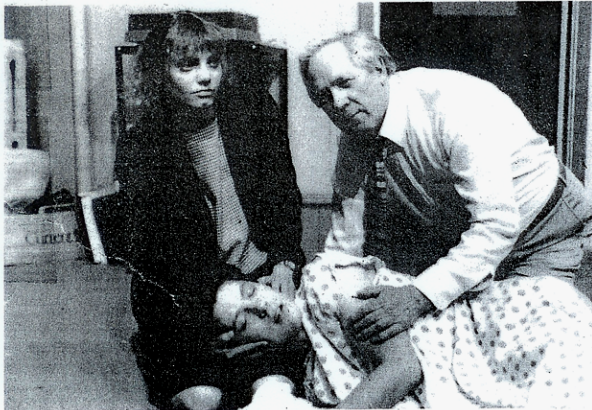


# Means & Media

## Armstrong shines in local production



Carrie Danielson, Bill Cramer and El Armstrong star in the Colorado Theatre Festival production of "P.J."

### McQuown play works on two different levels

By DIANNE ZUCKERMAN

For the Colorado Daily

A siren wails, a slide projection freezes an ambulance in mid-rush, and a red spot picks out the frozen face and haunted eyes of P.J. A patient in a psychiatric ward, he sits in a wheelchair and trance like, starts to relive the traumatic experience that brought him to this place.

So begins "P.J.," an intriguing drama written and directed by Mark McQuown. The play, first staged at a 1984 playwrights festival in Littleton, is being presented at the Guild Theatre as the inaugural production of the Colorado Theatre Festival.

On one level "P.J." depicts the conflict between faith in scientific reason, represented by psychiatrist Hugh Shearson, and spiritual faith, in the person of P.J., whose schizophrenia is linked to his belief in mysticism. But the play also is about shaking off the constraints of traditional external authority in order to realize individual inner freedom.

During much of the 20th century doctors often have been given heroic, almost demigod, status by many people. "P.J." puts a spin on that approach by instead presenting us with a patient who has performed one heroic, lifesaving act, and now seeks divinity within himself in order to achieve another miracle.

The most mesmerizing aspect of this production is El Armstrong's performance as P.J. Tormented with guilt one moment, glowing with spiritual fervor the next, Armstrong's emotional state and physical appearance both are convincing, from his schizophrenic behavior to the realistic looking burns on his hands.

Bill Cramer is warm and kindly as the psychiatrist, but I got little sense of the character as a man who believes equally strongly in the traditional Western approach to treating psychiatric illness. Ultimately, this undercuts the play's basic conflict and dilutes the tension that propels the show forward.

Carrie Danielson gives an excellent performance as Shelly, P.J.'s former lover who agrees to reopen an old wound in an effort to help Shearson break through to P.J. Danielson strikes just the right balance between anger, embarrassment and vulnerability as she reexperiences the painful details of a broken relationship.

A sub-plot in "P.J." involves Shearson's old buddy, a jive-talking medical assistant named Burt, who uses information he gleaned from P.J.'s rambles to make money betting on the horses. As played by Kirk McCrea, Burt is a lively, loose-limbed type who bops around in high-tops and a baseball cap. The character gives the play some welcome comic relief, but otherwise has limited credibility. Among other things, Burt interrupts with inane outbursts during therapy sessions, something no psychiatrist—even one who's an old friend—would tolerate.

McQuown has received good technical support from his designers, particularly Bob Shannon, who lit the production, and Armstrong, who created the sound design.

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"P.J." plays at the Guild Theatre, 4840 Sterling Drive, Boulder, Wednesdays through Sundays at 8 p.m. through June 25. Tickets \$7.50-443-2866.