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LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Alienation, paranoia, a refusal to grow up. Those themes dominated the 3rd Humana Festival of New American Plays, an annual event on the shores of the Ohio River, where writers, critics and producers from around the globe gather in search of the "next big thing."

THEATER

This year they weren't likely to find it, despite contributions by 25 playwrights ranging from Arthur Kopit ("Y2K") to Tony Kushner (the forgettable "And the Torsos Even More So"). Many of the works had an untraditional bent: short plays printed on T-shirts, a series of "phone plays" accessed through a bank of pay phones, even one eight-minute play accessible by only three people at a time in the back seat of a car outside the theater.

Intriguing gimmicks, but ginger food hardly qualifies as a full meal.

To that end, the festival served up four full-length productions and eight 10-minute shorts under the heading of "Life Under 30."

If none of these works left you swooning with delight, at least two proved worthy of future productions.

The best of the bunch was "God's Man in Texas," a scathing indictment of church politics. Loosely based on a true story, David Rambo's script details life backstage at a big Dallas Baptist church, where 81-year-old patriarch Phillip Gotschall (William McNulty) is being pressured to name a successor.

Rev. Phil built the church-university-bowling alley complex from scratch; he'll not be driven from the pulpit until he's good and ready. But politics being a fact of life, he names young, idealistic Rev. Mears (V. Craig Heinenreich) as his co-pastor, then bristles as the young upstart makes greater inroads with the congregation than he ever did. Both claim to be doing the Lord's work, but in the end there can be only one.

Beautifully staged by director John Dillon, "God's Man in Texas" proves that religious plays don't have to be moral quagmires or existentialist treatises on the nature of faith. Rather, Rambo explores the big money underpinnings of religion — the link between faith and finance. Like the best theater, his play makes you laugh then leaves you with something to chew on.

More elegiac (and consequently spiritually satisfying) was "The Cockfighter," adapted and directed by Vincent Murphy from Frank Manley's story about a 13-year-old boy pressed into the family business of raising gamecocks. The boy (Danny Seckel) is old enough to know what his fa-

ther (Phillip Clark) does for a living, yet still young enough to embrace the livestock as pets. When the old man makes the boy handle one of the birds during a fight, then orders him to kill it once it loses, the feathers fly. A father pushes his son to become a man too soon, and the boy responds with violence.

The subtleties of Manley's story are lost on stage; on the printed page words can wield a poetic depth theater renders more formulaic. Yet Murphy's staging was both poignant and pointed, especially a dual performance from Ellen McQueen as the boy's protective mother and his slightly retarded uncle. By donning a cap and a coat, she moved easily between the extremes.

"The Cockfighter" proves that even a less than great play can haunt you long after it's over.

As can a play about the evils, or at least abuses, of modern technology. Arthur Kopit weighed in on the subject with "Y2K," a textbook example of how to milk paranoia from drama.

A book publisher is picked up on his way home by the FBI and taken to a secluded warehouse for questioning. What's he done? We're not exactly sure, but it has something to do with

child pornography on the Internet. The man protests his innocence, yet the record speaks for itself. Or does it?

It turns out the man's wife had an affair with a university student, and the jilted boy has set out to exact revenge. Like most kids he knows his way around the Net. Unlike most kids, he's just mean enough to tamper with people's lives. A few keystrokes and paradise is lost for good.

Despite an often uneven staging (director Bob Balaban has the terrorist scamper up and down scaffolding to little effect), "Y2K" is quick to make its point: For all the good it has done, technology can also hold us hostage. Think of "Y2K" as e-mail from the heart of darkness.

Only one play at this year's festival pushed the boundaries of what theater has been. Part comedy, part tragedy, part performance piece, "Cabin Pressure" seduces even if you don't always understand it. New Yorker Ann Bogart conceived and directed this piece, which takes as its theme a novel conceit: What role does the audience play in theater? Should it be passive? Active? Should we even care?

The four actors move swiftly between repetitive scenes and pseudo-evaluation sessions, where they remark on the roles they've just played. They rumble, they whirl, they rage, they laugh — all to prove the futility of drama done in a vacuum. This work can be comic and jarring, sometimes at the same time. The one thing it happily avoids becoming is predictable and staid.



ARTHUR KOPIT'S 'Y2K' spins Web of paranoia.

Few of festival's plays merit ovation

If only the same could be said of Naomi Iizuki's "Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls," which never quite finds its focus. Is it about recovering from broken relationships? About the disillusionment of writing fan mail to your favorite star, only to find that it's been trashed unread? Or maybe it's about how people go to Hawaii to recuperate from traumas in their life, like, say, your fiancé getting eaten by a large dog.

All these elements collide in Jon Jory's deft but nonetheless unsatisfying staging. We like Iizuki's characters, but we don't trust them. Like sand on a beach, they shift allegiances with every tide.

Of the 10-minute plays showcased, only one — Caroline Williams' "Just Be Frank" — would seem to warrant further development. Its premise is simple: What if you opted to seek a promotion at the office, only to have co-workers be brutally honest about what they think of you? Do you crumble or go with the flow? Williams' answer to those question is brief but memorable.

If only more about this year's Humana Festival fell into the memorable category. Instead, we were privy to the inner workings of the playwright's mind: follies, fears, fascinations. Which is its own reward when you get right down to it: Even in a raw, unrefined state, theater can be illuminating.



TONY KUSHNER'S 'And the Torsos Even More So' is forgettable.