

*American Shorts* represents a fresh approach to bringing theater to public television. Its look will be informal, like its title. Non-threatening and accessible, *American Shorts* will not be culture with a capital "C." It will not have a "this is good for you" flavor. While the content of its plays will often reflect serious issues, *American Shorts* will be viewer-friendly in approach and format.

The decision to shoot the series in high definition allows the setting to become part of the drama as never before in television. The setting creates mood with its detail and suggests meaning. HD also frees the actors and allows them to use minimal gestures to convey emotion. HD drama on TV will bring about nothing less than the emergence of a new artistic medium, one that combines the visual detail of cinema with the intimacy of television.

For KET, the decision to shoot the drama in HD was in line with its tradition of technological innovation. KET has three open-broadcast channels, one designated for digital programming, and three satellite channels for instructional programming. KET maintains the largest interactive state communications network in the country, with 1,700 downlinks to schools, libraries and other institutions. HD will help give *American Shorts* a long shelf life as an educational series for high school and college students. Each drama is followed by a brief documentary section that takes

viewers backstage to discuss the themes of the play and to meet the playwright and actors. The day is coming when students will look at television as we now know it say, "Why's it out of focus?" Everyone will say that eventually, but the kids always say it first and loudest.

*American Shorts* has three main goals. The first is to bring new and distinctively American dramatic voices to public television, to counter the colonizing influence of *Masterpiece Theater* and *Mystery!* With the fade-out of *American Playhouse*, those British imports will be the most prominent dramatic series on PBS. The second goal is to create a viable place for theater on public television. *American Playhouse*, formerly an important broadcast outlet for stage works--including "The Gin Game," eight years after it premiered at Actors Theatre of Louisville--evolved into a series of independent feature films with no theatrical connections. In recent conversations, PBS and CPB officials have impressed KET with their desire to somehow bring the richness of American theater to public television, but they have also been pessimistic that a workable formula can be found, citing a number of concerns, including low carriage for ambitious dramatic programs. *American Shorts* didn't originate as a self-conscious attempt to meet this challenge. It's a grassroots project that grew out of the partnership of Actors Theatre of Louisville and KET and

their shared excitement over making interesting theater into interesting television. As the concept has matured, though, we have come to believe that *American Shorts* has characteristics of format, tone and spirit that could help gain American theater a wide television audience.

The third goal of *American Shorts* is to reach out to viewers. The subject matter will be thoughtful, sometimes disturbing and provocative, but the dramas will unfold in familiar ways. The half-hour length of the programs, a staple of television, will insure low commitment from viewers, and the *American Shorts* concept is full of subliminal allusions to traditional TV genres. Its program length suggests the half-hour sitcom and its dramatic conciseness the classic TV sketch, a staple of the medium from *The Honeymooners* to *Saturday Night Live*. The project's anthology format and seriousness of purpose hearken back to the heyday of *Playhouse 90*. It's easy to see the programs as heightened versions of TV genres--a sitcom episode written by Arthur Miller or a crime thriller by Marsha Norman--but these allusions to genre don't add up to the potential represented by *American Shorts*. Ultimately *American Shorts* will be something new for American television.

*American Shorts* begins with the library of short plays at Actors Theatre. ATL currently has 400 of these works on its

shelves. This material, which includes plays by three Pulitzer-Prize winners, is richly diverse and represents a wonderful opportunity for a television director of Fred Barzyk's skill. These plays tend to be linear; they waste no words, no gestures; they use comedy frequently and effectively, to underscore content and to hook an audience and pull it into places where it wouldn't willingly go. The sheer number and variety of plays will insure a consistent reserve of high-quality scripts for the series. The production team can afford to be selective and will be able to combine and transform scripts in many ways. Well-known writers who have created short plays for ATL include: Arthur Miller, Athol Fugard, John Guare, Christopher Durang, Marsha Norman, John Patrick Shanley, Brian Friel, Lanford Wilson, Jane Martin, John Pielmeier and Joyce Carol Oates. ATL's interest in short works has also provided opportunities for new voices. Jane Anderson, now a busy TV and movie writer, was discovered when producers noticed her short plays at ATL's annual Humana Festival of New American Plays. Robert Schenkkan wrote his short plays "Intermission" and "Lunch Break" while acting at ATL, launching a writing career that has been honored by a Pulitzer. Other actors whose short works have premiered at ATL include Regina Taylor, who played Lily Harper in *I'll Fly Away* and Jim Beaver, now a regular on *Thunder Road*.

ATL has built up its inventory of short plays through commissions and with its National Ten-Minute Play Contest. Established a decade ago, the contest receives 2,000 short plays annually. These shorts add texture to ATL's schedule and can be produced cheaply. An early champion of the form, ATL normally premieres two dozen shorts a year, either at its fall showcase of short plays or as part of its annual Humana Festival of New American Plays in the spring. (A "ten-minute" play, that is to say a ten-page play, actually runs closer to thirteen minutes when staged.) Two collections of ATL shorts have been published, and a third is being prepared. ATL's Producing Director Jon Jory links the growing popularity of short plays to the spoken-word movement in poetry, to the rap aesthetic in music and to the "hunger for the succinct" that two generations of television-watching has helped to create.

A second component of the *American Shorts* project is the involvement of a guest director who will be selected each season to translate the ATL material into compelling television. KET will select those professionals who can best bring intensely personal visions to the plays, shifting styles and approaches to best convey the essence of each work for the largest possible audience. The national-level directors with whom KET has discussed the project feel that the ATL plays and the programs of *American Shorts* will be a good fit artistically; since theater and television are both

"talk-based" media, the transition from stage to TV will be easier to achieve than the leap from stage to cinema, in which words must co-exist with big-screen visual imagery.

*American Shorts* represents Fred Barzyk's return to drama after more than a decade as one of the mainstays of educational programming for WGBH and Annenberg/CPB (*French in Action*, *Destinos*, *The Western Tradition*, and so on). His many television dramas during the 1970s and 80s included memorable collaborations with humorist Jean Shepherd and National Book Award winner Charles Johnson. He also directed the cult sci-fi classic, *The Lathe of Heaven* (1979) that PBS returned to prime time after two decades of nagging from rabid fans. In the wild and woolly days of early public broadcasting, Barzyk became a legend for his creative use of available technology. In 1969, he created *The Medium is the Medium*, a WGBH program that introduced the work of Nam June Paik and other video artists to television. Barzyk did the first double-channel program with the comedy team Bob and Ray, *The Yin and the Yang of It* (1973) – Bob on one channel and Ray on another, and the audience told to place two televisions six feet apart to get the full effect of their exchanges. And in 1978 he directed the world's first interactive drama, *The Chicken That Ate Columbus*, for QUBE in Columbus, a program that won the ACE award for best drama. Barzyk has also won

three Emmys and three Television Critics Circle awards, as well Venice and Peabody awards.

Another major component of *American Shorts* is the inclusion of well-known actors. Jon Jory and Fred Barzyk feel strongly that the quality of the writing found in the ATL shorts will attract name actors, which in turn will help to attract a national television audience. Jory has identified the "ideal actor" for *American Shorts* as "youngish and under-40, someone who has made a name in TV, but who is still romantic about theater." *American Shorts* will enable such an actor to keep a connection with the theater with a minimum amount of work and commitment. "Successful actors can't afford to do theater because it ties them up for too long and costs them too much money," added Jory. *American Shorts* will be taped in the summer, traditionally a slow time for actors; each half-hour program will take only one week to shoot. Barzyk, ATL and KET will seek out well-known actors and will shamelessly press every artistic and emotional button to involve them in *American Shorts*. It should be noted that Holly Hunter, Kevin Bacon and Joe Morton nurtured their careers at ATL, and that Tom Cruise, George Clooney, Johnny Depp, Sean Young, Lily Tomlin, Ashley Judd, and Ned Beatty are Kentucky natives.

Another important element of *American Shorts* is the close relationship of KET and ATL, which began seriously discussing a television collaboration three years ago. Both feel that the *American Shorts* project could evolve into seasons of more than three programs, as well as into another series with longer programs featuring full-length plays from the Humana Festival. Both ATL and KET are committed to maximizing educational outreach for *American Shorts*.

The final component of *American Shorts* is economy. Financially, ATL's short-play initiative is built on a human scale, as opposed to Hollywood proportions. ATL's commissions for short plays average \$800, comparable to what literary magazines pay for short fiction. "Playwrights don't do these plays for the money," Jory told KET, "but for the fun and the creative challenge." Sets for plays that reach the stage are minimal; and production expenses are kept low. *American Shorts* will be shaped by this cost-effective spirit. Because ATL's huge inventory of short plays is readily available, the production team will not have to re-invent the wheel and spend major sums to commission scripts for the series. (A number of playwrights, including Arthur Miller, Jane Anderson, Marsha Norman and Jim Beaver, have already expressed interest in letting their work be used in the series.) *American Shorts* will be able to make its innovative contribution to the national program schedule at relatively low cost.