

Festival of new plays includes some new venues and novel ideas

By JUDITH EGERTON
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Arthur Kopit's play, "Y2K," with its theme of secret surveillance, voyeurism and exposure complements other works at this year's Humana Festival of New American Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville.

Not only will the festival produce 25 plays, it will do so in novel ways.

You can step into a phone booth and eavesdrop on five telephone conversations. The three-minute recorded dialogues, written by up-and-coming playwrights, can be heard before festival stage productions, during intermissions and immediately after shows. No coins required — the phone plays are free.

They are: "Will You Accept the Charges?" by Neal Bell; "Speech Therapy" by Rebecca Gilman; "Them" by David Greenspan; "The Visitation" by Rebecca Reynolds; and "Happy Birthday Jack" by Diana Son.

Theatergoers also can watch two actors perform a 10-minute play, "What Are You Afraid Of?" from the back seat of a car parked on Main Street. The car play by festival veteran Richard Dresser also is free, but tickets will be available only on the morning of performances during the festival and must be reserved. (Begins Wednesday.)

If those offerings aren't unusual enough, you can perform a play by wearing a T-shirt printed with the

text of an ultra-short play. Curtain time is whenever you want it to be.

The T(text)-Shirt Project playwrights include two Pulitzer Prize winners (Tony Kushner and Wendy Wasserstein), two renowned Kentucky playwrights (Jane Martin and Naomi Wallace) and two theater notables (David Henry Hwang and Mac Wellman).

The T-shirt plays are: "Merchandising" by Hwang; "And The Torso Even More So" by Kushner; "Stuffed Shirts" by Martin; "Manifesto" by Wallace; "To T or Not to T" by Wasserstein; and "The Fez" by Wellman.

The \$20 shirts will be available at ATL's box office, beginning Tuesday.

Now for the main event. The new play lineup, in order of appearance, includes five full-length works and a bill of short plays. They are:

"Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls" — Naomi Iizuka, who wrote the 1997 festival entry, "Polaroid Stories," returns with a dark comedy about people who meet and part as they struggle to evolve into adults. (Bingham Theatre, Tuesday-March 28.)

"Y2K" — Kopit, who stunned ATL audiences 10 years ago with "Bone-the-Fish," is back with a scary drama about a married couple who learn their private lives are no longer private. (Bingham Theatre, Saturday-March 28.)

"God's Man in Texas" — A drama by David Rambo about power struggles, family relations and reli-

gion. The setting is a Baptist church with a congregation of 30,000. (Pamela Brown Auditorium, March 3-28.)

"The Cockfighter" — A rural Southern boy becomes attached to the fighting cock his father has given him and realizes that his father's image of manhood conflicts with his own. Frank Manley's novel, "The Cockfighter," was adapted for the stage by director Vincent Murphy. (Bingham Theatre, March 7-27.)

"Life Under 30" — Eight 10-minute plays by playwrights under the age of 30. The plays are: "Slop-Culture," by Robb Badlam; "The Blue Room," by Courtney Baron; "Dancing with the Devil," by Brooke Beriman; "Forty Minute Finish," by Jerome Hairston; "Mpls., St. Paul," by Julia Jordan; "Drive Angry," by Matt Pelfrey; "Just Be Frank," by Caroline Williams; and "Labor Day," by Sheri Wilner. (Pamela Brown Auditorium, March 12-27.)

"Cabin Pressure" — Frequent guest director Anne Bogart brings a new work that examines actor/audience relationships throughout theater history. It may sound pedantic, but it's not likely to be. Bogart's disorienting, compelling direction and the performance by her cast always cause a theatrical stir. (Victor Jory Theatre, March 18-28.)

Tickets range in price from \$16 to \$30, with some discounts available. For more information, call (502) 584-1205 or, toll-free, (800) 428-5849.

Play examines loss of individuals' privacy

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gan probing the lives of Bill Clinton, Monica Lewinsky and everyone they knew, Kopit plunged into writing "Y2K" in a rush of furious creativity.

"No one thinks what Clinton did is good — it's appalling. But I happen to believe that the truly immoral act is what Ken Starr is doing," Kopit said. "If it can happen to the president, on lower levels it can happen to anyone and in all kinds of ways."

Kopit's play, set in present-day New York, concerns a married couple who discover that their lives are no longer private. Someone — and they don't know who or why — knows all about them and is meddling with their lives in a way that could destroy their reputations and careers.

The play isn't about the year 2000 computer bug or Bill Clinton's sex scandal, but it is a direct result, Kopit said, of his "fury at the sanctimony of Ken Starr."

"I wanted to deal with my anger about what was going on and about my fear about invasions of privacy."

With "Y2K," Kopit reveals how easily someone with a prurient interest and electronic means can profoundly alter another person's life.

The play "has a kind of Kafka-esque quality where someone will be destroyed in the course of a very short period of time," Kopit said.

Ironically, Kopit wrote his play on a computer and used the Internet for research. Computers are not dangerous in themselves, but Kopit warns that society faces difficult issues regarding how it will balance privacy and freedom of expression with controls over those who use computers in dangerous ways.

"Y2K" will be presented in-the-round at the Bingham Theatre, which will enhance the sense of characters being stalked.

Is Kopit's new play as scatological and shocking as "Bone-the-Fish?"

No. "Y2K" contains profanity and brief, discreet nudity, but it's more risky and scary than shocking.

"This play asks questions that we don't always want to ask ourselves," said Jon Jory, producing director of ATL.

"What happens in this play could happen to you — not in some absurd future, but now," Jory said. "You and I are on the phone — and who else is? Once our privacy is invaded, we are in the power of others, and the question becomes who are these people and what do they want?"

Kopit, a Harvard-educated New Yorker, also writes for television, but he's mainly distinguished himself as a playwright. His plays include the 1960 satirical farce "Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mama's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feeling So Sad"; "Indians," a 1968 play about the genocide of American Indians; and "Wings" in 1978, which Kopit based on his own father's stroke. Both "Wings" and "Indians" were finalists for the Pulitzer Prize for drama.

"Y2K" opens next Sunday and will be directed by Bob Balaban, a film director ("The Last Good Time") and actor who made his movie debut in the Oscar-winning "Midnight Cowboy."

Besides Kopit, two dozen other playwrights of various ages and experience contributed new works to this year's festival. The event begins with a preview of Naomi Iizuka's "Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls" on Tuesday and runs in repertory through March 28.

While Jory is pleased Kopit has arrived with another provocative play, he said he's equally excited about producing new works by young playwrights. "It's nice to have such a strong representation of writers who will take us into the next century."