

The Questors Theatre Archives
Questories
10th New Plays Festival

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The Dogs of Pavlov

by Gary O'Connor

Dannie Abse's play, the last to open in the Questors Tenth New Play Festival, is a work of exceptional merit, well worthy of transfer. A tragedy in feeling (one thinks of Racine, or even Henri de Montherlant), if not in actual fact—for its heroine dies no death, but has to suffer the pain of continued life—it is worked out with a precision of motive and justness of form into which all the parts fit concisely.

The plot, in barest detail, looks like a television story editor's dream. but don't be deceived. A medical research unit is experimenting in human reaction, in order to explore the criminal (Eichmann) mentality by giving the power of administering electric shocks to a volunteer victim, on the basis of how well this victim performs sums of mental arithmetic. But the doctor directing the research has chosen an actress to be the victim strapped to the electric shock machine. She simulates reactions of pain, and so stimulates the guinea-pig on the lever to face the problem of causing suffering—he has the justification of administering this under the order of medical authority.

The actress herself, adopting a red wig for the role of victim, is a protestor: she writes "Enoch is kinky" on walls, and before taking up with a young executive, had a Black Power actor boy-friend—this relationship is fed to us by means of film, capturing moments on walks, sensations of enjoyment or suffering, providing colourful interludes which reinforce the action. But the boss of her new boyfriend, a sexually ambiguous man of the world, sees the truly destructive neurotic nature of the actress, and attempts to sway his mind against her—by means of tape recordings, finally by revealing, when the young man has been asked by the girl to be one of those whose hand is on the lever, that she herself is the victim in the chair.

I won't reveal what happens because the control of the dénouement is first-rate, and needs to be experienced instead of described. A complicated situation of everyone becoming everyone else's victim is compellingly handled first and foremost for its dramatic value, but the wider implications are of prime importance. Central to the play's core is the racial issue, for the incipient Nazism in the ordinary man in the street's attitude to colour is forcibly demonstrated by presenting him in a situation not so far removed from the extermination camp, namely the experimental laboratory.

The character writing is hard and objective—the employer Gordon is a superb creation—and there are moments of hilarious comedy. The acting in Kenneth Ives' production is excellent, surpassing by far that in the other two plays, and the production itself is altogether well-handled.