

**Divinity, Rhythm and Ritual
in Peter Shaffer's *Equus***

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Despite the immense popularity and the world-wide success of Peter Shaffer's *Equus* (1973)¹ and *Amadeus* (1981), his dramatic achievement, unlike that of his contemporaries, namely Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard and Alan Ayckhorn, has received relatively little critical attention. He is thus, paradoxically, one of the most critically underestimated, yet popular, living British playwrights. Since his appearance upon the scene in 1958, Shaffer has exhibited a theatrical sensitivity to dramatic dialogue that has continued with him throughout his career. Far more sensitive to rhythm and music than any of his contemporaries, his plays exhibit the musical sensitivity that manifested itself with his first full-length play to be staged in 1958, *Five Finger Exercise*. In fact, Shaffer himself compares his work to musical pieces, each constituent of which should blend harmoniously into an artistic whole:

I like plays to be like *fugues* – all the themes should come together in the end.²

His most popular and successful play to date, *Amadeus*, may properly be said to be the best British play of the century within which music performs a basic constitutive function, no less important than that of any of the actors on Shaffer's stage.

Shaffer's has always been a lone individualistic voice, hardly reducible to the dominant schools competing for supremacy of the twentieth century modernist British theatre. His early success with *Five Finger Exercise* clearly distanced him from that school of *angry young men* who dominated the British stage with their youthful revolt, artistic as well as cultural, and whose most outspoken craftsman was John Osborne, and whose model-play was the by now classic *Look Back in Anger* (1956).

His work is also distant from that school associated with such names as Ann Jellicoe and John Arden, whose work sought to attain the status of political intervention through the pursuit of radical new techniques, whether in form or in content.

Finally, the entire corpus of Shaffer's plays seemed to have been indifferent at best to the absurdist trend that became fashionable in the 60s, and can be traced to the first showing of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, which opened at the Art's

Theatre in England in 1955. That same year also witnessed the introduction of Eugene Unesco to English audiences with *The Lesson*, which was followed the following year by *The Bald-Headed Prima Donna*.

And yet, the predominant vision of life that may be characterized as bleak, and is consistently at the heart of the absurdist canon, has informed Shaffer's project and provoked a new amalgamation, at once more traditional in technique, but modernist in spirit. It was Unesco who summed up the absurdist philosophy best suited to an approach to Shaffer's theatre, by his remark in *The Physician's Panorama*:

If the theatre is to be relevant today, it has to be a witness ... of our spiritual disintegration...³

"Spiritual disintegration" is indeed the major theme of Shaffer's best three plays to date: *Amadeus*, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, and the play under study, *Equus*.

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Equus is centered on the complex dialectical interaction between its two major protagonists. Dr. Dysart, the psychiatrist/healer, is simultaneously eloquent, self-controlled, professionally successful, who betrays neurotic symptoms that show him to be spiritually starved, and in need of meaning, no less urgently than his patient, Alan. Alan, by contrast, comes across as nervous, perplexed, and accused of a heinous crime (that of gratuitously blinding six horses with a spike), the motive for which has to be gradually and meticulously explored by the psychiatrist.

The entire mental world created by Shaffer in this play was based upon an anecdote he heard about through a friend of his, who narrated it casually as they were driving through the countryside, within sight of a stable. Even though Shaffer's friend did not go into any details, yet the episode - in Shaffer's words - "was enough to arouse in me an intense fascination." (9)

Three major aspects seem to have haunted Shaffer during the writing of the play, the most prominent of which was that the perpetrator was a "highly disturbed young man" (9). The second factor was the deep shock the crime had given to a local bench of magistrates. Among the members of the bench in Shaffer's

fictional account in the play, Shaffer decided to introduce Hesther Salomon, a sympathetic member of the bench, who introduces Alan to Dysart.

Yet the third, and most challenging element of the anecdote was that the young man's action had "lacked, finally, any coherent explanation" (9). Whereas every person, and every incident in *Equus*, apart from the crime itself, is Shaffer's own invention, his theatrical achievement may be said to lie in his ability to respond creatively to the challenge that the anecdote posed to him.

I knew very strongly that I wanted to interpret it in some entirely personal way. I had to create a mental world in which the deed could be made comprehensible. (9)

The blinding of the horses was metaphorically metamorphosed by Shaffer into a symbol of modern man's spiritual bankruptcy, and the mental state of the young boy became the subject of the theatrical psycho-analytic scrutiny that necessitated the psychiatrist's clinic, conveniently attached to a mental hospital, for Shaffer's setting.

Shaffer's play took the critics and the public alike by storm when it was first staged, by its total departure from the mainstream theatre, as the one serious play of the 70s to avoid the pitfalls of the commercial and comic plays that characterized the era in England.

Shaffer's Note on his text is careful to point out that theatrical experience is never limited to the words on a page, but how the setting, the lighting, the physical action and the gestures during the entire production, are all crucial elements, none of which is less important than the literary text itself.

Shaffer's director, John Dexter, working clearly in the tradition of *Noh* drama and Bertolt Brecht's theories, worked at directing "the flow" of communal imagination of his audience into the theatrical spaces he contrives. Brecht's concept of epic theatre, with its continual smashing of a dramatic performance's fictional frame, was creatively utilized by both the playwright and his director in the 1973 production of *Equus*.

Yet, whereas the theatre of alienation, *Verfremdungs Effekt*, prevents the audience from identifying with the *dramatis persona* for political purposes, in Shaffer's 'theatre it assumes an existentialist dimension that makes of it a commentary on the spiritual decadence and imaginative bankruptcy of modern man.

Shaffer's setting is a square of wood, set on a circle of wood. The square is consciously set to resemble a boxing ring. The entire square is set on ball bearings, which allows the actors standing around it, on the circle, to turn it round smoothly. Shaffer and his director are also careful to place the entire cast on stage throughout the evening. Each of the actors gets up, performs his/her designated role, and returns to his/her position around the set. As such, all of the actors "are witnesses, assistants – and especially a chorus." (13)

The staging and design of the play are meant to embody Shaffer's obsession with worship, seen at work in *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, as well as *Amadeus*. According to Madlein MacMurrough-Kavanagh (1998),...

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manifestation of this emphasis can be detected in the staging and design of the play where choral humming suggests both eerie levels of experience and the techniques of ancient theatre, and where an arena is created wherein the audience is placed (physically and dramatically) in the position of witnessing mythic ritual (ancient and modern, or more accurately, ancient *as* modern given the alignment here between mythic ceremony and psychiatry). (95/6)

Shaffer's "arena", thus, serves multiple functions: It is a battlefield in which the two conflicting wills of the psychiatrist and his patient are intertwined in a struggle, the object of which is Alan's sanity. It is also the torture-chamber, wherein Alan's secret is to be forced out of him through the advanced methods of contemporary psychiatry. At the mythic level, it is the temple, that holy of holies, where the demons haunting Alan will be exorcised by Dysart in his ritualistic capacity as a minister. Both the exorcism of Alan, and the haunting of Dysart himself, are public spectacles, to be experienced ritualistically by an audience

mesmerised and hypnotised just like the two major protagonists by the eerie humming of the horses, those representatives of divinity ritualistically transcending our notions of the domestic animal, or the prevalent techniques of pantomime. In his delineation of the horses, Shaffer introduces actors wearing track-suits of chestnut velvet. He supplies them with tough masks made of alternating bands of silverwire and leather, and their eyes are outlined by leather blinkers. Actors put on their masks before the audience with precise timing to give "an exact and ceremonial effect" (Shaffer 15). The rhythm punctuating the play is based upon humming, "a choric effect" (16). Shaffer categorically rejects any neighing or whinnying. This *Equus* noise, with its component elements of humming, thumping, and stamping is what creates the Dionysian atmosphere necessary for any successful staging of the play.

This emphasis on the communal ritualistic nature of the performance failed both critically and at the box-office with the transformation of Shaffer's play into a film. The substitution of real horses for the masked stimulants of public imagination reduced the divine *Equus* to a stable horse, and reduced the spiritual crisis of both protagonists to symptoms of abnormality and deviance.

Dysart, in addition to playing the part of a psychiatrist, also acts as a controlling narrator, who directly addresses his audience from time to time. The tone that he adopts at the beginning of the play reflects a mind prone to suffering. His incoherence can only be alleviated through the acting out the entire text of Shaffer's play. Dysart is obsessed by the strange relationship linking his patient to a particular horse called Nugget. One image in particular haunts his imagination, that of the boy and the horse embracing "like a necking couple" (17).

I keep thinking about the *horse*! Not the boy: the horse, and what it may be trying to do. (17)

The questions that the image poses for Dysart and his echoing of these questions for an audience yet to learn in detail the story of Alan's suffering, is meant to shock and surprise the audience into

a theatrical mode of questioning Dysart's sanity and emotional state, before they have even encountered his patient.

You see, I'm lost.

...

The thing is I'm desperate. You see, I'm wearing that horse's head myself. That's the feeling. (18)

Dysart comes across here as occupying that border between mysticism and divine madness, for which ordinary language is frustratingly inadequate.

All reined up in old language and old assumptions, straining to jump clean-hoofed onto a whole new track of being I only suspect is there. (18)

Only by contextualising such language, only through giving it form, can Dysart hope to make any sense of his experience. Drama, or play-acting, Shaffer seems to suggest, can exert a cleansing therapeutic function when the banal language of day-to-day existence becomes isolated from the unconscious and from man's deepest spiritual needs.

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I'm sorry. I'm not making much sense. Let me start properly, in order. It began one Monday last month, with Hesther's visit. (18)

At this point, the lights get warmer, and the play proper is already under way.

Dysart presides uneasily as the most competent member of a clinic he shares with two "highly competent psychiatrists. ... Bennett and Thoroughgood." (19). At the outset Dysart refers to his clinic, jokingly, as "the torture-chamber". Hesther presents Dysart with the essentials of the case: a troubled young boy, seventeen years old, who had blinded six horses with a metal spike. Hesther had a hard time convincing the other members of the bench of sending the boy to the clinic for evaluation and treatment.

My bench wanted to send the boy to prison. For life, if they could manage it. It took me two hours solid arguing to get him sent to you instead. (19)

It is Hesther's belief that Dysart is far more sensitive and talented than any other psychiatrist in the area, and that if the

young patient has any chance of recovery, it is up to Dysart to provide.

The middle-aged psychiatrist, who is overworked and skeptical about the normalising function of psychiatry accepts the challenge Hesther offers him. Dysart, however, has no great expectations concerning the young man:

What did I expect of him? Very little, I promise you.

One more dented little face. One more adolescent
freak. The usual unusual. (21)

The unusual, however, in this play, possesses mythic and divine qualities that impact the troubled psychiatrist at his first encounter with Alan.

Several critical attempts have been made at locating the central conflict emanating Shaffer's drama in Nietzschean terms, derived from his classic *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). At the heart of Greek tragedy, according to the philosopher, is a fierce conflict between what he terms the Apollonian and the Dionysian spirits. Apollo, of course, in his capacity as the god of the sun, is emblematic of knowledge, illumination and truth, and one of his titles confers upon him medicinal healing qualities (applicable to Dysart in this context). Dionysius, on the other hand, is a god of license; as the god of wine and of the theatre, he represents indulgence (possibly for this reason, identified with Alan).

Yet, despite the pattern of dueling protagonists, identified by C. J. Gianakaris and Doyle W. Walls, Dysart, not unlike the playwright himself, may be seen as a complex character, a divided subject, in Lacanian terminology, who feels the impact of oppositional impulses battling within himself⁴. Dysart's dissatisfaction with his role as a psychiatrist – as he repeatedly complains to Hesther, the only sympathetic woman in his life as opposed to Margaret, his unfeeling, insensitive and spiritually barren spouse – haunts his dreams as the therapeutic sessions with Alan begin to take shape. His interest in Greek mythology, and his own alignment with the primitive, which takes the form of annual journeys to the Mediterranean and to Greece, pales by comparison with the young patient's attempt to create and worship his own gods.

As an Apollonian hero, Dysart may be said to long for a satisfactory form of worship. Such a longing, however, is blocked both morally and intellectually by a strong sense of futility and meaninglessness. What Dysart represses in psycho-analytic Freudian terms, is no less than a capacity for life instinct, in one word, passion. As such, he resembles his own creator, Peter Shaffer, who describes the tension he experiences as follows:

There is in me a continuous tension between what I suppose I could loosely call the Apollonian and the Dionysiac sides of interpreting life [...] I just feel in myself that there is a constant debate going on between the violence of instinct on the one hand and the desire in my mind for order and restraint.⁵

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The tension described above finds its dramatic expression in Dysart's need to control and restrain Alan. For his mission to succeed he has to undertake a journey into the heart of darkness; in this case Alan's unconscious. He is to employ the tools of his craft: free association, suggestion, hypnosis, as well as psychodrama, to get at the root of Alan's "divine malady". He is also required to interview Alan's parents, together and separately, as well as the stable-owner whose horses the young man had blinded. Yet, paradoxically, such a journey activates those Dionysian impulses within himself, as he wades deeper and deeper into unconscious levels, activated by the divine humming against which he seems to have no defensive mechanisms. Alan's troubled nights, whose peace is interrupted by fearful nightmares, that cause him to scream at the top of his voice, instigate corresponding nightmares that begin to haunt the healer himself. After his first encounter with Alan, Dysart takes the centre of the stage, and directly addresses the audience, with an account of his first nightmare. In the dream, Dysart sees himself as the chief-priest in Homeric Greece, wearing a golden mask, and undertaking a bizarre ritual of sacrificing an entire herd of children; with surgical skill he slices and carves them one by one. His nausea and his fear carry over into his daily life; and it is only Hesther's support and her assurance that his work is crucial

for the alleviation of Alan's pain that gives him enough resolution to see his mission through to the bitter end.

Dysart is in no doubt as to the spiritual nature of Alan's neurosis. In order to test his hypothesis, he decides to visit the Strangs – Alan's parents.

If there's any tension over religion, it should be evident on Sabbath evening! (29)

Alan, it becomes evident, is the victim of a fierce clash of wills, largely responsible for the boy's chaotic state. Frank's (the father) resentful brand of socialism, to which he tenaciously adheres, is pitched against Dora's (the mother) brand of Christianity. The bitterness each feels towards the other, and the need to absolve oneself from responsibility concerning the boy's crime, is palpably clear in their asides to the doctor. Dora speaks of her husband's attitude towards religion with derision:

He doesn't set much store by Sundays. (30)

For this reason, she takes the boy's religious and spiritual development into her own hands. Frank dismisses his wife's notions as romantic, and attributes them to those upper classes, whom he despises:

My wife has romantic ideas, if you receive my meaning.

She thinks she married beneath her. I dare say she did.

I don't understand these things myself. (33)

Frank clearly blames his wife's "excessive religious zeal" for his son's condition. His one outburst during the interview with Dysart targets and puts the blame squarely on his wife:

Bloody religion – it's our only real problem in this house, but it's insuperable; I don't mind admitting it.(34)

Frank's authoritarianism in his handling of Alan takes various forms. He prohibits the boy from watching television. He tears up the picture of Christ that fascinated the boy. He quarrels with the rider who picks up Alan on his horse, and introduces him to what becomes his divine obsession.

Torn between his father's anti-Christian zeal, and his mother's fanaticism, Alan is driven to create his own god. The picture of a horse looking over a gate was a substitute for the picture that for Alan captured the essence of religion, that picture of Christ on his way to Calvary. This reproduction of Christ was first seen by Alan in Reeds Art Shop,

and [he] fell absolutely in love with it. He insisted on buying it with his pocket money, and hanging it at the foot of his bed where he could see it last thing at night. (44)

Even Dora, despite her zeal, describes the picture as "a little extreme. The Christ was loaded down with chains, and the centurions were really laying on the stripes." (45)

The object of the boy's fascination was torn down by the non-believing father, in a fit of fury, after a quarrel with his wife, precipitating a major trauma for the young boy.

Alan went quite hysterical. He cried for days without stopping. (45)

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When the picture of a horse was given to console the inconsolable boy Alan, it was invested with all his mother's dogmatism, and eluded the wrath and ridicule of his stern father.

Shaffer economically, yet stunningly nonetheless, theatrically displays this complex process. While Dysart is casually chatting with Dora, Alan calls from his bed at the back of the stage, without looking at his mother. As Dysart laboriously puts together a mental picture of the development of the boy's complex, its actual genesis is presented through the boy's tone and voice in the background. It is his mother who first gives the horse of a fairy-tale, called Prince, a speaking voice. "*Say it! Say it! ... Use his voice!*" (30).

As she explains to Dysart how the Christian cavalry in the New World were seen by the primitive pagans to be centurian creatures, half horse and half human, Alan sits up with amazement and fascination. As she explains to Dysart how each rider with his horse was perceived to be a god, Alan reverently echoes "a god". During her recitation from the Bible, "He saith among the

trumpets, Ha, Ha." (31), Alan trumpets to the biblical rhythms of The Book of Job. The horse is transformed into *Equus*, the Divine.

Shaffer realizes that he had to supply the young patient with a case-history, in which a specific horse figures prominently in the boy's unconscious. Shaffer achieves this theatrically by having Alan recollect and act out a childhood experience, when the boy was about six years old, and involved riding a horse. As Alan begins to narrate his experience, he throws himself on the ground, downstage, at the centre of the circle. He starts scuffing with his hands, miming playing at building a sandcastle. Shaffer, then, introduces a young horseman in slow motion, emerging out of a tunnel. The horseman carries a riding crop with which he urges an invisible horse onwards. The choric hum with which the scene opens, gradually increases. The horseman is friendly enough towards the little boy, and allows him to stroke the horse. Gently, he lifts the boy onto the horse. "*The hum from the CHORUS becomes exultant. Then stops.*" (39). The humming, the boy's fascination, and the magical chanting gives the scene the semblance of a sacred religious ritual. As the horse trots around the circle, with Alan beginning to laugh joyfully, the scene suddenly changes its tone with the appearance of Frank and Dora shouting at their son and the horseman, whom they accuse of irresponsibility. Frank pulls Alan violently, causing him to fall and graze his knee. Failing to placate the parents' anxiety, and taking exception to Frank's abuse, the horseman calls Frank "a stupid fart!" (42), as he gallops away from the scene. The ridicule of the father's authority, combined with the frustration and the pain caused by his fall, have made of this experience the most important of all Alan's troubled and unhappy childhood.

Alan explains the process by which the suffering Christ became identified with the horse in the recording he was persuaded to make at Dysart's request. As Dysart switches on the recorder, Alan is shown sitting on the bed, experiencing great emotional difficulty. He rises and stands on the circle, directly behind the doctor, though never of course, looking directly at him.

When the horse first appeared, I looked up into HIS
mouth. It was huge. There was this chain in it. The

fellow pulled it, and cream dripped out. I said 'Does it hurt?'. (48)

Equus has taken upon himself, in the boy's imagination, man's guilt, and Christ-like is required to atone for the sins of humanity.

Alan similarly aspired to be the one exceptional boy, who could ride Prince, the fairy-tale horse, his mother had told him about. The boy identifies with the rider of the white horse in Revelations:

'He, that sat upon him, was called Faithful and True. His eyes were as flames of fire, and he had a name written that no man knew but himself.' (48)

Religious ritual, in the play, as well as the religious ecstasy the boy feels throughout the play – it should be remarked – is always accompanied by a sensual pleasure, though few critics have noted this connection.

There was sweat on my legs from his neck. The fellow held me tight, ... His sides were all warm, and the smell ... (48)

This experience of *jouissance* simultaneously acquired a sexual intensity of its own, while it transcended normal sexuality altogether. Sexuality, of course, as Dysart knows only too well, as a practicing psychiatrist, must have been at the heart of Alan's disturbance. He bluntly puts the question to Frank, "Mr. Strang, exactly how informed do you judge your son to be about sex?" (34). Frank quickly dismisses the question, which he finds rather embarrassing in the light of his own nocturnal voyeuristic visits to the theatre which shows pornographic films. Dora, however, informed the boy of the biological facts, but was careful to qualify these facts by her religious faith.

But I also told him what I believed. That sex is not *just* a biological matter, but spiritual as well. ... That his task was to prepare himself for the most important happening of his life. (35)

Dora connects her fear of sex with guilt and shame, and succeeded in communicating her attitude to Alan. Dora's version of Christianity (probably a form of Anglicanism), is neurotic as

well as destructive, since it is based primarily on fear and guilt. It is she who drums into the boy's unconscious, in guilt-imposing ways, "God sees you, Alan. God's got eyes everywhere." (49). It is those eyes, whose stern look tortures Alan, and drives him ultimately to blind his own gods at the stable.

Shaffer's attitude towards institutional religion, it is important to stress, is in MacMurrough-Kavanagh's words,

- unequivocally hostile. In 1965 he told a reporter: 'I resent deeply all the churches. I despise them. No church or synagogue has ever failed to misuse its power.' (82)⁶

The victim of such misuse in this particular play is Alan Strang himself.

Alan's faith, partly derived from his mother, stresses those elements of guilt and pain represented by the suffering Christ. His fascination with the semi-divine creature, mythic man riding a horse, and combining to form a single divine creature, is at the heart of his bizarre ritualistic prayers. Dysart first hears of this from Frank, who is fully convinced that his wife is to blame for the boy's disturbed state. About eighteen months before the blinding of the horses, Frank happened to hear the sound of strange chanting coming from Alan's room late at night. He could clearly discern a similarity between the boy's sing-song list, and those biblical genealogies his mother was fond of reciting for him as a child.

Like the Bible. One of those lists his mother's always reading to him ...

Those Begats. So-and-so begat, you know.
Genealogy. (50)

As the father proceeds with his narration, Alan rises and moves slowly to the centre of the stage, and he starts reciting,

And Prance begat Prankus! ... And Prankus begat!
.... (50)

The boy squarely faces the invisible photograph representing the horse with the large eyes. Slowly, he bows to the ground, raising his head and extending his hands up in glory. He screams

out reverently, "Behold – I give you *Equus*, my only begotten son!" (51). Alan then proceeds to perform his ritual of penance and contrition. He bridles himself with an invisible string, and "*in mime, begins to thrash himself, increasing the strokes in speed and viscousness.*" (51).

The scene is reminiscent of one which occurs in *Everyman*. If the theme of penance and expiation is at the heart of that medieval text, defining theatricality itself for the Western stage, Shaffer's *Equus* aligns itself with that selfsame tradition, depicting a single man desperate to atone for his sins, by whipping himself, fully conscious of the sufferings of his god for the salvation of his soul.

This selfsame ritual is enhanced once Alan starts to work for Harry Dalton, the stable-owner. It is there, at the stable, where the divine creatures of Alan's imagination finally take on a life of their own. As he faces the horses, trampling and an exultant humming rise from the chorus.

It is here that Brecht's concept of "Epic Theatre", wherein the audience is invited to observe and analyze, just as within the play *Dysart* is the observant analyst, is fully developed by Shaffer. For Brecht, this necessitated the smashing of the fictional frame, in an attempt to remind the audience that the play they are witnessing is only a performance. Shaffer's stage directions stipulate that

[The] Three actors playing horses rise from their places. Together they unhook three horse masks from the ladders to left and right, put them on with rigid timing, and walk with swaying horse-motion into the square. (55)

In putting on their masks, Shaffer presents them as taking on divinity. As they converge towards the boy standing in the middle of the stable, Alan

"is sunk into this glowing world of horse" (56).

The boy, who has been obsessed with horses since his early childhood, is overwhelmed. He should be presented in Shaffer's words as

Lost in wonder, he starts almost involuntarily to kneel on the floor in reverence. (56)

Alan's psycho-sexual/religious fantasies, are transformed into a form of worship performed late at night, once every three weeks, with a specific horse, Nugget. Alan puts the bit into his own mouth, and then transfers it into the horse's mouth, leading it across the front of the stage, to the field he designates as "his place of Ha Ha" (70). The boy then proceeds to undress completely, revealing himself fully to his god.

As he mounts the horse, the hum from the chorus accompanies his poetic chant, as he rhythmically trots, egging on his horse to take on their invisible enemies.

And *Equus* the Mighty rose against All!
His enemies scatter, his enemies fall!
TURN!
Trample them, trample them,
Trample them, trample them,
TURN! (73)

Alan's prayer is accompanied by sexual fantasies. Not fully aware of what he is doing, the boy is literally masturbating.

I'm stiff! Stiff in the wind!

...
Feel me *on* you! *On* you! *On* you!
I want to be *in* you!

...
Equus, I love you! (74)

As the rhythm increases frantically, Alan screams "HaHa" before collapsing on the ground, kissing Nugget's hoof, and whispering "Amen".

This particular scene is not only unique in modern plays, but stands out as one of the most daring and original products of the entire English theatrical tradition.

Yet the complexity of Shaffer's dramatic vision extends far beyond his manipulation of the horses, or his portrayal of a highly original and complex young man. Dysart is no objective observer, or even a straightforward healer. His relationship with Alan is dynamic as he begins to examine not only his individual role as a psychiatrist, but the role psychiatry itself plays in today's modern world. His vision of himself in the nightmare mentioned above, as

the skilful priest of normalcy, carving up little children, puts Alan's face on every child who comes up for cure. His mission as far as Alan is concerned, is to cure him of his divine vision by ridding him of his individual faith. His attitude towards his patient is highly ambivalent. In his conversation with Hesther, he expresses a yearning for the boy's passion that can only be described as envious.

All right, he's sick. He's full of misery and fear ...
that boy has known a passion more ferocious than I
have felt in any second of my life. (82)

His has been a smug existence, as free of worship, as it is full of success. His sentiments about the lack of spirituality, and the need for worship are unequivocally clear.

"Without worship you shrink" (82).

His encounter with Alan magnifies his own sense of impotence, "the lowest sperm count you could find" (82). He spends his life with a woman he hasn't kissed in six years, leafing through works of mythology, anticipating his annual three-week visits "to the womb of civilization" (82). He finds that his own experience pales when compared to that of his unhappy patient.

I sit looking at the pages of centaurs trampling the soil
of Argos – and outside my window he is trying to
become one, in a Hampshire field! (83)

In his capacity as a doctor, Dysart's assignment is to get his patient to "abreact". His definition of the term, as far as Alan is concerned, is to get the boy to

Live it all again. He won't be able to deny it after that,
because he'll have shown me. Not just told me – but
acted it out in front of me. (80)

The entire text of *Equus* may thus be seen as Dysart's own abreacting. The live audience in a theatre are thus placed in his own position, both as healers and as in dire need for a form of "worship". It is with hesitation about his own mission that he undertakes to have Alan act out his blinding of the horses.

Can you think of anything worse one can do to
anybody than take away their worship? (80)

Alan has succeeded in making explicit to Dysart that worship had been "the core of his life" (81).

In staging Alan's moment of crisis, Shaffer pursues three clashing strains that drive the boy to the brink of madness. The first and simplest of these is through his introduction to Jill – the young attractive girl, who secures him a post at the stable. Jill's flirtation with the troubled Alan pays no heed to the boy's reluctance. Her carefree attitude towards sex is in sharp contrast to the boy's inherited guilt-ridden inhibitions.

As a form of initiation, she accompanies him to watch a pornographic film, the like of which he had never seen before. At the theatre Shaffer introduces the second complicating factor – the sudden appearance of Frank, the boy's father. The boy's fear is transformed into ridicule, and even sympathy, as Frank's attitude gradually reveals a frightened embarrassed husband, furtively seeking an outlet for his frustrated sexuality, thus smashing one of the most important of Alan's childhood idols.

And Dad, he's not just Dad either. He's a man with a prick, too

17

...

I just thought about Dad, and how he was nothing special – just a poor old sod on his own.

... (96)

Poor old sod, that's what I felt – he's just like me! (97)

Frank, who until that very moment had been larger than life, the source of authority, morality and reason in the Strang household, has been finally dethroned by this revelation.

On that fateful evening, however, two other idols had to be destroyed before the psycho-analytic exorcism could be completed. Facing the naked Jill inside the barn, Alan is simultaneously sexually aroused and driven to impotence by the physical presence of the divine horses.

The horses make their divine presence resound throughout the theatre by an increasing crescendo of humming. Alan dismisses the girl aggressively. The boy's fear develops into panic and terror in anticipation of the approaching mocking god, Nugget.

As the *Equus* noise becomes more terrible, the boy becomes acutely conscious of the horse's eyes.

"Then I see his eyes. They are rolling!" (105).

The horses represent divine fury, the anger of a jealous, vindictive divinity that sees all and punishes all.

Dysart takes on and articulates the voice of deity:

The Lord thy God is a Jealous God. He sees you. He sees you forever and ever, Alan. He sees you! ... *He sees you!* (105)

At this point Alan quietly gets up and picks up an invisible spike, and slowly moves towards Nugget. In his desperation, the boy stabs out Nugget's eyes, screaming,

*Equus ... Noble Equus ... Faithful and True ...
Godslave ... Thou – God – Seest – NOTHING!* (105)

With the stabbing of Nugget's eyes, screaming fills the theatre, growing louder. As the horses appear, they are bathed in cones of light, to simulate their metamorphosis into

dreadful creatures out of a nightmare. Their eyes flare – their nostrils flare – their mouths flare. They are archetypal images – judging, punishing, pitiless. (106)

No staging, it is important to note, can bring such a scene to life without the audience imaginatively projecting some of their own unconscious fears onto the spectacle on display. With the final collapse of Alan, a sigh of relief rumbles through the audience, as it quietly watches the solitary figure of Dysart who takes up the role of the chorus, implicitly accusing the normal world itself for its lack of passion.

As a normal person, belonging to modern society, Alan in the future and after Dysart's work is completed, will occupy a designated place.

I'll give him the good Normal world where we're tethered beside them [animals] – blinking our nights away in a non-stop drench of cathode-ray over our shrivelling heads! (108)

As a chorus Dysart performs one of the most ancient functions of the theatre. He explains in no uncertain terms how modern man

has killed his capacity for worship, his capacity for pain, and his capacity for passion.

Shaffer's *Equus* dares to echo the ancient playwrights' sense of a theatrical mission in the England of the seventies. For that alone he should be recognized as a unique playwright of our time.