

critic's notebook

High Anxiety

Peering over the edge at the Humana Festival

By Celia Wren

Culture means vertigo—that was the dominant message at Actors Theatre of Louisville in February and March. The works showcased at the 23rd annual Humana Festival of New American Plays, under the leadership of artistic director Jon Jory, depicted characters poised on tiny ledges of knowledge and practice—the art of cockfighting, or the science of Baptist ministry in Texas, or the spooky habits of computer hackers—overlooking the abyss where our common ground falls away. Audiences, too, could sense the possibility of free-fall, as Actors Theatre challenged conventions of dramatic form with plays on T-shirts, a play in a car and plays over telephone lines.

Of all cultural precipices, the most precarious may be theatre itself—a fact amply demonstrated by *Cabin Pressure*, Anne Bogart and the SITI Company's fascinating meditation on actor/audience relations. Based on a year's worth of interviews with Louisville theatregoers, this provocative work cartwheeled through the Big Questions that flummox thespians, administrators and critics. What is the magic of live action on a stage? What do the spectators contribute? Why do we bother with theatre in the first place?

Simulated panel discussions morphed into parodies of genres and scripts—from melodrama to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* to a *Mousetrap*-pastiche with spoken stage directions. With its wry allusions to tradition and theory ("Drama is a post-lapsarian form..."), *Cabin Pressure* catered to theatre professionals. But the physical expressiveness of the five-person cast, under Bogart's direction, kept the piece visually arresting and often hilarious, whether the actors were mincing about in Louis XIV costume, tossing artificial

snow or conducting a hyper-stagy Parisian tea party, bathed in candy-colored light.

A different kind of theatre—sturdily traditional drama—was on view at David Rambo's *God's Man in Texas*, in which an idealistic young preacher is picked to be second-in-command at a Baptist mega-ministry. Scurrying between televised services, AA meetings and the Women's Ministry Weight-Loss Jello Jubilee, the increasingly disillusioned hero finds himself caught up in a vicious power struggle. While limning rituals that, to most of us, will seem exotic—staged conversions, congregations monitored by "fidger factor," sermons that begin in the makeup room—Rambo manages, impressively, to avoid disparaging religion itself. His characters' sincerity is never in doubt, even as they founder on the slippery ethical ground of big-business religion.

The tight structure and controlled pacing of *God's Man* met its opposite in Naomi Iizuka's sprawling *Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls*. Iizuka's vision of discontinuity and rootlessness in the global village rises to a wackiness of near-hysterical dimensions. After kicking off with the image of a komodo dragon pinara, the play proceeds to twine around a python, tattoos, a hold-up in a pet store, a florist in Alaska, surfboards in Hawaii, the seer Tiresias and a man who turns into a lizard. The looping paths of the characters (including an airline steward, a hula dancer and Demi Moore's personal assistant) cross and recross so many times that a bird's-eye view would look like a Jackson Pollock painting.

Detractors will blame *Aloha* for self-indulgence but the play's zany shapelessness does have a purpose: to express the fragmentation and confusion of modern life. "I don't believe in fate," one character aptly remarks. "I think everything is kind of random." Fate once



Dallas Roberts as a computer hacker in Arthur Kopit's *Y2K*.

meant social coherence and a sense of place. These days, we have airports.

Of course, the Internet is wreaking yet more havoc with our notions of community, as Arthur Kopit points out in *Y2K*. This paranoid portrait of cyberterrorism introduces a dapper New York editor and a grungy, super-sinister computer hacker who broods around the play's action, gloating in high-tech jargon. Gradually the two lives intersect, as Kopit demonstrates—for anyone who has spent the last few years in a sensory-deprivation tank—that you jeopardize privacy and security by going online. *Y2K* ends on a piquantly dystopian note, but, despite its thriller-issue plot, is slack and a little dull en route.

Other Humana offerings that did not quite realize their full potential included Richard Dresser's car play *What Are You Afraid Of?*, which put rather generic characters in the driver's (and passenger's) seat. Of the 10-minute plays by writers under 30, the high points were Brooke Berman's nightmarish *Dancing with a Devil*, about rape, and Matt Pelfrey's taut *Drive Angry*, which used street-poetry riffs to study the relationship between two disaffected young men.

As for the phone and T-shirt plays—perhaps we'd better stick to more traditional formats. Theatres are less prone to credit-card fraud, and they don't shrink in the wash. **AT**