

Stage folk try to catch the next wave during a weekend of vibrant new plays

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In days of yore, before the cell phone took over the land, the intermission pay-phone lines were long in theater lobbies.

Moms and dads were calling sitters at home, and you could spend the whole time waiting to make a three-minute call.

Today, with so much cellular, pay phones sometimes sit lonely in lobbies. But not at Actors Theatre of Louisville last weekend during that annual theatrical extravaganza called the Humana Festival of New American Plays.

No, in Louisville the lines were back. Five Bell South phones were constantly busy with as many as a half-dozen folks waiting for each. The reason was not a check-in at home, but a brand-new necessity for being on the phone — to listen to a play.

One of those doing just that was the artistic director of a small re-

gional house, the B Street Theatre, in Sacramento, Calif., Timothy Busfield.

Once a well-known actor — he played philandering adman Elliot Weston on television's *thirtysomething* and earlier spent a couple of years as Pernell Roberts's son on *Trapper John, M.D.* — Busfield says that the 23-year-old Humana Festival changed the direction of his life.

Acting in the festival 18 years ago, he became inspired to work in the theater, even to found his own, the B Street.

The festival "literally changed my life," he said. "I learned how to produce. I found out that theater could be cool. It inspired me."

And why not?

Where else, after all, can you see five full-length plays, eight short plays and a whole bunch of other things theatrical — including a neat little piece watched from the back seat of a Lincoln Town Car, the actors performing in the front seat — in just one three-day weekend?

You can't. And that's what makes the Humana Festival so swell, so important. And if you arrived home in time last weekend to suffer through some of the excesses and foolishness of the Oscars, so seemingly filled with urgency.

The festival gives the lie to the idea that the American theater is dying, that young people want to write only for television or movies.

At Louisville, the play's the thing, and it is vibrant.

Major works have been born here. In the past, plays such as *Crimes of the Heart*, *The Gin Game* and *Agnes of God* emerged from the festival.

And there's a buzz about the Actors Theatre as — only a couple of blocks from the muddy and powerful Ohio River — a hundred or more theater folks, along with movie and television people scouting for writers, mingle with maybe 50 critics

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RICHARD C. TRIGG

CATCHING UP WITH ANNE BOGART:

Trinity Rep's former artistic director was in Louisville with a play by her New York-based company. See interview on Page 7.