



MUMBAI

American Center  
Выллетин

AMERICAN THEATER: PLAYWRIGHTS NEW AND OLD

by Chris Jones

Spring comes early in Montgomery, Alabama. But while the resplendent grounds of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival – which is perhaps America’s most beautiful theater – are especially verdant in the first months of the year, it’s one of the Festival programs, the Southern Writers’ Project, that attracts the arts world to the cradle of the Civil Rights Movement. Each year, over the course of several days, the Southern Writers’ Project puts on half a dozen or more new plays by aspiring and established playwrights.

The Southern Writers’ Project is not the only place to see the latest up-and-comers in the flowering field of American playwriting, however. The spring Humana Festival of New American Plays at the Actors Theatre of Louisville offers an even better-known slate of works including, in 2003, a dazzling and wildly popular new play called *Omnium-Gatherum*.

Penned by Alexandra Gersten-Vassilaros and Theresa Rebeck, this intensely stimulating dissection of American geopolitical views imagines a dinner party thrown by Martha Stewart immediately after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. With characters based partly on known American intellectuals, the “guests” represent a broad variety of political points of view. And judging by the response in Kentucky, American audiences clearly are hungry to debate America’s place in the world.

**On and Off Broadway**

The daring and laudably frank *Omnium-Gatherum* appears headed for Broadway. There was a time once in American theater when new plays typically opened on Broadway. For some years, however, the nonprofit American theaters – often called resident theaters or regional theaters – and their for-profit counterparts have enjoyed a lively give-and-take when it comes to the propagation of new American works for the stage. Some new plays begin in the commercial arena and flow to the regional nonprofits. Others move in the opposite direction – spawning in Louisville or Montgomery and ending up, like Donald Margulies’ *Dinner With Friends*, in major commercial productions. Nowadays, these two branches of an American theater industry forever hungry for new products feed each other – in roughly equal measure.

Indeed, the old stereotype of commercial producers as avaricious entrepreneurs looking only for lowest-common-denominator entertainment has long been outmoded. These days, commercial producers are, first and foremost, theater lovers looking for vibrant and

progressive new American works. And they’re willing to get behind even risky plays that catch their eye.

Musicals may still rule on Broadway, but it also launches some great new American plays, such as Richard Greenberg’s *Take Me Out*. A drama about a gay baseball player, Greenberg’s play was a finalist for the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for drama.

Still, visits to this year’s new plays in Alabama and Kentucky were an apt indicator of the breadth and diversity of the new work being developed by a new generation of playwrights. American theater has long been distinguished by playwrights’ efforts to explore current social issues on stage, and the new generation of playwrights continues that tradition.

**Fresh Voices**

Carlyle Brown, a remarkable scribe, currently best known for his *The African Company Presents Richard III*, penned and self-performed *The Fula From America*, wherein he explores the mythic and practical place of a modern-day African-American on a bus journeying through the bush of the African motherland. In Brown’s capable hands, this strange trip through the African continent becomes a real tour-de-force that is full of rich global characters and wry social commentary, and recalls the very best work of such great American monologists as Lili Tomlin. As it ponders the perennial questions of whether one can ever truly return home again and the changing role of the American abroad, *The Fula* feels fresh, wise, and realistic.

Meanwhile, the politically charged playwright Kia Corthron – an important new American writer and the author of the recent New York hit about girl gangs called *Breath, Boom* – offered a provocative new work called *The Venus de Milo Is Armed*, which deals with the global horrors of landmines from a uniquely American perspective. Herein, Corthron imagines landmines exploding in the United States, as a means of getting her domestic audiences to relate to this global problem.

And as light relief, a hitherto unknown Alabama writer named Linda Byrd Killian penned *Aaronville Dawning*, a funny and gossipy Southern gothic tale of an elderly woman from Mississippi who chats with the audience from her kitchen, about her life and local characters as she prepares food for a funeral. Droll and wise, it is like a southern version of *Having Our Say*, the splendid

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MARCH

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(Monday through Friday)

HOLIDAYS

March 19: Gudi Padwa

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## A WORD FROM THE CENTER

During the month of March we celebrate the anniversary of the birth of Thomas Lanier Williams III (March 26, 1911), better known by his pen name Tennessee Williams, a major American playwright and one of the most prominent playwrights of the twentieth century. In the years since his first play premiered, Williams' characters have become fixtures in the American consciousness. In fact, few playwrights have created so many influential characters. Williams explored stories that are uniquely American, essentially human, and thus capable of touching us and teaching us a great deal about ourselves. He follows a long line of American playwrights who have explored current social issues on stage and, as we look to the new generation of playwrights, we hope that this tradition continues.

## FAREWELL



I wanted to take a moment to bid a fond farewell to Ruth Bennett, Deputy Director of the American Center who has returned to Washington, D.C. to start her new position at State Department headquarters. We appreciate having had the opportunity to work with her and want to thank her for the support, guidance, and encouragement she provided us during her time in Mumbai. We wish her all the best.



**Kristina M. Dunne**  
Assistant Cultural Affairs Officer

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work from the last decade about the Harlem-born Delaney sisters.

Taken together, this remarkably disparate trio of works offered ample evidence that modern American theaters strive more and more for works that reflect a broad collection of voices, especially those we do not hear all that often.

Other playwrights – including the likes of Regina Taylor – were in the audience for the event. Increasingly, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival has become the venue of choice to see important southern writers – including the Alabama-born Rebecca Gilman, who has emerged in the last five years to become one of the most important new voices in American theater.

A modest and unassuming woman in her mid-thirties, Gilman came to Chicago from Trussville, Alabama. After initially collecting fistfuls of rejection letters, Gilman's big break came when a tiny Chicago-area theater company called the Circle Theatre in Forest Park produced one of her early plays, *The Glory of Living*, an unflinching exploration of child abuse, sexual deviance, and serial murder. Favorable reviews reached the ears of Susan Booth, then literary manager of Chicago's prestigious Goodman Theatre (now the artistic director of the growing Alliance Theater in Atlanta), and Gilman quickly became the Goodman's favorite daughter.

The Goodman premiered Gilman's *Spinning Into Butter*, a play about white liberal racism. Set on a fictional college campus, the play follows the reaction of white administrators to the news that an African-American freshman student has been receiving threatening and anonymous letters. In the second act, a stressed-out dean of students, Sarah Daniels, loses control in front of a colleague and unleashes a monologue in which she confesses her own racism. Since the character is hitherto empathetic –

and the racism is expressed with the language and logic usually favored by liberals – the monologue garnered both the play and production enormous attention, as well as a subsequent production at the Manhattan Theater Club.

Since then, Gilman has penned *Boy Gets Girl* (a relationship-oriented, Yuppie-populated drama) and *Blue Surge* (a piece that probes the connections between the police and the criminals whom they chase). Gilman is a provocative, important playwright and a name to watch.

## Probing Controversial Issues

The current American theater certainly does not rely entirely on new names. Writers like Tony Kushner, whose controversial *Homebody/Kabul* probed issues surrounding the creation of the balance of power in the Middle East, continue to serve as the political provocateurs of contemporary American theater.

August Wilson has almost completed his grand opus following the African-American experience in each decade of the twentieth century – his dazzling *King Hedley II* provided ample evidence in 2000 that this remarkably prolific and poetic writer is becoming more and more interested in invading the territory once reserved for the Greek tragedians. In 2003, Wilson is adding *Gem of the Ocean* to his stunning progression, leaving himself with nine decades covered and just one more to go.

And in the last couple of years, Edward Albee, a grand old man of the American theater, proved that a playwright in his seventies can still shock an audience. Albee's *The Goat*, or *Who Is Sylvia?* a domestic tragedy wherein one of the leading characters falls in love with a four-legged animal, won the Tony Award last year for the best original play on Broadway and became one of the most talked about dramas in years. The topic may sound prurient, but that's avowedly not the case. The work actually is a serious and weighty play wherein the taboo love object functions as a metaphor for any "other" in a personal (or, for that matter, political) relationship. The very word "tragedy," after all, has its origins in the term "Goat Song." In the case of the Albee play, the deep themes – which carry great metaphoric weight – make many younger writers look positively timid in comparison.

Still, several other new American playwrights have come to the fore in the last couple of years. Adam Rapp, an articulate voice of youthful anger who likes to break theatrical rules, has penned works like *Nocturne* (which probes a young man's journey through the confines of guilt) and *Finer Noble Gases*, an uber-naturalistic slice-of-life about a bunch of lonely musicians preoccupied with getting and then destroying technology.

The rather older Charles L. Mee, an astonishingly complex and gifted playwright, also ploughs a very singular path (including making all of his works available on the Internet and encouraging theater groups to mix and match material as they see fit). Much of Mee's work has been influenced by the classics – as he proved with his wildly popular *Big Love*, he's especially fond of modern versions of ancient Greek plays. And Mee's recent and poetic *Limonade Tous Les Jours*, follows a man to Paris, where a gorgeous young French cabaret singer finds him irresistible. As in all of Mee's works, there's a sense of romance, fantasy, and wisdom.

Mee has frequently collaborated with the director Anne Bogart, and together, the duo recently created *bobrauschenbergamerica*, a dazzling theatrical treatment of the vista of Bob Rauschenberg, the eminent visual artist of the 1950s. Bogart also has penned *Score*, a recent solo look at the career of the great composer Leonard Bernstein. And she has lent the superb actors who make up her SITI Company to other American playwrights – including the astounding Jefferson Mays, who will have spent most of 2002 and 2003 working on Doug Wright's *I Am My Own Wife*, a play about a German transvestite who survives the collapse of the Berlin wall.

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## Crossing Boundaries

In many ways, Bogart's work (wherein director and author often become inextricably merged) is indicative of the collapse of many of the old boundaries that used to divide the American theater. These days, those newly irrelevant divisions are eroding fast.

The writer-director Mary Zimmerman, whose gorgeous adaptation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was such a great success on Broadway, is what one might think of as a full-service artist. From her version of *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci* to her remarkable collaboration with Philip Glass on the opera *Galileo Galilei* at the Goodman Theater, Zimmerman typically has eschewed anachronism or direct political commentary, but she still has forged an unforgettable link between archetype and the nightly news.

Several times over the last couple of years, Zimmerman had gently coaxed her open-mouthed audience to a shocking place where ancient traditions crashed like powerful waves against the mean, destructive shores of modern life.

Zimmerman is a consummate storyteller. But in the main, the new generation of American theater artists tends to be less interested in traditional narratives – its video-generation playwrights grew up with an affinity for surrealist images and fast-changing visuals. Writers like the intense, San Francisco-based Denis Johnson (*Hellhound on My Trail*), the heir apparent to Sam Shepard and a chronicler of the motifs of a semi-mythic American West, often focus on the impact of images rather than cold dramatic logic.

In general, the emerging generation of writers is more intrigued these days by boundary crossings. Take, for example, the mature work of Suzan-Lori Parks, within whose Pulitzer Prize-winning *Topdog/Underdog* two African-American brothers named Lincoln and Booth share a grungy boardinghouse room. Lincoln even works as an Abe Lincoln impersonator at a penny arcade.

Is this history or a work of fiction? Is it a straightforward tale of sibling rivalry or a grand look at the echoes of the past? As she did with her equally challenging *The America Play*, Parks blends fact and fancy in the most provocative of fashions.

This self-conscious sense of theatricality – employed for both Brechtian and humorous purposes – even has infected the Broadway musical. Greg Kotis and Mark Hollmann's *Urinetown, the Musical* imagines a world where corporate ownership has run so amuck that residents have to go to privately owned toilets for relief.

The show aims to make a point about the importance of conservation and compassion. But its characters also know that they are, well, characters in a musical. And that lends the whole affair a smart, postmodern sensibility that appeals to younger audience members, even as the show pays homage to the traditions of the Broadway musical – one of the great American artistic inventions, as Mel Brooks' side-splitting live version of *The Producers* so aptly reminded us.

One can see this blending tendency in all areas of the arts – both American museum exhibits and rock concerts are becoming more overtly theatrical than was previously the case, even to the point of employing live actors and dramatic narratives. And Broadway often looks to Hollywood for inspiration and vice versa – the Hollywood version of the Broadway musical *Chicago* was named the best film of 2002 by America's Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

The play is still the thing in contemporary America, but the breadth of the modern theatrical canvas knows no boundaries.

Credits: <http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itsv/0403/ijse/jones.htm>

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## NOTES FROM THE AMERICAN LIBRARY

### A Select Webliography on American Theater

<http://www.aate.com/>

American Alliance for Theatre & Education

<http://www.americanartsalliance.org/>

American Arts Alliance

<http://www.aact.org/index.htm>

American Association of Community Theatre

<http://www.astr.org/>

American Society for Theatre Research

<http://www.americantheaterweb.com/>

American Theater Web

<http://www.athe.org/>

Association for Theatre in Higher Education

<http://www.artspresenters.org/>

Association of Performing Arts Presenters

<http://www.blacktheatrenetwork.org/>

Black Theatre Network

<http://www.dramaguild.com/>

The Dramatists Guild of America

<http://www.oneilltheatercenter.org/>

The Eugene O'Neill Theater Center

<http://www.ipl.org/div/subject/browse/ent85.00.00/>

The Internet Public Library – Theater

<http://www.kennedy-center.org/>

The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts

<http://www.livebroadway.com/>

The League of American Theatres and Producers

<http://www.lhat.org/>

League of Historic American Theatres

<http://www.loc.gov/rr/perform/new.internet.resources.html>

The Library of Congress – Internet Resources for Music, Theater and Dance

<http://www.nea.gov/resources/disciplines/musictheater/resources.html>

National Endowment for the Arts – Theater/Musical Theater Resources

<http://www.nypl.org/research/lpa/lpa.html>

The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

<http://www.nysca.org/public/guidelines/theatre/index.htm>

New York State Council on the Arts – Theatre

<http://www.tcg.org/>

Theatre Communications Group

<http://tla.library.unt.edu/>

Theatre Library Association

<http://www.usitt.org/>

United States Institute for Theatre Technology

Note: Internet sites included in this listing, other than those of the U.S. Government, should not be construed as an endorsement of the views contained therein.

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## MUMBAI MONDAYS

### A Discussion on The Federal Reserve Banking System led by Sandy Lien

**Monday, March 12**

**American Center Auditorium**

**6:00 p.m.**

The informal interactive discussion will focus on the Federal Reserve Banking system and Ms. Lien's experiences as a bank auditor. Come learn about the functions and methods of the U.S. central banking system.

**Sandy Lien** joined the State Department in May 2006. Prior to joining the Foreign Service, Sandy worked for six years at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, in the Banking Supervision and Regulation Department. She has a B.S. in Economics from Miami University, and a Master's degree in International Economics and Finance from Brandeis University. She is currently working on getting her Chartered Financial Analyst designation, and hopes to complete the program during her time here in India. Born in Hong Kong, Sandy grew up in Taiwan and immigrated with her family to the United States when she was 10 years old. Sandy speaks Mandarin and Cantonese, and soon will be learning Hindi.

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## FILMS THIS MONTH

### A TRIBUTE TO TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Friday, March 16 *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1962, color, 120 mins)

Friday, March 23 *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951, b/w, 122 mins)

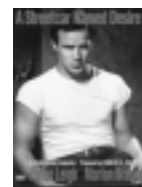
**American Center Auditorium**

**3:30 and 6:30 p.m.**



Powerful rendering of the Tennessee Williams classic which stars Paul Newman as a young wastrel returning to a hometown where he isn't wanted with fading screen star Geraldine Page in tow. Fine supporting turns from Rip Torn, Shirley Knight and Oscar-winner Ed Begley under Richard Brooks' direction.

Winner of four Oscars, Tennessee Williams' drama of lust and madness in New Orleans, stars Marlon Brando as brutish Stanley Kowalski and Vivien Leigh as his sister-in-law, neurotic Southern belle Blanche DuBois. Kim Hunter and Karl Malden costar.



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## DID YOU KNOW?

### **Humorists Are Artists Month (HAAM) – March 1-31**

To recognize the important contributions made by various types of humorists to the high art of living.

### **National Nutrition Month – March 1-31**

To educate consumers about the importance of good nutrition by providing the latest practical information on how simple it can be to eat healthfully.

### **Highway Numbers Introduced: Anniversary – March 2**

A joint board of state and federal highway officials created the first system of interstate highway numbering in the U.S. in 1925. Standardized road signs identifying the routes were also introduced. Later the system was improved with the use of odd and even numbers that distinguish between north-south and east-west respectively.

### **Time Magazine First Published: Anniversary – March 3, 1923**

The first issue of *Time* bore this date. The magazine was founded by Henry Luce and Briton Hadden.

### **Congress: Anniversary of First Meeting Under Constitution – March 4, 1789**

The first Congress met at New York, NY. A quorum was obtained in the House on April 1 and in the Senate on April 5, and the first Congress was formally organized on April 6. Electoral votes were counted, and George Washington was declared president (69 votes) and John Adams vice president (34 votes).

### **U.S. Paper Money Issued: Anniversary – March 10, 1862**

The first paper money was issued in the U.S. on this date. The denominations were \$5 (Hamilton), \$10 (Lincoln) and \$20 (Liberty). They became legal tender by Act of March 17, 1862.

Source: **Chase's 2006 Calendar of Events**

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**Admission to all American Center programs, restricted to persons over 16, will be on a first-come, first-served basis. Please bring the envelope containing this issue of the bulletin for admission (maximum two persons). The auditorium doors will open 30 minutes before the start of the program.**

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