



CenterStage

BY SHERRY EAKER

Louisville Fest Offers More Opps for Scribes

How is it that a theatre located in Kentucky annually attracts industry professionals from across the country, including major studio and broadcast reps?

The answer is simple. The Actors Theatre of Louisville's Humana Festival of New American Plays has built itself a reputation for setting theatre in new directions and attracting top talent. And though this year's fest might not have turned up any showstoppers, it still managed to introduce its audiences to worlds and cultures that definitely deserve to be explored, raised issues that I'm sure will be the route of many playwrights ahead, and introduced new ways of keeping theatre fresh and alive in the eyes of playgoers.

This 23rd annual five-week fest (it runs through March 28), which I attended this past special visitors' weekend, attracted about 200 pros, including theatre critics and journalists, artistic and producing directors, reps from film and television production companies (Miramax; Walt Disney's Features, Theatricals, Pictures, and TV divisions; Hallmark; and ABC Entertainment, to name a few), play publishers and literary agents. All of these (with the exception of the critics) were looking for product and talent and the chance to network, which there was plenty of time for.

The weekend featured full-length works by Arthur Kopit, David Rambo, Anne Bogart and her SITI Company, Frank Manley and Vincent Murphy, and Naomi Iizuka. Though many issues were raised, one theme that kept coming up was a need for family relationships—as odd as that might sound among plays that dealt with mega-churches and computer systems.

The predominant voice heard was that of today's youth, and this was most apparent in the eight 10-minute plays under the umbrella title of "Life Under 30," which featured writers all under 30, writing about life under 30, and performed by actors under 30. These plays, plus the phone plays, car play, and t(text) shirt project—terrific new concepts devised by ATL's producing director, Jon Jory—allowed for more writers, including aspiring and lesser-known scribes, to be heard at this prestigious fest.

David Rambo's "God's Man in Texas," the most realistic of the five full-length works, and the one with the most commercial appeal, appeared to be the favorite among the festgoers that I spoke with, as well as being my own personal top choice. The universe that we're introduced to here is the phenomenon of "mega-churches." The play centers on the rivalry between a young renowned preacher and the aging pastor of this "Super Bowl" of the Baptist universe, whose job the young man is "auditioning" for. A third character, the church's audio technician, has been coaching the young preacher to be the successor, and it turns out that all three are looking for the father-son relationships that they've never had in their own lives. The whole idea of religion on a grand scale is explored and carried to perfection, thanks to the first-rate performances by three ATL vets—V Craig Heidenreich, Bob Burrus, and William McNulty—under the expert

hand of director John Dillon.

The world of the Internet and the dangers that can incur are fascinatingly examined by Arthur Kopit in "Y2K," a Kafka-esque tale in which reality and fantasy are blurred and left up to the audience's own imaginings. The narrator of the play, a young punk rocker-hacker, destroys a couple by entering and altering their private lives through the computer. He also alters the facts so the couple becomes the parents he's never had. Graeme Malcolm as the husband stands out among the cast under Bob Balaban's precise direction.

A play all about the quest for family and connection was Naomi Iizuka's "Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls," a quirky comedy about young people and how they enter and leave each other's lives. The problem here is that the production starts off at a frenetic pace and doesn't let up for the entire two and a half hours—on top of the fact that one never really gets to know, like, or understand any of the characters since they're all basically caricatures. ATL's Jon Jory had expertly directed Iizuka's previous work two years ago at the festival—an entirely different piece—but his efforts here are less appreciated.

"The Cockfighter," from a novel by Frank Manley, adapted for the stage and directed by Vincent Murphy, introduces us to the world of cockfighting, a 19th-century culture that still continues in rural America. The poetic drama centers on a young boy's coming-of-age and his admiration for his father. But he learns at his first cockfight that his father cannot be his role model after all, and an "Equus"-like ending ensues, though it's not made very clear.

Finally, in "Cabin Pressure," Anne Bogart and her SITI Company explore the actor-audience relationship in the world of the theatre. (No search for family relationships here.) It's a fascinating discovery, beautifully crafted and physically dramatized by cast members Will Bond, Ellen Lauren, Kelly Maurer, Barney O'Hanlon, and Stephen Webber under Bogart's surefire direction. Based on the writings of Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Artaud, and Brook, as well as interviews with Louisville theatregoers, and excerpts from "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" and "Private Lives," the work teaches us to appreciate the various perspectives presented. Though the production is low on commercial appeal, it deserves to be seen by the many who can and will appreciate it.

On the bill of 10-minute plays, the only one that stood out because of its genuineness was Julia Jordan's "Mpls., St. Paul," about two teenagers who cover up their feelings for each other by telling tall tales until the young woman so naturally confesses her love for her boyfriend. Also interesting was Brooke Berman's "Dancing With a Devil," a piece that poetically tells a disturbing tale of rape.

But the best feature of the evening was watching the choreography of the set as it shifted from one scene to the next. Mention must be made here of Resident Set Designer Paul Owen, who did the sets for every production seen over the weekend. Kudos, too, to New York-based casting director Laura Richin for on-target casting using ATL members along with New York and regional actors.

Continued on page 46

CenterStage

Continued from page 7

A highlight of the festival were the phone plays, car play, and t(text) shirt project, though I have to admit that I never got the chance to experience Richard Dresser's car play, "What Are You Afraid Of?" (I was never able to get to the box office on time to get tickets, and my standby tickets were futile since the "ticketed passengers" always showed up). Nor did I read all the t(text) shirt plays by David Henry Hwang, Tony Kushner, Jane Martin, Naomi Wallace, Wendy Wasserstein, and Mac Wellman, written on a series of shirts displayed on a table in the lobby.

But so fascinated was I with the telephone plays that I listened to them twice, each time experiencing the feeling that I was eavesdropping on someone's conversation. The five three-minute plays were "performed" on telephones lined up against the wall of the upper lobby. Rebecca Gilman's "Speech Therapy" had the same genuineness for me as the ten-minute "Mpls., St. Paul." ("Therapy" is about a young man eventually proposing to his girlfriend-partner-companion—because he prefers the term "wife.") Very funny was Neal Bell's "Will You Accept the Charges?" in which the portability of the medium takes on a whole new dimension. Other writers were David Greenspan, Rebecca Reynolds, and Diana Son.

Also part of the weekend were two panel discussions that I will cover in upcoming columns.