

EVERYDAY

Packing 'em in

"God's Man in Texas," starring V. Craig Heidenreich, was one of 19 plays staged in three days at the Humana Festival in Louisville.

Theater critic Judith Nemark says the experience was sometimes weird, but worthwhile. Page F3

SUNDAY, MARCH 28, 1999

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH



Anne Bogart's SITI Company in the most talked-about play at the Humana Festival, "Cabin Pressure." Actors in this Noel Coward-influenced scene are (from left) Will Bond, Kelly Maurer, Ellen Lauren and Stephen Webber. (Photos by Richard C. Trigg)

to further life, "Y2K" by the well-known playwright Arthur Kopit and "God's Man in Texas" by the relatively unknown David Rambo.

Rambo's play is a powerful, well-constructed look at tensions between two pastors at a big Baptist church. It has three juicy parts (all for men) and one simple stage set. It's going to get around.

Kopit is already planning to retitlle his play; currently, he favors "nemesis.com." "Y2K" is misleading, he's decided. Although his sophisticated, menacing thriller deals with the dangers implicit in the collision of virtual reality with *real* reality, it does not focus on a crisis that may or may not occur with a flip of the cosmic odometer. "It's about totalitarianism, about the invasion of privacy," says Kopit, author of plays from "Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mama's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad" to the Tony-award winning musical "Nine." "What do you really know about anyone — about yourself? What can you count on? What's solid?"

Kopit loved the production that Humana gave "Y2K," both the performances and the staging. He should. Humana puts on first-class productions. Notably, first-class productions are welcome in the case of a drama like "Y2K," yet they may be all too revealing in the case of a rambling "relationship" mishmash like Naomi Iizuka's "Aloha, Say the Pretty

Girls" or Vincent Murphy's play "The Cockfighter," which has not yet ceased to be Frank Manley's novel "The Cockfighter." These plays are disappointing, but they certainly got a fair shake.

So, too, did this year's Heide-man Award winners. The Heide-man, presented to 10-minute plays, had eight winners this year, all plays about characters under 30 years of age. Like the full-length plays, the shorter efforts show a wide range, but "Labor Day" by Sheri Wilner and "Just Be Frank" by Caroline Williams promise a bright future for work with a comic, feminine sensibility.

The 10-minute form — which has proved immensely popular among writers and actors trying to explore particular skills and among troupes eager to strike a lot of different notes in a single evening of theater — was invented at Humana. Now that the 10-minute form almost feels familiar, it's worth remembering that just a few years ago, it was considered a gimmick.

Experiments that stretch the bounds of theater do not need to produce a work of art every time to be worthwhile. To succeed, they need only sharpen our awareness of what happens in the theater and to make us remember that the actors, the writers, the artists can't do it alone. Theater is pointless unless the passion onstage finds its match on the dark side of the footlights.