

Arts Leisure

Playing around offstage

The Humana Festival shows the play is still the thing, even if it's in a car, over the phone, or printed on a T-shirt.

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Broadway still represents status and financial success, but the life of the theater is smack dab in the heart of many cities across the country. Regional theater companies keep theater alive — bouncing out new plays, nurturing playwrights, and experimenting with new forms.

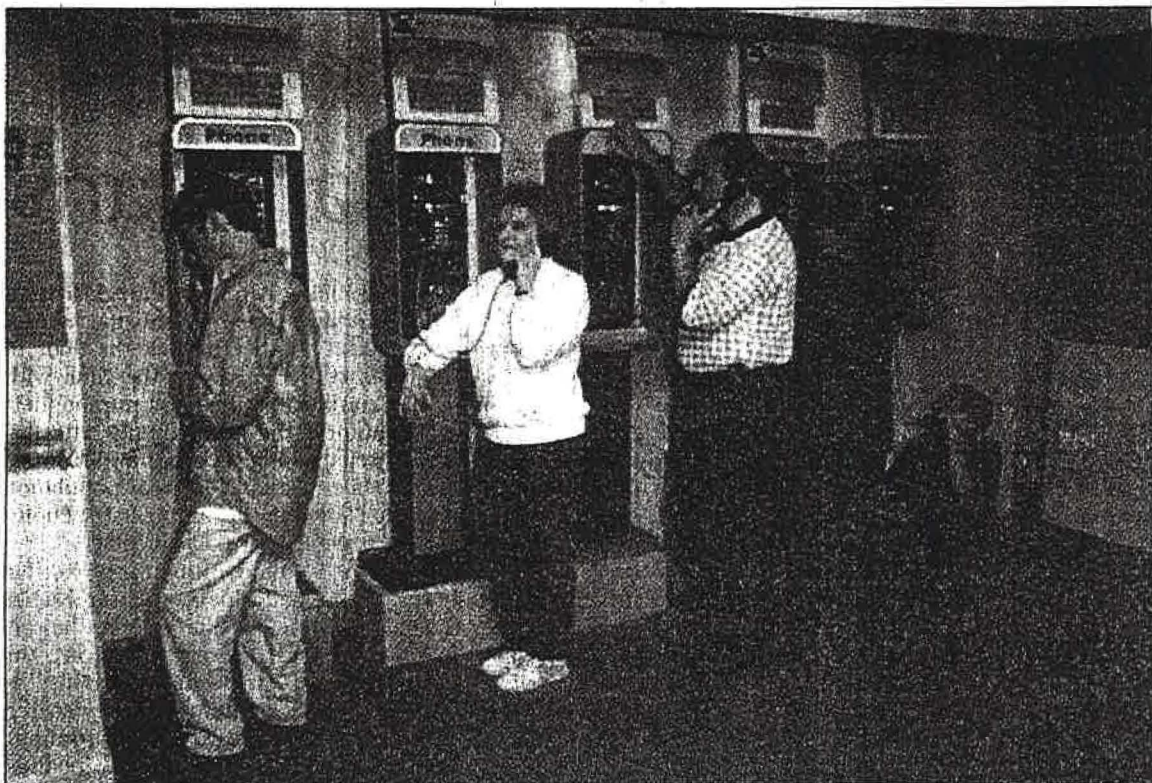
One of the most important forums for experimental forms is the Humana Festival of New American Plays at the Actor's Theatre of Louisville. For 23 years, some of the finest new plays by both established playwrights and emerging talents have found a venue in Louisville, held up before the eyes of visiting press and fellow theater lovers from around the world.

There's good reason for the Humana Festival's success: Of the 3,000 scripts submitted each year to the festival for consideration, only a handful are produced. This year's crop includes five full-

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JOHN NORDELL — STAFF



PHOTOS BY RICHARD C. TRIGG

'HEY BUDDY, CAN YOU SPARE A LINE?' At the Humana Festival in Louisville, Ky., five 'phone plays' spoofed the idea of voyeurism. Each audience of one listens on a 'pay phone' installed in the theater lobby.

Phones, cars, T-shirts: this is theater?

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length plays, eight 10-minute plays, six "T-shirt plays," five "phone plays," and one 9-minute production that was in a class by itself: "The Car Play: What Are You Afraid Of?"

This experimental comedy by Richard Dresser was produced in a specially fitted four-door sedan. The actors sat in the front seat, the audience of three-at-a-time sat in the back.

The lightweight plot about a man who picks up a young woman hitchhiker and imagines married life with her is sardonic, funny, and poignant. What was most enjoyable about this caustic little romance, though, was the proximity to the actors.

At a couple of points, the audience becomes the three subdued children of the couple, threatened and coaxed by turns. The breaking of the invisible "fourth wall," when the actors acknowledge the audience, is thrilling and rather sweet.

It's these gifted experiments that help keep the form growing. And experimentation is arguably the most important contribution any festival can make.

Of phones and T-shirts

Since experimentation was everywhere in evidence at Louisville this year, it gave viewers the chance to think about performance in new ways.

Five "phone plays" spoofed the idea of voyeurism. Pay phones were installed in the mezzanine lobby, and when one picked up a receiver, it was to eavesdrop on

two voices conversing.

In one charming phone play by Rebecca Gilman, "Speech Therapy," a man and woman discuss what terms they should use to describe their relationship ("significant other," girlfriend, "boyfriend"). In the end, he proposes marriage, and she accepts.

In "Will You Accept the Charges?" a man calls his wife from a casket six feet underground. Another play, called "Them," concerns a paranoid conversation in which the speakers discuss who might be listening in. It gets eerie when the voices ask the listener to reveal himself or herself, then wait until the audience of one answers.

The short subjects resemble little radio plays of yore. While some were less interesting than others, each challenges the way we think of performance, each invites us into a small conspiracy against traditional forms, and each makes us think about the intimacy new forms of theater might inspire.

What if the voices had been live?

Then there were the T-shirt plays. The festival commissioned six of America's most famous younger playwrights (Tony Kushner, David Henry Hwang, Jane Martin, Naomi Wallace, Wendy Wasserstein, and Mac Wellman) to write very short plays. The texts of each play were then printed on T-shirts — cleverly called "T(text) Shirts."

The idea is that when you buy one of the T-shirt plays, you become a producer. When you wear the shirt, you become the actor

and entirely responsible for the production. Standing in line at a supermarket or a bank, sitting at a baseball game, the "audience" (whoever is standing behind you) will read the play. And since most of the plays are fairly amusing or startling, they create a kind of instant street sensation.

Elements of real life

Text, of course, is the basis of theater. But what about plays that are not so much written as "assembled"?

Assemblage has become commonplace in the visual arts. In theater, plays assembled from real conversations and other elements have been produced for a while, too.

But no one has done so well or gone so far with this enigmatic form as Anne Bogart. Ms. Bogart is a soft-spoken yet riveting pres-

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ence. Her aesthetic light beams radiantly through her work. Of all the productions at the festival this year, hers was the only one that offered a sense of transcendence.

The visionary theater artist draws her poetic shows from the raw stuff of daily life — hints and haws, stereotypes, clichés, bits of ordinary speech patterns and situations — to make something extraordinary, joyful, and beautiful.

In this case, she solicited the help of 59 people who agreed to see plays and be interviewed over a period of several months. From many hours of tapes, she gleaned much of her text. But it is the application of her imagination, affection, and skill that turns it all into a substantial experiment.

"Cabin Fever" is about the theater, the actor's craft, and the responsibility and involvement of the audience.

At one point, the actors take the part of audience members, stumbling through their emotional responses, without ever being very clear. They repeat performances, do snatches from Shakespeare and Edward Albee, and prepare for performance "backstage" (before the real audience). They repeatedly break the fourth wall between performer and audience.

The production's lighting is almost a character in itself, so expressive and lovely that we are always aware of it.

Where Bogart's piece draws on the found beauties of daily and theatrical experiences, Arthur Kopit's stunning "Y2K" draws its life from cyberspace and privacy issues. The play explores the dangers to a profes-

sional couple who are far more sinned against than sinning.

A vengeful cyberpunk with a grudge sets out to "get" the couple — a scary, relevant tale written with brilliant precision and steely mystery.

The enigmatic subject matter, more than the form, helped make this an experimental investigation into the moral quandaries of the Information Age.

Frank Manley's "The Cockfighter," based on his novel of the same name, experiments with form and psychological content. A 12-year-old boy is crushed under the weight of his father's idea of manhood.

The child escapes his father's perverse rite of passage (managing roosters for cockfights) by "becoming" a feathered creature himself. It is a cautionary tale, but it never reaches the passionate intensity of the author's novel.

Naomi Iizuka, a young playwright of excellent promise, offered "Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls."

The play acquaints us with a compilation of young characters, who drift in and out of terminally superficial relationships. Like so many birds displaced from their nesting places, they aimlessly fly, land, flutter, and take off again.

Traditional theatrics

The one play in the festival that was written and directed in more traditional theatrical form dipped into territory most often left alone by the theater — the world of organized Christian fundamentalism.

Based on a true story, David Rambo's gripping "God's Man in Texas" concerns the rise and sudden departure of a scrupulous young minister — a man being groomed by an aging televangelist to inherit a religious empire, including a theme park.

Mr. Rambo does not despise his subject — it might as easily have been about a corporate empire — but neither does he capture the nature of authentic religious life.

Many of the productions this year tested the limits of the medium — asking, "What is the role of the audience?" — and then supplying various exciting answers. It was like a terrific conspiracy to change the proximity of actor to viewer — with the viewer mattering more than ever.

And that is the meaning of live performance.



GET INTO MY CAR: The nine-minute 'The Car Play' puts the three audience members in the back, while the actors perform in front.