

1999

## Review of the 1999 Humana Festival of New American Plays, Actors Theatre of Louisville

David Wohl, *Winthrop University*



---

The 23rd Annual Humana Festival of New American Plays

Review by: David Wohl

*Theatre Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 4, Theatre and Technology (Dec., 1999), pp. 451-455

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](http://www.jhu.edu/publishing/)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25068714>

Accessed: 25/07/2014 11:13

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*The Johns Hopkins University Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Theatre Journal*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

formed into a semi-vertical bed for the moment Ishmael was introduced to the "savage," Queequeg, for the song "I Met Queequeg and Queequeg met me." Striking visual images were generated by video projectors onto the various surfaces. As Pip, the cabin boy, is lost at sea, Anderson (who played the role) was engulfed in an underwater canvas—the stage became a theatrical aquarium. Old world maps scrolled across the stage as the crew hunted the white whale. At the end of act 1, spinning coins hypnotized as they flashed from all sides. In act 2, print and manuscript copies of *Moby Dick* wafted through the space as Anderson spoke about Melville's writing process and the context from which the novel emerged.

Anderson created striking audio effects as well to lure the audience into Melville's creation. Built with the assistance of her long-term electronics inventor, Bob Bielecki, Anderson created what she calls a Talking Stick, a long metal pole that served as both prop (often a whaling harpoon) and an electronic musical instrument. When hands were rubbed along the body of the instrument, it triggered a series of musical or vocal samples. As she said in her program notes, the Talking Stick is literally a disembodied voice, representing the multitude of disembodied narratives that shift back and forth within Melville's book.

The sporadic presence of Laurie Anderson herself signaled something new for a Laurie Anderson production. In all of Anderson's past performances, she commanded center focus. Possibly influenced by Anne Bogart (who co-staged the piece), Anderson effectively decentered herself, shifting focus onto the ensemble. Three male actors (Tom Nelis, Anthony Turner, and Price Waldman) performed three-quarters of the entire event, each playing several characters from the novel. Anderson played the roles of Pip (the cabin boy), a reader, and the Whale. When she appeared on stage she seemed more an interruption than a participant, sawing on her electronically amplified violin and functioning as a Brechtian device to keep us at a distance through a powerful wall of sound.

Unfortunately, the piece still felt unfinished. As the only live musician, bass player Skúli Sverrisson's contributions were confusing but were more than offset by the engaging performances of the actors, especially Tom Nelis as Ahab/Noah/Father Mapple/Explorer. Nelis's powerful voice was enhanced through thick, electronic filters that shook the theatre walls. As Father Mapple, he literally defied gravity as he swung out over the open orchestra pit while his feet remained attached to the stage floor, embodying the downtrodden mad-

ness of the priest and foreshadowing the coming insanity of Ahab. As Ahab, Nelis yelled "the white whale" throughout the show, walking a razor's edge between admirable passion and dangerous madness. In act 1, Nelis cut his wooden leg with an amplified hand saw. The sound so overwhelmed that focus could only be driven to Ahab's freakish obsession.

Anderson ended the show with one of Melville's questions: "And what are you, dear reader, a fast fish or a loose fish." A fast fish, she explained, is one that has been caught and tied fast to the side of the boat, one that is owned. A loose fish is free to roam. If we, as the audience/reader, are the fish then Anderson seemed to suggest that interpretation is power and questioned who controls that power. Are we fast fish or loose fish? She left us to answer the question for ourselves but in retelling Melville's story, she freed us from overused, canonical assumptions about *Moby Dick*. Old meanings and interpretations were flung out. Anderson cleverly rediscovered the text and opened it up to critical and aesthetic reconsideration.

**WOODROW B. HOOD**

*High Point University*

**THE 23RD ANNUAL HUMANA FESTIVAL OF NEW AMERICAN PLAYS.** Actors Theatre of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky. 19–21 March 1999.

The 1999 Humana Festival of New American Plays, produced by Actors Theatre of Louisville (ATL), will undoubtedly go into the record books for the production of the most new plays (twenty-five) in the shortest period of time (five weeks). Of course eight of the new works were ten-minute plays and five were three-minute "telephone plays" (audiences used specially designed pay phones in the theatre lobby to overhear phone conversations created by playwrights Neal Bell, Rebecca Gilman, David Greenspan, Rebecca Reynolds, and Diana Son). Another play (*What Are You Afraid Of?* by Richard Dresser) was performed for an audience of three squeezed into the backseat of a car parked outside the theatre. Six others were "T(ext) Shirt Plays" written on the back of 100% cotton T-shirts and hawked at ATL's lobby bookstore. The Kentucky-based regional theatre pioneered the ten-minute play concept two decades ago and their 1999 offerings raised brevity to new heights. Can email plays be far off?



The cast from *Cabin Pressure*, conceived by Anne Bogart and created by The Saratoga International Theater Institute Company for the 23rd Annual Humana Festival of New American Plays at the Actors Theatre of Louisville. Photo: Richard Trigg.

The car, phone, T-shirt and ten-minute plays were, by and large, amusing diversions (with the exception of Brooke Berman's short and powerful ten-minute piece on rape, *Dancing With the Devil*), offering light hors d'oeuvres prior to the main course of new full-length works. Two of the central themes explored by these plays were father-son relationships and technological alienation.

Veteran playwright Arthur Kopit's latest work, *Y2K* (it was only a matter of time before someone used it as a play title) is not really about the year 2000 compatibility problem in microprocessors. It is Kopit's code phrase for a world full of technological paranoia and conspiracies. Like Kopit's 1984 work, *The End of the World With Symposium to Follow*, which explored nuclear deterrence through the eyes of a private eye, *Y2K* is a sinister, Kafkaesque vision of what can happen when technology runs amuck. Joseph Elliot, a successful publisher, and his equally successful wife Joanne were wealthy, beautiful people who were, apparently, ripe for the hacking. Their lives were shattered when two federal agents confronted Joseph with evidence that he was not what he appeared. This "evidence" (computerized phone records, bank transfers, digitized photos, etc.) was planted by one of Elliot's ex-

students who, obsessed with Joanne, was able to infiltrate the family computer. The evil Gen-X computer nerd (with a streak of blue hair) had several aliases—ISeeU and FlowBear were but two. From his metallic grid-like cage (designed by ATL's resident designer Paul Owen) which served as the visual context for the play, he menaced the Elliots from on-high, occasionally down-loading himself directly into their lives. No less dangerous than the teenage killers at Colorado's Columbine High School, Kopit's villain was an all-too-familiar symbol emerging from a culture of video games, pop music, and mass media. IseeU was an electronic stalker who enjoyed chaos simply because he could create it through high-tech surveillance and calculated manipulation. Movies and plays have always had their share of technological bad guys, but as the twenty-first century dawns, it seems as if the young computer nerd has supplanted the more mature Dr. Faustus, Dr. Frankenstein, and Dr. Jekyll. The terror may come in 0's and 1's, but the havoc created is still swift and horrifying.

The acting in the production was first-rate. Graeme Malcolm and Lucinda Faraldo as Joseph and Joanne were appropriately witty and articulate and Dallas Roberts, as the human computer virus

who stalked the unlucky couple, sounded eerily like John Malkovich. Bob Balaban's direction was crisp and Kopit's dialogue was terse and intelligent. If there was one major problem with Kopit's play (besides the title) it was that in some respects it is a one-trick pony. The horrible ease with which someone's life could be ruined via modem was quickly asserted and acknowledged, but the premise did not really go anywhere. We were left (as at the end of some X-Files episodes) trusting no one but wondering if the truth is really out there. There seemed to be no light at the end of Kopit's technological tunnel and no way to turn back, either. Privacy, Kopit believes, may become an increasingly rare phenomenon as our behaviors and actions are saved and accessed on zip drives, hard drives, and floppy disks. In his bleak and electronic world, the winners will be the computer-literate. The losers would do well to ask the bank for signed deposit slips.

Using technology as a means to an end, director Anne Bogart creates theatre works that remind us of the potential for human relationships and direct contact using live dialogue between performers and audience members. Bogart was celebrated by ATL as its first "Modern Master" in 1995. She has developed works that attempt to re-awaken the actor's body through the development of a new physical vocabulary for performance. The four-year old relationship between ATL, Humana, and Bogart's SITI Company, has yielded many successes. Bogart's contribution to the 1999 Humana Festival, *Cabin Pressure*, was a fascinating and uniquely theatrical investigation of the actor-audience relationship. Using excerpts from two famous "couples" plays—Noel Coward's *Private Lives*, which Bogart previously directed at ATL, and Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, deconstructed by Bogart in her 1996 Humana production, *Going, Going, Gone*—Bogart actively explored what it means to be an audience member watching actors act. She had her players move in and out of performance mode into dialogue sampled from theatre theorists such as Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Artaud, and Brook. The questions Bogart posed in *Cabin Pressure* have been asked and answered before: What defines an audience? What is the act of performance? Do audience members really participate in a performance? What does it mean to empathize? How do you really feel while disbelief is being suspended? But these questions have never been asked and answered within a theatrical context. Bogart examined the journey performers and spectators take together by providing an experience of that journey. Her brilliant use of the tiny Victor Jory Theatre (ATL's flexible, experimental space) provided the perfect laboratory for this performance/experiment.

With her distinctive blend of active, physical choreography, evocative sound and music, and inclusion of portions of actual transcripts from discussions with audience members, Bogart and her quintet of talented performers—Will Bond, Ellen Lauren, Kelly Maurer, Barney O'Hanlon and Stephen Webber—created a theatrical event which dazzled and inspired. In many ways, watching *Cabin Pressure* was like witnessing an exploration of the core of theatre itself—like watching the early experiments and discussions spawned by Stanislavski and the Moscow Art Theatre, or Grotowski and the Polish Laboratory Theatre. *Cabin Pressure* may have limited appeal, but of all the 1999 Humana offerings, it was by far the most innovative and exciting.

Two other works at the Festival, *The Cockfighter* by Frank Manley (adapted and directed by Vincent Murphy) and *God's Man in Texas* by David Rambo, continued a Humana Festival tradition by focusing on Southern families and relationships. Manley's play, set in rural Appalachia, is about a father whose passion for cockfighting turns this savage sport into a coming-of-age rite for his twelve year-old son. The boy (played with excessive wide-eyed innocence by Danny Seckel) idolizes his father (Phillip Clark) until forced to confront the real



Phillip Clark and Ellen McQueen in *The Cockfighter* by Frank Manley, adapted by Vincent Murphy for the 23rd Annual Humana Festival of New American Plays at the Actors Theatre of Louisville. Photo: Richard Trigg.





(from left): William McNulty as Dr. Philip Gottschall and Bob Burrus as Hugo Taney in *God's Man in Texas*, by David Rambo at the 23rd Annual Humana Festival of New American Plays at the Actors Theatre of Louisville. Photo: Richard Trigg.

violence of the sport and his father's true nature. Clark portrayed the redneck cockfighter with energy and vigor. The boy's over-protective mother (Ellen McQueen) attempts to act as buffer between son and husband, but is weak and ineffectual. McQueen shone in this role, and even more so as the boy's uncle, a simple but good-natured alcoholic who works for the father for pocket-change. Murphy's novel-to-stage adaptation was hampered by an overemphasis on narrative description at the expense of dramatic action. Nonetheless, the play is an effective and disturbing work. In the final, chilling scene (comparable to *Equus*), the boy becomes a man, but not what his father expects.

*God's Man in Texas*, set in Houston, "the center of the Baptist universe," is also about fathers and sons, but in a larger sense. Dr. Philip Gottschall, the aging minister of the Rock Baptist Church, is being pressured to step down by the church's elders. The ministry begins auditioning likely successors to the venerable evangelist. Part Billy Graham, part Jerry Falwell (with a little Oral Roberts thrown in), Gottschall (played to perfection by ATL veteran William McNulty) does not intend to give up control and wants a hand in naming his replacement. Dr. Jeremiah "Jerry" Mears (V. Craig Heiden-

reich) is the likely young candidate and surrogate for the son Gottschall never had. Mears, whose own father sold vitamins, preached on street corners, and abandoned his family, wants the job badly and will do everything he can to get it. Heidenreich was superb as the conflicted Mears, who tried to please at the expense of whatever integrity he possessed. Playwright Rambo draws a detailed and sometimes explosively funny picture of the evangelical world that both Reverends Mears and Gottschall inhabit. A third character is Hugo Taney, a video technician who serves as confidante to both preachers. Rob Burrus was excellent as Hugo; his folksy, though witty charm contrasted sharply to the fiery delivery of religious rhetoric by the two preachers. Ultimately, church politics and Gottschall's Lear-like reluctance to let go cause Mears to reconsider his life's calling and, like the boy in *The Cockfighter*, question his own need for a father's approval. Even though the climax of the play is somewhat misplaced, *God's Man in Texas*, ably directed by John Dillon, is funny and perversely fascinating. In some ways Rambo's world of swimming pools, bowling alleys and Christian hypocrisy is no less violent than the world of cockfighting.

The Humana Foundation and the entire staff at Actors Theatre of Louisville were, as always, deserving of our loud applause and appreciation for their steadfast efforts to promote and encourage the work of American playwrights. The annual Festival of New American Plays continues to be one of the most exciting and important events on the theatrical calendar and for one month in late winter and early spring Louisville, Kentucky, becomes the indisputable epicenter of the theatre world. The Festival's level of professionalism and total commitment to the playwright and the text are always exemplary. Critics can argue over the merits of each new play, but we are all grateful for the opportunity to argue at all.

DAVID WOHL

West Virginia State College

**FOR COLORED GIRLS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED SUICIDE/WHEN THE RAINBOW IS ENUF.** By Ntozake Shange. Penumbra Theatre Company, St. Paul, Minnesota. 11 June 1999.

By the time Ntozake Shange's Obie-winning *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* received national acclaim, in productions first at the Public Theater and then the Booth Theater on Broadway in 1976, its seven women characters were all played by African American actresses. But Shange described "the energy & part of the style that nurtured for colored girls" as inspired by, among other things, the multiracial feminist writing collectives in San Francisco during the early 1970s [(New York: Scribner, 1977), p. x]. Penumbra Theatre Company's production of *for colored girls* took these roots to heart, choosing three African Americans, two Asian Americans, and one Latina to sing different variations on "a black girl's song." By choosing a multiracial cast, director Kym Moore put a different spin on the terms of being "colored," opening up Shange's lyrical choreopoems to suggest their common terms of oppression, poverty, and racism, and showing that "bein' alive and bein' a woman and bein' colored is a metaphysical dilemma."

To its great credit, the production did not assign its parts indiscriminately; this perhaps might be better termed "color-sensitive" than "color-blind" casting. For the most part, the specific "color" of the actress merged with the characterization, adding complexity to a specific role rather than disguising the realities of race. African American

actresses Aimee Bryant and Sharon Cage respectively performed rhapsodic reminiscences of sexual initiation on "graduation nite" in a New Jersey factory town and the story of a childhood adoration of Toussaint L'Overture. The poem "somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff," received a dynamic performance by Signe Harriday in the style of a black sermon. In one of the play's most interesting moments two Asian American actresses, Sun Mee Chomet and Jeany Park, enacted Shange's depiction of "the passion flower of southwest los angeles." Their casting transformed the story of a predatory woman who wears "orange butterflies & aqua sequins" to lure her male conquests into a more specific commentary on the exotic and sexualized stereotypes of the "Oriental" woman.

However, at times this choice of multiracial casting fell flat or became disorienting. Shange's choreopoem takes its force not only from the beauty of its poetry, music, and dance but also from its creation of an extraordinary sense of intimacy with its characters. This delicate familiarity rests in part on the assumption that only particular bodies are privy to certain experiences and can speak these lives truthfully. Occasionally, the production reminded us how difficult it is to translate specific and individual embodiments across the lines of racial and cultural difference: in moments, for instance, when an Asian American actress described her family as "just reglar niggahs with hints of spanish" or when actresses failed to render the rhythms of Shange's poetry without lapsing into patently artificial accents.

Other inconsistencies with the production were the fault of specific movement and design choices rather than casting. Sharon Cage's powerful rendition of "abortion cycle #1" was limited by trapping her in a large blue hemisphere (a multi-purpose receptacle also used in a number of other scenes), which reduced her body language to awkward and restricted pantomime. In the "latent rapists" sequence, the characters delivered their lines as if speaking at a tea party; again, an overly stylized effect ruined the power of Shange's disturbing poetry, rendering the confidential testimonial of "bein' betrayed by men who know us" too alienating. Movement and a use of crude gestural mimicry unfortunately became equally distracting in the "sechita" sequence. And the ending chorale's use of a circular translucent scrim that rose around the actresses became a gratuitous special effect.

At the same time, these momentary lapses did not interfere with a moving and honest set of performances, particularly in the second half. The best of these again reminded us of the play's roots