

Letter from Louisville

Notes from the Humana Festival.

BY GERARD RAYMOND

All but invisible in the past, lesbian characters may finally be getting their share of the spotlight on stages across America, especially if the work featured at the Actors Theater of Louisville's Humana Festival of New American Plays is any indication. At this year's festival, which concluded early last month, four of the ten plays presented featured lesbians or bisexual women.

My Left Breast, a full-length monologue written and performed by Obie-winning playwright Susan Miller, was one of the most moving and certainly the most personal of the works at the festival. Talking about her mastectomy, Miller skillfully relates a love story and a medical history. The love affair (with another woman) ends unhappily and, at forty, she has developed the physiology of a post-menopausal woman. But she never once lapses into sentimentality. Woven through the piece are stories about how she raised her son, and anecdotes about her male and female lovers. For the finale, she courageously exposes her scar, the only visible reminder of her left breast, citing it as proof that the human body and heart can and does repair itself.

A lesbian relationship also figures in **Slavs!**, Pulitzer Prize-winner Tony Kushner's new play which, not surprisingly, received a good deal of attention at the Festival. With his customary intelligence and wit, Kushner explores some of the same themes that he expresses with somewhat greater finesse in *Angels in America*. The opening scenes are pure vaudeville, set in 1985 Moscow, when the bad old days of Communism are about to give way to the chaotic new days of restructure. Originally written for the prologue of the second part of *Angels*, these scenes, in fact, incorporate the speech by the Oldest Bolshevik in the World, from the prologue of *Perestroika*. The second act of *Slavs!* focuses on a lesbian romance between a pediatrician and a security guard at the



Steven Culp and Mary Shultz in *Trip's Cinch* by Phyllis Nagy at the Humana Festival. Richard C. Trigg

Soviet archives where the brains of important Communists are preserved. In the last act, which takes place seven years later in Siberia, Kushner examines the wretched conditions of Russian life in the aftermath of perestroika, particularly of those people who live in the shadow of nuclear waste dumps. In an epilogue set in a Heaven similar to the one in *Angels*, two deceased Bolsheviks play cards and ponder the age-old question, "What is to be done?"

Written in a far more conventional style, Wendy Hammond's **Julie Johnson** is a comedy about the mental and sexual awakening of a New Jersey housewife from Hoboken. The eponymous heroine throws her uncaring husband out of the house and suddenly finds herself without any ability to support herself or her children. In short order, she enrolls herself in a physics course and falls in love with her best friend, a cocktail waitress. Echoing the famous scene in *Bent* where two men make love without touching each other, the two women in *Julie Johnson* bring themselves to orgasm sitting side by side on a park bench. "I never knew there could be so much feeling," exclaims Julie afterwards. The romance doesn't last, but Julie has forged an identity for herself.

I missed Jane Anderson's ten-minute play, **The Last Time We Saw Her**. It also features a lesbian character, one who attempts to come out in the corporate world.

The media suddenly "discovered" lesbians and "lesbian chic" in the last two years, now it's the turn of theatergoers. As Susan Miller wryly commented in *My Left Breast*, "I am the topic of our times. . . And I am coming to a theater near you."

Many journalists who attended the New Plays festival noted that several plays reflected other currently popular subjects as well. One of the best pieces at the festival was Phyllis Nagy's one-act **Trip's Cinch**, a response to the current debate on sexual politics in general and Mamet's *Oleanna* in particular. In three sharp scenes, ironically written in pseudo-Mametspeak, Nagy presents the viewer with shifting perspectives in the aftermath of an alleged rape. In the first scene a rich, confident young man who has been acquitted of rape charges (read William Kennedy Smith) describes his version of the story to a female academic who is writing a book about the alleged event. In the next scene the academic (read Camille

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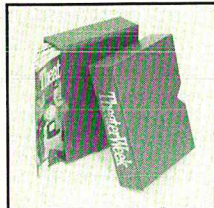
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Paglia) interviews the young woman, who is hostile towards her. The final scene is a flashback to the night of the alleged rape. Each scene seems to carry a truth but finally, unlike *Oleanna* where the deck is loaded, you cannot be certain of what happened, even if you have decided whose side you're on.

Jon Klein's inane comedy, *Betty the Yeti*, is informed by environmental concerns. Klein invites unfavorable comparisons with Lanford Wilson's *Redwood Curtain* by setting his play in a Redwood forest, and then featuring a grizzled Vietnam vet, a tough woman who owns a logging business and a young Amerasian woman (a park ranger). The play is a series of sub-Neil Simonese one-liners wedded to ecologically correct sentiments. For the record: The Vietnam hero literally fucks nature in the form of a rare American version of the Himalayan yeti.

Among the other plays at Louisville were a theater piece created by Tina Landau, and a new play by Romulus Linney. Landau's *1969*, looks at the year in which a man landed on the moon and the modern gay right movement was born through the eyes of a sexually confused gay teenager. Energetically performed by an enthusiastic singing and dancing cast, *1969* entertains, but doesn't offer anything more than the usual high school stereotypes and tired *Wizard of Oz* references as the boy gravitates towards Greenwich Village on his voyage of self-discovery. Romulus Linney, who has previously concentrated on historical subjects or stories set in Appalachia, takes on a contemporary subject for the first time with *Shotgun*. A bleak but powerful domestic drama, *Shotgun* explores the devastating long-term impact of divorce.

The New American Plays Festival, now in its 18th year, is a feather in the cap of artistic director Jon Jory and the Actors Theater of Louisville. No other theater in this country presents a similar concentrated showcase devoted solely to new writing. Over two weekends during the run of the festival various members of the theater profession flock here hoping to catch the next year's hits. Festival past successes have included two Pulitzer Prize-winners, *The Gin Game* and *Crimes of the Heart*, as well as commercial hits like *Extremities* and *Agnes of God*. There'll probably be no prize-winners among this year's crop of plays, but what's important is that there is a place for new work to flourish. TW