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How'd They Do That?

Tips for Playwrights on Scoring a Debut at Humana

by David Wohl

The recipe is fairly straightforward: Start with 2,000 full-length and 10-minute plays, stir vigorously for several months and then reduce to approximately 10. Rehearse gently for about three weeks with as much collaboration as possible and serve hot to more than

28,000 theatre critics and audience members from across the country and around the world.

Sound easy? The devil is in the details. Creating the annual Humana Festival of New American Plays takes a mammoth effort by playwrights, actors and staff at Actors Theatre of Louisville

(ATL), which has been putting it on for 29 years. The nation's oldest and best-known theatre festival, Humana has debuted more than 300 plays, including three that went on to become Pulitzer Prize winners, six that received the American Theatre Critics Award and four that won the Obie Award.

Although the festival itself lasts only six weeks, preparation takes a year or more. In fact, planning for Humana 2006 was well underway three days after the end of Humana 2005, which ran from February 27 to April 9 and featured six full-length plays, four 10-minute plays and a collaborative vaudeville production performed by the Acting Apprentice Company.

Typically, the playbill includes both plays that have been commissioned and plays selected for Humana from submissions. This year three of the full-length plays were commissioned by ATL (*Pure Confidence* by Carlyle Brown, *Moot the Messenger* by Kia Corthron and *A Nervous Smile* by John Belluso), and three were submissions from agents (*Hazard County* by Allison Moore, *The Shaker Chair* by Adam Brock and *Memory House* by Kathleen Tolan.

So how does ATL pull off this festival? How are plays selected? And what's it like being one of those playwrights whose works are selected for this prestigious festival?

How Plays Are Screened

Tanya Palmer, ATL's literary manager from 2000 to 2005, discussed the screening process used for the Humana Festival plays in an interview prior to her move to Chicago's Goodman Theatre in April. She notes that the literary manager and three other fulltime staff members typically began reading plays immediately following each year's festival. ATL receives 600-800 submissions of full-length plays and approximately 1,200 submissions of 10-minute plays annually, according to Palmer. (Note: ATL accepts unsolicited 10-minute plays, but accepts full-length plays only from agents and playwrights invited to send work. ATL also commissions two to three plays each year from specific writers.) Scripts often are submitted and/or commissioned a year or two before they make it into the line-up for a festival

The readers don't have formal standards that they use to winnow down the selections, Palmer says.

"We have an informal system of evaluation, but we employ no set criteria," says Palmer. "Our basic philosophy is to ask the questions, 'What is the play trying to do and how does it do it?' Obviously, we respond to works that excite us personally."

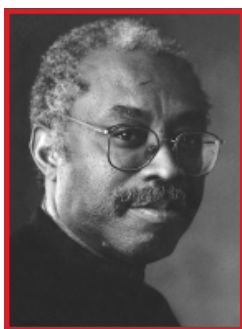
Adrien-Alice Hansel, a former literary associate and 1998 summer intern at ATL, replaced Palmer as literary manager shortly after the 2005 Humana Festival. Hansel graduated from the Yale School of Drama in 2003 with a degree in dramaturgy and has worked at ATL since February 2004. Her enthusiasm for the Humana Festival and ATL's commitment to new plays is unrestrained: "This is the best job in the theatre," she says. "I feel so lucky working at a theatre where my job is actually important! They take it very seriously here."

Hansel doesn't anticipate making many changes in the way ATL selects its plays for Humana. She notes that, "the biggest change has been our transition from tracking plays on 3" x 5" index cards to using a computerized database. Much easier."

She and her literary team read new plays daily



Harlan Taylor



Carlyle Brown (above) received a commission to write *Pure Confidence* (top) for the Humana Festival after a chance encounter with Marc Masterson in a bar during a Theater Communications Group conference. Pictured in the play's performance at Humana are Gavin Lawrence and William McNulty.

and plan to travel to new playwright workshops, readings and showcases (including the Eugene O'Neill Center's Conference in Connecticut, The Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis, MN and the Pacific Coast Playwrights Festival in Costa Mesa, CA) throughout the year.

By mid-July, the literary staff typically passes its top 35-50 choices on to ATL Artistic Director Marc Masterson and Executive Director Alexander Speer.

Selecting the Finalists

In August and September, in-house readings of plays that have made it through the initial round are scheduled, featuring ATL resident actors and guest actors from out of town.

Then the process becomes more intense. The artistic staff begins to examine cast size, technical requirements and other aspects of each play. Hansel points out that choosing the final plays is a bit like finalizing a season of productions.

"Because this is a festival, we look for a cross-section of styles and subject matter," she says.

By mid-November, Masterson and Speer make the final selections of full-length plays for the next year's festival. Although some theatre critics have looked for thematic motifs in festival selections, both Hansel and Masterson say that diversity is probably the most important criteria they use in choosing plays.

"We look for an interesting mix of work – a variety of styles, content; a mix of emerging writers and established playwrights," says Masterson. "I respond to work that can resonate in different ways to potential audiences. Selection is a tricky business. We ask questions such as 'what do we believe in, what do we respond to?' In a sense, we introduce writers to the American theatre – and American theatre today is very diverse."

In the past two years, ATL has tried to build in extra time during the winnowing process for workshopping plays that may not be ready for Humana in a particular year, but might be ready the next year.

How Playwright Commissions Are Awarded

So how does a playwright land a commission to write a Humana play? For Carlyle Brown, who was commissioned to develop the 2005 Humana play *Pure Confidence*, opportunity came in the form of a chance meeting in a hotel bar.

"I happened to be at a TCG [Theater Communications Group] conference in Philadelphia a few years ago, and Clinton Turner Davis [the director of *Pure*

Top 2005 Humana Festival Picks

Some of the plays produced at the 2005 Humana Festival had Southern themes or locales, and at least half addressed contemporary and historical politics. Interestingly, all of the full-length works were, essentially, naturalistic in style. Three out of the six plays stood out. Here are my top picks:



Memory House by Kathleen Tolan

When I saw a stove and a refrigerator on the set, I got nervous. I don't usually react favorably to kitchen sink domestic dramas, especially when they have kitchen sinks that really work. But after a slow start, *Memory House* grabbed me. As the play begins, a mother and daughter are each working on a task – the mother baking a pie and the daughter trying to complete her college admissions essay (with the deadline less than three hours away). As they work to complete the tasks, Katherine Tolan gives us a memorable, funny and painfully recognizable mother/daughter relationship drama. *Memory House* may be

old-fashioned, but it works on many levels, especially if you've experienced the joys and heartaches of living with a teenage daughter. With top-notch performances by actresses Taylor Miller (above, left) and Cassandra Bissell (above, right), it easily was one of the best plays of the festival.

Pure Confidence by Carlyle Brown

Pure Confidence has a first act brimming with charm, wit and promise – and a second act that is still in need of work. Using the Civil War as a backdrop for exploring the utilization of black jockeys in 19th century horse racing, the play flirts dangerously with treating slavery the way television's *Hogan's Heroes* treated the Nazis. ("Join us as we remember those lovable plantation masters getting outsmarted by the slaves...") Simon Cato, the slave jockey, is hell-bent on winning his freedom from his master, but a journey north and a career-ending injury (both of which occur just as war breaks out) force the talented rider to consider just what freedom is. *Pure Confidence* is buoyed by an excellent performance by Gavin Lawrence as Simon. His owner, Colonel Johnson, is played convincingly by ATL veteran actor William McNulty.

A Nervous Smile by John Belluso

Playwright John Belluso's play is a drama about two well-to-do families who meet at a cerebral palsy support group and design a frightening plan to abandon their handicapped children. The play is mostly on target, and Belluso deftly draws characters that are all on the edge of despair, coping with burdens that most of us can barely imagine. Its premiere during the center of the Terry Schiavo controversy was timely, but *A Nervous Smile* would have worked better if the characters had been more sympathetic. Their infidelities and self-absorption do little to help us understand their pain and suffering. Strong performances by Mhari Sandoval (above, left) and Maureen Mueller (above, right) added to the texture of the play, as did the tight direction by David Esbjornson.



Photos by Harlan Taylor

- David Wohl

Confidence] was there at the hotel bar, talking with Marc Masterson," recalls Brown, the author of such works as *Talking Masks* and *The African Company Presents Richard III*. "They were having a discussion about jockeys. Marc asked me if I knew anything about black jockeys. It just so happened that I had previously been commissioned by the Houston

Grand Opera to revise the libretto of a musical by Harold Arlen called *St. Louis Woman*, which was an incredibly dated and racist piece, but the central character was a black jockey! I had done a lot of research for that show and when Marc asked me the question, I think I talked about black jockeys for about 20 minutes straight! A few months later, he called me and offered me the commission."

Based on historical accounts of African American jockeys, *Pure Confidence* tells the story of Simon Cato, an amalgamation of some of the slave riders that dominated American horse racing before and after the Civil War. Using his skills as a jockey, Cato is able to buy his freedom from his master. Brown puts the "peculiar institution" of slavery under the microscope and examines it from economic, social and personal perspectives.

A year after discussing the subject matter with Masterson and Turner, Brown had completed Act I of the play, and ATL scheduled a reading in Louisville. Brown had already been working with Kent Thompson, former artistic director of Alabama Shakespeare Festival (ASF) and was in discussions with that company about doing a play with a Southern theme. After some communication between Louisville and Montgomery, ATL and ASF decided to cosponsor *Pure Confidence*. When Brown completed Act II, a first reading was done in

Alabama at the Southern Writers Project.

The play was originally scheduled to premiere at the 2004 Humana Festival, but Palmer and Masterson "thought it wasn't quite ready, and I agreed," says Brown. "So it was a three-year process for me."

How a Noncommissioned Work Makes it into the Festival

Unlike *Pure Confidence*, Allison Moore's play *Hazard County* was not a commissioned work but rather was selected for the festival from among 800 plays sent to ATL.

Like Brown, Moore had been working with the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, and her play was given a reading there in June 2004. Palmer of ATL attended the reading in Alabama and, as Moore recalls, "she asked me to submit it to Humana. My agent sent it in, and I was absolutely shocked when they called me in October and told me that the play had been selected for production in 2005!"

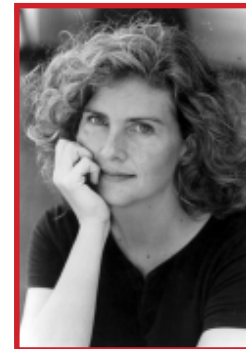
Based loosely on a 1995 murder that took place in southwestern Kentucky, Moore's play focuses on a television producer who decides that he can tell the "real" story of the incident to a national audience. Interspersed with recollections of the popular television show, *The Dukes of Hazzard*, *Hazard County* tackles such topics as race, family and the media.

Playwright Involvement Is Key

All playwrights whose work is produced at the Humana Festival are intensely



Harlan Taylor



Allison Moore (left) was asked to submit *Hazard County* after ATL's Tanya Palmer saw a reading at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. Above, Sean Dougherty (left) and Chelsey Rives (right) appear in a scene.

involved with the production process, which makes the festival very popular with writers who want to play a role in taking their words from page to stage.

"The beauty of Humana is the fact that we bring fully realized productions of new American plays to the stage, which gives the playwright an amazing opportunity to take a critical look at his or her work," says Palmer.

Moore credits Marc Masterson with ensuring that the playwright remains at the center of the process.

"Marc and I even spoke about choice of director, and I was delighted to have Chris Coleman (artistic director of Portland Center Stage in Oregon) assigned, whom I had worked with previously," Moore says. "I was also involved in the casting process in New York...in December 2004."

Keeping playwrights involved in their works' development is crucial to the process at ATL, Masterson notes.

"I have discussions with each writer," he says. "We try to serve the playwright – and we try to match up writers and directors – but we definitely listen to what they have to say."

The ATL process is designed to give
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ATL's 10-Minute Play Contest Offers Production Opportunities in Miami, Louisville

Actors Theatre of Louisville's (ATL) 10-Minute Play Contest accepts scripts from all playwrights. Beginning in 2006, the competition will be cosponsored by City Theatre in Miami, FL, which presents about 30 productions of 10-minute plays per year. ATL Literary Manager Adrien-Alice Hansel notes that this new partnership will expand opportunities for playwrights because any play submitted to ATL will be considered for production in Miami as well as at the Humana Festival in Louisville.

The deadline for submission is November 1, 2005. Playwrights may submit only one script, and entries may not exceed 10 pages in length. Previously submitted plays, plays that have received an Equity production, musicals and children's shows are not accepted. All plays submitted are considered for the Heideman Award (\$1,000), the Humana Festival and City Theatre's Summer Shorts Festival. Plays that meet the following criteria also will be considered for the annual Actors Theatre Apprentice Showcase: playwright aged 18-28, minimal sets, minimal props and minimal costume requirements. Playwrights must be citizens or permanent residents of the USA. Detailed guidelines are available on ATL's Web site (www.actors theatre.org/humana_contest)

Humana

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playwrights plenty of opportunities to improve their work, even as it moves toward festival production.

"I did two rewrites before rehearsals began in February," Moore recalls. "I also was able to do some rewriting during rehearsals. That's one of the luxuries of working with the festival. I cut two short scenes during rehearsals and moved some monologues around and rewrote some scene endings. These were small adjustments that had big payoffs. The actors also made significant contributions. Good actors are some of the smartest people in the world. Their work and involvement led to further understanding and clarifications and, as a result, more rewrites."

Brown also found it helpful to see actors performing his work, and he did some rewriting in rehearsals as well.

"I had worked with three of the actors previously (Gavin Lawrence, Kelly Taffe and Jane Welch) and I definitely wrote the play with them in mind," Brown says. "Watching them in rehearsal was extremely helpful. The process definitely encourages further shaping and honing."

Brown was amazed that five other full-length plays were undergoing the same process as his simultaneously.

"Until I came to Louisville, I didn't know what a big deal the Humana Festival was," he says. "We had about three weeks of rehearsals, and most of the actors are doubling and performing in other plays. Very intense. Clearly these guys know their business."

Brown says that Masterson sets the example.

"On every level, the support is tremendous – and Marc is a very cool cookie. A great leader and completely calm at all times. If there was a crisis, you wouldn't know it by looking at his face."

The Value of Humana

Both Brown and Moore say their Humana experience was especially beneficial to them as playwrights because of the opportunity to participate in developing

their plays into full productions.

"The thing I appreciated most about working with ATL was the remarkable openness and flexibility of everyone connected to the festival," Moore says. "The process has been amazing and it's been a tremendous gift to enjoy full [Actors] Equity days. I felt we were ready to go into tech rehearsals three days before we were scheduled! The thing that is unique about Humana is the fact that, as a playwright, you are offered the best case scenario to see a production of your work."

Brown also "was immensely happy with the production. For the state that the play was in when we went into rehearsals, I feel that this was the best rendering it could have gotten."

And, of course, the publicity associated with Humana doesn't hurt. Already, both playwrights have secured additional productions of their plays. Brown's *Pure Confidence* will be performed next season at ASF, and his agent has had inquiries from other theatres. Moore's *Hazard County* was produced in May by Dallas' Kitchen Dog Theatre and in June by Atlanta's Actors Express.

Funding is Key

As wonderful as Humana's process is, Brown notes that funding is what enables the festival to be truly in a class by itself.

"The luxury of the festival is that it is subsidized by the Humana Foundation," Brown says. "That's just amazing."

The Humana Foundation is the philanthropic arm of Humana, Inc., a Louisville, KY-based company that is one of the nation's largest publicly traded health benefits companies. Humana first sponsored the festival during the 1979-80 season. During the 1981-82 season, the event was renamed for the company in recognition of its ongoing support.

"Our 23-year relationship with Humana is one of the longest of its kind between a corporate foundation and an arts organization," says Masterson.

In today's difficult arts funding times, when many other theatres have lost benefactors, ATL not only has continued secur-

ing Humana's commitment at regular three-year intervals, but also has enjoyed complete artistic freedom in operating the festival.

"One of the great strengths of their philanthropy is that content and subject matter have never been an issue," says Masterson. "The relationship continues to be strong. They understand that there are natural cycles in terms of the work we produce, and they don't panic. They share our commitment to excellence and that's what the festival is all about." ■

David Wohl, who served as SETC president in 1997, is the dean of Arts and Humanities at West Virginia State University.

Social Change

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American actor to portray Jesus in a 1997 production of the Passion Play. "Racism," they said, "is alive and ugly in our society."

As might be expected, ticket sales jumped 20 percent, although two school groups withdrew fearing violence from the death threats. However, the theatre's image took a nosedive more than a week later after organizers admitted – when pressed by the media – that just two threats had been received, only one busload had cancelled (100 people out of 10,000 during the run of the show), and only about 10 complaints had been lodged.

Sometimes, despite the best efforts at handling controversy, a theatre can end up crushed by unexpected obstacles. For example, a play planned for the University of Dallas's 2004 fall semester proved so controversial, so sexually explicit, so full of objectionable and bawdy innuendo that many cast members quit after the first read-through, refusing to say the lines on stage. "Sexual content used explicitly for the entertainment of a third party is pornographic," wrote a sophomore in a protesting e-mail. "Clearly this is in opposition to morality, modesty and decency."

The play in question? The 2,415-year-old anti-war comedy *Lysistrata*. ■

Freelance writer Leslie Mizell covers theatre for the *News & Record* in Greensboro, NC.