republican is scared of you).

David was clearly unhappy with the STAR WARS medley - I suggested, given that he and I likely had different political points of view, nonetheless the event was a celebration of freedom of the press, freedom of thought, and that was something we both could easily agree on, and the music/songs should celebrate that. He liked that idea (he might have even been charmed, Alan thought so). His office had a lot of CD's, review copies and his own collection - he told me to take whatever I wanted, and between his collection and mine, I put together a medley (pre pro-tools and laptops, by the way) that included Laibach, Hendrix, James Taylor, Samuel Barber, Orff, Wagner, Ethiopian Women singers, Koto drums, and Bob Marley - David especially liked that, it was his Bob Marley CD. We sent the medley to the Grucci's. They asked us to change most of it back to STAR WARS etc., and it became clear we all had to meet, so we hopped on the Copley private jet and flew cross country to negotiate. Quite a gig.

We stayed at the St. Regis - at dinner, David got quite drunk and loosened up - he laughed a lot, told me he was very happy that I was working on the party, and the next morning we drove out to the Grucci compound in Stonybrook (imagine a lower echelon Corleone-family compound, with slightly less-lethal explosions) to talk through the medley. We negotiated every minute of music, they clearly didn't like the more political stuff like Marley and even the Taylor song ("Shed a Little Light," great song) - and also liked the idea of using music that they'd already designed fireworks for - less work for them. David in each case said he preferred what we had come up with, especially the Marley, and he was the producer, and so we won each point.

The event happened a few months later (just to be clear, there were no Republican politicians at the party - Bob Dole was not there . . . Eleanor Clift and Paula Zahn, for example, were). There are no rehearsals for this sort of thing, it just happens. The Grucci's in the end were great and gracious, the main firework designer said he was glad we had stuck to our guns and challenged them, they thought it was one of the best programs they'd done, and it was pretty cool. David was very grateful, and in the years that followed I saw him rarely - he generously supported my self-produced recording of my opera THEIR THOUGHT AND BACK AGAIN. The last time I saw him was post-heart transplant - he was a lot thinner, and did not look terribly well - he said hi in his quiet way.

Some are born great, some achieve greatness, some have greatness thrust upon 'em. Malvolio's observation notwithstanding, I remember thinking that David was born not great at all, but into enormous wealth and privilege and even a bit of power eventually, none of which was he very comfortable with, as he seemed so uncomfortable with himself. The arts in San Diego and elsewhere have clearly benefited from him. On the other hand, I remember hearing him once referred to as a "fat fop" - cruel, it made me cringe a bit, but probably, and painfully, not completely inaccurate (especially for those who never met him at all).

And so it goes - a strange sad and interesting fellow, I'm glad that I had the chance to work with him. RIP.