

Millennium bugged at Humana

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD

LOUISVILLE, Ky. This year's Humana Festival of New American Plays hijacked the art form and took it in some quirky new directions, but it was the sturdier stylistic traditions that ultimately won the day.

The 23rd annual event at the Actors Theater of Louisville offered plays you could hang up on (Phone Plays), spill a glass of wine on (T-shirt Plays) or potentially get carbon monoxide poisoning during (Car Play), but the enduring appeal of story, character and technique were most vividly illustrated in the traditional format, particularly in veteran Arthur Kopit's "Y2K."

Kopit's cool, topical chiller exploits technophobes' fear of the new millennium and the increasing power cybergicks will wield at the expense of the computer-illiterate. (It's not actually about the much-discussed



YEAR FEAR: Lucinda Favaldo and Graeme Malcolm appear in Arthur Kopit's "Y2K."

glitch that we all hope will not send planes plummeting from the sky come New Year's Eve.)

The lives of Gotham power couple Joseph Elliot (Graeme Malcolm) and Joanne Summerhays Elliot (Lucinda Favaldo) begin to unravel when a pair of federal agents descend upon Joseph and start interrogating him in quirkily Pinteresque style about his trafficking on the Internet. (It's not hard to guess what evil crime he's accused of; Kopit needn't be so coy about revealing it.)

Watching the action from a catwalk above the playing space is a leather-clad hipster with blue-streaked hair (Dallas Roberts) who is calling the shots in the Elliots' lives with the click of a mouse. His motivation is re-

Turn to page 81

MARCH 29 - APRIL 4, 1999

Continued from page 75

venge, although Kopit plays some tricks in delineating the details behind his desire for retribution: scenes recalled (or fantasized) by this cybermenace are confusingly mixed with others that contradict them.

In a laser-sharp production expertly directed by Bob Balaban, Malcolm and Favaldo precisely evoke their characters' progression from amused surprise to idle dismay to outrage and terror as they see control of their lives and livelihoods slip from their grasp into the hands of an Internet phantom.

Kopit's writing is laced with mordant wit, and the central characters are subtly drawn, so it's a pity that the play ultimately concludes as a paranoid thriller forsaking credibility in favor of a nightmarish Orwellian vision. Toning down of the plot's more preposterous twists and a stronger accent on character would give the play some ambiguity and better chances for a long afterlife.

Manipulation is also a theme of David Rambo's "God's Man in Texas," likewise given a strong production by director John Dillon that featured flawless performances by ATL veterans V Craig Heidenreich, Bob Burrus and William McNulty.

Rambo's comic drama describes the internecine warring over control of a Baptist church in Houston that has morphed into a multimillion-dollar corporation through the wonders of cable TV exposure. McNulty, in Santa Claus wig and beatific smile, plays Dr. Philip Gottschall, the aging father of the church and its telegenic public face. At 81, he's uneasily facing the question of an heir to the throne.

Heidenreich's Dr. Jeremiah Means is the lucky winner of the succession sweepstakes, while Burrus' Hugo is the hapless pawn in the struggle that results when Gottschall proves less

than willing to facilitate an easy transition of power. All three actors wring the laughs from Rambo's script without turning these pragmatic believers into caricatures of venality — Burrus is particularly fine as the seen-it-all recovering addict.

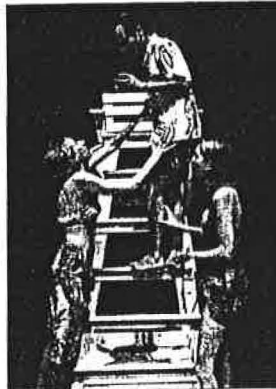
Although many a playwright has been accused of too much preaching, the charge is literally true of Rambo's well-written but overextended drama, which includes long passages from a half-dozen sermons. (Moreover, the play's barrage of potshots at the commercialization of religion grows wearisome.) Still, with some streamlining, Rambo's play would be a strong candidate for regional exposure.

Loss of innocence

The third of the fest's more traditionally structured full-scale offerings was "The Cockfighter," Vincent Murphy's adaptation of a novel by Frank Manley. In this somber one-acter, an encounter with the bloodsport is used as a heavy-handed symbol for the loss of innocence of a sensitive young farm boy torn between admiration for his brutish father and his own more tender instincts, which his mother tries desperately to protect.

Murphy's adaptation uneasily mixes earthy naturalism (talk of "peckers" and peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches) with strained attempts at poetry. The actors struggle with little success to make compelling theater of a work stuffed with too much turgid narration, and the use of a violent and repellent form of gambling as a literary symbol ultimately begins to seem both precious and distasteful.

Avant-garde doyenne Anne Bogart and her Siti Co. presented a new production somewhat mysteriously titled "Cabin Pressure." A sometimes charming if never particularly revelatory meditation on the art and experience of the theater, "Cabin" could use some sharpening of its ideas.



HAWAII EYED: Caitlin Miller, left, Nick Garrison and Peter Pamela Rose perform in Naomi Iizuka's "Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls."

Familiar-feeling musings about the relationship between audience and artists and the roots of theater's appeal are only occasionally presented with the stylistic brio that marks the best of Bogart's work (finest was the final sequence, with the actors turning audience behavior into a comic ballet). The impression left was of a hermetic exercise that will primarily appeal to insider theater audiences and fans of the Bogart aesthetic.

But just whom Naomi Iizuka's "Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls" will appeal to is anyone's guess. This aimless, maddeningly prolix play tries audience patience with its self-consciously madcap, fuzzily conceived characters and meandering plot.

Road show

Through a tale of missed connections that moves from New York to Alaska via Hollywood and Hawaii, Iizuka wants to say something about contemporary alienation and the transitory nature of love and attraction, but moments of clarity are as rare for the audience as they are for Iizuka's characters. Despite some bright dialogue, the play resembles an overgrown garden, to borrow imagery the playwright

herself uses to hazy effect. Al were it thoroughly weeded, o suspects there wouldn't be mu aesthetic foliage left.

This year's short plays, a Humana festival tradition, were collected from emerging young writers and presented under the title "Life Under 30." There were no stirring new voices to be heard, but it's probably fair to judge on the basis of the demanding short-play format.

Nor did the festival's more venturesome gambits show off the talents of name writers at their best. Richard Dresser's "What Are You Afraid Of?" was a play for two actors and as many audience members as could be squeezed into the back seat of a sedan hitherto untried question of audience etiquette: Who has to sit the hump?). Dresser didn't

the intimacy of the venue to interesting effect. Presumably legal reasons, the car didn't allow a move — also rather deflating.

Rebecca Gilman, Diana Sonnet, Neal Bell, David Greenspan and Rebecca Reynolds provided texts for the Phone Plays bank of pay phones were set and festgoers duly lined up to listen in. Unfortunately, none of the plays really gave one the authentic frisson of eavesdropping on conversations, and the probably nothing harder to overhear than a phone call. The most interesting thing about the play was observing the various attitudes of the listeners, a piece of impromptu theater in itself. Bogart, for one, would certainly appreciate.