

# Humana: Festival raises question: What is theater?

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us who have let integrated computers and the Internet into our daily lives, Koppit's skillful drama is all too easy to believe.

In "God's Man in Texas," Seattle-based director John Dillon has created a taut three-man ensemble for David Rambo's accessible new play. Based on a true tale of political struggle for the leadership of a "mega-church" in Dallas, Rambo's play explores the depths and conflicts of religious faith with generosity and balance.

As acted by Humana veterans V Craig Heidenreich, William McNulty and Bob Burrus, these three characters grab the audience and never let go. Heidenreich offers a bravura performance as a driven young preacher and scholar who questions his own ambition, but never his faith. The middle-age McNulty, who plays an 81-year-old pastor, is a convincingly charismatic spiritual leader to vast multitudes of worshipers (even if he does seem to channel Ronald Reagan at times). Burrus' performance is edged with humor as the folksy, addled recovering addict who gets caught amid the pastors' rivalry.

It would be too bad if one of Seattle's major theater companies couldn't find a spot for this play in a coming season. It isn't simply an adept inquiry into religion and faith. Playwright Rambo also interweaves a poignant tale of lost fathers and found sons, which has resonance both religious and otherwise. (And Seattleite Dillon has certainly proven that he's the director for the job.) Like its characters, "God's Man in Texas" is neither sacred nor profane. It is profoundly human.

"Cabin Pressure" is experimental director Anne Bogart and her SITI Company's exploration of theatrical performance and audience reception. Bogart and company do physical theater like no one else — some would argue she's more choreographer than director. But "Cabin Pressure" is a kind of theatrical atom-splitting. The company focuses on a tiny matter and attempts to burst it open. The released energy, in this case, dissipates unharmed because Bogart is preaching performance to the converted: an audience filled with theater people. It's unlikely that the uninitiated will find this topic fascinating, even if its execution is masterly.

Vincent Murphy's evocative adaptation of the Frank Manly novel "The



Caroline Williams' "Just Be Frank" (with Monica Koskey) satirizes corporate culture. It was one of the offerings by young playwrights billed as "Life Under 30."

Cockfighter" stumbles over its coming-of-age story with an unrelenting feel of white-trash tragedy in the making. As the narrative shifts from character to character, we are left wondering whose point of view can be believed and how a young boy can possibly survive, much less come of age.

Two years ago, Naomi Iizuka made a strong showing at Humana with her adaptation of Ovid's "Metamorphoses" titled "Polaroid Stories." A vivid rendering of adolescent life on mean streets, it promised an exciting voice for our theatrical future. Unfortunately, Iizuka's "Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls" fails to live up to that earlier vision. Iizuka and her always-competent director, Jory, fail to crack the code of this play's sprawling, disjointed structure. Iizuka again probes the lives of the young and confused, but there's nothing much below the surface. Think of these characters as emotionally damaged "Friends" — without the charm.

In addition to the usual theatrical formats — actors acting, audiences reacting — offered in ATL's three main theater spaces, performances were overheard in five "Phone Plays"; read on the backs of people who wore one of six "T(ext) Shirt Plays" (after shelling out 20 bucks for the shirt); and experienced up close and personal from the back seat of a Lincoln Continental (the actors worked in the front seat).

While it is usually possible to find

a slender thread that ties the Humana offerings into a thematic package, this year's work resists a universal reading. Bombarding us with theatrical images that dominate a single sense in the phone plays (hearing) or the T-shirt plays (reading while it moves through space or hangs on a wall), Jory and his literary manager, Michael Bigelow Dixon, ask us to rethink the theatrical experience.

Ultimately, though, the weekend visitors to Louisville are looking for the Next Big Thing in theater. Which play, which playwright will break out to become a staple of regional theater seasons? Who will be co-opted by the big bucks Hollywood script monster? Where is the young talent that will keep theater's flame burning in the next generation?

This year, eight young playwrights offered a bill of short plays under the title "Life Under 30." While the writers and the writing were often concerned with the cultural significance of "Gilligan's Island" and the deep life lessons offered by rock music (at least some things never change), one play was reminiscent of the early, raw Eugene O'Neill ("The Blue Room" by Courtney Baron). In "Just Be Frank," Caroline Williams also showed promise with an amusing knack for satire as she lacerated mendacious corporate culture. Indeed, promise abounds among these young writers even if the current offerings lack depth and dramaturgical polish.

So, what is theater? Does the form require a live audience to receive a live performance? Or is reception of an overheard phone call — including one that asks "Are they listening? Who are they? Hello? Hello?" — an act of theater? What is performative about silly little plays — by such familiar names says Tony Kushner, Wendy Wasserstein, David Henry Hwang, Mac Wellman and others — printed on T-shirts?

And what of Richard Dresser's delightfully funny and poignant "Car Play" titled "What Are You Afraid Of?" In less than 10 minutes, we see the unfolding and failure of a couple's life that includes us in the action more than once — if a bra flying into the back seat and landing on a notepad qualifies as interaction.

Each of these unusual formats potentially reminds us of the voyeurism inherent in being an audience member — we eavesdrop, we stare openly, we're a little too close for comfort.

And next year, with any luck, we go back for more.