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FLAWED FESTIVAL

Lackluster plays tarnish silver anniversary of HUMANA

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FEATURES - ACCENT & ARTS 08E

By Michael Grossberg

Illustration: Photo

Dispatch Theater Critic OUISVILLE, Ky. -- No winning streak lasts forever, especially in the ephemeral world of theater.

For Actors Theatre of Louisville, the winning streak of its annual Humana Festival of New American Plays has ended at an especially bad time -- during its 25th anniversary and as a change of leadership has raised questions about the festival's future.

Sponsored by the Humana Foundation, the 2001 festival is presenting well-acted, well-directed and well-designed productions of six full-length works and 24 short pieces. Quite a few short works are entertaining, but most of the full-length works are disappointing, and the Humana Festival ultimately must be judged by its more substantial efforts.

After a quarter century, the festival, admirably, refuses to play safe. Actors took a risk commissioning New York's Mac Wellman to write
Description

Beggared: or the Allegory of Whiteness. Famous for his nonlinear off-off-Broadway experiments, Wellman lived down to expectations in the festival's biggest failure. Despite some lovely metaphoric imagery and

Michael Roth's haunting musical score, *Description* is an incoherent indictment of 20th-century white America.

Festival regulars Jane Martin and Richard Dresser have returned with offbeat comedies, but *Wonderful World* is lesser Dresser, and *Flaming Guns of the Purple Sage* is minor Martin. At least Martin can be counted on for funny dialogue, but Dresser's twisted comedy about a dysfunctional family falls flat.

Admittedly, after last year's spectacular lineup, which introduced delights such as Martin's *Anton in Show Business* and Charles Mee's *Big Love*, expectations were high. Yet, even the best new works -- presented this past weekend to about 350 producers, directors, agents and critics -- fall short of the best plays of previous years.

Under Jon Jory's leadership, Actors Theatre launched the festival with breakthrough hits such as *The Gin Game* (1977), *Getting Out* (1978), *Crimes of the Heart* (1979) and *Agnes of God* (1980). After a mid-1980s lull, the festival bounced back with more than a dozen enduring plays, culminating in Donald Margulies' *Dinner With Friends* (1998), a Pulitzer Prize winner.

Jory left this past fall to teach theater in Seattle, and Associate Artistic Director Michael Dixon (who helped choose many festival entries) is leaving this month for Minneapolis' Guthrie Theatre. Actors Theatre is now led by Marc Masterson, former head of Pittsburgh's City Theatre.

Jory and Masterson reportedly each chose half of the 2001 festival entries, but no one will confirm who chose what. Given such ambiguity in a transitional year, drawing conclusions about the festival's future may be premature. Perhaps 2001 will end up being just another off-year. They occasionally happen, even at North America's premier new-play showcase.

bobrauschenbergamerica

This joyful Pop Art collage is the exhilarating result of a collaboration between Charles Mee and director Anne Bogart's SITI Company.

More of a playground than a play, the long one-act celebrates the life and

imagination of painter Robert Rauschenberg with visual quotes from his paintings and frequent pop references to the 1950s and '60s.

Led by Ellen Lauren, Will Bond and a delightfully childlike Barney O'Hanlon, Bogart's company performs the 105-minute one-act with exuberance. It's full of wildly funny and sweetly romantic moments, from a couple slip-sliding across a martini-soaked plastic sheet to a white-sheet-caped O'Hanlon jumping into a pile of laundry.

Regional theaters aren't likely to tackle such a specialized SITI performance piece, but the Wexner Center for the Arts (which frequently has hosted Bogart's troupe) should invite Bogart to reprise it in Columbus.

When the Sea Drowns in Sand

Eduardo Machado, who grew up in pre-communist Cuba, uses the Elian Gonzalez drama as backdrop for a poignant, semiautobiographical story about a Cuban-American who visits Cuba for the first time in 40 years on an ambivalent search for family and identity.

At the play's emotional heart is its affirmation of the power of friendship to cross ideological and psychological gulfs -- between neurotic Federico (Joseph Urla) and his old buddy (Ed Vassallo), and between the U.S. pair and their Cuban guide (Felix Solis).

Machado throws in too much ideology near the end of each act, but his deft blend of humor and pathos is likely to make this play a regional-theater favorite.

Flaming Guns of the Purple Sage

Even Jane Martin's minor comedies are funny, but Flaming Guns is minor indeed -- and way too violent.

Jory briskly directs the bloody farce, which begins promisingly with a quirky flirtation. Big 8 (an older woman previously seen in one of Martin's monologues in Talking With . . .) is nursing Rob Bob, a wounded rodeo

cowboy, back to health at her Wyoming ranch house.

When a flipped-out relative named Shedevil shows up for shelter, it's love at first sight for Rob Bob, a devotee of the Wild Western code of good guys and bad guys. Then a genuine bad guy shows up -- a mad Ukrainian biker obsessed with Shedevil -- and Flaming Guns takes a flaming leap into the preposterous.

The biker is killed but keeps coming back to life until he is dismembered -- something Martin doesn't even try to justify dramatically.

As a romance, Guns is sweet. As a horror story, it's a horror.

Quake

A passionate young woman crisscrosses the country on a seemingly endless search for true love in Melanie Marnich's romantic fantasy.

In 13 quick-moving scenes, an idealistic heroine (Tracey Maloney) embraces telescoped relationships with an ice fisherman, a geology student, a brutal mechanic, a married beauty-contest judge and an aspiring cowboy, all to no avail.

The aftershocks of the affairs are glossed over, and Marnich doesn't adequately develop the subplot about the heroine's fascination with a female serial killer. Quake has a lot of charm, but not enough sense.

Still, Marnich (an up-and-comer whose *Blur* opens this month off-Broadway) is a new and welcome addition to the festival. Her fresh voice is bound to mature.

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Caption: (1) From left, Felix Solis, Joseph Urla and Ed Vassallo in Eduardo Machado's *When the Sea Drowns in Sand*

(2) Above: Leon Pauli, left, and Ellen Lau ren in Charles Mee's *bobrauschenbergamerica* at the 25th Humana Festival of New American Plays

Right: Peggity Price, left, William McNulty and Monica Koskey in Jane Martin's Flaming Guns of the Purple Sage
Richard Trigg photos

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