

ENTERTAINMENT

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In Louisville, theater happens anywhere you find it

By Jeffrey Borak
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LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Anne Bogart's remarkable theater piece, "Cabin Pressure," clearly one of the high points of the Actors Theatre of Louisville's 23rd annual Humana Festival of New American Plays, actually begins while the audience is in the lobby waiting to enter the most intimate of ATL's three performing spaces — the 159-seat Victor Jory Theatre. Providing background to the hum of conversation in the lobby, speakers mounted high on the lobby walls convey the sounds of a performance in progress. It is as though we are latecomers.

Sure enough, as the audience enters the theater, there are four actors on the stage, members of Bogart's SITI Company (Ellen Lauren, Kelly Maurer, Will Bond and Stephen Webber — veterans of the now-defunct StageWest in Springfield, who are joined later by Barney O'Hanlon) are performing a truncated version of Bogart's interpretation of Noel Coward's "Private Lives," which she presented at ATL a few seasons ago.

The performance unfolds as if it were a continuing loop, repeating itself until the audience is seated, the lights dim and "Cabin Pressure" moves on to other things.

"Cabin Pressure" is not, of course, about Noel Coward — or Edward Albee (whose "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" shows up in "Cabin Pressure's" extended epilogue) or any of the other theater styles that weave their way through this inventive, probing piece. "Cabin Pressure" is about the creative process and, more importantly, how the audience fits into that process. The questions "Cabin Pressure" asks, directly and indirectly, have to do with mystique of theater and the ways in which audience and artists can bridge the gulf created by that mystique.

At one point, "Cabin Pressure" goes backstage during a performance, capturing the nervous tension and ties that feed, in one way or another, an actor's craft. But "Cabin Pressure" is mostly concerned with audience. At more than one point in this piece, Bogart focuses on audience attitudes, their questions and concerns, their inability to express what they are thinking, how they feel about what they have seen. She pokes fun at audience behavior in a theater, at audience mannerisms — facial expression, body language — without condescension. And while all this is going on a small stage that is surrounded on three sides by an audience, the gulf between

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Bogart's idiosyncratic style and her audience is bridged in exhilarating ways.

In a sense, "Cabin Pressure" was emblematic of this year's festival. In his 30th year as ATL's producing director, Jon Jory seemed to share Bogart's fascination with the dynamics of the relationship between actor and audience.

In this festival, you could sit in the back seat of an old town car, parked alongside the curb in front of the theater, with two other people and watch while, in the front seat, two performers, one male, one female, performed a clever, witty 15-minute play by Richard Dresser.

You could stand at any one of five telephone booths in the upper lobby and spend three-minutes eavesdropping on the lives of a variety of characters.

You could even create a play by putting on any one of six T-shirts (they were on sale for \$20 apiece) and encourage people walking behind you to read — aloud or themselves — any one of the texts by Wendy Wasserstein, Tony Kushner, David Henry Hwang, Jane Martin, Mac Wellman, or Naomi Wallace printed on the back. If you didn't want to wear a play or plays, you could read them to yourselves from large posters in the lobby.

Theater, Jory seemed to be saying, need not be confined to a dark room filled with strangers who have come together for a few hours. Theater is both a shared and an intensely personal, intimate experience.

Intimacy and privacy are precisely what are at stake in the highlight of the festival, Arthur Kopit's chilling, profoundly unsettling "Y2K," which was presented in ATL's 318-seat arena theater, the Bingham.

The title has less to do with a calendar date than with the symbolic connotations of that date — the threat of computer holocaust, a complete breakdown of society, at the turn of the millennium.

For Joseph Elliot (Graeme Malcolm) and his wife, Joanne Summerhays Elliot (Lucinda Faraldo), the future is now. Joseph is an editor at Random House. Joanne has a snug, well-paying job at Sotheby's. But their comfortable life and marriage is about to be pulled apart by a young sociopath (Dallas Roberts) who poses under a variety of names.

The play begins in almost Pinteresque fashion with Joseph whisked away to an

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abandoned warehouse by two

FBI agents (played by Fred Major and Thomas Lyons) who ask what seem to Joseph to be a bizarre series of questions. It is not the last he will see of them. As their periodic questioning continues, the net of their inquiry widens to include Joanne. What begins on a preposterous note is transformed into a nightmare of the worst kind, in which the life Joseph and Joanne have been living together is turned into a fiction, replaced by a shocking fiction that has been made reality through the cunning of a twisted, extremely talented hacker who uses cyberspace to make his dark, self-absorbed fantasy come true.

"Y2K" has a lot to say about illusion and reality, about deception and trust, about how

vulnerable our lives are in high-tech age.

Working with a remarkably gifted cast, Bob Balaban's reaction was virtually flawless, particularly as he negotiated play's tricky stylistic and matic currents. What begins comedy of the darkest sort comes, by the end, Kafkaesque at a pitch not even Kafka could have anticipated.

The mix at this year's festival was top-notch. At the opposite of the here, the "Cabin Pressure" Richard Dresser's imaginative and witty car play, "What You Afraid Of?" were Naizuka's interminable "Al Say the Pretty Girls," which tracks 11 insufferable thirty-underthirtysomethings from New York to Hawaii and Ala

"Life Under 30," a collection of eight one-act plays by various writers looking at the uncertainties of life in under-30s America; "The Cockfighter," a grim, rambling coming-of-age-rite-of-passage drama involving a father and son in a rural American family; and "God's Man in Texas," a three-character play that deals with the personal conflicts in a religious and commercial Baptist empire. The play falls apart in the second act but the production boasted a stunning, richly commanding performance by V Craig Heidenreich as a well-meaning, intelligent, talented Baptist preacher who, out of the best intentions, enters into a kind of Faustian bargain.

The Humana Festival is about new plays but what stood out

the most about this year's festival — as has been the case with many of the Humanas — was the quality of acting, even though not all performances reached the set by Heidenreich and casts of "Y2K," "Cabin Pressure," the phone plays, Dresser's car play. Strip festival of its excesses, shortcomings and what you would have thought was a festival that honored the art of theater.

The Humana Festival certainly has come a long way from the kitchen plays that for journalists — and some AI can critics — complained about in the festival's early years.