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## Parts mesh in solid 'P.J.'

By Alan Stern  
Denver Post Drama Critic

After getting off to a shaky start, the Colorado Playwrights Festival is in top form with the second offering in its three-play series. Mark McQuown's "P.J." represents a triumph of

'P.J.'

★★★★

A play by Mark McQuown. Directed by Margaret Mancinelli; Lighting, Sheree Goecke; scenery, Michael Barr-Duran; costumes, Kay Mosko; sound, Suzanne Pierson. With Dennis O'Farrell, Richard Beall, John B. Bennet and Karen Erickson. Presented as part of the Colorado Playwrights Festival at Town Hall Arts Center, Littleton, through Oct. 27. Reservations, 794-ARTS.

collaboration: The provocative script, the tight direction, superb design and a top-notch cast all add up to a thrilling evening.

As a psychological detective story with spiritual overtones, "P.J." recalls such recent successes as "Equus" and "Agnes of God." Once again we're thrown in the middle of a confrontation between psychiatrist and patient. The doctor, Hugh Shearson, is a cool professional with a bad marriage and a wide streak of mundanity; the patient — who calls himself P.J. — has become

Please see P.J. on 3-C

## Tension builds into thrilling production

P.J. from 1-C

schizophrenic after witnessing an automobile accident. As Shearson works with P.J. and his former girlfriend — who reluctantly agrees to help — we discover that the young man believes he is connected to another world. Voices, he says, ordered him to lead an ascetic life. And the same "voices" have sent him to save the young girl injured in the accident.

It should be obvious that "P.J." is one of those plays about the limitations of science, and how we must open our minds to faith. And I must confess that when I hear a synopsis like this, my first reaction is to shout "hooley!" But put an Anthony Hopkins or Elizabeth Ashley in the cast, and I'm hooked.

In this respect, "P.J." doesn't hinge on one bravura performance, but on a tight, fired-up ensemble. Dennis O'Farrell is extraordinary as the disturbed patient, giving his stream-of-consciousness blatherings a fascinating conviction. The actor also presents the most physicalized performance I've seen on a Denver stage. As P.J. relives past traumas and moves from incoherence to lucidity, O'Farrell's body modulates from violent spasms to fluid undulations. The actor's movements form a text in itself that perfectly complements McQuown's script.

As P.J.'s girlfriend, Shelly, Karen Erickson matches O'Farrell's spiritual intensity with an edgy, down-to-earth sarcasm. Richard Beall provides a comic lift as a numbers-playing orderly. And in the central role of the doctor,

John Bennet is the play's conduit to the audience. At first, he provides a steady foundation of normalcy, but as the doctor loses control of his case, the audience becomes unsettled as well.

What keeps "P.J." from playing like an "Equus of God" is that McQuown's script has its own life and direction. For one thing, the doctor does *not* make self-flagellating speeches to the audience (thank God!), and the play's three skeptics — Shearson, Shelley and the orderly — keep the proceedings from getting too high-blown. McQuown also takes a refreshing, presentational approach. Unlike his Broadway predecessors, he doesn't overtly analyze and interpret: We're given the facts and are allowed to draw our own conclusions.

Under Margaret Mancinelli's perceptive direction, there isn't a lax moment in the production — the tension just builds and builds. The director brings out unexpected nuances in the characters, and she gauges the audience precisely. Mancinelli knows how far to stress a point, how much information to provide, when a flash of comic relief is needed. And she never condescends to the viewers.

Michael Barr-Duran's simple black set is transformed by Sheree Goecke's evocative lighting, and Suzanne Pierson's sound effects add to the thick atmosphere. As it happens, the virtuosity of these technicians boosts the play's credibility. While a drama about the supernatural will raise any skeptic's defenses, by the end of the evening this production has yielded true magic.



Richard Beall, John B. Bennet and Dennis O'Farrell, from left, in "P.J."