

ARTS & LEISURE

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IT'S PLAYTIME

ATL adds fun twists to Humana Festival

FULL-LENGTH PLAYS



Anne Bogart
"Cabin
Pressure"



Naomi Iizuka
"Aloa, Say the
Pretty Girls"



Arthur Kopit
"Y2K"



David Rambo
"God's Man in
Texas"



Frank Manley



Vincent Murphy

"The Cockfighter"

By JUDITH EGERTON
The Courier-Journal

Don't expect to go to the Humana Festival of New American Plays and just sit in a theater seat watching actors do their thing onstage.

Sure, Actors Theatre of Louisville presents its usual fare of full-length plays in conventional surroundings. But this year, producing director Jon Jory has added several new twists. There will be plays written on T-shirts.

There will be plays performed over a telephone. And there will be a play performed in the front seat of a car.

Jory said the emphasis will be on fun. There will also be an emphasis on young playwrights.

"We want people who come to get a look at the next generation of writers," he said.

The annual festival will be 23 years old, so it's fitting that many of the plays that will be introduced to the world at ATL have been written by playwrights in their 20s.

This year's festival (Feb. 23-March 28) will put the spotlight on young writers with a full evening of 10-minute plays. In recent years, the short plays were offered as a

weekend dessert at the end of the festival. This time, they are part of the festival's entrees and are included in a rotation with five full-length plays.

The eight 10-minute plays, titled "Life Under Thirty," written by unknown playwrights, will be directed by people under 30 and cast with young actors. It's a risk, but one ATL producing director Jon Jory wants to take.

As ATL began planning this year's festival, Jory's interest in young voices was reinforced when he called other theater professionals and asked them to recommend playwrights under 30. When they couldn't name any, Jory decided it was important to find them and give them an opportunity to have their work staged.

"It's harder for young people to break in," he said.

The themes of the short plays relate to coming of age in a new world. The playwrights are examining "the traditions and problems they have inherited that can't be solved with traditional methodologies," Jory said.

For example, the play "Just Be Frank" by California actor-writer Caroline Williams is about an ambitious young woman who learns how honesty in the workplace clashes with her idealism.

The festival will open with a full-length play by Naomi Iizuka, whose "Polaroid Stories" was a gritty, edgy capper to the 1997 festival. For 1998, Iizuka has written about people in their

TELEPHONE PLAYS



Neal Bell
"Will You
Accept the
Charges?"



Rebecca
Gilman
"Speech
Therapy"



David
Greenspan
"Them"



Rebecca
Reynolds
"Visitation"



Diana Son
"Happy
Birthday Jack"

10-MINUTE PLAYS



Brooke
Berman
"Dancing
with a Devil"



Jerome
Hairston
"Forty Minute
Finish"



Sheri Wilner
"Labor Day"



Caroline Williams
"Just Be Frank"



Matt Pelfrey
"Drive Angry"

T-SHIRT PLAYS



David Henry
Hwang
"Merchandising"



Tony Kushner
"Untitled"



Naomi Wallace
"Manifesto"



Wendy
Wasserstein
"To T or Not To T"



Mac Wellman
"The Fez"

20s who are at a point in their lives where they are deciding on careers and mates.

They are characters "who are struggling to evolve into their adult selves," Jory said.

In addition to Iizuka's play, the new full-length offerings include works by returning playwright Arthur Kopit ("Bone-the-Fish"), director Anne Bogart ("Going, Going, Gone"), West Coast playwright David Rambo, and a collaborative effort by a theater director and playwright at Emory University.

Kentuckian Jane Martin, a perennial festival favorite, has an entry this year, too, but it will be only a line or two.

Martin and five other major playwrights have taken up Jory's challenge to write a T-shirt play.

Each will contribute an abbreviated play that will be printed on T-shirts. The idea is to draw

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Humana Festival will offer fun twists at ATL

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attention to the festival and playwrights while giving the wearer of the shirt a sense of being a theater participant.

Two unusual theatrical events, called Phone Plays and Car Play, were created by the ATL staff with the aim of appealing to young adults and older folks with adventurous hearts.

"We've always fooled around with the form," Jory noted. In the past, ATL has staged performances at a dump ("Food From Trash") and hired novelists to write plays, which was a less successful venture.

It's all part of ATL's celebration of writers. "We want it to be a party — the point is, it's a party for playwrights," Jory said.

Here's a closer look at the 23rd Annual Humana Festival of New American Plays, the 25 playwrights involved and the opening dates of the full-length plays.

Full-length plays

"Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls" by Naomi Iizuka is "funny, quirky and wildly imaginative," Jory said. It's a dark comedy about how people cross paths and collide in their search for a family. The plays by Iizuka, currently a Humanities Fellow at Princeton University, have been produced at theaters in New York, Dallas and Los Angeles. Her play "Skin" was named best play of the season by the Dallas Observer. (In the Bingham Theatre, Feb. 24-March 28)

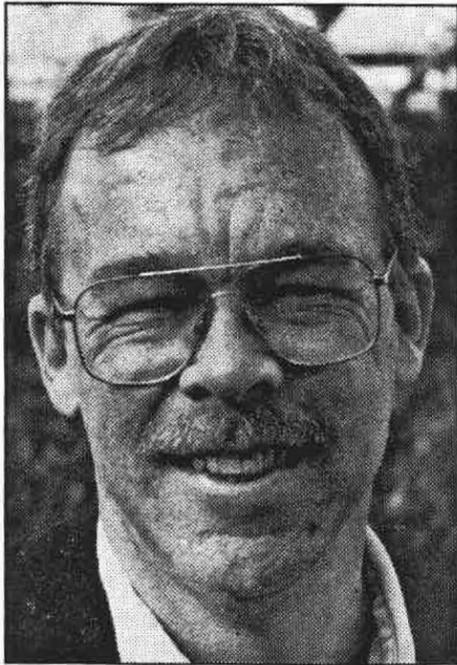
"Cabin Pressure," created by Anne Bogart and the Saratoga International Theatre Institute, looks at the relationship between audiences and actors. The play is the result of a two-year project, funded by a grant from the Pugh Foundation, in which Bogart invited a diverse group of 50 people to follow and comment on the process of creating a theatrical production. Bogart's unconventional direction and collaborative techniques result in surprising and stimulating theater. It will be Bogart's seventh production at ATL. (Victor Jory Theatre, March 19-28)

"Y2K," by Arthur Kopit of New York, takes on the issue of privacy in a drama about a couple who learn there are no secrets. The recent events surrounding President Clinton spurred Kopit to write the play in a little more than three weeks, Jory said, adding, "It's riveting reading." Kopit is best known for his absurdist play, "Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feeling So Sad." (Bingham Theatre, Feb. 28-March 28)

"God's Man in Texas," by David Rambo, is a drama about the internal politics at a huge Baptist church during the transition of power from a retiring minister to a new, young minister. "It's a good play on a subject we haven't seen before, and it has relevance to the area," Jory said.

Rambo's previous play, "Speaky-Spivey-Spovey," was named one of the best plays at this year's Bay Area Playwrights Festival in San Francisco. (Pamela Brown Auditorium, March 4-28)

"The Cockfighter," written by Frank Manley and adapted by Vincent Murphy, is a play adapted from Manley's novel by the same name.



Richard Dresser's 10-minute play will be performed in the front seat of an automobile.

It's the story of a boy's rebellion against his father's idea of manhood. It's a powerful and highly theatrical work, set against the backdrop of the blood sport, Jory said. Manley teaches Renaissance literature at Emory University, where Murphy is artistic producing director of Theatre Emory. Murphy was a guest director at the Humana Festival in 1994. (Bingham Theatre, March 9-28)

Eight 10-minute plays

"Life Under 30" is a bill of short plays in the Pamela Brown Auditorium March 13-28. The plays are:

"Drive Angry," by Matt Pelfrey of Los Angeles, is set in the traffic congestion of Los Angeles. The play examines a polluted world and a diseased society. Pelfrey's play "Lycanthophobia" was produced on stage and adapted for film.

"Slop-Culture" by Robb Badlam, a New York native and script reader for Artisan Entertainment, is about a woman who must answer a loaded question about her cultural heritage.

"Forty Minute Finish" by Jerome Hairston, a senior at James Madison University, focuses on two young men who ponder life's uncertainties. Hairston's plays were featured twice in the New York Young Playwrights Festival.

"Labor Day" by Sheri Wilner is about one woman's act of refusal. This New York playwright's works "Joan of Arkansas" and "Hiding Places" have been performed in Pittsburgh and New York.

"Just Be Frank" by Caroline Williams is about a worker who declares her wish for honesty in the office — and gets it. The playwright is a theater major at the University of California and lives in Los Angeles.

"Dancing With the Devil" by Brooke Berman looks at a painful turning point in a dancer's life. A former solo performer, Berman, who also has trained with director Bogart, is a playwright-in-residence at the Juilliard School.

"Mpls. St. Paul" by Julia Jordan follows two teen-agers as they fall in love. Jordan, a former playwright-in-residence at Juilliard, is a prize-winning playwright whose play "Tatjana in Color" is published in "Women Playwrights: The Best Plays of 1997."

"The Blue Room" by Courtney

Baron involves a sailor who longs for land and his beloved. Baron's play "Dream of Heaven and Hell," based on a work by William Blake, will be produced next year in New York.

Six T-shirt plays

Printed on T-shirts are short dialogues written by top playwrights, including two who won the Pulitzer Prize for drama. The idea, Jory said, is for audiences to experience narratives and dialogue in an untraditional way.

"Merchandising" is by David Henry Hwang, who wrote the Broadway play and screenplay "M. Butterfly." His short play "Trying to Find Chinatown" appeared in the 1996 Humana festival.

"Stuffed Shirts" is by the pseudonymous Jane Martin, whose last Humana play was "Mr. Bundy."

"Manifesto" is by Prospect, Ky., native Naomi Wallace, who now lives in England. Wallace's play "The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek" premiered at the last Humana festival. Her previous play, "One Flea Spare," which was first seen in the United States at ATL, won the 1997 Obie for Best New Play.

"To T or Not to T" is by Wendy Wasserstein, a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, who wrote "The Sisters Rosensweig" and the "Heidi Chronicles."

"Yet to be Titled Play" is by Tony Kushner, who won the Pulitzer and Tony awards for "Angels in America." Kushner's play "Slavs," as well as several other works, have appeared in previous Humana festivals.

"The Fez" is by Mac Wellman, an accomplished playwright, novelist and poet. His recent plays include "Girl Gone," "The Sandalwood Box" and "Second-Hand Smoke."

Five telephone plays

In ATL's lobby during the festival, phone booths will be stationed where people can listen to recordings of three-minute plays. The Monica Lewinsky-Linda Tripp phone talks inspired these provocative mini-plays about phone conversations. The plays are:

"Will You Accept the Charges" by Neil Bell, who is a 1992 Obie winner for sustained achievement in playwriting.

"Speech Therapy" is by Rebecca Gilman, who earlier this year won the top play award given by the American Theatre Critics Association.

"Them" is by David Greenspan, whose plays have been staged at the Public Theatre in New York.

"The Visitation" is by Becky Reynolds, who also lists two films and two HBO pilots on her résumé.

"Happy Birthday Jack" is by Diana Son, whose latest play, "Stop Kiss," has New York buzzing.

One-car play

Richard Dresser's 10-minute play "What Are You Afraid Of?" will be performed in the front seat of an automobile while an audience of two to four people watches from the back seat.

Dresser's play will take its passengers along in a story about an earnest young man who picks up a spirited hitchhiker. The car, which hasn't been selected yet, will be parked on Main Street in front of

ATL. The play will be free, but reservations will be required.

The playwright, who also writes for movies and television, has had his share of Humana hits. His rowdy, funny "Gun-shy" opened at the Humana Festival in 1997 and was produced at New York's Playwrights Horizon this year. His other Humana plays include "Below the Belt" and "Alone at the Beach."