

DINING OUT: THE IRISH QUESTION

MARCH 1999

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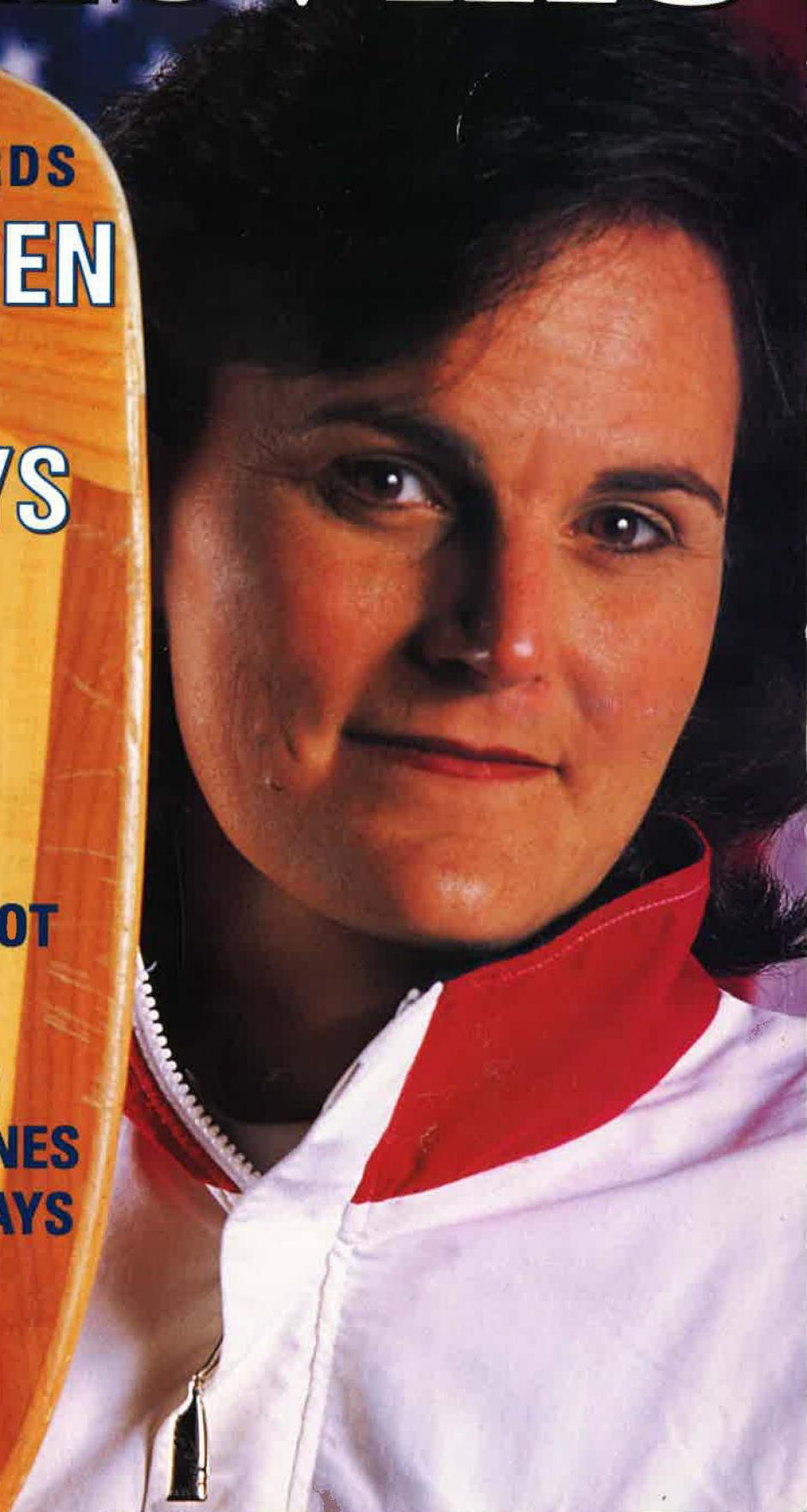
Louisville

IN HER OWN WORDS

**TORI MURDEN
RETRACES
HER 85 DAYS
AT SEA**

**LIFE, LIBERTY AND
THE KNOB CREEK
MACHINE GUN SHOOT**

**HUMANA FESTIVAL:
T-SHIRTS, TELEPHONES
AND 10-MINUTE PLAYS**



T-shirts, Telephones and ATL

BY JULIE BECKETT

THE 23RD EDITION OF ACTORS THEATRE'S HUMANA FESTIVAL OF NEW AMERICAN PLAYS IS TAKING AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION TO A WHOLE NEW LEVEL.

The discerning critic has a confession to make before beginning her preview of this year's Humana Festival of New American Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville, with its self-proclaimed "emphasis on fun."

The discerning critic is a bit of a cynic.

Okay, the D.C. is a major cynic.

The D.C. casts a wary eye on all things that attempt to fuse art with fun.

Art isn't fun. Art is art. Fun is something else entirely.

This year's Humana Festival (the theater's 23rd) consists of 25 "offerings," including five full-length plays, an evening of 10-minute plays, several "phone" plays, a "car" play, and "T-shirt" plays. These last three categories, mind you, are not plays *about* phones, cars or T-shirts, but plays that take place in phone booths, in the front seat of a car, and on T-shirts. If you are wondering how a play takes place on a T-shirt, you're not alone. The discerning critic would have liked to have been a fly on the wall at the Dramatists Guild meeting when *that* contract negotiation came up.

It is with some trepidation that the discerning critic feels compelled to ask, regarding this year's eclectic "offerings," exactly where does one draw the line between art and gimmick? And when does a play cease to be a play and become a merchandising tool?

The Humana Festival has a long and impressive history. Rumor has it that 23 years ago it was but a pile of unsolicited manuscripts on the floor of producing director Jon Jory's office, sent to him by overachieving agents who didn't believe it when they were told that Actors was not interested in new plays. As the pile of scripts grew ever higher, Jory figured somebody had better read them or return them or, preferably, both. He assigned the task to his then-assistant, ElizaBeth King, and from simple housecleaning history was born. Somewhere in this process Jory realized that a) these plays might be worth doing, and b) no other regional theater had yet dedicated itself to the way, way,

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way off-Broadway premieres of new works.

Two plays were produced that first winter: D.L. Coburn's *The Gin Game* and something else that faded from memory pretty quickly. The next year saw the production of at least twice as many plays, among them Louisville-native Marsha Norman's *Getting Out*. Under the auspices of the Great American Play Contest, which was simply the theater's way of generating manuscripts by promising prize money for the best unproduced play, the Festival began to thrive. Wintertime at ATL became a blur of frenzied energy. People worked harder than they had ever believed possible. And loved it. And came back for more.

There were phenomenal successes. *Crimes of the Heart*, *Extremities* and *Agnes of God* are the plays most-often mentioned, but there were other, less-public triumphs that came about because writers found a safe place to flex their creative muscles and become, for however fleeting a time, part of a community. There were also, inevitably, huge failures — plays that never found their shape, actors who never found their play, writers who had to slink out of town under the weight of so much unrealized potential.

The Humana Foundation generously agreed to underwrite the festival four years after its inception, and from then on it became known as The Humana Festival of New American Plays. The infusion of financial support was a huge relief, and made it possible for the theater to continue producing new works, which is at best risky in terms of audience support. Let's face it — not everybody stayed for the second acts of some of these plays.

There was a time when the glut of unproduced work threatened to overtake the place. Sack after sack of manuscripts would arrive in April. It took a day just

to empty the mail bags, weeks to return all the unwanted plays, additional weeks of deliberating and negotiating before the plays for the festival were chosen.

And somewhere in there, say six or eight years after its beginning, the newness of it all began to wear off. It no longer seemed enough just to *do* new plays. It became necessary to find hooks upon which to hang them. And so came the years of commissioning novelists (Jimmy Breslin, William F. Buckley and lots of other perfectly pleasant big-name writers with little knowledge of theater), and experimenting with docudramas, and commissioning prestigious playwrights — all the while continuing to search for new theatrical voices in the piles of scripts that arrived annually.

As the system that produced the festival was refined, its position as the centerpiece of Actors Theatre was challenged. Other regional theaters began to incorporate new plays into their seasons. There came a kind of drying up of the fervor that once gripped January and February in Louisville. Don't get me wrong — the Humana Festival remains vital and exciting, and it still stimulates everyone's creative juices, but its original manic energy seems to have waned, replaced by clever experimentation with form. Not that that's a bad thing. Just curious.

Which brings us to the plays in this year's festival, which include five new full-length plays, each promising in its own way.

Arthur Kopit (*Indians*, *Wings*, *Bone The Fish*) has tackled the thorny issue of computer hackers and privacy in his new play *Y2K*, which has everything to do with personal violation. In it, a young professional couple's lives are completely rewritten by a sinister 19-year-old hacker with an axe to grind. As he says, "With what I know, I can go anywhere. . . I've done the math." The play is both harrowing and creepy and addresses the very current question of whether anything in our lives can ever again be truly private. Kopit's best-known work is probably his absurdist play *Oh, Dad, Poor Dad, Momma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feeling So Sad*. *Y2K* will be performed in-the-round in the Bingham Theatre and begins on Feb. 28.

God's Man in Texas, by David Rambow (no kidding, that's his last name), addresses the internal politics of mega-churches, where television affability, screen presence

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God's Man in Texas, by David Rambo (no kidding, that's his last name), addresses the internal politics of mega-churches, where television affability, screen presence

and "the numbers" are as important as the actual message. The aging pastor of the biggest and best-known Baptist church in Texas auditions a younger pastor to be his replacement while simultaneously maneuvering to retain most of his dynasty, including the coveted 10 a.m. TV slot. This is a play about power, pure and simple. Rambo, who lives in Los Angeles (and who is not a native Texan), is making his ATL debut. His play begins performances on March 4 in the Pamela Brown Auditorium.

Frank Manley, a novelist, playwright and professor at Atlanta's Emory University, has teamed with director Vincent Murphy to adapt Manley's novel *The Cockfighter* for the stage. This extremely vivid, colorful portrait of a young boy's initiation into his father's brutal world is full of details about the fierce sport of cockfighting. On the occasion of his first fight, the boy finds himself both wanting to please his father, who has given him his prize bird to handle, and wanting to protect the bird, whom he has come to love like a pet. Murphy is the artistic producing director at Theater Emory, and directed *The Survivor: A Cambodian Odyssey* in the 1994 Humana Festival. *The Cockfighter* will open in the Bingham Theatre on March 9.

Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls marks the return to Louisville of Naomi Iiuka, whose play *Polaroid Stories* was produced here in 1997. This quirky ensemble piece revolves around the intertwined lives of a group of young adults as they try to find their way to true maturity. The play begins in Los Angeles. From there, the characters move to either Hawaii or Alaska, trading in their fast-paced, familiar urban environment for one that is exotic, unknown and extreme. Iiuka is currently a Humanities fellow at Princeton University. *Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls* will be playing in the Bingham Theatre from Feb. 24 through March 28.

Finally, director Anne Bogart and her SITI company return with a production entitled *Cabin Pressure* that explores audience/actor relationships. The work will evolve from a series of interviews conducted with diverse members of Louisville audiences and is part of a two-year project funded by the Pugh Charitable Trust. Bogart's continuing presence in this town (*Cabin Pressure* will mark her seventh Louisville production) is no small gift, as

her innovative approach to theater is startling and invigorating. The discerning critic maintains that this woman could direct the yellow pages of the phone book and find a way to make it interesting. *Cabin Pressure* will be performed in the Victor Jory Theatre from March 19 through 28.

Also on the main stage this year is an evening of 10-minute plays entitled *Life Under Thirty*. These plays, all written, directed and performed by artists under the age of 30, are diverse in style but thematically linked. They are the result of Jory's continuing interest in new, young voices. As he called other theater professionals and asked them to recommend writers for this project, he discovered that many of them didn't know any. This is an ironic comment on the current state of the American theater. Fifteen years ago, these same professionals would have been hard-pressed to name any writers over 30, leading one to wonder where have all the playwrights gone? To which the answer is: Los Angeles and the cable-TV networks. Sad, but true. *Life Under Thirty* will begin performances on March 13 in the Pamela Brown Auditorium.

Actors Theatre has for years been a writers' theater, cognizant of the number of writers it serves. This year is no exception, with 25 writers represented in one way or another. Which brings us, however circuitously, to this: So what *is* a phone play? Is it like phone sex? (No, but good question.) Is it like voyeurism? (Yes, and also a good question.)

Here's the deal. There will be phone booths in the lobby. You go into one, pick up the receiver, and listen to the three-minute play going on at the other end of the line. Why? Because it's something to do, I suppose. These plays were written by Neal Bell, Rebecca Gilman,



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On Thursday, April 8 at 5:30
PM, **David Revere McFadden**
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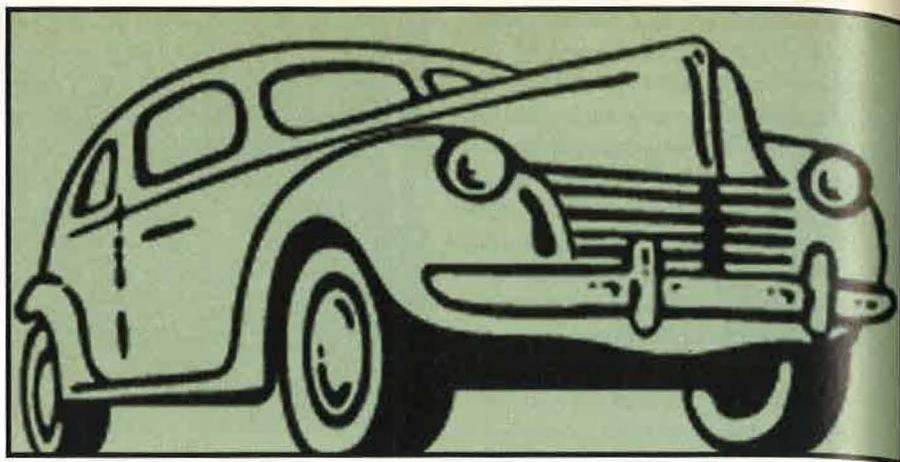
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Taking voyeurism one step further, you may elect to hop into the back seat of a car parked on Main Street and listen to a play (written by Rick Dresser) being performed in the front seat. This reminds the discerning critic a bit of when she was a child and listened in on conversations her parents were having while they were driving her to piano lessons. Sometimes they'd forget she was there, and then she could really learn some good stuff! While this 10-minute play, entitled *What Are You Afraid Of?*, may yield fewer enticing secrets, it is guaranteed to be funny. Dresser will be familiar to Louisville audiences because of his previous Humana plays, *Gun-Shy* (1997), *Below the Belt* (1995) and *Alone on the Beach*.

And finally — finally and most confounding — there are T-shirt plays. Also referred to as T(ext)-shirt plays, they have been contributed by David Henry Hwang, Jane Martin, Naomi Wallace, Wendy Wasserstein, Mac Wellman and Tony Kushner. All of which begs the question: When is a play not a play? If it is never performed, is it still a play? Or is the wearer "performing" it by wearing it? To which the discerning critic says, "Oh, please." Experiment with form, if you must, push the boundaries, expand your vision, do whatever the hell you want before an audience, but for God's sake don't become the Planet Hollywood of the American theater. (Overpriced mediocre food, long lines, so much noise you can't hear yourself think, but HEY, GREAT T-SHIRTS!)

Cynic though she is, the D.C.'s heart breaks at the thought that it is no longer enough just to do the plays, revel in the process and move on.

Nonetheless, and recognizing a certain reluctance when it comes to change — okay, the discerning critic also admits she isn't good at transition — the bulk of the festival is wildly promising, and curiosity alone will drive me to check it out in its entirety.

Which is probably the point.

**23RD HUMANA FESTIVAL
SCHEDULE OF PLAYS**

ALOHA, SAY THE PRETTY GIRLS: Feb. 23-27, March 4-6, 14, 17, 20-21, 23, 28.

Y2K: Feb. 27-28, March 2-3, 6-7, 11, 14, 18-20, 25, 27-28.

GOD'S MAN IN TEXAS: March 3-7, 9-11, 13-14, 17, 19-21, 23-24, 26-28.

THE COCKFIGHTER: March 7, 9-10, 12-13, 16, 19, 21, 24, 27.

LIFE UNDER 30: March 12-14, 16, 18, 20-21, 24-25, 27.

CABIN PRESSURE: March 18-21, 23-28.

Car Plays: Feb. 24, 28, March 4, 6, 9, 13, 27-28. Tickets are free and available only on the morning of performances from the ATL box office (limit 2 per person). These plays will be performed for an audience of three people every 15 minutes during scheduled times.

Phone Plays: Feb. 23-March 28. Phone booths are located on ATL's mezzanine level. These plays are free and available on a first-come, first-served basis before and after regular festival performances.

T(ext) Shirt Plays: Sold in the ATL box office for \$20 each while supply lasts.

For performance times, call 584-1205.