

An intricate puzzle of a play

A REVIEW

"P.J."

A premiere of a play by Mark McQuown presented by the Colorado Playwrights Festival. Produced by the Performers Guild at the Town Hall Arts Center, 2450 W. Main St., Littleton. Directed by Margaret Mancinelli; set design by Michael Barr-Duran; costumes by Kay Mosko; sound by Suzanne Pierson; technical design and lighting by Sheree Goecke. Laura Cuetara, producer/artistic director. With Richard Beall, John B. Bennet, Karen Erickson and Dennis O'Farrell. At 8 p.m. Saturday and Oct. 18 and 26. 794-2787.

By ROBIN CRUISE

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"P.J." is an intricate jigsaw puzzle of a play. Many of the pieces are rough and the whole doesn't come together neatly, but the power of playwright Mark McQuown's vision survives despite the psychological drama's jagged edges.

"P.J.," the second staged production of the Colorado Playwrights Festival series, opened Thursday at the Town Hall Arts Center in Littleton. It reveals in dark detail the story of a patient who finds himself caged in the psychiatric ward of a New York hospital.

Charles Paulson is a lost disciple. An accident has left his hands burned and, we are led to believe, his brain scrambled. In the hospital, he is called "P.J." for Paul-John. His spirit — if not his soul — has been broken, and painful bits of his past come back to him in flashbacks and inner voices: an aborted love affair, the indignities he has suffered as a stripper and the horrifying accident that pushed him over the edge.

The pieces are laid out in the office of Dr. Hugh Shearson, who tries to cut through the riddle of P.J.'s life. Together they wade deep into the morass. But the roles of patient and doctor become muddled as the medical profession's shortcomings and the healing powers of expanded consciousness are brought to light.

McQuown's script is complex and at times overblown, a web spun around parapsychology, metaphysics and brutal reality. There are echoes of Arthur Kopit's "Wings" as we are drawn into P.J.'s tangled thoughts. Sheree Goecke's lighting and Suzanne Pierson's sound design turn his terror into a macabre collage.

Under Margaret Mancinelli's direction, John B. Bennet and Dennis O'Farrell engage in a violent tug-of-war as doctor and patient. O'Farrell's P.J. is socket-eyed; his hair is cropped, and he seems lost and frail in his hospital-issue gown. The role is demanding, but Farrell sustains it, writhing in torment to the cacophony in his head and pleading for understanding. As



Dennis O'Farrell, in wheelchair, and Richard Beall are on stage in "P.J."

P.J., he careens convincingly between moments of lucidity and nightmare.

Bennet is cool and calm by comparison, the epitome of propriety in necktie and sport coat. But the doctor's orderly life veers out of control as the pieces of P.J.'s begin to come together. Bennet's movements are as constricted as O'Farrell's are wild, perhaps a reflection of the doctor's strangled soul.

The tension builds carefully in the first act, with ripples of humor as an antidote to P.J.'s pain and outrage. Karen Erickson is strong and forthright as Shelly, P.J.'s estranged lover. The levity that she and Richard Beall as Burt, a hospital orderly, bring to the production come as flashes of light in oppressive darkness.

The two help balance the weight P.J. must shoulder. But the flickers of humor are extinguished when the lights go down on Act 1, and the second act founders in heavy-handedness. Better to have ended the drama before it resorted to sledgehammer tactics.

The dialogue becomes intentionally elliptical, and doctor and patient — seated on the floor like cross-legged Buddhas — converse while holding hands. There are doses of zen, flashes of Prince and a blizzard of spiritual references as the last pieces of the puzzle are forced together.