

So many plays, so little time; but Humana Festival is worth it

BY JUDITH NEWMARK
Post-Dispatch Theater Critic

LOUISVILLE, KY. — Nineteen plays in three days. The Humana Festival of New American Plays packs them in.

Actually, there were 25 productions, counting the T-shirt plays. But you really can't include them. These original works, commissioned from playwrights like Wendy Wasserstein and David Henry Hwang, are meant to be worn, not performed. The scripts are complete, though they're definitely on the short side.

But they represent the logical extension of the theme that ran like an underground river below the polished surface of the 23rd Humana Festival: Committed artists need to find ways to make theater wherever they can, however they can.

It's an optimistic thought at a time when everyone — from avant-garde puppeteers to Pulitzer Prize-winning playwrights like Lanford Wilson to theater-goers standing in line at the box office — share the same worries. Is theater becoming too lavish to stage? Too pricey to attend? Too snooty to attract new audiences?

Humana makes a key point: Theater isn't as much about money as it is about imagination. The challenge lies in discovering new ways to stretch its boundaries. And that exploration could lead to theater that is less expensive to produce and attend, more exciting to established customers and more appealing to new ones.

For example, maybe you can't afford to build a theater. You still might have a car.

Hence, "What Are You Afraid Of?" Or, as everyone in Louisville called it, the Car Play.

The Car Play is the brainchild of Jon Jory, producing director of Actors Theatre of Louisville, which presents the annual festival. He asked veteran author Richard Dresser ("Below the Belt," "Gun Shy," etc.) to write a play that would take place entirely in a car — actors in the front seat, audience in the back.

"I told Jon I wasn't sure that was a compliment. Didn't he think my work could draw an audience of more than three?" Dresser chuckled. But as he got into it, he found it a healthy challenge, one that required him "to strip away everything that is not essential. Not an extra word, not an extra syllable. The limitations turned out to give the play its shape."

"What Are You Afraid Of?" about an inhibited man who picks up an alluring hitchhiker, doesn't even take 10 minutes. But it's a fully realized play, offering romance, humor, tension and a poignant conclusion. Originally, Jory



Actors Trip Hope and Ginna Hoben take to the "stage" in Richard Dresser's "What Are You Afraid Of" better known as the Car Play.

insurance company said no (inspired, no doubt, by that old safety slogan, "Don't act and drive").

Staying at the curb doesn't matter, though. The play is an intense experience simply because of the proximity of actors to audience. How often at the theater does clothing land in your lap? How often do you *really* look into an actor's eyes?

People were confused about how to react. Some tried to be invisible; some talked to the actors; Dresser found himself subjected to "the playwright's ultimate paranoid fantasy" when he found himself squeezed into the back seat between two critics, taking notes.

The play challenges ingrained assumptions about what constitutes theater and about the audience's role in shaping it. Do we just sit back and say, "Entertain me," or can we alter the experience if we are more involved intellectually, emotionally or, in this case, physically?

The nature of theatrical experience was also explored in the most controversial play at the festival, "Cabin Pressure," created by Anne Bogart and her New York-based SITI Company. (St. Louisans had a chance to see Bogart's work recently when she directed the world premiere of "Gertrude and Alice" at Washington University.)

Some people hated "Cabin Pressure," considering its subject matter too inbred and its style too mannered. Others found it a work of heart-stopping imagination and grace. Seeing this extraordinary play is like stumbling into someone else's dream, a strange, beautiful world where nothing is familiar. You're forced to figure out everything

"Cabin Pressure" is made up of scenes that echo many different theatrical styles: a smart snatch of Noel Coward, a sly Restoration-era promenade, a snarl from Edward Albee. They flow one into another, intercut with pause-laden, uncomfortable conversations about the stage. ("What were your expectations?" "Did you learn anything?" "I felt ... chilly.") Parts of these conversations came from interviews that Bogart conducted with Louisville residents a couple of years ago, when she directed "Private Lives" at Actors' Theatre.

It's a lot of fun to see this tight company work together and create, in just a stroke or two, an entire theatrical world: a crashing teacup for Coward, cavaliers in wonderfully towering white wigs that seem to be made out of hair curlers.

But here, stripped of their usual context, the familiar styles have to be re-evaluated. We see things like teacups and wigs with the vivid particularity of images in dreams; an actor curls up on a chair or coughs, and it's as arresting as a spotlight. Without a plot to direct us, we're obliged to decide at every step what's insignificant and what's important. At the end, when the actors use folding chairs to become an audience themselves, watching us, the point is unmistakable: We need to make those moment-by-moment decisions every time. In the theater, artists and audience are lovers. We have to rely on each other.

The experiments with theatrical forms continue with five short telephone plays that were "performed" in one of the Actors Theatre lobbies. A bank of pay

someone lifted a receive plays included a love s mystery, a fairly incohere ing on communication. were slight, but they scored the idea that the lots of ways to create the you use your imagination.

Of course, more conve approaches were not over At Humana, the emphasi writing. The stars are wrights, not actors. This the biggest star was Lanfo son. He came to Humana up the American Theatre Association's new play aw. "Book of Days" (which op 1999-2000 season at the Ry Theatre of St. Louis), to ble a little about impossibility of opening an on Broadway unless you A musicals or B) are British, praise regional theater maintaining a venue for American scripts.

The Humana festival is, itself, one of the most imp of those venues. Plays th buted at past festivals i "The Gin Game" by D.L. C "Getting Out" by Marsha man, "Crimes of the Hea Beth Henley, "In Firewor Secret Codes" by John "Redeemer" by Douglas Ward, "Agnes of God" by Pielmeier, "Courtship" by ton Foote, "Danny and the Blue Sea" by John Patrick ley, "The Queen of the Roof Circuit" by Jimmy B "Extremities" by William trosimone, "God's Countr Steven Dietz, "Stained Gla William F. Buckley Jr., "In est America" by Joyce Oates and "Slavs!" by Kushner.