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The Arts

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Best of the fest

Humana event loads up on gimmicks but again unveils promising plays

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Most editions of the annual Humana Festival of New American Plays have contributed substantial works to the American repertoire.

The 23rd festival offers a cautionary comedy and a powerful drama, but it may be remembered more for its gimmicks. With such playful experimentation, the Actors Theatre of Louisville seems to slight traditional, well-constructed plays.

Quantity counts for more than quality, with a record 25 new works presented last weekend to some 400 producers, directors, agents and critics.

Producing Director Jon Jory denies that entries are selected by theme, but history indicates otherwise: Last year, the festival focused on children in crisis; this year, it explores various fears — most commonly, the fear of growing up, growing old or losing control.

The fear of losing control is most powerful in *God's Man in Texas*, the probing portrait of a power struggle in a Baptist church; and *Y2K*, a cautionary comedy about computer hacking.

The fear of growing old is most achingly transparent in *Life Under 30*, a promising collection by young playwrights.

All eight 10-minute plays reveal the authentic voices of more youthful writers.

Three stand out: *Dancing With a Devil*, Brooke Bernman's sorrowful, lyrical memory piece about a dissociated rape survivor (Carolyn Baeumler and Monica Koskey); *Just Be Frank*, Caroline Williams' perky comedy about the ruinous effect of honesty on office politics; and *Drive Angry*, Matt Pelfrey's thrill ride about a cancer-stricken teen-ager (Brian Richards of Columbus) and his buddy out for an anything-goes good time.

The fear of growing up is most amusing in *What Are You Afraid Of?* — a deft, 15-minute "car play" in which a seductive hitchhiker (Ginna Hoben, a Bishop Hartley High School graduate, alternating with Jessica Jory) stimulates a young man's fantasies and fears.

The festival's hottest ticket, the Richard Dresser work allows only three audience members at a time into the back seat of a parked car to share the cozy ride.

Similar in theme but incoherent in structure and characterization: *Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls*, Naomi Iizuka's scattershot comedy about scatterbrained women saying goodbye to love and hello to other infatuations. Also disappointing: *The Cockfighter*, director Vincent Murphy's emotionally flat and predictable adaptation of the Frank Manley novel about a teen-ager's bloody initiation into rural manhood.

Of the five full-length works, *Y2K*, *Cabin Pressure* and

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Richard C. Trigg photo



Dallas Roberts in *Y2K*



ABOVE: In *Cabin Pressure*, from left: Will Bond, Kelly Maurer, Ellen Lauren and Stephen Webber

LEFT: Tripp Hope, left, and Ginna Hoben of Columbus in *What Are You Afraid Of?*

FEST from 8G

The *Cockfighter* run a trendy 90 minutes or less.

Less can be more, but many of the shorts this year don't add up to much.

Of the five three-minute, taped conversations overheard at phone booths in the upper lobby, the most entertaining are *Speech Therapy*, Rebecca Gilman's touching drama about a hesitant marriage proposal; and *Happy Birthday Jack*, Diana Son's comedy about a young man (Jon Brent Curry) who calls a former lover (V. Craig Heidenreich) to boast about a career coup.

Only a few minutes are needed to read all six "T-shirt plays," on sale in the lower lobby throughout the festival, which will end Sunday.

In the spirit of George Orwell's seminal essay about "Politics and the English Language," I would urge Actors Theatre to be more clear: A "T-shirt play" is *not* a play, it is merely an upscale T-shirt.

What a waste of talent and cotton: Pulitzer Prize-winning Wendy Wasserstein makes her nominal festival debut in *To T or Not To T*, with a few cutesy quotations from other playwrights searching for the perfect T-shirt slogan. Pulitzer winner Tony Kushner, whose *Slavs!* highlighted the 1994 festival, returns largely in name only with *And the Torso Even More So*, a lyrical sonnet about a shirt's warp and weave.

Humana favorites Jane Martin, David Henry Hwang and Naomi Wallace, and off-off-Broadway maverick Mac Wellman, also have written mildly humorous T-shirts — but no sale. Any new-play festival has occasional huls.

Yet, despite several off years in the mid-1980s, the Actors Theatre and Humana Foundation have earned a reputation for presenting the best in North America.

Notwithstanding the gimmicks that don't work, the 23rd festival ranks as the decade's most adventurous.

The three best plays:

'Y2K'

Aside from its misleading title, *Y2K* stands alongside the most stylized and sophisticated plays that Arthur Kopit has written.

The sleek, sinister and deliciously paranoid work revolves around an affluent New York couple whose lives are destroyed by a revengeful hacker.

Variouly nicknamed ISeeYou, FlowBear and Costa Astrakhan Caka BCuzlCan, the hacker (punk Dallas Roberts) infiltrates the life of a Random House editor (Graeme Malcolm), seduces his wife (Lucinda Faraldo) and transforms their computerized records into a dangerously illicit fantasy.

The director, Bob Balaban, reinforces the urban paranoia and dark comedy while highlighting the underlying anxieties about identity and family.

Brimming with allusions to mysterious authority figures, the thriller updates Orwell's *1984* and Kafka's *The Trial* for the nervous '90s.

'God's MAN IN TEXAS'

Faith and power jockey for primacy in the souls of three men within "God's locker room," the pastor's study at the world's largest Protestant congregation.

How large is the Rock Baptist Church? Large enough



Richard Trigg

From left, Carolyn Baeumler, Monica Koskey and C. Andrew Bauer in Brooke Berman's *Dancing With a Devil*

to have the nickname "the Baptist Super Bowl" but not large enough to make aging pastor Philip Gottschall (William McNulty) feel comfortable with Jeremiah Mears (V. Craig Heidenreich) as co-pastor and eventual successor.

The first act is so funny that playwright David Rambo arouses suspicions of another easy satire about Southern fundamentalists. On the contrary, in his Humana debut, he is more ambitious, perceptive and compassionate.

Refusing to condescend to his characters, Rambo deepens the second act into a sobering portrait of fear, hope and self-delusion.

Three Humana veterans milk the plum roles for comedy and drama: Heidenreich is plaintive as the deferential idealist; McNulty is hilarious but pathetic as the paranoid Gottschall. Bob Burrus balances humor and pathos as a recovering alcoholic whose loyalties become divided.

Despite the need for some editing and better transitions, *God's Man in Texas* rivals *Elmer Gantry* as the story of a devout preacher's rise and fall.

'CABIN PRESSURE'

Perhaps only innovative Anne Bogart could conceive and direct *Cabin Pressure*, a mysterious, romantic exploration of the relationship between actors and audiences.

Bogart blends audience interviews and scenes from her previous Actors Theatre productions — including *Private Lives* and *Going, Going Gone* — to weave a self-referential tapestry of deconstructed theater.

As one actor (Barney O'Hanlon) asks questions, Will Bond, Ellen Lauren, Stephen Webber and Kelly Maurer parody Noel Coward, Edward Albee and Victorian melodrama in an increasingly hallucinatory state of exaltation.

Just as filmmaker Francois Truffaut put his heart into *Day for Night*, about the romance of movies, Bogart shows more of her oft-mysterious heart in her strangely haunting theatrical essay.