

THEATER REVIEW

‘The Effect’ is an actor-driven play given a thought-provoking production at the Gamm

It is also a reminder that after 40 years, the Gamm Theatre in Warwick, R.I., is still one of the most dynamic theater companies in New England

By **Bob Abelman** Updated October 1, 2024, 6:00 a.m.



From left, Jeanine Kane as Dr. Lorna James, Gabrielle McCauley as Connie, and Anthony T. Goss as Tristan in “The Effect,” running at the Gamm Theatre in Warwick, R.I., through Oct. 13. CAT LAINE

WARWICK, R.I. — During the Great Depression, the Federal Theatre Project was created to produce original plays and perform them in a network of regional venues across the country. The purpose was to provide salaried opportunities for out-of-work theater professionals while

expanding access to theater for everyday Americans at a time when entertainment was sorely needed.

So-called “Living Newspaper” plays, which turned current events into theatrical productions, were among the most popular offerings. Part drama, part advocacy, part education, works like “One Third of a Nation” — which delved into the American housing crisis — and “Spirochete” — which argued for widespread public testing for syphilis — brought social, political, and economic concerns to life through innovative, thought-provoking storytelling.

Lucy Prebble’s “The Effect,” is not of that era — it premiered in London in 2012 and received an off-Broadway run in 2016 — but it is most certainly of that ilk.

The big-ticket subject addressed in this play, which is currently in production at the Gamm Theatre, is whether advances in neuroscience, psychiatry, and pharmacology bring us closer to understanding the human brain and what it means to be human. This is something that the National Institutes of Health have been exploring and the press has been reporting for decades.

“The Effect” is set in a progressive clinical drug trial where the supervising psychiatrists — an officious Dr. Lorna James (Jeanine Kane), who facilitates the day-to-day operation, and the personable Dr. Toby Sealey (Stephen Thorne), who has a vested interest in the outcome of the trial — hold differing positions about medical science’s ability to control and accurately measure our human qualities. They also have differences of opinion on the ethics associated with medically manipulating and repairing our human frailties.

The drug being tested is an experimental, fast-acting antidepressant that escalates the subject’s level of dopamine, which stimulates the neurotransmitters responsible for pleasure sensations and euphoria, among many other emotions. “It’s the Viagra of the heart,” quips Dr. Sealey.

ADVERTISING

The subjects — Connie (Gabrielle McCauley), a logical and self-confident college student interested in the study of psychology, and Tristan (Anthony T. Goss), a playful and intelligent young fellow who is participating in the trial for the cash — find themselves in an antiseptic medical facility for four weeks. There, every behavior is controlled, every action is observed, and every biological response to the drug or its placebo is monitored.

Or are they?

In addition to telling an intriguing tale about the state of psychopharmacology, the play offers no shortage of commentary on human nature (highly unpredictable) and scientific protocol (highly fallible). All this raises important questions about whether the subjects' behaviors and emotions — the sexual urges, the declarations of love, and the violent outbursts — are naturally occurring, drug induced, or experimental error. And as the dosage of the mystery medicine is increased throughout the play, so too is the audience's own level of dopamine, courtesy of Prebble's smart and clever writing, Steve Kidd's bold and always interesting direction, and the superb acting choices delivered by these four performers.

This production takes place on a barren black box stage void of set pieces, scenery, and production pyrotechnics. Set designer Patrick Lynch's vision relies on Jeff Adelberg's lighting to establish the key characters' sense of place and isolation, as well as Hunter Spoede's provision of an airy, omnipresent soundscape to create the haunting environment in which this clinical trial takes place.

The minimalization of production values and the focus on the performers' actions on stage is not the only thing that makes this a very actor-driven play. So does the playwright's provision of brilliantly written theatrical moments that spotlight the skills of each performer, which they handle beautifully. Best of all is Kane's powerful monologue, which gives voice — quite literally — to her character's depression. Kidd's direction is at its finest in the tableau staging he creates to capture the intimacy between McCauley's Connie and Goss's Tristan and, later, their heartbreaking, time-lapsed despondency.

“The psychopharmacological revolution is the defining event in medicine in my lifetime,” declares Dr. Toby Sealey early in the play. Clearly, this superb production is a defining moment in Gamm Theatre’s 40 years and confirmation of what [The Boston Globe](#) has long recognized as one of the most dynamic theater companies in New England.

THE EFFECT

Play by Lucy Prebble. Directed by Steve Kidd. At the Gamm Theatre, 1245 Jefferson Blvd., Warwick. Runs through Oct. 13. Tickets \$63-\$73, which includes fees. 401-723-4266, gammtheatre.org.

Bob Abelman is an award-winning theater critic who formerly wrote for the Austin Chronicle. Connect with him [on Facebook](#).

[Show comments](#)