

Rich Copley
HERALD-LEADER ARTS COLUMNIST

Young writers stole the show at Humana



LOUISVILLE — The 1999 Humana Festival of New American Plays made a strong statement about playwriting in the new

millennium. The craft is in good hands. Young playwrights took center stage at the 23rd edition of the festival and made the most of it, while the more established scribes on the program faltered. Leading the youth brigade was Humana's first and best offering, Naomi Iizuka's *Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls*. Iizuka's *Polaroid Stories* impressed many critics at the 1997 festival. She returned with a play that honestly covered a decade in the lives of eight young adults.

Poignant and hilarious, *Aloha* showed Iizuka's keen ear for the rhythms of how people really talk and what they say. It also distin-

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If you go

Today is the last day of the 23rd Annual Humana Festival of New American Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville, 310 W. Main St. Shows are:

- 7 p.m. *God's Man in Texas*
- 7:30 p.m. *Just Be Frank* and *Cabin Pressure*

Tickets are \$15-\$20. Call (800) 428-5849.

COPLEY: Young writers filled the bill

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guished itself from other twentysomething chronicles through its distinct lack of whininess. While the characters had struggles, they weren't looking for someone to blame.

A big plus for *Aloha* was the cast. Many players fit their parts perfectly, adding to the show's natural charm.

Aloha's sister production was *Life Under 30*, a compilation of eight 10-minute plays by writers younger than 30. It featured several of the same actors, giving Humana audiences a chance to get to know some of the performers.

Standouts in both shows included Carla Harting, Bruce McKenzie, Nick Garrison, Derek Cecil and Caitlin Miller, all of whom should be invited back to Actors Theatre of Louisville as soon as possible.

Life Under 30 also introduced such budding playwrights as Robb Badlam, Julia Jordan and Caroline Williams, whose hilarious *Just Be Frank* was her midterm for Playwriting 101.

Not quite as hip, but certainly as aware as those shows, was *God's Man in Texas*, a generational power struggle set in a fictional Houston megachurch. The full-length play, the only one on this year's schedule written by a newcomer to the Humana festival, was a daring piece that took the religious convictions of its characters seriously.

Misplaced snickering in the

opening-night audience indicated that some people didn't know how to take men of faith who weren't caricatures. But David Rambo's respectful style made for compelling drama.

The best acting of the festival came in *Cabin Pressure* from the five players in Anne Bogart's Saratoga International Theatre Institute. Split-second character changes throughout the 90-minute production showcased the actors' versatility.

Unfortunately, that effort was somewhat wasted on a show that got lost in its stated mission, which was to explore the actor-audience relationship.

Award-winning playwright Arthur Kopit did little more than momentarily accomplish his mission to scare people with the possibility of cyberterrorism in his shallow *Y2K*.

Writer-director Vincent Murphy explored interesting theatrical techniques in his adaptation of Frank Manley's novel, *The Cockfighter*, having his three-person cast employ the physical characteristics of fighting gamecocks to tell the story of a family at war. But it did not amount to an evening of compelling drama.

All of the last three shows I mentioned clocked in at less than 90 minutes. I'm all for a play that can quickly, efficiently tell its story, but all these productions seemed distinctly underdeveloped.

Still, the lasting impression of this year's Humana festival was its youthful vigor. And if that can be sustained, we can look forward to exciting Humana festivals in the 21st century.

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