OF MICE AND WOMEN*

A Ten-Minute Play

Merilee D. Karr
Portland, OR

Characters: **PROFESSOR ROBINSON**
A professional woman in her late forties.

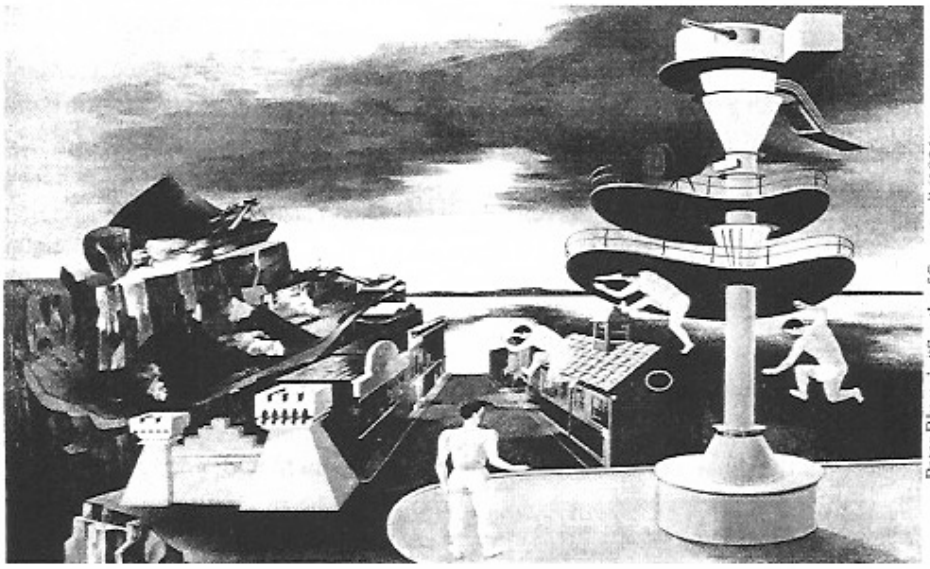
TERRI
A female college student - Bright but young

Scene: The Professor's office, at exactly 1 pm
Set: A desk with a phone, one or two chairs

Based on "MHC-dependent mate preferences in humans," by Claus Wedekind, ***Proceedings of the Royal Society*** . 1995:260(1359):245-249.

*This play was workshopped by the Northwest Playrights Guild, under the direction of Diane Englert. Rebecca Becker originated the Professor, and Acasia Wilson created Terri.

It was produced in New York by the Love Creek Festival, directed by Kathy Monahan, with Jennifer Drake and Riley Jones-Cohen; and in Los Angeles at City College, directed by Louie Piday, with Melissa Courter and Nicole Mansour.



Peter Blume's "South of Scranton" (1931)

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: She's late. Late. (Picks up phone, punches one digit.) Campus voicemail, please. (Dials, from a list, waits for connection and recording.) Hello, this is Professor Robinson, calling for Dwight Harvey to confirm your appointment at 9 am tomorrow in Biosciences Building 304. (Hangs up, checks watch.)

She's still late. Well. Well, well, well. (Dials.) Hey, Bubbles? Yeah, it's me. I might be out early this afternoon. Can you get away? Let's go out. I found a little Italian place I want to take you to. Yeah. My one o'clock research subject is a no-show. I'll kill some time, then blow this popsicle joint. Okay. Call you later. See you.

(Hangs up. Then punches one digit.) Campus voicemail, please. (Dials, from a list, waits for connection and recording.) Hello, this is Professor Robinson, calling for Jessica Harrison to confirm your appointment at 1 pm tomorrow in Bio—
(Knock at door.) —sciences 304. (She hangs up.) Come in.

(Terri enters.)

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Hello. Are you Terri?

TERRI: Yes. Sorry I'm late. It's really cold out. Am I too late?

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: No, you're not too late.

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TERRI: Good. Thanks, Professor. I'm trying to catch up on my research points. Wouldn't want to flunk Psych 101 'cuz I missed the research points.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: You did well on the midterm. And didn't you ask a question last week?

TERRI: Yes. That's me in the back row. It's a fun course, Professor Robinson. Especially your lectures. They're so interesting. I read your book. I'm thinking of being a Psych major. I was thinking of maybe applying to be your research assistant.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: I'm glad you're enjoying the course. We put a lot of work into it.

TERRI: So what do I have to do? Run a maze? Funny words on flash cards? Count colored lights? I've done those. They were fun.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: In this research project, we're testing the sense of smell, and its relationship to reproductive genetics.

TERRI: Reproductive? Ooh — How interesting.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Let me go over the Human Subjects Informed Consent Questionnaire, the HSICQ, for this experiment, so we can get started. You gave a blood sample at the beginning of the course, so we have your DNA type on file.

TERRI: Your experiment is about my sense of smell — and my DNA? I don't understand. How does DNA smell?

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: That's what we're trying to find out. Let me explain. We have your DNA on file, for comparison with the other research subjects. The subjects are 50 men and women, all undergraduates taking Psych 101 —

TERRI: Wow. That's a lot of research points.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Yes. We are going to correlate your ratings — that is, the ratings the women subjects give — to the body odors of the male research subjects, and correlate them with your genetic similarity or dissimilarity.

TERRI: Body odors?

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Yes. Of the male research subjects.

TERRI: The body odors of the male research subjects?

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Yes, that's right. Let me —

TERRI: You want me to tell you what I think about how guys smell? This is, um, interesting.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: No. Not exactly. Let's get back to the Informed Consent Questionnaire.

TERRI: I mean, this is Psychology, sure. So where are they?

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Where are —?

TERRI: The guys. Don't you want me to smell, some guys? How many? I hope I don't actually *know* any of them.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: No, you're getting a little ahead of yourself. Let me get back to explaining the research

protocol on the HSICQ. We have a surrogate for the body odor.

TERRI: Like, a surrogate mother?

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: No. A surrogate is a, a substitute. You don't have to actually smell the, men. We have given each of our male research subjects an identical white cotton T-shirt, to sleep in for 3 nights.

TERRI: Oh, I smell the T-shirts, I don't smell the men, themselves. Darn.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Right. Exactly. And I will ask you to assign ratings, on a scale of 1 to 10, in which 1 is a very unpleasant smell and 10 is a very pleasant smell.

TERRI: 1 to 10. Got it.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Good. Now I also need to know, are you on the birth control pill?

TERRI: You bet I am.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: All right, Group B. About half of our female research subjects are on oral contraceptives, the other half are not. We're going to compare these two groups of women, on and off oral contraceptives, in their preferences for genetically similar or dissimilar men. You see, in mice, females choose mates who are genetically different from them. And the more genetically different they are from each other, the more they reproduce.

TERRI: You mean, the more baby mice they have?

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Right. The more baby mice they have. So a female mouse, in a maze with several male mice, will go toward the male mouse who is most genetically different from her.

TERRI: Wow. That is amazing. And mice don't even know what's in their DNA. I mean, they never see their own blood samples.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Right. It's instinct. But, in a way, they do know what's in their DNA, because in all animals studied so far, body odor correlates with DNA markers.

TERRI: Who's the cute guy?

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Where?

TERRI: The picture on your desk.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Oh, that. That's my husband. (An affectionate glance.) Where was I?

TERRI: What's he doing?

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: What do you mean?

TERRI: With his mouth. He's all —

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PROFESSOR ROBINSON: He's blowing bubbles. You know, soap bubbles. With the — Where was I?

TERRI: Oh. Mice. Mazes. Mice guys. Mice guys finish last?

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: (Amused, but plowing ahead.) Now, a *pregnant* mouse in a maze will go toward the smell of the male mouse who is most genetically *similar* to her.

TERRI: God. Why does she *do* that?

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Why do you think?

TERRI: We have the unit on this next week, don't we? I haven't read it, but I would say it's because she wants to maximize, instinctively, the survival of her offspring. And the number of them. I mean, when she's looking for a mate, she wants someone genetically different, because he's from, like, another gene pool, and she can have the most kids with him; and when she's pregnant, she wants to be with her own family, to help her take care of them.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: I see why you did well on the exam.

TERRI: Thanks. I used to read about this stuff in high school. I think it's neat. *Clan of the Cave Bear* and stuff.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: *Clan of the Cave Bear.* Good. Well, I don't have many pregnant human research subjects, so the next best thing is to study women on the Pill, because the Pill makes your body think you're pregnant.

TERRI: Really?

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Yes. That's why you don't *get* pregnant.

TERRI: Oh. Cool.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: So, I'd like to know if women on the Pill prefer the body odors, or rather the T-shirts, of men who are genetically similar or dissimilar to them.

TERRI: I'm just thinking about the relationships you could have. Like, guys I have stuff in common with are fun to be around. Other Psych majors, for example. The computer geeks, or the ROTC guys, I don't go out with, once I find out what they're like. I mean, guys that I have nothing in common with are not fun to be around. You know? I guess you don't know, I mean you're married, it's been a long time since you were, like, out there.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Ah. Yes, it has been. Thank god. But you're right, Terri, that's what's important about this line of research. I'm reaching a little beyond what we know here, and speculating, but I said that mice who are genetically different have the most babies, right?

TERRI: Right.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Well, among both mice and humans, couples who have trouble getting pregnant, or who have repeated miscarriages, turn out to be more genetically similar to each other, than couples who have children easily. I'm afraid that if the birth control pill makes us choose mates who are genetically similar to us, that we have a genetic ecodisaster on our hands: the selective sterilization of responsible people.

TERRI: So if you meet a guy when you're on the Pill, your contraception could be, like, permanent.

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PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Yes.

TERRI: Because he'd be the wrong guy. You'd be in love with him, but he'd be the wrong guy. Except you'd still be in love with him.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Exactly.

TERRI: Wow. That's really big. You could get a Nobel Prize for this kind of research. *Could* you get a Nobel Prize for this?

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: No, I don't think so. But look at the time. This is more depth than I usually go into on the Human Subjects Informed Consent Questionnaire. You ask more questions than most of my subj — students. Sign right there that you understand the experiment. Ready?

TERRI: Ready.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Here is a box containing 3 cotton T-shirts, sealed in individual plastic bags. One at a time, take each one out of the bag, smell it, and tell me the rating you give it. Remember, 1 is the most unpleasant, and 10 is the most pleasant.

TERRI: 1 bad, 10 good. Got it. Which one do you want me to take first?

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Whichever you like. Just read me the serial number on the collar of each one, when you open it.

TERRI: Jeez, where to start? So many men, so little time. You know?

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Just pick one, Terri.

TERRI: Okay. This one. The serial number is — M-142.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Now smell it, and tell me what you think.

TERRI: Smell it. (She holds the rolled-up shirt to her nose.) What if I can't smell anything on it?

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Just try.

TERRI: Okay. It doesn't smell like anything. Well, yes, it does. You know, I don't think I can do this with you watching me.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: I'll turn away. I actually find that's a rather common reaction. (She turns away.)

TERRI: Thank you. There *is* a smell to this. I have to, kind of, listen with my nose, that's really weird. This is not a *good* smell. This is — this reminds me of a creepy guy I knew in high school. Majorly creepy guy. Well, so you *can* smell a guy on his T-shirt. Who knew? This T-shirt, I would not go out with it if it were the last man on earth. He smells like feet.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: And your rating? (Turning back to face Terri.)

TERRI: Well, he's not quite the Boston Strangler. I'll give him a 2. Of course, what do I know? I never even *met* the Boston Strangler. Wonder what he smelled like?

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Two. Okay, put that one back in the bag.

TERRI: (Holding the shirt up by the shoulder corners, to look at it for the first time. She's seen it, or one like it, before.) That's funny.

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PROFESSOR ROBINSON: What?

TERRI: Nothing. You don't see this style much anymore. Real retro.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Don't you like the style?

TERRI: No, it's not that. I thought I saw one like it — Well, this guy sure has B.O. You should tell him.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Maybe I shouldn't tell you this, but he's very genetically dissimilar to you.

TERRI: Really? So this is Mr. Right? Him? You want me to spend my life with someone who smells like feet?

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: No. Not if you don't want to. Go ahead. Choose another one.

TERRI: I don't know which one to pick. Two left. This one. Decisions, decisions. (Takes it out of the bag, begins to smell it.) It's M-703. (She looks at the professor, who turns away.) I was wrong about the last one, now I don't know whether to trust my nose.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Terri, there are no right or wrong answers. Just listen to your nose, as you put it.

TERRI: Yeah. I'm trying. I'm not getting anything right away from this one. Kind of a nice — laundry smell. Like clean sheets, you know? Nothing like the last one. Nice guy. I could imagine having a nice talk across the kitchen table in the morning with this one. With the kids asleep in the next room. Kind of a pleasant smell. Not bad.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: And your rating?

TERRI: Five. No, make that six. Seven.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: (Turning back.) I'll take the five. I think the first reaction is the most accurate.

TERRI: Oh, okay, five. He's a five. So, how genetically similar to me is he?

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: I'll tell you later. You have one more shirt.

TERRI: One more. That makes the choice easy. Serial number M-386. (Begins to smell it.) You can't watch.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Excuse me. (She turns away.)

TERRI: Now, this is somethin' else. This is, this is the real thing. This is — hints of oak, and persimmon, a robust domestic blend, with a clean finish, and, and a lingering aftertaste, in fact, an afterglow, in fact, I know this smell (she unrolls the T-shirt) I knew it, there's my lipstick, on the edge, down there, heh. Oh, and on the collar, too. I slept with this guy last night. He was really —

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: I *told* them not to do that. (Turning back to face Terri.)

TERRI: — good, boy, he was fabulous — so this is why he wouldn't take off his shirt. Everything else, everything else but his shirt. M-386, huh? He's a ten.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: They were not supposed to do anything to interfere with the scent of the shirt. Wear aftershave, have sex —

TERRI: It wasn't his idea, entirely. I had to overcome a little — resistance. It was so cute.

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PROFESSOR ROBINSON: I'm glad you had a good time. But I'll have to throw out this data point.

TERRI: Can I still have the research credit?

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Sure. Sure. You can have all the research credits you want. You might want to know that you're very genetically similar to him. You share all 7 DNA markers, identically, with him. You two couldn't have children if you were Adam and Eve.

TERRI: Hey, we're not at that stage yet, okay? But if we get to that stage, you know, someday, we can adopt. If we feel like it. There's a lot to be said for going out with — for spending your life with, someone who's a lot like you. Just to enjoy each other's company.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: There's a lot to be said for that.

TERRI: Yeah. But what about the second T-shirt? I liked him. Was he right for me? I mean, genetically?

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: The one with the nice laundry smell? I put a blank in every set as a control. No one slept in that shirt.

TERRI: I was about to make a commitment to that shirt. I could have spent my life sitting across the kitchen table from an empty T-shirt. I don't see any pictures of kids on your desk.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: No. There aren't any.

TERRI: You and that cute husband have a good time together?

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Yes. We have a very good time together. We're best friends.

TERRI: That's nice. That's really nice, Professor Robinson. You don't know how lucky you are. I hope I get that lucky.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Thank you.

TERRI: Maybe if you got back on the birth control pill, Professor Robinson, he'd smell better.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Thank you for your helpful suggestion.

TERRI: Can I go now? I think I've done enough damage — enough research, for one day. I'm sorry.

PROFESSOR ROBINSON: Don't apologize. Thank you. You've been one of my more interesting subjects. I must get my male and female research subjects from different towns from now on. I'll see you in lecture next week.

TERRI: Okay. Thanks for the — insight into your research, Professor Robinson. I really do think this is interesting. I would like to be your research assistant. G'bye. M-386, here I come.

(TERRI exits.)

(Professor Robinson looks after her, wadding up the last T-shirt, then presses it to her nose and inhales deeply.)

CURTAIN

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U.S. $3.50
Canada $5.00
Volume 45/Number 5
Volume 45/Number 6

JOURNAL OF Irreproducible Results

Official organ of the Society for Basic Irreproducible Research (ISSN 0022-2038) ®

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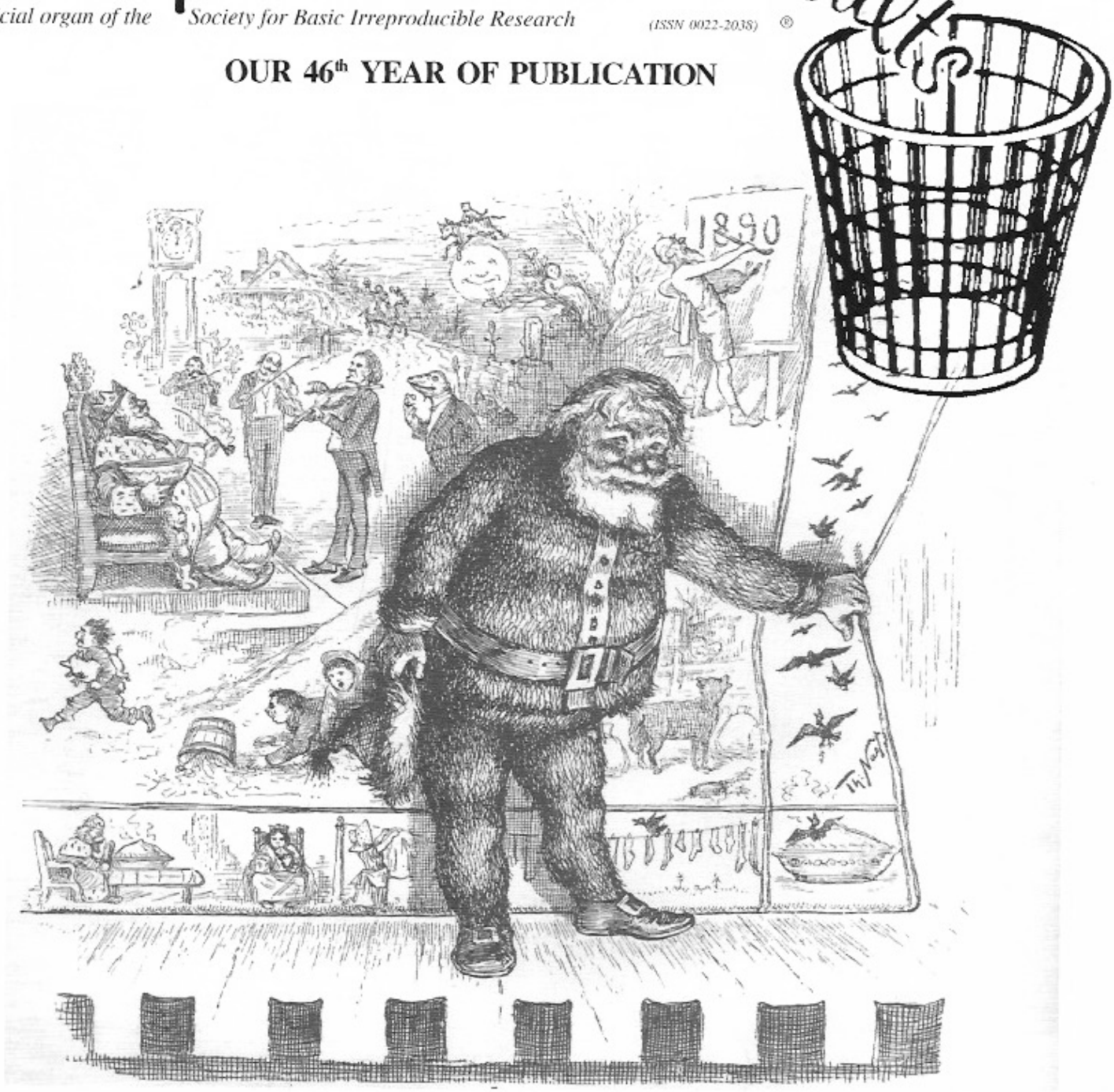

Published by
The Journal of Irreproducible Results
232 Main Street-Suite 11A
Park Forest, Illinois 60466
U.S.A.

Second-class postage paid at Chicago Heights, IL
Second-class Permit No 725710
Published Bi-monthly except for issues 5 and 6,
which are published as a combined issue.

Postmaster:
Send address changes to the Journal of
Irreproducible Results, Box 234
Chicago Heights, Illinois 60411,
Postage Guaranteed.