

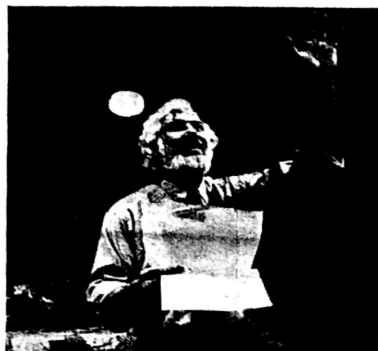
Other Places

Louisville's Festival of New Plays



Christian Kauffmann, Dana Mills and Debra Monk yuk it up in *The American Century*.

Photos by David S. Teibort



Levi Lee chewing the scenery in *Tent Meeting*.

Of Theater and Thoroughbreds

by Hunter Drohojowska

The annual Humana Festival of New Plays, presented at the Actors Theater of Louisville (pronounced "Loo-ville" by the natives), runs through March, but there is one hectic weekend — a "Special Visitors Weekend" — when critics and journalists from around the world are invited to attend. During this weekend the festival is the heart of the nation's theatrical community. Producing director Jon Jory has secured the festival's reputation as the place to showcase new plays by emerging writers, and it was from Louisville that two

novice playwrights went on to win Pulitzer Prizes: Beth Henley for *Crimes of the Heart* and D.L. Coburn for *The Gin Game*. Checking into the elegant Seelbach Hotel in the renovated downtown district near the theater, I noticed the lobby was crowded with folks desperate to make the 5 p.m. curtain. Hundreds of journalists, agents, playwrights, actors and talent scouts had come to this city of Civil War monuments and bluegrass along the Ohio River. An unrelenting drizzle and turn-of-the-century architecture accentuate Louisville's Gothic atmosphere of forlorn ro-

mance and lost history. But we got only glimpses of this from the bus windows as we were shuttled between hotel and theater. As one New York agent confided, "ATL is so organized it's frightening." We were picked up at the airport and given name tags and navy-blue plastic satchels full of programs and schedules. Over the next 48 hours we saw 12 plays in two theaters. At 5:05 p.m., we were catapulted via the time machine of theater back to 1945. The *Jack Benny Show* was on the radio, and the little woman was puttering around a

modest kitchen when her husband Kilroy unexpectedly walked in, back from the war. Written by Murphy Guyer and directed by Jory, *The American Century* recreates the period's atmosphere of optimism only to systematically knock it to pieces with evidence from a future yet to come, a future explained to the couple by their yet-to-be-born son who has come back (at his therapist's suggestion) to witness his own conception. It is a quirky, occasionally hilarious one-act that sets the tone for plays to come by addressing the concerns of Middle America.

Of the dozen plays, half of which were one-acts, five involved some sort of attack on organized religion, and all but two were set in the South, West, Midwest, or rural East. There were no urban, or even urbane, scenarios. The avant-garde camp's snipes at regionalism surfaced like bad odors, but the talent scouts from the entertainment industry were there specifically to seek star vehicles that might appeal to the broad Middle American audience.

Jory is known for staging a writers' festival, as opposed to a platform for directors or actors, and he sniffed at the suggestion that the presence of industry scouts dilutes a writer's radical tendencies. In his own words: "There are people who say, 'You shouldn't invite the TV people here, they're going to take all the writers away from the American theater. Meanwhile, this writer whose soul they're going to save has an annual income of \$2,700. Give me a break! I think it's ethically questionable not to provide American writers with an opportunity to make a living.'"

In a way, the plays served as scenes in the larger drama that is the festival itself. After each piece came the scene downstairs in the bar, where folks traded business cards, shook hands, slapped backs and knocked back that fine Kentucky bourbon. It was during this milling and eyeballing of name tags — "Oh, there's Richard Christiansen of the *Chicago Tribune*, and Mel Gussow of *The New York Times*, and Julius Novick of *The Village Voice*," and "There are the scouts from HBO, Columbia, Universal, CBS, Leonard Goldberg Company, Scherick Associates, 20th Century-Fox . . ." — that the true business of the festival went down. This was the Industry hustle from both coasts and elsewhere — condensed, heated up and hunkered down in an upbeat, high-volume exchange.

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Travel continued from previous page

On Saturday morning, the carousing spectators were assembled again in the theater lobby, all decked out in Ultrasuede sport coats and Maude Frizon pumps. Slated first was *Tent Meeting*, as performed by its three creators — Larry Larson, Rebecca Alworth, and Levi Lee. (The latter two were co-founders of Atlanta's Southern Theater Conspiracy, where the

play premiered.) A measure of its success was the attention it received from an already exhausted, cranky audience.

Lee stars as a beleaguered evangelist who believes his daughter's illegitimate child — born without limbs, ears, eyes or organs — manifests the second coming of Christ. He and his son (Larson) and daughter (Alworth) are on the lam after stealing the child from a government hospital to present it for worship at a tent meeting. The outrageous comedy is highlighted by

Alworth's dirty, "Raped by God," played on a ukulele. *Tent Meeting* proved to be a textbook example of how the festival's machinations can work. By that afternoon, the three writers had been asked to bring their play to the Dublin Theater Festival, and it was selected for this month's Spoleto Festival in Charleston.

In the afternoon, festival-goers who were not selling, buying or critiquing plays went on tours. Some went to see the old

mansions of Louisville. I went to the stud farm.

Hermitage Farm is set apart from the surrounding farms and black barns with red trim. Frank Miller, a sage Southerner who had been in charge of the stud barn for 13 years, brought out a 19-year-old chestnut thoroughbred named Sauceboat. We patted his nose and admired his gentle temperament. With a sly grin, Miller explained, "He's been with a girlfriend twice this morning — \$25,000 for each time." At the unanimous gasp of astonishment, he added, "Oh yeah. Well, Raja Baba gets \$50,000."

Up the road, in fenced half-acre lots, mares stood with their newborn foals. A two-day-old balanced on spindly legs nearly as long as his mother's; at the approach of the strangers, both took off at a gallop. The thoroughbred baby kept right at his mother's shoulder, both mahogany-coated animals moving with balletic grace and speed. "This is where the Queen of England brought her mares to be bred," said Miller, his voice full of pride. Hermitage owner Warner Jones recently rejected offers of \$10 million each for two of his yearlings.

I'm not sure what play could have outshone the thoroughbreds, but it certainly wasn't James McClure's *The Very Last Lover of the River Cane*. If you cut the elaborate (albeit fun) fight scenes, this saga of annual fisticuffs between suitors of the comely owner of the Tranquility Lounge — short on content, long on lines like "You're meaner than God with hemorrhoids" — would be a one-act.

Afterward we tumbled into the Saturday-night party where bartenders and caterers were having difficulty keeping pace with a crowd bent on dissecting the festival. The consensus emerged that there were no plays of obvious Pulitzer caliber. ATL had received more than 2,000 submissions, and if these were the most promising, well... Meanwhile, Jory flitted from actor to writer, from socialite to journalist with studied elan. One HBO executive remarked, "It's really the only entertainment industry convention where people from all fields — TV, films and theater — get together."

By Sunday morning, the chic costumes had been packed for a quick getaway to the airport, but many got to leave on a high note: Frank Manley's pair of one-acts, *Two Masters* and *The Rain of Terror*, turned out to be the finest of the weekend, enhanced by the performance of Kathy Bates, who played the suicidal daughter in Marsha Norman's *night, Mother*. As an obese Oletta Crews ("Doctor says I'm hundreds of pounds overweight, shortening my life with every bite I take"), Bates sits in her shabby mobile home with her husband (well played by Andy Backer) and tells us the shaggy-dog story of an escaped convict who paid a visit and of her plans to murder him for his money. It was a blend of Mark Twain and Flannery O'Connor, with nasty, witty dialogue that kept me alternately in suspense and convulsed with laughter. *An Errand of Mercy*, which followed, seemed a bit contrived in comparison. Looking back on the festival, however, most would agree that the one-acts were most successful.

By Sunday afternoon, the party was over. What endured were the memories of those few plays of genuine, original vision. I remembered what Julius Novick had said the day before: "The question is not the food, or the weather, or who showed up. What matters is the work itself. What I like [here] is the sanity beneath the craziness." ■

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