

The Wave of the Future

Actors Theatre of Louisville stages new plays by writers young and old

According to Jack Bradley, "Audiences want to be surprised and yet constantly try to guess what's coming next." They could satisfy both urges with some time in Louisville this month. Bradley, literary manager of the Royal National Theatre in London, was speaking during a panel discussion last weekend in Louisville.

He was one of more than 200 people from around America and the world (including England, Hungary, Scotland, Japan, Costa Rica, France, Italy, Germany, Denmark, Malaysia and Ukraine) who converge annually for a weekend in Louisville that's not about horse racing. It might be Kentucky's greatest cultural attraction: The Humana Festival of New American Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville (ATL).

It's just about 100 miles from downtown Cincinnati to downtown Louisville. Very driveable. Louisville is a pretty commodious place — some nice hotels (in a variety of price ranges) and a few decent restaurants. But the feast of cutting-edge theater at ATL is what draws people back every year.

The Festival is a mecca for theatrical tastes not satisfied by revivals of musicals and other derivative forms. Traveling to Louisville is always an adventure, and this year provided audiences another chance to

broaden their horizons.

Oh, there are five new full-length plays by veterans and lesser-knowns. And a bill of eight 10-minute shows offering a great chance to sample works by up-and-coming writers.

But that's just the beginning. There are "T(ext)-shirt Plays," six works by some big names in the theater (like Tony Kushner and Wendy Wasserstein) screen-printed on T-shirts.

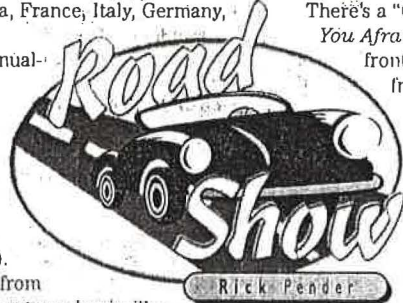
There's a "Car Play" by Richard Dresser, *What Are You Afraid Of?*, a comedy with two actors in the front seat of a Lincoln Town Car parked in

front of the theater. The audience of three slips into the back for a quick eight minutes about picking up a hitchhiker, fantasizing about outcomes and returning to reality. The answer to the title question is, "Nothing Everything."

It's intimate, with actors virtually in your lap, one moment making out, the next treating you as misbehaving kids waiting impatiently at the McDonald's

drive-thru. The writing is concise and conversational, and the experience is made more real by sitting in a car.

Then there are five "Phone Plays," experienced by picking up one of five pay phones and listening. Each is three minutes long, varying from comic to poignant, chilling to surreal. Each uses the limitation of the medium — just voices — and the conventions of



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phone calling: We are more eavesdroppers than audience. It's fascinating how natural it feels, yet how odd to witness a tiny drama or comedy by telephone. It was equally intriguing to watch people listen — intent, smiling, self-conscious, self-absorbed, relaxed, straining to hear.

The Humana Festival lets ATL show off its three diverse stages: The Bingham Theatre (seating 318 in the round) is the most versatile, used for three plays. The Pamela Brown Auditorium (seating 637 with a proscenium stage) has one big work, plus the 10-minute plays on a flexible set. The intimate Victory Jory Theatre (a black-box theater seating 159) works well for *Cabin Pressure*, examining relationships between audiences and actors.

Cabin Pressure is the product of workshops by director Anne Bogart and five actors. In 80 minutes they explore how performers and theatergoers need each other. The show may be a bit esoteric for some audiences, but it's a truly provocative work with lots of humor. We see at least a half-dozen theatrical styles (Bogart explained to me that their technique is inspired by sampling, a device in Hip Hop music



Arthur Kopit's *Y2K* (Lucinda Favaldo, Dallas Roberts, Graeme Malcolm)

where recorded musical cuts are played and juxtaposed) — from Noel Coward to Edward Albee, with a stop or two for the avant-garde, a murder mystery, a vaudeville melodrama, a farce and more. Bogart's excellent cast handles the styles with aplomb, while exploring and re-examining a series of questions: Was it fun? What does it mean? Why do you do it? *Cabin Pressure* is a good show for a theater festival that pushes its audiences beyond their normal comfortable envelope of "theatrical entertainment," and the performance I saw had an attentive and appreciative audience, laughing out loud, thinking hard and applauding loudly at the conclusion.