

COVER STORY

Big Love in Kentucky

By P. Gregory Springer

From the window on the eighth floor, the hotel room overlooks downtown and, just beyond, the lazy Ohio River. The Derby is still a few weeks away, but downtown Louisville seems a perpetually amiable, easygoing, unexcited place. On the wall, there's a Larry Kanfer color print of a faded red farm shed. Kanfer's work and sensibility suit the decidedly Southern, bluegrass, whisky and horses attitude that pervades the Kentucky territory. (Even the strippers at the friendly, seedy, neighborhood club drawl a little.)

The breakfast crowd is a colorfully diverse lot, punkish intellectuals and droves of families coexisting with a naturalness that seems to ignore the possibility that any world exists beyond the encompassing pleasures of Louisville. The world *is* Louisville.

For one spring weekend over the past 24 years, the world has indeed come to Louisville for the Humana Festival of New American Plays. Visitors this year arrived from the scattered reaches of Beverly Hills, Warsaw, Lithuania, Singapore, Malta, and more for what the *Chicago Tribune* refers to as "The Cannes of Live Theatre."

"The quality of the plays is so exciting!" enthused statuesque playwright Tina Howe (*Painting Churches*, *Coastal Disturbances*) as we filled our plates with elegant pates and caviar (washed down with Maker's Mark, of course) at the Saturday night reception.

Her own 10-minute religious comedy, *The Divine Fallacy*, would be presented the following day, although Howe — a UI Uni High School graduate who has lived in New York most of her life — seemed particularly taken with the full-length plays, rather than the short plays, or the *Phone Plays* that visitors waited in line to listen to over public telephones in the lobby, or the compilation experiment called *Back Story*, that combined original short works by 18 well-known playwrights into one play. "The gimmicks betray the experience of immersion into the theatre," she said.

Immersion in the theatre, though, is precisely what the Humana Fest accomplishes in a few short days. New plays are seen; actors are scouted; scripts are passed around; deals are struck and seasons planned, all within the buzz of international discovery.

The contemporary works at Humana Fest provide the living, breathing relationship between audience and performer, and nowhere in the world does this become more evident than during the compressed annual celebration at the Actors Theatre of Louisville.

THE SITI COMPANY — WAR OF THE WORLDS

One of the biggest buzzes at the festival was for Anne Bogart and The SITI Company, a troupe at work this week on the University of Illinois campus. They arrived here from Louisville and they'll perform *Cabin Pressure* — a 1999 Humana Fest entry — at the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts at 8 p.m. on Saturday, April 15 in the Colwell Playhouse.

Cabin Pressure, sponsored by *The Octopus*, was written and derived from the comments provided by audiences coming to the rehearsals. Bogart's work is pure exploration, nuts and bolts theatre inhabiting the edge without ever toppling into chaos.

Particularly accessible is *War of the Worlds*, SITI's new biographical play about the life of Orson Welles. Theatrically charged, *War* is staged in the styles of Welles' own movies and radio plays, from a grid of spaceship-shaped lamps that ascend from the floor, to a reconstructed *Lady from Shanghai* hall of mirrors, to a dramatic structure like that of *Citizen Kane* — actors piecing together the tragic riddle of Welles' life.

ANTON IN SHOW BUSINESS

Written by the prolific and pseudonymous Jane Martin, *Anton in Show Business* seemed a crowning, valedictory work for the festival. Writing a play about a play within a play about the perils of staging Chekov's *Three Sisters*, Martin delivered "an equal opportunity satire of a system running amok," cast with women in all roles. The

"three sisters" rehearsing are Holly, a television prima donna trying to break into movies via the stage; Casey, a leather-clad, perpetually unpaid veteran of 200 off-Broadway plays; and Lisabette, a third-grade teacher making her first, overexcited New York audition. The trio become bonded in the process, overcoming bizarre directors with multicultural agendas, rehearsals in which gobbledygook is spoken rather than script, and producers who pander and gush ("Welcome to Actors Express. Get it? Actors EXPRESS!").

The references are barbed — regional theatre is "mean-spirited new plays or deconstructed classics that EVERYBODY loathes," where half the audience is "two weeks away from the nursing home" — yet

When his wife disappears one night from a quick mart shopping lot, the stargazer cannot be consoled by his best friend Bennie (played by former UI student Dominic Fumusa), his sister-in-law, or the possibility of any meaning above in the cosmos. Instead, he seeks answers and consolation in the arms of a woman for hire, a prostitute he carefully chooses to be the outlet for his love, a release from his inexpressible rage. Without sentimentality, *Touch* puts a deeply human spin on the search for God or meaning in the universe. It is moving in mysterious ways, with scientific descriptions of the stars that elicit a sense of profundity and introspection.

TAPE

Actors Kunken and Fumusa also performed together as old high-school pals reunited at a beer-can strewn room in the Motel 6 in Lansing, Michigan, in Stephen Belber's *Tape*. While Jon (Kunken) has become an independent filmmaker since graduation, his unambitious buddy Vince (Fumusa) never got beyond dealing pot as a career goal. To say Vince lives on marijuana has several meanings. Their reunion celebration at Jon's potential "big break" soon evolves into a confrontation, shrewdly calculated by Vince, about what really happened one night between Vince's former girlfriend Amy and Jon. Perhaps a forced, possibly violent, sexual event took place that night 10 years ago, and Vince's downhill spiral might have been the result of this betrayal. When Amy, now an assistant D.A., shows up at the motel, the pursuit of "unresolved issues" escalates, aided and abetted by a recording device.

NO. 11 (BLUE AND WHITE)

Alexandra Cunningham's *No. 11 (Blue and White)* also deals with teenage date rape. The lacrosse-playing boys of Spencer, a private high school in Connecticut, take their privilege for granted. Capturing the language and culture of "Jeep-driving, leg-waxing prep school attendees," Cunningham depicts the way denial takes over when the golden boys of affluence become the perpetrators of violent crime; even the victims doubt their own experience, particularly when the social circle insists that nothing could mar their way of life,



The cast of The SITI Company's 'Cabin Pressure,' directed by Anne Bogart. (Cover and story photos courtesy of The SITI Company.)

the audience at Louisville, recognizing itself over and over, devoured the play with gusto.

TOUCH

Toni Press-Coffman's *Touch*, while more script-bound and less visually compelling, is equally provoking and hypnotic. It's the story of a self-described astronomy geek who shares a deep love with the free-spirited woman he marries. Actor Stephen Kunken delivered an opening 30-minute monologue, but with such conviction (and naive awe at the science of the heavens) that this unusual gambit — which should have caused squirming in the audience — became entrancing and convincing.