

Satire the common theme at Humana Festival

By Richard O Jones

Satire was the order of the day at the 25th annual Humana Festival of New American Plays, which wrapped up its full schedule last weekend at the Actor's Theatre of Louisville.

Half of the eight premiere offerings (if you count the three 10-minute plays as one unit) have strong satirical elements that often verge on theater of the absurd.

The best of those is "bobrauschenbergamerica," a creation of Charles L. Mee, whose "Big Love" was the hot offering at Humana 2000.

This play has been inspired by the art of Robert Rauschenberg, a contemporary artist known for using found objects in mixed media assemblages. Although

nothing in "bobrauschenbergamerica," except for a few set pieces, directly refers to the artist's work, the inspiration is in the spirit, and this is nothing if not a spirited piece. It's a collage of "people and places, music and dancing, love stories and picnics," as described in the festival brochure.

A fast-paced and entertaining revue that includes poetry by Walt Whitman, readings from William S. Burroughs and reflections by Los Alamos scientist Philip Morrison and Rauschenberg himself, not to mention an actor crushing a garbage can with a baseball bat onstage, "bobrauschenbergamerica" looks like 20th century America poured from a Cuisinart.

This year's offering from Jane Martin, the pseudonymous play-

wright many believe to be former Actor's Theatre artistic director Jon Jory, was "Flaming Guns of the Purple Sage," a take-off on B westerns and gothic horror. The play reprises a character from "Talking With," the first full-length Jane Martin play from the 1982 festival, a wiry rodeo queen that goes by the name Big Eight, now an aging healer for young, injured rodeo stars.

This healing session goes awry when a pink-haired young lady named Shedevil comes calling late one night, pregnant with Big Eight's grandchild by her estranged son and being chased by a large Ukrainian biker who has the festival's best and only death scenes. Three of them.

During the festival, Martin received the American Theatre

Critics Association's Steinberg New Play Award for last year's "Anton in Show Business."

The three 10-minute plays this year were commissioned to Arthur Kopit, who took inspiration from the cliff-hanging Hollywood serials of 1910-40 with "Chad Curtiss, Lost Again," in which a young boy finds a message from God in the form of an engraved, Frisbee-like disc and has to battle the forces of evil on a remote island.

My pick for the Best of the Festival, however, has to go to a more conventional story. "When the Sea Drowns in the Sand" is Cuban-American playwright Eduardo Machado's story of a 40-something man returning to Cuba for the first time since he was airlifted out as a child, part of the "Peter Pan Brigade."

Coming from a family that was wealthy before the revolution, Frederico must confront the question whether he was kicked out or whether he walked out.

Machado's script is poetic and evocative as Frederico lands on the island just as Cuba and America are poised to go to media war over the fate of Elian Gonzalez and proceeds to fall in love with his homeland but must remain a stranger for the same reasons he left.

The Humana Festival is the nation's premiere festival devoted entirely to new works by contemporary authors. Many of the plays produced in the 25 years of the festival, including three Pulitzer Prize-winners, are standards for community and regional theaters across the country.