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Questories
10th New Plays Festival

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Ethics of experiment

by Michael Billington

It is always encouraging to find a new play that suffers from a surfeit of themes rather than a shortage. The Dogs of Pavlov, by Dannie Abse, being presented by the Questors Theatre, Ealing, as part of their New Play Festival, also has the merit of tackling a subject that most commercial dramatists would fight shy of: namely the ethics of a certain type of modern scientific experiment.

The experiment in question involves the strapping of a female guinea pig to an electrically wired chair. She is then asked to do a series of straightforward arithmetical sums and if she fails another volunteer is asked to give her a series of increasingly powerful electric shocks. The catch is that the guinea pig is an actress, skilfully simulating pain, and that it is really the volunteer's instinctive obedience to command that is being tested.

We are twice assured that the experiment has been tried in America and in itself it naturally makes a gripping Kafkaesque piece of theatre. Mr. Abse errs, however, in trying to extract too much capital from it: it becomes the excuse for the break-up of a precarious love affair, an attack on the latent violence of ordinary citizens and an arbitrarily truncated debate on the morality of scientific practice. But for all its technical shortcomings and thematic excess, at least the play raises the kind of questions most dramatists prefer to ignore. It also gets a very fluent production by Kenneth Ives, marrying film and live action with surprising success, and relaxedly assured performances from Ann Whybrow, Peter Whelan and Sylvia Estop.