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Dance and theatre, between and beyond

In real life, when Jay is not sitting in a dark theatre or concert hall (or scribbling about his last such experience), he is a Consulting Database Specialist (whatever that is) at the OCLC Online Computer Library Center in Dublin, Ohio. Over the years he has been a performing arts critic for the daily "Columbus Citizen-Journal" and "Columbus Dispatch," Columbus public radio station WCBE-FM, and the alternative weeklies "Columbus Alive" and the "Columbus Guardian." He is a member of the Dance Critics Association, OhioDance, the American Theatre Critics Association, and a founding member of the Central Ohio Theatre Critics Circle.

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Humana Festival of Plays

The Fantasticks

Mark Morris & YoYo Ma

23rd Annual Humana Festival of New American Plays

Actors Theatre of Louisville

1999 February 23 through March 28



After twenty-three years of showering the world's stages with some of its most respected and beloved works, the **Humana Festival of New American Plays** should be content with that single "gimmick." But this year, Actors Theatre of Louisville went for the gimmicks big time: Plays on T-shirts, plays overheard on phones, a play enacted in the front seat of a car parked in front of the theatre. Especially given the huge names involved in some of these ventures, it was stunning to see how utterly forgettable most of them were.

Mac Wellman (probably best known for his seminal essay, "The Theatre of Good Intentions") went the Stan Freberg route in "**The Fez**," trying to conjure up a larger-than-ever-possible-in-life scenario but mostly evoking Matt Groening's Akbar and Jeff. **Tony Kushner** ("Angels in America") crafted a nifty sonnet in "**And the Torso Even More So**." **Wendy Wasserstein** ("The Heidi Chronicles") giggles her way through "**To T or Not to T**," dropping names from William Shakespeare to Aphra Behn, to negligible effect. One could go on, but it would only serve to embarrass the likes of **David Henry Hwang** ("M. Butterfly"), **Jane Martin** ("Keely and Du"), and **Naomi Wallace** ("One Flea Spare"), the other perpetrators of the "**T(ext) Shirt Plays**."

The "**Phone Plays**," even when limited to three minutes apiece, had the potential to fascinate, if for nothing but the voyeuristic value. Witness Columbus's own MadLab company and its recent phone plays. In the Louisville event, the young playwrights mostly got wrong numbers. Only **Rebecca Gilman** in "**Speech Therapy**" approached that potential with her comic take on the semantics of relationships.

Richard Dresser has proven, with "**Below the Belt**" (Humana 1995 and CATCO 1998) and "**Gun-Shy**" (Humana 1997), to have a wicked sense of humor. This year, Dresser revved up the "**Car Play**" entitled "**What Are You Afraid Of?**" Audiences totaling just two or three at a time piled into the back seat of a slightly battered sedan parked in front of ATL. The situation was certainly memorable, even if the play was less so. A young male driver picks up a young female hitchhiker and in a fluid ten minutes, fantasizes scenes from their future together. The title question pops up in each scene and at the punch line, we discover just who is afraid of what. It's kind of cute, but isn't in the race for one of Dresser's better works.

But enough of the gimmicks. Maybe other playwrights in later times can take up the Bard's assertion that "All the world's a stage" and mold less ephemeral and more affecting, less cutesy and more clever works for shirt back, front seat, and phone booth. Not this year, though. In 1999, the stage was all the world the Humana Festival really needed.



Among the stage plays, the biggest name of the 1999 Humana Festival was **Arthur Kopit** ("Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad," "End of the World With Symposium to Follow," "Wings," and his collaborations



with composer Maury Yeston, "Phantom" and "Nine"), offering the trendiest title, "Y2K." The festival notes suggest that

Kopit wrote "Y2K" in about five weeks. And it shows. In it, Kopit sets up a chilling, if by now familiar situation that has little or nothing to do with the so-called "millennium bug" that we know so well. A young and criminally brilliant hacker has absconded with the identities of an upscale couple. She works for Sotheby's, he for Random House, but the hacker has electronically altered and planted information that connects them to a huge and unsavory enterprise neither has anything to do with. So far so good. Problem is, Kopit just sets up the situation and leaves them there. It's as though he wrote the first act of a paranoid epic, then tired of it and stopped. Mr. Kopit, if you ever find another five weeks to complete "Y2K," I'd be honored to see it.

At the 1997 Humana Festival, Naomi Iizuka's "Polaroid Stories" struck me as a confused and self-indulgent mess, so I did not approach



her new "Aloha, Say the Pretty Girls" with high expectations. Wrong again "Aloha" needs considerable pruning, to be sure, but there's a funny, touching, and delightful play in there, one that suspends "the rules of time and space" and reconsiders the size of our world. Under the direction of ATL Producing Director Jon Jory, seven actors play

eleven roles that bounce off each other with abandon and occasional insight into how we relate to others and perhaps even to know ourselves. The most extraordinary performance is that of Nick Garrison, terrified of life as the gay Richard but in command as "the only grown-up in the room," the school teacher and part-time Santa, Myrna.

Playwright David Rambo's intentions in "God's Man in Texas" seem to be right there on the surface: a respectful, but hardly uncritical, examination of the megachurch. Dr. Philip Gottschall (William McNulty) is the beloved but aging pastor of the largest religious complex in America Protestantism, Rock Baptist Church in Houston. Hugo Taney (Bob Burrus) is Gottschall's audio technician, general factotum, and spy, saved from a life of drugs, alcohol, and dissipation by his devotion to the pastor. Dr. Jeremiah Mears (V Craig Heidenreich) is the young, would-be successor to Gottschall, torn between a commitment to his own much smaller congregation and a desire to reach the maximum number of souls. After decades of leading

a huge church, Gottschall seems more interested in the numbers -- money, ratings, behinds in the pews -- than in anything even vaguely religious, and has more faith in his pitted prunes and laxative teas than in his god. Mears' sincerity appears much more genuine. The two are pitted against each other in a fairly obvious father-son struggle for temporal power in a purportedly spiritual world. The three performances are virtuoso, but the over-long drama doesn't really say much we don't already suspect about both faith and hypocrisy.

Also among the obvious is the rural coming-of-age play "**The Cockfighter**," adapted and directed by Vincent Murphy from the novel by Frank Manley. Sonny (Danny Seckel) idolizes his father (Phillip Clark), a breeder of champion gamecocks, and lives for the day when he will be



allowed to handle his first rooster in a fight. The play centers on that day and the lessons Sonny learns about winning and losing, humans and animals, his family and himself. About the only ambiguity in "The Cockfighter" concerns the ending, which can be read as an urgent declaration of selfhood or might be taken as parricide. Either way, it feels unnaturally abrupt in the context of this kid's life.



Leave it to Anne Bogart and her SITI Company to create a literal love letter to the audience in the form of "**Cabin Pressure**." It has always been my contention that great art requires great audiences, but never in my theatregoing experience have I felt so appreciated and understood by a playwright. Yes, of course I recognize that Bogart and SITI (Will Bond, Ellen Lauren, Kelly Maurer, Barney O'Hanlon, and Stephen Webber) are acutely aware of the audience they're talking to and are manipulating the hell out of us. But how can we mind that

when the artist is explicitly acknowledging our indispensable role in the act of creation? "Cabin Pressure" opens with a repeated scene from Noël Coward's "Private Lives." That is, the scene is already underway when the audience begins to enter. When it's done, we are treated to the awkward ritual of the post-performance question-and-answer session, wherein the questions and the answers (culled from real Louisville audiences and such artists and theorists as Shakespeare, Stanislavsky,

Peter Handke, Antonin Artaud, and Peter Brook) propel the play itself. Bogart imposes an almost musical structure on the freewheeling work, returning to scenes and themes that change because of their context. "Cabin Pressure" is a dizzying act of "leaning forward" by both the creators and the observers, who all touch at the brain and at the heart.

There's theory about what theatre can be, as embodied by the work of Anne Bogart, and then there's practice. In this festival's evening of ten-minute plays by writers in their twenties, collected under the rubric "Life under 30," the future of theatre looks almost as bleak as a random flip through the channels on any given night of television. The first four playlets -- Robb Badlam's "Slop-Culture," Julia Jordan's "Mpls., St. Paul," Matt Pelfrey's "Drive Angry," and Caroline Williams' "Just Be Frank" -- were forgettable sitcom scenes. Brooke Berman's "Dancing With a Devil" changes the tone considerably with a serious and somewhat promising look at a woman's dealing with the aftermath of a rape. Jerome Hairston's "Forty Minute Finish" returns to the sitcom setting as two grocery store employees clean up after a customer has split his head open on the floor. Courtney Baron's "The Blue Room" is a completely mysterious encounter between a woman and a sailor. Sheri Wilner's "Labor Day" shows signs of cleverness, using the societal ban on wearing white after the title holiday to contemplate the evanescence of existence. All told, though, the best that can be said of this gathering was that they all had the good grace to stick to the time limit.



If past seasons are any indication, Columbus audiences can look forward to seeing a Humana Festival offering or two locally in the not-too-distant future. Both Otterbein Summer Theatre (in August 1999) and Reality Theatre (in March 2000) will present "Private Eyes," the deliciously deceptive comedy by Steven Dietz from the 1997 festival. This fall, Reality will produce "The Batting Cage" by Joan Ackermann, from the 1996 festival. Other Humana plays that have been revived locally in recent years include "The Gin Game" by D.L. Coburn (Humana 1977), "Lloyd's Prayer" by Kevin Kling (1988), "God's Country" by Steven Dietz (1989), "Evelyn and the Polka King" by John Olive (1992), "Keely and Du" by Jane Martin (1993), "Below the Belt" by Richard Dresser (1995), "Jack and Jill" by Jane Martin (1996), and "The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek" by Naomi Wallace (1998). That's a selection to satisfy almost any theatrical taste. And it's no gimmick.