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## Louisville's Humana captures human touch

BY CHRISTINE DOLEN

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### FRONT CUTLINE

Playwright Carlos Murillo calls Actors Theatre of Louisville a "mecca for new plays," noting that its high-profile Humana Festival offers ``a snapshot of what's happening in American theater."

True and true.

So what did theater-savvy visitors, who flock to this annual Kentucky Derby of drama from all over the world, see reflected in this year's collage?

Anxiety over the state of the world and America's shifting place in it. Fluid concepts of gender and sexuality. The manipulative dangers of cyberspace. Unending emotional fallout from 9/11. Loneliness and a longing for connection.

As always, the pieces at the just-ended festival -- six full-length plays, three shorts, an anthology work with 18 separate components and a sampling of eight pieces from Pulitzer Prize winner Suzan-Lori Parks' ongoing *365 Days/365 Plays* project -- offered a stimulating, exhausting demonstration of just how differently reasonable, well-educated people react to the same new thing onstage.

Take Murillo's offering, *dark play or stories for boys*.

Most people loved the direction, by University of Miami grad and Humana Fest veteran Michael John Garcés, and found the acting superb. But the script by the Chicago-based Murillo, who grew up in both the United States and Colombia? It struck some as a thrilling (if horrifying) exploration of cyberspace fiction colliding with real-life adolescent longing, while others out-and-out loathed its depiction of malleable, obsessive sexuality. But that spectrum of reaction is what makes for dramatic horse races.

Undeniably, through the more than 300 plays produced over the 31 years of the Humana Festival,

Actors Theatre has nourished American theater in a significant, impactful way. The best-known titles -- D.L. Coburn's *The Gin Game*, Marsha Norman's *Getting Out*, Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*, Donald Margulies' *Dinner With Friends*, William Mastrosimone's *Extremities*, Gina Gionfriddo's *After Ashley*, Alexandra Gersten-Vassilaros and Theresa Rebeck's *Omnium-Gatherum* -- have won prizes and been produced on stages all over the world. But it isn't just scripts that get a boost from the festival.

Marco Ramirez, a 24-year-old who works as literary manager of Miami's City Theatre, spent the first part of last weekend as just another quiet face in the huge Humana Festival crowd. Then his 10-minute play, *I Am Not Batman*, kicked off a program of three short plays on Saturday night in the 637-seat Pamela Brown Auditorium. And by the next morning, everything seemed to be changing.

"This is my 'Hialeah-kid' play, so to have it produced here is very exciting," said a glowing Ramirez, who won theater's prestigious Heideman Award (and a \$1,000 prize) for *Batman*. "Last night was overwhelming. An agent approached me. A bunch of literary managers had conversations with me. It was very inspiring and eye-opening."

*I Am Not Batman*, which will also be produced at City Theatre's Summer Shorts Festival this year, was written during Ramirez's final year in the play-writing program at New York University. Though he's still contemplating grad school, he came home after graduating "because the New York scene was super-saturated with young artists, and I'm a Miami kid," he said. "Exposure like this is great. I'm excited to write stuff and have it take place in Miami."

Marc Masterson, in his seventh year as artistic director at Actors Theatre, said his company found *I Am Not Batman* because of its partnership with City Theatre (both companies read and share short scripts), adding that the Louisville theater might not have discovered Ramirez's work otherwise.

"I love that play," Masterson said. "He's clearly a gifted writer."

Masterson also admires Garcés' work, both as a director (he previously staged Eduardo Machado's *When the Sea Drowns in Sand* and Adam Rapp's *Finer Noble Gases* at Humana) and a playwright (he contributed two pieces, *the ride* and *on edge*, to this year's *The Open Road Anthology*).

"Michael is one of my favorite directors, and he has an open invitation to be here any time," Masterson said. "The actors [in *dark play*] said they'd go anywhere any time to work with him. Garcés is a gift."

Garcés, who is now the artistic director of Los Angeles' Cornerstone Theater Company, is readying an ambitious piece titled *Los Illegals* for a June run at his company. He hadn't intended to do any outside directing his first year, but Murillo's script and that it was being done at Actors Theatre convinced him.

He loves working at Humana, he said, in part because ``Marc has an ability that's rare among artistic directors. He has real dialogue with the people who work here. He *really* wants to know what you think. He'll challenge me, and we don't always agree . . . And he's bringing the right writers here."

This year's writers also included Naomi Iizuka (*Strike-Slip*), Ken Weitzman (*The As If Body Loop*), Sherry Kramer (*When Something Wonderful Ends*), Craig Wright (*The Unseen*) and a collaborative Actors Theatre-commissioned effort from Alice Tuan, Whit MacLaughlin and his Philadelphia-based New Paradise Laboratories (*Batch: An American Bachelor/ette Party Spectacle*).

Though he is loath to unearth themes from a given festival ("that's *your* job," he says with a smile), Masterson did find a recurring idea this year: connectedness.

"There's a yearning or longing to find one's place in the world, which makes sense, though I don't think anyone started out to write that [specifically]," Masterson said. ``Americans feel disconnected from the world, from each other, from ourselves."

Playwright Kramer, whose solo piece combines her Baby Boomer past (including a love of Barbie dolls), her mother's death and the deadly legacy of America's unquenchable thirst for oil, is a woman as thoughtful, emotional and wryly amusing as the play she wrote for her Humana Festival debut.

"It has been extraordinary working here," she said. ``Whatever we needed, it would show up the next day. It's a shame we didn't ask for the cure to cancer."

Her goal with *Something Wonderful* (which admirers likened to *An Inconvenient Truth* and the less-impressed saw as a kind of theatrical lecture) was to begin provoking change through art that helps connect the dots in a world with too many dots.

"I believe theater is a tool. The point is to change the world," she said. ``We've gotten good at moving people with shock art. But we don't move them anywhere . . . Baby Boomers have to wake up. . . . Our childhood is over. We have to pack the whole thing away."

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