

The New York Times

JUNE 3, 2007

By JASON ZINOMAN

THEATER: New Dramas, New Voices, Below 14th Street

SPEND enough time in small New York theaters, and you will see your share of obscene solo shows, onstage violence and confessions of incest. But after reviewing productions for the last year in the margins of Off Broadway and the wilds of Off Off Broadway, I've discovered something much more shocking: hope for the American play.

While we are hardly living in a golden age of drama, it was a pretty good season to discover new and, for lack of a better term, emerging playwrights. Not on Broadway, of course, where there were only three new plays by living American writers, only one of which received a Tony nomination: "The Little Dog Laughed," by Douglas Carter Beane, a satire of the movie business that features a subplot about a playwright working on -- what else? -- a screenplay.

New American plays have been better represented on Broadway in the past, and considering the long odds of financial success, commercial producers are understandably nervous about signing up a new playwright. But with less to lose, small companies like the SoHo Rep and New Georges have been helping to present one of the better crops of straight dramas seen below and around 14th Street in years.

It includes works by talented young writers, including Young Jean Lee ("Church") and Sheila Callaghan ("Dead City"), who have injected energy and literary style into the theater scene. Of this group, most in their 20s and 30s, three playwrights stood out with

dramas that brilliantly use language to play on a very modern brand of anxiety.

On the surface "God's Ear" by Jenny Schwartz, "The Internationalist" by Anne Washburn and "The Thugs" by Adam Bock do not have axes to grind, but they project an unease that belongs to a post-Sept. 11 world of red alerts and airport checkpoints. In general themes of American imperialism and living in fear of attack remain buried, although not too deeply.

In what might be the most fully realized play of the three, "The Internationalist," produced at the Vineyard Theater in the fall, Ms. Washburn presents a story of an American abroad through the eyes of a naïve and entitled businessman, Lowell. He has taken a work trip to an unspecified country in Eastern or Central Europe, where he doesn't speak the language. A scandal emerges in his office involving an employee stealing company money, and if this were a more conventional play, that would be the central drama. Instead it's only a sideshow to a perceptive investigation of the contradictions in how Americans see themselves and, more important, how they don't care to see others.

Mr. Bock's "Thugs," a creepy pocket drama about a room full of temps working at a sinister-seeming law firm, has much in common with "The Internationalist," including some biblical imagery and a nagging sense that something awful has happened, though just what it is is not exactly clear. Both plays portray insecurity in the workplace, but "The Thugs" is more obliquely written and allegorical.

Mr. Bock is known for his flights of fancy in plays like "Swimming in the Shallows," with its gay shark. (Playwrights Horizons has announced it will produce his new work, "The Drunken City," next spring.) In "The Thugs" he leavens the ominous tone with black humor that feels like a mix of Kafka and "The Office."

Rumors float about something terrible going on upstairs. One temp is called away dramatically. And eventually the truth slips out: "Someone's killing people. In the

building," says the office gossip Bart, before adding some banality to the evil. "Anyone want gum?"

"God's Ear," a poetic drama that ended its run Saturday at the East 13th Street Theater, has a fairly thin plot about a couple coping with the death of their son that is similar to that of the far more accessible "Rabbit Hole," the winner of the Pulitzer Prize for drama this year. "Rabbit Hole," by David Lindsay-Abaire, sticks to a sober kind of naturalism, but "God's Ear" has a jarringly artificial style that eloquently summons up the routine of a struggling marriage, if not the flesh and blood of real people. Ms. Schwartz's intentionally lifeless dialogue consists of clichés, repeated puns and overused adages that reflect the deadened emotional state of her characters.

Perhaps it's their experiments with language that make these works less accessible than your average Broadway show. While the characters in a drama like, say, "The Coast of Utopia" articulate their worldviews in dazzlingly literate dialogue and fully formed paragraphs, the people in these American dramas, which have more modest narrative ambitions, can hardly muster a complete sentence without being interrupted.

The temps in "The Thugs" mutter and grunt in a staccato rhythm, while the couple in "God's Ear" emit generalities that seem to say next to nothing. (Incidentally, Anne Kauffman, one of the finest young directors in New York, directed both plays.)

The hackneyed phrases in "God's Ear" and the stop-and-start poetry of "The Thugs" communicate a certain kind of exasperation, a feeling of being trapped. It's not just that language has broken down, it seems designed to prevent communication. But even if these two mysterious dramas require close attention, they are at least in English.

In "The Internationalist" the natives of the European country in which it's set speak a made-up language that seemingly has its own logic. It's a savvy move by Ms. Washburn, creating a sense of the fog of being lost in a foreign land and emphasizing the position of the American businessman, who doesn't really care what they're speaking. It's not

English, and that's what counts.

As his hosts try to master English, their culture clash is filled with misconstrued jokes and ambiguous meanings, which provides a constant tension; and it's in the moments of inarticulateness that a true thought is spoken, often accidentally. When Sara, a foreigner and co-worker of Lowell's who meets him at the airport, tells him that "people are always more appealing when they're unintelligible" -- a point that seems to bear itself out -- does she really mean that or has she misspoken? Lowell doesn't seem to know.

By inventing highly stylized theatrical vocabularies, these three playwrights have staked out a position for the theater that harks back to the absurdist dramas of the 1950s and '60s, while addressing very contemporary concerns.

One factor encouraging new plays has been the founding of 13P, a collective of theater artists dedicated to the idea summed up by its defiant slogan: "We don't develop plays (we do them)." Members of this troupe, founded in 2004 as a reaction to the prevailing system of nonstop workshops, include Ms. Washburn (an early version of her "Internationalist" was 13P's inaugural production in 2004), Ms. Lee, Ms. Callaghan and Sarah Ruhl. Of this group Ms. Ruhl has received the most uptown success with "The Clean House" at Lincoln Center. (Her "Eurydice" is in previews at Second Stage.)

The question now is: What will happen to these playwrights? Will they continue to refine their art or decamp for more lucrative pursuits? The real crisis in American theater is not that there aren't any new writers. It's that they so frequently fade away, heading to the big or small screen. And without the support of the commercial theater, that trend will probably continue.

Ms. Washburn, Mr. Bock and Ms. Schwartz so drastically depart from naturalism that they seem more suited to the stage. Here's hoping they keep at it. For while none of their works last season could be called the great American play, the dramas are good enough to suggest that they have the potential to write it someday.