

ATL's new-play fest — and casts — shone

This year's Humana Festival of New American Plays was an event of small treats, surprises and a bill of new plays that



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were neither stunners nor flops.

The five full-length plays staged for the 23rd annual festival at Actors Theatre of Louisville were consistently good, although not always trans-
portive.

Even Anne Bogart's

"Cabin Pressure" must be classified as interesting and diverting, but not the kind of awe-inducing productions that ATL audiences have come to expect from Bogart, namely "Picnic," "The Adding Machine," "Miss Julie" and last season's "Private Lives."

In retrospect, Arthur Kopit's "Y2K" stands out for its timeliness and dramatic impact, but with qualifications.

Director Bob Balaban's decision to reveal to the audience the computer hacker who destroys the careers and lives of a New York couple created a sense of voyeurism, but undermined the creeping suspense of Kopit's arresting script. Revealing the hacker intermittently would have allowed the audience to identify more strongly with the couple under siege and enhanced the paranoia inherent in Kopit's play. Is someone really there? What is he trying to do to us?

Nearly as much as the playwrights and directors, it was casting choices and actors that shone this year.

Another defining mark of this year's festival was the excitement of seeing ATL teaming with bright young writers, actors, directors and backstage artists.

"Life Under 30," the festival's slate of 10-minute plays by playwrights under 30, had its hits and misses. But the young actors and audiences involved contributed an exciting flow of energy to the annual festival, something ATL producing director Jon Jory



Lucinda Faraldo, left, and Graeme Malcolm starred in Arthur Kopit's "Y2K."

intended when he focused this year's festival on short works by young playwrights.

That energy was displayed fully in the nutty "Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls," written by Naomi Iizuka and directed by Jory. The play, while fun to experience, is fading quickly from memory. It's the actors, notably Todd Cerveris, Caitlin

See HUMANA
Page 3, col. 1, this section

Humana new-play fest — and casts — shone

Continued from Page 11

Miller, Derek Cecil and Carla Harting, that I hope to see again.

The cast of "The Cockfighter" also must be commended, particularly the touching performance by Danny Seckel, a former ATL apprentice, who portrayed a teen-ager who must defy his father to save his soul.

Vincent Murphy, who directed this adaptation of Frank Manley's novel, also deserves a nod. His job was a difficult one, but the set by Paul Owen and Manley's abstract direction mostly worked. At times the narrative bogged down the play, but "The Cockfighter" was among the most moving of the festival.

As-for veteran actors, ATL's William McNulty, V Craig Heidenreich and Bob Burrus lifted "God's Man in Texas" to a high level.

David Rambo's play, with elements of comedy and drama, was a surprisingly strong entry that touched on several themes. In it, fathers and sons struggled to find each other and church leaders defined their relationship to their church, congregation and God. The actors perfectly personified the issues in Rambo's play and their fiery oratory riveted the audience.

"Cabin Pressure" had the inventive, amusing choreography of a Bogart play, but the subject matter — the role of an audience in theater — was not compelling.

The play's worthiness resides in the challenging and fascinating way Bogart and her superb cast of collaborators (Ellen Lauren, Will Bond, Kelly Maurer, Barney O'Hanlon and Stephen Webber) approached and presented an audience's diverse responses to theater. Yet, it's odd that a play that focuses on audiences in general will play best with theater insiders:

Whether one has an attention span of three minutes or two hours, ATL's new-play festival offered something for everyone.

Lines formed for the five phone plays (short recorded dialogues heard on pay phones in ATL's lobby), and the car play, a 10-minute Richard Dresser play performed in a car parked on Main Street, tickled those who saw it.

I applaud ATL's willingness to experiment with form and take chances on new voices.

Sure, there's a marketing element to the T-shirt plays, but ATL's effort to include some silly fun is a good thing. The festival can get awfully intense.

One disappointment was that Jane Martin was missing from the main event. The award-winning Kentucky playwright and author of "Keely and Du" and "Jack and Jill," had no full-length play this year. Fans had to be satisfied with a "Stuffed Shirts," a 16-sentence play printed on a \$20 T-shirt — a souvenir rather than a theatrical memory.