

# the e y h a v e s it

by Lou Harry

At the 1999 Humana Festival for New American Plays, the audience was watched almost as much as it was watching.

I've always had this nagging belief that all theater is, ultimately, about death — that the very act of seeing a work on stage and knowing that it will eventually be over without any chance of replay is a reminder of our own mortality.

Defined by its own finality, when a play is over, it's gone. But something is left, a shrinking fragment to hang on to. "When you close your eyes," hauntingly asks a character in the new play *Cabin Pressure*, "what moment would you remember?"

*Cabin Pressure*, created by Anne Bogart and her Saratoga International Theatre Institute, recently stunned crowds at the Humana Festival of New American Plays in Louisville, Kentucky, the country's premier festival of premieres. And *Cabin Pressure* is only one of the works this year that dance around the boundaries between audience and actor.

Each year, the Humana Festival attracts crowds of theatrical producers and audiences willing to take risks on the unknown for five or six full-length plays and a full complement of shorter works. The playwrights represented have included such familiar names as David Henry Hwang, Marsha Norman, Tony Kushner and the pseudonymous Jane Martin (who many theatrical oddsmakers believe is actually festival director Jon Jory), and some relative unknowns. The festival has been a launching pad for recent off-Broadway shows (*Gun Shy*, *One Flea Spare* and *The Batting Cage*), as well as theatrical staples (*Crimes of the Heart*, *Extremities*, *Agnes of God* and *The Gin Game*).

For the 1999 gathering, the best-known playwright was Arthur Kopit, whose multi-decade career includes the landmarks *Indians* and *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad*. In Kopit's take on the dawn of a new millen-

nium, *Y2K*, a couple's intimacy is violated by a young computer hacker. "Though you think you see me now, I promise you you do not," says the brilliant but immature lad known by such names as Costa Astrakhan, BcusICan and FlowBear as the play begins. Hovering on a scaffolding over the stage while the action takes place below, he gazes at the audience like a predatory animal — think David Spade on a mission.

The hacker's victims are Joseph Elliot, a Random House book editor, and his wife Joanne Summerhays Elliot, who works at Sotheby's. The method of the couple's destruction is familiar to anyone who has seen or read any of the screw-with-your-identity thrillers that have cropped up over the past few years. Kopit seems to have little to

add to the usual methods of the genre — the couple's bank accounts are drained, a paper trail turns Joseph into a child pornographer, Joanne is digitized into sex photos and video — but what he does bring to the table are a trio of sharply drawn, richly detailed characters. Early on, we are casually confronted with the questionable morality of their first union (Elliot's wife was hospitalized, stricken with cancer), and the way that knowledge plays on the audience's judgment is echoed in the distrust that the couple begins to have for each other. The distrust becomes the wedge that disables their ability to defend themselves, and, in such a world without walls, Kopit seems to be saying, absolute purity — an impossibil-



Graeme Malcolm and Lucinda Faraldo in *Y2K*.

ity — may be the only way to stay safe. Unfortunately, Kopit seems to care less and less about these people as the play goes on, and the final third of this short work (well under an hour and a half) is plausible but unsatisfying.

I didn't learn until after my frustrations with the play were firmly entrenched that Kopit had written the play in just over a month. Given that fact, Kopit should be praised for what he has done — and encouraged to do what he has to do, which is solve the play's final third. *Y2K* has the makings of a terrific theater work, one that is likely to be staged around the country over the next few seasons. Of course, he'll have to ditch

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the soon-to-be-dated title.

The you-are-watching, you-are-watched edginess also popped up in Richard Dresser's intimate *What Are You Afraid Of?*, probably the first car play in the history of theater. In it, a three-member audience is ushered

out of the theater and into the back seat of a parked vehicle. A male driver enters the car, cranks the music and proceeds to pick up a female hitchhiker. These characters morph into a couple who have parked to neck at an industrial site. A stray bra is thrown off and into the back seat,

sparking a sudden awareness of the proximity shared here by audience and actor. We are used to seeing actors in close-up in movies, not in theater; that awareness of actor/audience intimacy is magnified in the next scene, where the front-seat "parents" pull into a fast food drive-thru and turn to directly address the "children" in the back.

After the play, I became aware of casual spectators outside the Actors Theatre who had been watching us participate in the play, filtering the whole experience through another level of voyeurism. How did my pair of back-seat cohorts and I perform? I wondered. And was anyone watching the people who were watching?

Another new gimmick at this year's festival was the phone play. Five writers each composed a short work meant to be heard via a phone booth. An interesting idea, but far less successful than the car piece because of the lack of live actors. Having the plays on tape watered down the sense of eavesdropping, making the experience akin to listening to a Bob and Ray routine on the radio.

What was theatrically interesting here, though, was probably not intended by the plays' creators. There were nearly always lines for the phones, which were set up in a lobby of the theater. This meant that eyes were constantly on whoever was listening to one of the plays. As such, the work was filtered through the sole audience member, whose body language was read by those still waiting. In a sense, the unsuspecting audience member became a performer and a critic whose reaction influenced the expectations of other patrons waiting in line.

A third gimmick tested this year also turned innocent participants into part of the show. For twenty dollars, patrons could buy a T(ext) Shirt. Not just a marketing gimmick, these garments offered at least a semi-serious attempt at playwrighting in a new format. I dismissed these at first with barely a glance. But then, during an idle period between plays, I found myself studying them more carefully. Tony Kushner's *And the Torso Even More So* was a poetic love story from within the garment itself. Wendy Wasserstein's *To T or Not to T* was an obvious but wittily self-reflexive piece set in a boardroom in which the world's greatest playwrights are trying to come up with a T-shirt slogan. (Tennessee Williams favors "I rely on the kindness of strangers," which he says at least will get some attention in a bar.) Here, too, the art itself wasn't as interesting as the reaction to it. Watching people try to read the plays on the chests of strangers made the experiment at least partly worthwhile. (More than one pair of forward-thinking theatergoers debated whether to buy two sets of shirts — one to wear and one to save as an appreciating investment. Ah, art.)

RICHARD C. TRIGG

Trip Hope and Ginna Hoben in the car play: *What Are You Afraid Of?*



The cast of *Cabin Pressure* on stage.

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All of this watching and being watched culminated in *Cabin Pressure*, a nonlinear play about the fragility, absurdity and spiritual satisfaction of participating in a theatrical experience.

It began, in a sense, in the lobby, where a sign warned that the play contained, among other things, "gunshots," "strobe lights," "strong language," "nudity" and "live animals." Already, odd expectations were in place, and these were magnified on entering the theater space itself. Here, a quartet of actors playing absurd tourists in Europe went through their ritualized, very funny paces. The dialogue began to loop back to the beginning, though, and it became clearer that the actors were making choices. These realizations occurred at different times for different audience members, because we all entered the theater at different times. By the time the dialogue circled back for the fifth time, the audience was watching the audience as much as it was the players.

That was all purposeful, we soon discovered, because the four actors themselves were asked questions by a fifth as if they had just seen the same spectacle. What was your favorite part? What did you like about it? What did you get out of the experience? All of the common answers were given, from the blank stare to the inarticulate mutter to the over-intellectual analysis, but the specific answers were not important. The play, after all, wasn't about characters being asked about a play. It was about us, the people sitting in the audience, taking part in a theatrical experience. It was about our willingness to be in a room with other people and share an event, understanding that we will, of necessity, react differently to it.

Although it did not contain gunshots, strobe lights, strong language, nudity or live animals, *Cabin Pressure* was the most honest and satisfying piece of theater I've seen in a long time, and the most hopeful. In a world where the plot of *Y2K* is well within the realm of possibility, theater, with its unique ability to promote empathy and remind us of the limit on our time here, is more important than ever.

"When you close your eyes, what moment would you remember?"

This year, as in previous years, the Humana Festival offered many ways to answer that question. ■

**The Humana Festival of New American Plays is held each year at the Actors Theatre of Louisville. For more information, call (502) 584-1205, or visit their Web site at [www.actorstheatre.org](http://www.actorstheatre.org).**