

etc! THEATER

Louisville festival gives new playwrights a stage

By JULIE KISTLER

LOUISVILLE — Sometimes you have to shake up even the most successful theater enterprise.

The well-respected Humana Festival, which annually presents new American plays at the Actors Theatre of Louisville, took its mission to agitate and rejuvenate seriously this year.

It presented really only one traditional offering among a sea of T-shirt plays, phone plays and one funky little work, where the audience (three at a time) camped out in the back seat of a big old car while the action took place in the front seat.

This attempt to redefine and broaden the form gave the festival energy and curiosity value at the very least, and, at its best, cast an intriguing light on the audience/actor relationship.

The festival's best was represented by "Cabin Pressure," a fizzy, fun and altogether riveting piece of words, movement and light created by Anne Bogart and the SITI company.

With chunks of Noel Coward's "Private Lives" and Edward Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," it is performed cheek-to-jowl with a spoof of English country-house mysteries and a twitchy, candy-unwrapping, acting-and-reacting exercise that mirrored audiences.

"Cabin Pressure" took a fascinating look at life on both sides of the footlights. Its cast of five — Will Bond, Ellen Lauren, Kelly Maurer, Barney O'Hanlon and Stephen Webber — acted, moved and showcased the material in marvelous fashion, creating a one-of-a-kind work that played beautifully to its theater-driven audience.

Richard Dresser's short, surprising car play — "What Are You Afraid Of?" — also hit the audience where it sat. Although the text was somewhat less than inspired, the idea of sitting a few inches from the people who are performing made the point: Theater is alive and kicking in Louisville, even outside the theater.

Or on the phone. This year's other innovation was a series of "phone plays," where people stood in line, picked up what looked like pay phones and eavesdropped on short conversations that passed for plays.

Slight as they were, the plays represented an interesting experi-

ment, with Neal Bell's "Will You Accept the Charges?" about a call from the crypt, and Diana Son's "Happy Birthday, Jack," a neatly plotted comedy of modern manners involving a call.

Looking for agitation on the stage, Tony-award-winner Arthur Kopit penned a stylish little thriller called "Y2K" to warn us all of the imminent danger of computer peeping toms and psychos.

The most traditional entry of the weekend, David Rambo's "God's Man in Texas," offered a satirical look at a tele-preacher unwilling to give up his spotlight to a younger man.

Naomi Iizuka's "Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls" was less successful, although brightly staged and acted. It was somewhat reminiscent of Craig Lucas' equally peripatetic "Reckless." But ultimately this story of kooky, kicky characters rolling from New York to Hawaii and then Alaska left audiences more baffled than enlightened.

And then there was "The Cockfighter," adapted and directed by Vincent Murphy from a novel by Frank Manley, which wasted some really striking effects on a script that hit you over the head — again and again — with its phallic/cockfighting symbols.

If that represented a hyper-male point of view, Wendy Wasserstein came though for the women with her T-shirt play. It included a reference to "Women playwrights at Louisville — 35 years of scribbling for excellence."

OK, so the playwrights themselves seemed very aware that these wearable works were a form of crass commercialism — an excuse to sell T-shirts that purported to be "performed" merely by being worn.

Still, Wasserstein's "To T or Not to T" — where a series of historical playwrights offer suggestions on what to print on a T-shirt — was the most successful, while Mac Wellman's dialogue for red-fezzed dwarves (called "The Fez") was definitely the oddest in an odd form.

If that covers agitation, rejuvenation came in the program of 10-minute plays, all written and performed by members of the under-30 crowd.

Most of them seemed a little juvenile, actually, with too much dependence on swearing and slacking, but Courtney Baron's lyrical look at a sailor and his lost love, called "The Blue Room" broke the mold. With actors Carla Harting and Bruce McKenzie both silky smooth, "The Blue Room" was something special.

With one more Humana Festival of new American plays put to bed, audiences were left wondering what in the world they would come up with next year that could possibly top car, T-shirt and phone plays, not to mention those musings of the 20-something set.

For information about the Actor's Theatre of Louisville or the Humana Festival, call 502-584-1205 or visit its Web site at www.actorstheatre.org

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