

A huge canvas

Love, revolution, and art at the Humana Festival

By Don Corathers

IF YOU SUGGEST to Marc Masterson that he has the best job in the American theatre, he'll smile and agree with you.

"It seems that way to me," he said with an expansive gesture that took in his office at Actors Theatre of Louisville and, beyond its walls, the 2001 Humana Festival of New American Plays, which was winding down in the theatre next door. When Masterson succeeded Jon Jory as ATL's artistic director last fall, he also assumed the mantle of leadership of the Humana Festival, generally recognized as the most important annual showcase for new work in the United States. "It's a huge canvas with all sorts of possibilities. The opportunity to do great contemporary new work, and right alongside it to do classical work [in ATL's subscription season], and to do it with talented people at the highest level of their profession. You can't beat that."

This year's festival was the twenty-fifth, and the first without Jory at the helm. The departing artistic director collaborated with Masterson in the selection process, though, and that is probably one reason the 2001 festival looked a lot like other recent ones. It featured plays by Richard Dresser, Eduardo Machado, the pseudonymous Jane Martin, Arthur Kopit, and Charles L. Mee, all of whom have had work at Louisville



Leon Pauli and Ellen Lauren in *bobrauschenbergamerica*.

before, along with festival newcomers Mac Wellman and Melanie Marnich.

Another factor that contributed to continuity in play selection was the continuing presence of Michael Bigelow Dixon, who has been the theatre's literary manager for fifteen years. But on the day after this year's Humana Festival special visitors weekend, Dixon drove to Minneapolis to begin his new job as literary manager at the Guthrie Theatre. He leaves ATL's literary affairs—and thus much of the responsibility for shaping future festivals—in the hands of two twenty-eight-year-old protégés, Amy Wegener and Tanya Palmer.

When the Sea Drowns in Sand, with Felix Solis, Joseph Urla, and Ed Vasallo.



"I think that the basic idea of the festival is so rock-solid and so smart and so open to new initiatives that it shouldn't change," Masterson said when asked how the event might evolve under his artistic leadership. "It doesn't need to be fixed. There are several things about it that are essential, I think, to its continued success. First of all that we discover new plays by doing them in full production. We're not doing workshops, we're doing full productions. We're doing a lot of them at the same time, and we do them in close proximity to each other, in a festival format so people can come and see what this body of work is like on an annual basis."

In its twenty-five years the festival has premiered scores of plays that have gone on to prosperous lives in the American repertory, including three Pulitzer Prize winners. Every year it draws critics, artistic directors, producers, agents, publishers, and others who are interested in taking the pulse of the American playwright.

And every year there are surprises. One of the more pleasant ones in the 2001 festival was Melanie Marnich's *Quake*, a comedy with serious intent in which we witness the peregrinations of Lucy, a young woman who has resolved to "move with the curve of the world... looking for the love of my life." She is

serially disappointed by a parade of men, and finally arrives at the wisdom that yes, absolutely, there is such a thing as perfect love, it just depends on how many flaws you're willing to put up with. It's a smart and funny play, and Marnich, who lives in Minneapolis, is a playwright to keep an eye on.

Another standout production was Eduardo Machado's *When the Sea Drowns in Sand*. Closely paralleling events in Machado's life, the play is the story of a Cuban exile's return to his childhood home in December 1999, and his attempts to reconnect to the past that had been wrenched away from him forty years before. While a drummer taps out Cuban rhythms from a platform above the audience, Machado deftly personalizes the politics of the revolution, the U.S. trade embargo, and the Elian Gonzalez case in a lyrical and stirring ninety minutes of theatre.

ATL wisely teamed Charles L. Mee, author of the 2000 festival's much-admired *Big Love*, with Anne Bogart and her SITI Company to create a piece of theatre about the artist Robert Rauschenberg. The formidably influential Rauschenberg is best known as a collagist who combines found objects and images into sly commentaries. The resulting theatre piece, titled *bobrauschenbergamerica*, is not so much *about* the artist as it is an attempt to translate his sensibilities, aesthetic, and quirky humor into performance. Appropriately it is a collage, or rather a cascade of images, impressions, monologues, tableaux, dances, song fragments, reminiscences, jokes, and set pieces, many featuring favored Rauschenberg props. It's all played on an enormous painted American flag, a nod to Rauschenberg's friend Jasper Johns, that covers the entire stage floor and back wall of the Victor Jory Theatre. Rauschenberg has been famously quoted that "painting relates to both art and life... I try to work in the gap between the two." The same can be said of theatre, and *bobrauschenbergamerica* works in the gap very well.

The title of Mac Wellman's *Description Beggared; or the Allegory of Whiteness* may be taken as a cautionary note from the author: good luck explaining to your



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David Wilson-Barnes and Tracey Maloney in *Quake*.

friends what this piece is about, and anyway, since it's an allegory, it's not about what it says it is. Dense, dreamlike, and poetic, occasionally bursting into song (there's a hot band playing music by Michael Roth, and the cast is full of fine voices), the play does seem to be about whiteness. At least the costume design is, and the text makes frequent references to white and its opposite. We meet the very white, very well-established Ring family, inhabitants of "a vast, metaphysical Rhode Island" at "the turn of this century, or perhaps the last." We learn that the family made its fortune by cornering the market on mechanical flea circuses. We watch as a malevolent dwarf clown rides in on a tricycle to summon Fraser Outermost Ring, the patriarch of

Marc Masterson



DAVID R. LUTTMAN

the family, to defend certain unspecified actions in the Rings' past. "We don't understand these things," one of the Ring women observes, "but it's true just the same." Possibly, but for this witness the truth was as elusive as the author's willfully, if artfully, obscured intentions.

Because of their fine work in the past, comedies by Richard Dresser (*Below the Belt, Gun-Shy*) and Jane Martin (*Talking With, Keely and Du*, and a string of others) were, at least in these quarters, among the more eagerly anticipated titles in the festival. Both were in ATL's big Pamela Brown Theatre, both were conventional, straight-ahead linear plays with two acts and an intermission, and both were disappointments.

In Martin's *Flaming Guns of the Purple Sage* we are reintroduced to Big 8, a tough, straight-talking female bronc-rider from one of the *Talking With* monologues of twenty years ago, now retired and amusing herself with a rodeo cowboy about a third her age. Quickly we meet Big 8's putative daughter-in-law Shedevil, her buddy Shirl, Shirl's sheriff's deputy boyfriend Baxter, and Black Dog, a very large one-eyed Ukrainian Hell's Angel who has pursued Shedevil to Big 8's place. There are some laughs, but the play serves mostly as a vehicle for a protracted display of Grand Guignol gruesomeness involving the shooting (many, many times) and subsequent onstage dissection of the big biker.

Dresser's *Wonderful World* concerns two brothers, Max and Barry. Barry is married to the intractably self-centered and manipulative Patty, a woman so calculating that she requires Max's fiancé, the bland but sweet Jennifer, to audition for her friendship. At rise, Patty provokes

a family schism over an imagined slight, and Max, Barry, and Jennifer scramble to appease her. That's act one, and act two is spent sorting out the complications that arise from the appeasement. If this sounds kind of schematic and mechanical, it's because that's the way it felt in the theatre.

Recent Humana Festivals have been marked by a great deal of experimenta-

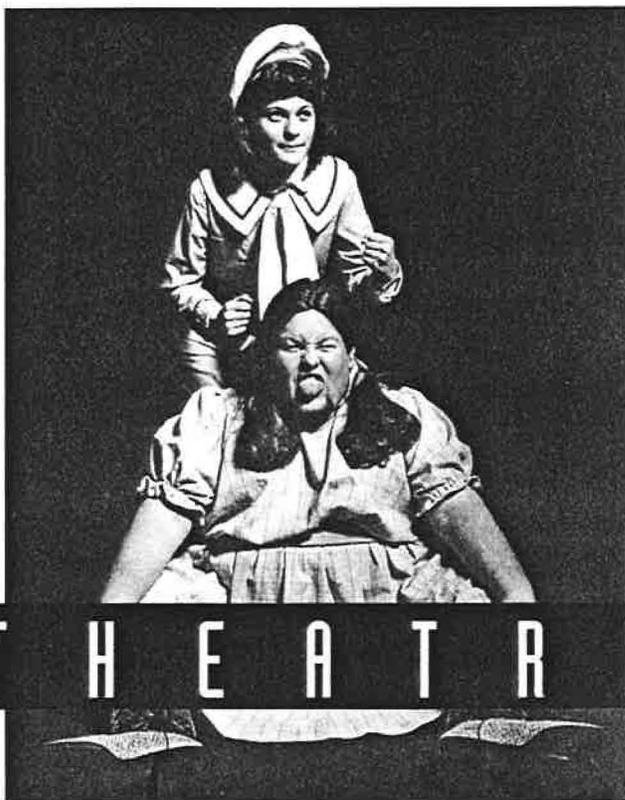
tion with form. A couple of years ago there was a play staged in a parked car with two actors in the front seat and an audience of three in the back. The theatre has also commissioned plays that it printed on T-shirts, and for the past three years has offered phone plays—short recorded pieces that one listens to on a pay phone headset, like eavesdropping on a private conversation.

This year the impulse toward formal experimentation—or maybe it was just messing around—was manifest in Arthur Kopit's *Chad Curtiss, Lost Again*, which played in three ten-minute segments, offered on consecutive days, each with a cliffhanger ending in the manner of a Saturday serial. The humor and acting were both way over the top, the props cheesy in an appealing Flash Gordon-mad scientist way, and the costumes included a lot of the kind of stuff you used to be able to get only by mail order, delivered in a plain brown wrapper. The plot concerns efforts by competing factions to find and translate a tablet bearing a final message from God. It was an entertaining, if not terribly substantial, way to start each festival day. (Audience members attuned by Mac Wellman's play to decoding allegory might be forgiven for reading *Chad Curtiss* as a rendering of Jon Jory's departure: when the tablet is finally translated, it is determined that God's last words to humankind are "Goodbye and good luck.")

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