

'P.J.' leads viewers on spiritual quest

By KATHRYN BERNHEIMER
Camera Film and Theater Critic

A severely disturbed young man, his hands badly burned, appears at a New York hospital. He does not who is he — although he answers to the name Paul John — nor does he know how he got there. Like Joan of Arc before him, P.J. hears voices.

Like "Equus" before it, "P.J." is about the relationship between a patient and a psychiatrist, the latter trying to unravel the mystery of the former, and having his faith in conventional medical wisdom shaken in the process. But "P.J." pushes the crisis of faith one step further, suggesting, rather strongly, that the voices P.J. hears are in fact real. How else does P.J. know all the little things he knows — such as which horse will win at the track? How else has he been able to rip a door off a burning car to rescue a little girl? How else does he work miracles? But why, if he has these powers and this divine wisdom, isn't he able to cure himself? That is the intriguing central issue in "P.J.," written

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and directed by Boulder's Mark McQuown.

El Armstrong and Bill Cramer, who — not exactly coincidentally — starred in a production of "Equus" directed by McQuown at the Nomad Playhouse several years ago, play P.J. and Dr. Hugh Shearson in the production of "P.J." now playing at the Guild Theatre in Boulder. (The play, which won the 1984 Colorado Playwrights Festival, was first produced four years ago at the Littleton Town Hall Arts Center.)

The similarity between "Equus" and "P.J." is quite obvious, but does not need to be belabored. "P.J." is quite interesting and successful in its own right, and it is clear that the playwright's primary interest lies in the spiritual rather than the psychological realm.

This production of "P.J.," however, suffers somewhat from the re-casting of Armstrong and Cramer. Although both are fine actors, and Armstrong is particularly strong,

they aren't quite right for the roles. Armstrong, who is technically excellent, doesn't have a spiritual aura. And Cramer, although able to effect the demeanor and tone of a psychiatrist, doesn't really connect with this patient.

Watching "P.J." produces a curious reaction. Although the dialogue and ideas are sound, and the acting is skilled, something just doesn't quite click. It's as though there's a gap between the acting and the writing, and McQuown — as the director — doesn't quite close it.

Carrie Danielson has a few lines that convey the same problem, but on the whole her performance as Shelly, P.J.'s ex-girlfriend, is the most satisfactory. In a way, since P.J. is so severely disturbed, there isn't really a character there. (Dramatically speaking, the play might be more effective if P.J. were "present" more of the time.) Since P.J. is essentially an unsolved mystery, the focus is thrown to Shelly and Dr. Shearson, whose conflict isn't really the thematic center of the play.

McQuown has done a fine job staging the drama, which, through the use of sound and lights, puts the audience inside P.J.'s head. As effective as the dramatic device is, it doesn't go



Photo by Lindon Lewis

Carrie Danielson and El Armstrong in 'P.J.'

far enough establishing P.J. in reality. That appears to be, at least in part, intentional. The audience must decide what to make of P.J. But it also leaves us in the dark much of the time.

The Colorado Theatre Festival and Sirius Theatre presents "P.J." by Mark McQuown at the Guild Theatre, 4840 Sterling Drive, at 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Sundays, through June 25. Tickets are \$7.50. For reservations, call 443-2866.