



THEATER

Pondering How Tales Are Told

Varied New Works at 38th Annual Humana Festival

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Critic's Notebook

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Theater is fundamentally a storytelling medium, and at the 38th annual Humana Festival of New American Plays here, the manner in which tales are told — be they fantastical, historical or ripped from the headlines — became a recurring theme in the five full-length plays on offer. The finest of the bunch was Lucas Hnath's "The Christians," in which a debate over the meaning of that big book of stories known as the Bible causes a dangerous rift in a thriving evangelical church.

Mr. Hnath ("Isaac's Eye," "A Public Reading of an Unproduced Screenplay About the Death of Walt Disney") is quickly emerging as one of the brightest new voices of his generation. What's fresh about his work is how it consistently combines formal invention with intellectual inquiry — both of which are often in short supply in contemporary American theater. In "The Christians," which has been superbly staged by the festival's artistic director, Les Waters, Mr. Hnath adds a new layer of emotional resonance to his arsenal of gifts.

The play unfolds as a stylized church service, with the principal characters seated on a bright-blue-carpeted podium in contemporary-ecclesiastical chairs. Even when they are ostensibly having private conversations, the characters speak into the microphones, and the central figure, Pastor Paul (Andrew Garman), occasionally narrates the story himself.

Mr. Garman portrays Pastor Paul with an inviting earnestness that never dissolves into the gelatinous. The light in his eyes today has a particular urgency: Pastor Paul has had a revelation and believes his church, whose congregation has swelled to thousands, must forge a new path. Put plainly, he has decided that hell, as it has traditionally been conceived — a fiery pit and eternal damnation for the unsaved — does not exist. God's mercy will be granted not just to those who have been formally baptized and believe in Jesus as their savior, but also to all mankind. "We are no longer a congregation that says my way is the only way," he says.

Just how divisive this new message will be becomes readily apparent when his associate pastor, Joshua (Larry Powell), takes to the podium and confesses his profound disagreement with Paul's message. For him, the Bible's literal truth must be upheld (even though, as Paul points out, the term "hell" in the Bible in the original Greek referred only to an actual garbage dump). When he cannot agree to follow Paul's new path, Joshua is invited to leave the church, and sorrowfully does so, taking some congregants with him.

Mr. Hnath captures with ease the particular flavor of the several voices in the play, who include an elder and board member (Richard Henzel) who wonders about the pastor's motivations; the pastor's wife (a terrific Linda Powell), who comes under pressure from some of the remaining faithful as discord begins to swell; and a congregant (Emily Donahoe, touching in her faltering anxiety) who haltingly brings forth her worries about

this new doctrine. None of the characters are depicted as being fanatical, hypocritical or lacking in intelligence, which is too often the case when pious Christians are depicted onstage.

Mr. Hnath grants his characters the dignity of sincere belief, even as his play raises probing questions about how and why organized religion can be a divisive, if not abusive, social force. With many institutional churches beginning to grapple with issues of how to accommodate changing social mores, the play illuminates the mechanics of how large churches operate and why stasis is far more comfortable to their members (and leaders) than change. And yet, by including in its text several gospel songs, sung with beaming cheer by an onstage choir, Mr. Hnath's smart, stimulating play also manages to convey the comfort and sense of community that being a member of such a church can provide.

The pleasures, and maybe the dangers, of spinning tall tales forms the swirling center of "The Grown-Up," by Jordan Harrison ("Maple and Vine"), a frequent contributor to this festival. In this slight but diverting new play, Mr. Harrison charts a day in the life (and the life in a day) of a 10-year-old boy named Kai (Matthew Stadelmann). At his grandfather's knee, Kai eagerly devours the story of a doorknob that's actually a magical talisman, and the only surviving memento from the wreck of a pirate ship.

When, at Grandpa's urging, Kai removes the crystal knob and slides it onto another door, it becomes a portal to the future. Presto! Kai is now in his 20s, and a writer squirming through a pitch meeting with a slick television executive (an amusingly glib Chris Murray). When he once again grabs the crystal and slaps it on the nearest door, Kai moves forward another couple of decades, and finds himself in bed with a man.

Apply hardheaded logic to Mr. Harrison's flight of fancy, and the play's modest charms would evaporate. But, as directed by Ken Rus Schmoll, "The Grown-Up" succeeds as a playful-rueful reflection on the dizzying speed with which life hurtles past.

The Humana festival often includes one crowd-pleasing comedy of contemporary life. This year that slot was filled by Dorothy Fortenberry's "Partners," about two New York couples — one married and straight, one gay and pondering tying the knot — negotiating the financial and romantic perils of the late 20s, when life's options begin to narrow.

Clare (Annie Purcell) is an aspiring chef with a placeholder job as a food stylist; her husband, Paul (David Ross), has a steadier if hardly lucrative job working in information technology at a law firm. Clare's best friend, Ezra (the wryly comic Kasey Mahaffy), keeps nudging Clare to get their business launched before the food truck craze peaks. (News bulletin: Too late.) His partner, Brady (LeRoy McClain), works as a teacher, but they, too, are living at a level that keeps them on the edge. A financial windfall Clare receives complicates all her relationships and causes a rift with Paul when she decides (somewhat inconceivably) to donate most of the money to organizations promoting the legalization of same-sex marriage.

Under the direction of Lila Neugebauer, the cast brings plenty of comic zest to Ms. Fortenberry's well-turned dialogue about those primal matters of young(ish) adulthood: love, sex and money. But while "Partners" considers interesting themes, particularly relating to the issue of same-sex marriage, Ms. Fortenberry never seems to decide exactly what story she wants to tell.

The tale of John Henry, the black hero of folklore who died working on a railroad in the 19th century, is refracted through the now finely honed style of Anne Bogart in "Steel Hammer." This nearly two-hour piece blends elements of dance and drama, and incorporates the composer Julia Wolfe's musical work of the same name.

Ms. Bogart commissioned four playwrights — Kia Corthron, Will Power, Carl Hancock Rux and Regina Taylor — to contribute scenes and monologues dramatizing or riffing on the story. These are laced together with Ms. Wolfe's piece (recorded by the Bang on a Can All-Stars and Trio Medieval), which combines Philip Glass-style vocal patterning with haunting, sometimes discordant, folk-inflected music.

Eric Berryman's spellbinding performance as John Henry, or rather many versions of him, gives the show an entrancing focus, although he is equaled by the wonderful Patrice Johnson Chevannes, playing his wife. Accomplished and meticulously wrought though it is, "Steel Hammer" nevertheless can be repetitive and taxing to watch (there is no intermission). Its busy dynamics left me feeling almost as exhausted as the hard-working performers must be at the show's conclusion, when the last hammer has been raised, and John Henry has given up the ghost for good.

The question of how a black man's life and death is memorialized — or trivialized into a generic statistic — is the subject of Kimber Lee's "brownsville song (b-side for tray)," directed by Meredith McDonough. This earnest but sluggish drama begins with a fiery, (rather too) eloquent monologue delivered by Lena (a forceful Cherene Snow), the grandmother of a young boxer, Tray (John Clarence Stewart), who was killed in the crossfire of gang warfare.

The play moves back in time to explore a promising life that was cut so cruelly short. Tray's own father also died young, and he has taken an almost paternal role in caring for his young sister, Devine (Sally Diallo). Tray is reunited with Merrell (Jackie Chung), a woman who looks to be roughly his age, and who has offered to help him with college applications.

But as it zigzags somewhat haphazardly, Ms. Lee's exploration of the ills of urban poverty takes too much time to clarify the relationships among its characters. It wasn't until well into the play that I discerned that Merrell was Devine's mother and Tray's stepmother, who had been absent from their lives for some time because of her alcoholism. The friend sitting next to me never sorted out the relationships at all, a reminder that the power and significance of the story a writer sets out to tell will ultimately be immaterial if the story itself isn't told with sufficient clarity.

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