

# The San Diego gang's all here

By Anne Marie Welsh  
THEATER CRITIC

Three days in Louisville, Ky., soon felt like Old Home Week. At the Humana Festival, San Diego-sprung actors, directors, scholars and playwrights held forth on various stages and chatted amiably between shows.

One hot topic of conversation was the La Jolla Playhouse search for its next artistic director. Mark Taper associate director Lisa Peterson and recent Globe visitor Tina Landau had taken themselves out of the running, their associates reported. The short list consisted of two candidates: Christopher Ashley, the versatile director of Paul Rudnick's "Jeffrey" on stage and screen, and Anne Hamburger, the En Garde Arts founder who last week got the La Jolla nod.

Also of local connection, this year's favorite Humana production among most audiences and critics was by L.A. playwright David Rambo. "God's Man in Texas," which drew a terrific performance from San Diego-born, Globe-trained V Craig Heidenreich.

With his splendidly agile voice, nimble movement and attractive presence, Heidenreich has been a mainstay of the Actors Theatre of Louisville acting company for 10 years. Craig Noel discovered the untutored talent at an audition when Heidenreich was 17.

At the end of this season, though, he's hanging it up in Louisville. The actor and his craftswoman wife Gretchen Heidenreich have bought a house on the North Carolina coast; from there, V Craig will seek stage work in New York.

Meanwhile, the super, intelligent UCSD directing grad Maria Mileaf directed half of the "Life Under Thirty" plays at the festival, including a gorgeously staged duet by Courtney Baron with San Diego-sprung actors Bruce McKenzie and Carla Harting. Mileaf, founder of the B-Attitudes collective in San Diego, directed a visually stunning production of Odon Von Horvath's "Faith, Hope

and Charity" before leaving the city in 1994. She's married to gifted set designer and sometime collaborator Neil Patel; their year-old daughter Pia was in Louisville, as well.

Among Mileaf's directing projects was the Chicago production of "Art" and an upcoming gig this summer at the Lincoln Center Festival, where she will direct a play by Sledgehammer associate Eric Ehn.

Another UCSD grad, playwright Naomi Iizuka, had a second play commissioned by the Humana Festival after 1997's "Polaroid Stories" convinced ATL director Jon Jory (if not some befuddled critics) that she had the gift.

During one intermission conversation, Jory said he felt "honored" that Iizuka, 34, allowed him to direct her new "Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls." (The pop exotica costumes

## Another UCSD grad, playwright Naomi Iizuka, had a second play commissioned.

were by designer Jack Taggart, a La Jolla Playhouse, San Diego Rep and Sledgehammer collaborator.)

"It might be more obvious to choose a younger person, or a woman to direct," Jory said, adding that he's commissioned a third play from Iizuka for next year. Jory is celebrating his 30th season as head of the Actors Theatre; Iizuka and even younger playwrights were everywhere, suggesting his lifeline to the future.

The playwright will also create an adaptation of "The Cherry Orchard" for ATL, a project that has her both excited and intimidated. After years of study, she feels ready to work on Chekhov, her favorite playwright, she said. Iizuka is writing at Princeton University, where she holds a prestigious Hodder Fellowship. When that ends, she'll be teaching playwrighting at the University of Iowa.

Iizuka still shares a dog and her

life with actor Bruce McKenzie, a Sledgehammer veteran who took the title role earlier this season in Louisville in a controversial "Hamlet." In Jory's staging, the melancholy Dane was at first drug-addicted; as the stuff passed out of his system and the psychic shadow lifted, reported several sources, McKenzie's procrastinating prince could at last seek his revenge.

Carla Harting, so fine at the San Diego Rep in "Zoot Suit" and other plays, turned up in Louisville, as well. The Humana Festival was the first big East Coast gig for Harting, who recently moved to New York.

UCSD playwrighting Professor Adele Shank was there, too, along with her husband, alternative-theater expert and TheatreForum co-editor Ted Shank. Adele appeared on a well-attended and, according to sources, "heartfelt" panel about the intricacies of teaching writing for the theater.

Mead Hunter, who heads the ASK Theatre Project in Los Angeles, was there, too — watching, chatting and planning with another UCSD-trained director, Lisa Portes.

Portes — who staged the Des McAnuff production of "Tommy" in many cities, and at her adventurous Theater E in downtown San Diego — directed vital productions of works by Iizuka, Erin Cressida Wilson and others. Next month, Portes will collaborate with San Diego-born writer Annie Weisman during a residency at ASK's Pacific Palisades facility.

Weisman, whose first play was produced at the Old Globe by the Playwrights Project when she was a teen-ager, is working on a script called "Be Aggressive."

Just 23, Weisman labors by day at the Mark Taper Forum, has produced a play by Kelly ("Demonology") Stuart in L.A., and works in all aspects of theater around the City of the Angels. Says the gracious Hunter: "I think the Taper is just beginning to find out how talented Annie really is."

## Humana standouts

Three playwrights with ties to Southern California take divergent approaches to theater-making:



**David Rambo**  
"God's Man in Texas"

His fact-based drama draws from traditions of stage realism.



**Naomi Iizuka**  
"Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls"

Her meandering episodes channel-surf damaged, indulgent lives.



**Anne Bogart**  
"Cabin Pressure"

Her brilliant collage ruminates upon the actor-audience bond.