



CenterStage

BY SHERY EAKER

Humana's New Play Fest: ATL Serves Up An Eclectic Batch

Searching for the perfect love; looking at America through the eyes of pop artist Robert Rauschenberg; rediscovering one's roots and identity. These are just some of the subjects that were explored at this year's Humana Festival of New Plays at the Actors Theatre of Louisville.

The annual fete, which concluded its six-week run last Saturday, celebrated its 25th anniversary this year, introducing six new full-length plays, a three-part serial play, seven phone plays, and an anthology of playlets. Also introduced to the more than 200 theatre professionals that attended the special visitors' weekend, March 29-April 1, was Actors Theatre's new artistic director, Marc Masterson, who took over the reins last year from Jon Jory, the festival's founder and ATL's leader for 31 years.

Over the years, the festival has built itself a reputation for attracting top talent—playwrights, directors, and actors alike; for selecting and/or commissioning plays that raise issues that need to be explored; for adding to the American stage repertoire; and for being daring and setting theatre in new directions. That's why so many industry pros—many in the market for product and talent—make Louisville an annual jaunt.

This year's selections were an eclectic bunch in terms of subject matter and genre, with no single underlying theme running through them, as has often been the case in the 10 previous festivals that I've attended. (Whether a theme had been intentional or not, I usually came up with something that threaded the plays together.) Perhaps the most distinguishable among the plays presented were the two that used visual images to convey ideas and/or elicit emotional responses.

Charles L. Mee's "bobrauschenbergamerica" gives us a glimpse of the American landscape as Rauschenberg might have written it if he had been a playwright instead of a painter. Created with Anne Bogart and The SITI Company, with Bogart also directing, the collaborative work is a collage of images, a sort of Rauschenberg vision come-to-life. Against the backdrop of a huge American flag covering both walls and floor, we meet Rauschenberg's mother talking about her son growing up ("Art was never part of our lives," she mentions, although the various props used on stage were what Rauschenberg would use in his work), a homeless man, a pizza delivery boy who admits to committing a triple murder, a couple that slide around a plastic drop cloth soaked with gin and vermouth, a woman bagpiper, and others. There's a garage sale, an outdoor picnic, a fellow

telling chicken jokes (some of them were pretty funny!), a square dance, even sections used as text taken from Mee's autobiography, from Walt Whitman's poetry, and from novelist William S. Burroughs. Always fascinating to watch, the production, as the program notes, "weaves together a tapestry of moments" that succeeds in creating an overall sense of America, both past and present.

In Mac Wellman's "Description Beggared; or the Allegory of Whiteness," the various visual images are indeed striking—white costumes, snow falling—but what Wellman is trying to get across through these images, and through the words of his characters, as lovely as they sound standing alone, begs description. The play, portions of which have been adapted from "The White People" by Arthur Machen and from Strindberg's "The Ghost Sonata," centers around the Ring family in a "vast metaphysical Rhode Island" at the turn of some century. The family has gathered together to take a family portrait, but Fraser Outermost Ring refuses to participate for fear of the "whiting out" of his soul. "Whiteness," according to one of the characters, represents "what we all want, and not know." Go figure. For me, the most redeemable aspect of this production was Michael Roth's music, which has a contemporary sound (though the five-member orchestra was dressed in early 20th century garb), and much more meaningful lyrics.

The play that had the most to say about relationships, conflicted passions, and even politics—and in the most straightforward way—was Eduardo Machado's "When the Sea Drowns in Sand." Focusing on Federico, a Cuban-American who was exiled from his native land when he was a child, the play opens 40 years later with Federico (played by Joseph Urla) returning to his homeland, urged on by his best friend, Fred, an Italian-American (Ed Vassallo). There's also Ernesto (Felix Solis), the cab driver hired to help them find Federico's former family house. Federico, an openly gay man, deals with his conflicted emotions arising from returning home; Fred, a heterosexual, confronts his own sexuality for the first time; and Ernesto, who has not been in touch with his sister for 19 years since she fled Cuba for the States, also lets out his pent-up feelings. And this is all set against the background of the Elian Gonzalez affair. The emotional highpoints of the piece are punctuated by percussionist Hugh "Fuma" Petersen, and the production is handsomely and meaningfully staged by Michael John Garcés.

But the funniest and wildest of the full-lengths, and given an ace production, was Jane Martin's "Flaming Guns of the Purple Sage," directed by Jon Jory (who, as rumor has it, is Jane Martin). Martin's previous full-lengths, which all premiered at the Humana Festival, have demonstrated such a remarkable range of subject matter, from a zany comedy about female wrestlers ("Cementville") to a serious drama about a child molester ("Mr. Bundy"). "Flaming Guns" adds still another dimension to this author's body of work.

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