

THEATER'S NEXT WAVE

The new works that made a real splash

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The pick of the litter of all the new works at the Humana Festival of New American Plays was *God's Man in Texas* by West Coast playwright David Rambo. It was nothing less than a longhorn.

Taken from a true story, *God's Man* looks in on Rock Baptist Church, "the largest Protestant church in the world" right there in downtown Houston, where Dr. Philip Gottschall has made the church into his own little baronetcy.

Dr. G is on TV every Sunday morning, and don't you know there's everything else, from their own little campus to even a dinner the-a-ter where only certified Christian plays are done.

But don't you also know that all empires can come crashing down?

That is the crux of *God's Man*: The numbers, playwright Rambo tells us are lower in terms of attendance and cash, and the 81-year-old Dr. G. suddenly finds out there's a Pastoral Search Committee looking for his successor.

Enter Dr. Jeremiah Mears, educated at the Southern Baptist stronghold, Baylor University, and ready to move to the Big Leagues.

The conflict is obvious but *God's Man in Texas* never is. It makes the grinding of inexorable gears so real, so nitty-gritty that you feel them in your own bones. And

Rambo's script never caricatures these men. The reverends are real in their faith, real in their desire to do what they firmly believe is God's work, and oh-so-recognizably real in their human failing. In their ambition, their petty jealousies and conceits, you can always see their hearts.

Yikes, Y2K

Playwright Arthur Kopit (*Wings*, the musical *Nine*, among others) is interested in a very different game. If you've been following *Doonisbury* on the comic pages, you can figure that computer hacking is kind of a joke.

Kopit's Y2K sees it through a much much darker screen. He focuses on an British couple leading the chattering-class life. He's in book publishing — what an anachronism. She's in the art-auction business.

And they chat, drink vodka, perpetrate that randy, quick and verbal humor known as BritWit, and generally lead a somewhat specious but decent life.

Until the Boy arrives. On Actors Theatre's high-tech cage of a set over the usual upper-middle living room, he flies in, hair streaked blue, mind a hacker's warren of brilliance and filth.

I won't even pretend to understand the cyberspace stuff here. Suffice to say that the boy, who calls himself BCuziCan among other names, including ISeeU first takes over the publisher's personal computer. From there it's a downhill run to pornography with children, to set-

ting up the man and his wife, so that federal agents are involved.

Y2K is terrifically funny and often sexy. There's a little nudity, some titillating foreplay, and generally a strong production, until the end.

What happens? Well, if you think that you may have a little Y2K problem yourself, wait until you see what happens to these totally invaded, totally defeated Brits. Kopit's play is a nightmare you've got to hope won't happen to you.

Bogart's latest

Anne Bogart's *Cabin Pressure* is one that has happened to a lot of us.

The former Trinity Rep leader (see accompanying story) decided to investigate that all-important (and only-in-live-theater) relationship between actor and audience. Bogart surveyed Louisville-ians in depth, having them sit in on rehearsals and then have discussions with the cast and herself.

Developed with the actors of Bogart's New York-based SITI Company, *Cabin Pressure* is very Bogart-ian. Colors are bright, movement frenzied. Actors are often stylized and frantic. They seem to love to do schtick, jump in with little vaudeville-style jokes and bits.

The play runs from snatches of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and *Private Lives* through dialogue taken directly from the audience members who worked with Bogart.

One playgoer attends the theater because "it's better than TV." Another goes "because life is unbearable."

Actors comment on the audience. "They're good tonight," one says. "Laughers," the other agrees.

It's that mix between seat holder and stage user that Bogart's after. What is it that makes it work, or not?

Cabin Pressure does not come up with an answer, of course. But it has insights, it is playfully funny, and at the very end, the actors rush frantically to their seats. They, and Bogart, hope some of us are ready to do the same, to see more, to love the theater.

A back-seat view

Other mainstage productions were, ah, less successful.

Frank Manley's *The Cockfighter* was just what it sounds like: A cock-fighting pit set up on stage turns into a father/son battleground. The metaphor only goes so far.

Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls by young playwright Naomi Iizuka has so much going for it — lightness, some genuine howl-making dialogue, and a general good nature — that you wish it wasn't so overwritten. As it bounces from Hawaii to Alaska, as it has giddy moments (Demi Moore drives her agent/gofer bonkers, for instance) the play just meanders on into the land of pointlessness. You can't wait for it to end, and it seems it never will.

That's not the case with *What Are You Afraid Of?*



RICHARD C. TRIGG

BUGGED BY A HACKER: In Y2K, a British couple is terrorized by a boy with blue hair and a mean streak.

three folks sit in the back of the Town Car parked in front of the theater while two actors pretend to be driver and hitchhiker up front.

The piece moves forward, to their life together, to the days of children and disappointment and anger. The view from the back seat is of lives trapped by life. It's a hard and pointed piece.

10-minute plays

The Humana Festival is known in the theater world for its 10-minute play competition. This year seven were presented, and, as you might guess, ranged from real good to not so good.

The Blue Room by Courtney Baron, who describes herself as a wayward Texan who now lives in New York, is 10 minutes of poetry about the sea. A man who sails for a living and his woman splash in a bathtub. As they giggle and play, the writing is reminiscent of Eugene O'Neill's early works in its bittersweet insights into love and loss.

Dancing With A Devil by Brooke Berman, once a student at Trinity's Conservatory, is far from poetry. It's about rape. It's about the aftereffects on a 24-year-old virgin raped by a masked intruder. It makes you fiercely angry and crumpled and despairing, at the same time. It's fine writing, powerful theater.

It's also something you don't get on the tube. Not that graphic. Not that intense. Not on TV.

Which happens to be the theme of *Slop-Culture* by Robb Badlam, which chronicles the effect of "25 years of bad TV" on Gen X, a generation that — according to this play, at least — thinks *Gilligan's Island* is filled with

Here's a passion for plays that you can phone home about

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and 30 other journalists from newspapers all over the country.

All mix with locals (the city is often pronounced Loo-uv-vul, by the way) who care enough to have developed a theater with three major stages and an \$8-million yearly budget.

Last weekend, the fashion statement that is New York black crowded the lobbies, contrasting with the gold-buckled loafers and plaids of the Louisville-ians.

Around the playgoers, an Actors Theatre army of workers worked, hard. The Humana Festival is a tremendous undertaking even for a good-sized regional theater. The



TIMOTHY RUSFIELD the for-

were interesting or funny or both. Worth hearing.

So was playwright Lanford Wilson's (*Hot L Baltimore*, *Fifth of July*) speech as he accepted a Best New Play Award from the American Theatre Critics Association (\$1,000 prize courtesy of *The Providence Journal*) for his work, *Book of Days*.

"Television," Wilson said, "just won't dare to be daring."

On the other hand, he said, playwrights sometimes "just don't give a damn, and that's refreshing."

This year's Humana Festival, as you might guess, had a couple of clunkers, but nothing that could not have been improved with rewriting and cutting. There was nothing embarrassing.