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A COMEDY ABOUT CONFORMITY

Questors Theatre: *The Workout*

From Our Dramatic Critic

One of the most expert pieces of comic writing to have come out of America for some time appeared last week in the Questors Theatre's festival of new plays. This is Albert Bermel's *The Workout*, a one-acter that gloriously redeems an evening beginning with a leadenly pretentious double-bill by William Norfolk.

In a tightly packed 40-minute dialogue Mr. Bermel rings the changes on three aspects of American conformity - salesmanship, evangelism, and physical culture. All are concerned, in one way or another, with salvation - so what more natural than to fuse them together? Mr. Bermel does so with the all-too-plausible invention of a New York spiritual gymnasium. Here a potential convert presents himself for treatment; a balding, pot-bellied commuter in gold-rimmed spectacles (beautifully played by John Howard), who is instantly swept into action by a masterful instructress in virginal tennis kit (Kay Eldridge), an aggressively antiseptic girl exuding spiritual wellbeing. After selling him a "revised" Bible (a specimen verse from Kings reads "Have you bowled anybody out recently?"), and delivered demoralizing criticisms of his physique, she gets him to strip and leads him to the "altar" where repose two 10lb weights and a dumbbell. "Take up your burdens", she says, placing a weight in each of his hands and giving him a text to speak during the exercise.

At this point the convert unmask himself as a mattress salesman who has been watching her methods with a critical eye. Hard negative salesmanship, he says, is no good: what she needs is a positive approach with an emphasis on benefits - "not just God; something bigger". At this the girl's façade collapses; admitting in tears that she has been in the job for only three weeks, she submits to his instruction and the roles are reversed.

Mr. Bermel's writing is as athletic as the subject matter. It is taut, witty, and without a single dead line, and extracts its comedy as much from physical action as from dialogue. Alan Chambers's production can be seen again tomorrow night. The play is also to be published in the summer issue of *Gambit*, a useful new international drama quarterly, the first number of which appeared last month containing the texts of Georges Schehade's *Vasco* and Dannie Abse's *Gone*.