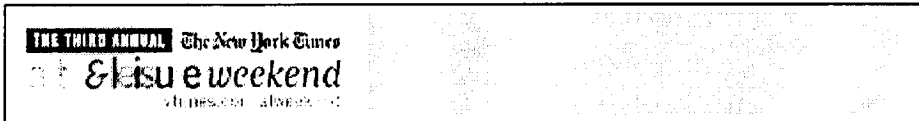


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The Spotlight at the End of the Tunnel

By CLYDE HABERMAN

THE big onstage excitement last night — excitement being a relative concept on Broadway's dead day — was a series of quickie plays that were performed at the American Airlines Theater in Times Square.

"The 24-Hour Plays on Broadway," they were called, six 10-minute works written overnight and then rehearsed and performed in the short time suggested by the title. It was a high-octane exercise by people prepared to go all out 24/7. They also enjoyed a fair amount of publicity, in part because they included boldface-worthy names like Benjamin Bratt, Bebe Neuwirth, Rosie Perez and Liev Schreiber.

As show biz razzle-dazzle goes, it was fine. But it was arguably a walk in the park compared with what another theater crew put itself through days earlier with far less fanfare.

The "24-Hour" playwrights could at least lock themselves in a quiet hotel room for a few contemplative hours. The writers in the other group were given a mere hour and a half, the time it took them to ride the 32.5-mile length of the A train from the 207th Street station in northern Manhattan to the Far Rockaway terminus in Queens.

Along the route last Thursday, their creative instincts were tested by evening rush crowds, lurching subway cars, an occasional loudmouth, a touch of motion sickness and intrusions like the break dancers who worked the train with a boom box at full blast. This group, too, gave itself about 24 hours to turn wispy concepts into solid

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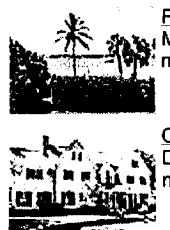
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stagecraft: three musicals and three straight plays, each 10 to 15 minutes long.

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"This is the Nascar of theater," said Lawrence Feeney, an actor and producer who thought up "the A train plays," the words squished like passengers on a No. 6 train at 8 in the morning. "Theatrical skydiving" and "theatrical mountain-climbing" are other phrases favored by members of his crew, who have produced seven series of playlets set on the A train since they got going in May 2002.

In the main, they are not nearly as well known as those in the Broadway plays. (It might be noted, however, that Mr. Feeney was seen last year by millions of HBO viewers. Not that they necessarily knew it. He was a body double for Joe Pantoliano when the Ralph Cifaretto character went to pieces in a "Sopranos" episode. It was arguably the best performance in the role of a corpse since Kevin Costner in "The Big Chill.")

What's the point of doing plays in a hurry? Think of Samuel Johnson's take on the prospect of a hanging. It concentrates the mind wonderfully, he famously said. A tight deadline can have a similar effect.

"In the theater, you're used to overreacting to things, overthinking them," said Michael Lazan, who wrote one of the musicals. "Here, you sort of blurt it out. And it often comes out better than you expect."

Reneé Flemings, another playwright, said, "It's exciting living on the edge. Look at what you can do when you're not criticizing yourself, and just going with the flow." Ron Stetson, an A train actor, agreed. "You have to kill the critic inside you," he said.

THE logistics on the A train, chosen because it is the longest subway line, were daunting.

Those writing the books for musicals set out at 207th Street knowing no details about their assignments. At the station, they had a random drawing to determine the number of characters in each play. A separate drawing decided who the actors would be.

Off they rode to Far Rockaway. They had to be finished before they arrived. The composers and lyricists, also assigned at random, then came on board. So did the writers of the straight plays. Each now had to do the job in the 90 minutes it took for the train to go back to 207th Street, where they met the directors, again randomly selected.

Then the crew rode to 59th Street, to pick up the actors before heading to the theater, the Neighborhood Playhouse, on East 54th Street. Twenty hours later, it was curtain up.

Did it qualify as great theater? The audience of 100, mostly young people, enjoyed itself to no end. Then again, no one went in expecting "Guys and Dolls."

It was a lot of fun. In a sense, though, the standouts were ordinary subway riders. Oh, they gawked briefly at a choreographer going through her dance steps. One or two asked the writers and composers what they were up to. But the stares lasted only a