

Off-Off-Louisville

At New American Play festival, you've gotta have a gimmick

By Richard Christiansen

TRIBUNE CHIEF CRITIC

LOUISVILLE — It was a novelty when it started, and now, in its 23rd annual Humana Festival of New American Plays, the Actors Theatre of Louisville is still trying to reinvent itself, to put a new spin on the plays to which it is dedicated.

What was once fairly special, an intense focus on the presentation of new works by American playwrights, has now become a common pursuit among resident theaters throughout the country. Spurred in part by Louisville's ambition, not to mention the flow of Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award plays that had their first major outings in the early years of the festival, theaters everywhere want first crack at a new American play by a new American playwright. (Regina Taylor, whose commissioned "Oo-Bla-Dee" is now on the main stage of Goodman Theatre, had her short play, "Watermelon Rinds," presented at Actors Theatre in 1993).

This season, as usual for its crowded visitors' weekend, the Louisville theater staged six programs of new works on its three stages. But, in a sudden wave of invention and gimmicks, there also were several short, unconventional theater pieces that took place way outside the confines of an auditorium.

The most unusual of these were the T(text) Shirt Plays, a series of specially composed scenes by prominent American playwrights that were printed on the backs of T-shirts. For \$20 a shirt, customers could walk around with works by Tony Kushner, Wendy Wasserstein, David Henry Hwang, Mac

Wellman, Jane Martin and Naomi Wallace on their backs.

With the shirts, moreover, came a small brochure offering a brief history of the T-shirt, plus biographies of the playwrights.

Outside the theater on Louisville's Main Street, a parked Lincoln sedan was the arena for another gimmicky project, the car play.

Here, in 15-minute shifts, three customers climbed into the car's back seat and watched a young male driver and a female hitchhiker in the front seats enact Richard Dresser's quick little comedy/drama, "What Are You Afraid Of?"

And in the theater's mezzanine lobby, audience members regularly waited in line to listen to the phone plays, five short pieces of telephone dialogue fashioned by playwrights Neal Bell, David Greenspan, Diana Son, Becky Reynolds and Rebecca Gilman.

None of these novelties was substantial, but none was an embarrassment either. Dresser's car play, in fact, was an ingeniously constructed piece, with a pungent view on where a seemingly casual relationship might lead.

Jon Jory, the theater's artistic director, viewed the T-shirt, phone and car projects as ephemera, but also as one way of hanging on to connections with established and emerging playwrights.

For the more conventional form of theatergoing, in a theater, the festival offered at least one play with signs of a mainstream success.

This was David Rambo's "God's Man in Texas," the fact-based story of the Christian conflict between a young pastor and the rip-roaring old preacher-entrepreneur who presides over the small real estate empire of his Southern

Baptist church in Houston.

Rambo's colorful, topical script includes several short, rousing sermons by the two reverends, and, under John Dillon's direction, there's a fire-breathing performance by William McNulty as Dr. Philip Gottschall, the canny, white-maned capitalist-preacher hanging on for dear life to the controls of his multimillion-dollar church "campus" (with a hotel, gymnasium, movie theater and

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two swimming pools among the amenities).

Two other Actors Theatre veterans, V Craig Heidenreich as the young co-pastor and Bob Burris as the Rev. Gottschall's devoted assistant complete the excellent cast.

In Arthur Kopit's dark and dour "Y2K," the technological wizardry of the new computer age is the background for a parable about an abandoned child's horrifying revenge on his parents. Here, a sleek publishing executive and his sleep-around wife find their careless, comfortable world shattered by damning evidence, real and manufactured, that

shows up on the Internet.

Director Bob Balaban's eerie, effective production featured a strong cast: Graeme Malcolm as the smug publisher brought to ruin, Lucinda Faraldo as his sexy second wife and Dallas Roberts as the malevolent punk, known by the user IDs of ISeeU and Flow-Bear.

Naomi Iizuyka, whose "Polaroid Stories" is on view in Chicago through April 10 at the Trap Door Theatre, contributed to the festival "Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls," a sweet but scattershot comedy about the fragility of loving relationships that takes off from the fact that "Aloha" means both hello and goodbye.

Swerving from New York to Hawaii to Alaska, the free-ranging play has been invigorated by the attractive cast and by Jory's inventive staging.

A believer in the validity of the short play, Jory has assembled eight pieces to fill out a full evening of theater about "Life Under 30." Among the best are Matt Pelfrey's "Drive Angry," a profoundly disturbing dialogue between a young cancer patient and his cynical friend as they race recklessly down the highway, and "Forty Minute Finish," a poignant reflection on death by two teenage bag boys cleaning up the mess caused by an old man who had suffered a heart attack in the supermarket where they work. The latter play was directed by Maria Mileaf, who has staged the Chicago production of "Art" now at the Royal George Theatre.

"The Cockfighter," adapted and directed by Vincent Murphy from Frank Manley's novel, is an obvious, heavy-handed rite-of-passage piece centered on a young boy entering the violent world of cockfighting.

The most original work at the



William McNulty (left) and Craig Heidenreich in a scene from David Rambo's "God's Man in Texas."

festival was "Cabin Pressure," a site specific work developed over the last two years by director Anne Bogart and her company. Working in connection with 40 Louisville citizens of all ages and from all fields of life, Bogart and her actors workshopped a piece dealing with the ever-fascinating topic of the relationship between audience and actors.

The result, presented in a swift, dazzling parade of scenes, is a stimulating string of questions, jokes, comments and investiga-

tions into the ties that bind performers and their audiences. The final segment, a ballet of chairs in which the five actors move through the full range of body language of customers in their theater seats, is amazing.

This was an example of theater that occurs only in the context of a real theater. No phones or T-shirts here, but the electricity flowing between these actors and the people they drew into their world was powerful and immediate.