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The Anger in *Equus*

BARRY B. WITHAM

PETER SHAFFER'S *EQUUS* is neither great theatre nor bad psychology, but it has elements of both. It is an exhilarating play: a remarkable blend of delayed exposition and theatrical effect, of melodrama and circus, which has inspired huge ticket sales and adoring critical reviews. And it is that increasingly rare serious drama which capitalizes on lurid events while maintaining a devotion to "ideas." Yet, in spite of its wide popular acclaim, *Equus* is difficult to sort out even when all the clues have been discovered. Why does Alan make his slightly sadomasochistic leap from Jesus to horses? What specifically does the scene in the porno theatre have to do with Alan's confrontation with Jill and the horses? Is the climactic nude scene an organic part of the play's structure or simply a gratuitous bow to contemporary fashion?

These questions—and a variety of others—have been raised in the aftermath of the play's initial sensation. Sanford Gifford has criticized the drama for its faulty psychology and for its deceptive views of the patient-psychiatrist relationship.¹ And John Simon has indicted it as a trumped-up plea for a homosexual life style.² James Lee, on the other hand, has praised *Equus* for the fullness of its dramatic experience,³ and James Stacy has pointed out the strength of its religious passion, particularly in relation to Shaffer's earlier *Royal Hunt of the Sun*.⁴ What we are confronted with, then, is a major work of serious drama which continues to enthrall sophisticated (and not so sophisticated) audiences, but which leaves many viewers uneasy because they are uncertain what they are so enthusiastically applauding. Robert Bru-

stein, for instance, has written about his surprise at seeing Broadway audiences heartily endorsing sodomy.⁵ It is probable that the controversy will continue, and the purpose of this essay is to shed some light on the traditions which have given us *Equus* nearly twenty years after a similar work—*Look Back in Anger*—began changing the face of the contemporary English theatre.

The comparison is not so surprising as might be initially assumed. In its subject matter, its dramatic tradition, *Equus* is still infused with the same philosophical outlook which was so popular and controversial in 1956. And in spite of a variety of dramatic viewpoints carefully exhibited by two generations of English playwrights, we seem to be back almost where we began. Thus, being truly alive is synonymous with suffering an intensity of experience which frequently borders on the abnormal and which is repeatedly glamorized as "passion." Alison Porter in *Look Back in Anger* can only be "saved," after all—as she herself comes to realize—if she grovels and suffers. (This despite the fact that she confides to Helena that she was very happy for the first twenty years of her life.) Jimmy Porter, whose passions we are sometimes invited to admire in much the same way that we are Alan Strang's, tells his wife that there is hope for her if she "could have a child and it would die."⁶ Indeed, Jimmy accuses everyone of wanting to avoid the discomfort of being alive, and he describes the process of living as a realization that you must wade in and "mess up your nice, clean soul" (p. 115). Routine is the enemy for Jimmy Porter, and those who are not willing to take part in his crusade of suffering are forced to desert him.

The same points and counterpoints are echoed in Shaffer's drama. Dr. Dysart's bland and colorless life is endlessly exhibited and catalogued. Like Alison and her brother, Nigel, Dysart is not a participant but a spectator. He has never ridden a horse. He experiences passion only vicariously. He is married to an antiseptic dentist whom he no longer even kisses. He travels to romantic climes with his suitcases stuffed with Kao-Pectate. And because he is acutely conscious of his normality, he feels accused by Alan just as Alison is attacked by Jimmy.

Alan Strang, on the other hand, experiences passion in its extremity; a passion which Dysart not only lacks but envies. Like Jimmy Porter, Alan has made a pain which is uniquely his, and uniquely part of his being alive.

DYSART. His pain. His own. He made it. Look . . . to go through life and call it yours—your life—you first have to get your own pain. Pain that's unique to you. You can't just dip into the common bin and say, "That's enough!"⁷

Dysart's description of Alan recalls Jimmy's complaint that, "They all

want to escape from the pain of being alive" (p. 115), as well as Alison's cry, "Oh, don't try and take his suffering away from him—he'd be lost without it" (p. 63).

The pain that defines both Jimmy and Alan, of course, is always contrasted with the commonplace, the normal experiences of everyday life. Both of these plays explore, without ever resolving, the conflict between the abnormal and the ordinary events of our existence. Jimmy wants Alison to show some enthusiasm in order to experience the emotions of being alive. But it is always life by his terms, and his terms are demanding. He wants to "stand up in her tears" (p. 71). And ultimately he wins. "I was wrong," she admits. "I want to be a lost cause. I want to be corrupt and futile" (p. 118). She becomes a kind of victim-healer, because she is willing to give him his pain and reaffirm his vision of a world where "plundering" is equated with being alive.

Shaffer covers much of the same ground. Instead of Jimmy Porter, we now have the tormented Alan, whose horrible acts are translated by Dysart into a kind of enviable pain. The extremity of Alan's passions is what Dysart covets, and he is reluctant to remove Alan's pain because (like Alison) Dysart sees in the pain the source of a passionate life.

You won't gallop any more, Alan. Horses will be quite safe. You'll save your pennies every week, till you can change that scooter in for a car, and put the odd fifty P on the gee-gees, quite forgetting that they were ever anything more to you than bearers of little profits and losses. You will, however, be without pain. More or less completely without pain. (p. 124).

Dysart finally accepts his part as healer because any other alternatives are simply unacceptable. Alan's extremity—the blinding of the horses—is a shocking dramatic device, but no amount of theatrical trickery can enable Shaffer to equate barbarism with an enviable passion for life.

But what are we to make of all this? Is this stern indictment of the commonplace what is so compelling about *Equus*? Is it the core "idea" at the center of the drama? Or is it a metaphor for a more complex statement?

John Simon has examined the thematic issues in *Equus* and discovered a thinly disguised homosexual play beneath the surface of Shaffer's pseudo-psychology. Simon claims that the depiction of Dysart's wife and marriage, the sexual imagery associated with the horses, and the inability of Alan to perform with Jill are all clear indications of a viewpoint which rejects heterosexuality—the ordinary—in favor of a homosexual world view. Simon additionally points out that the marriage of Jill's parents is also painted in a bad light, and that Jill, herself, is presented as a naughty seductress tempting Alan

away from his Horse-Eden. Thus, for Simon the play abounds with dishonesty: "...toward its avowed purpose, the explication of 'a dreadful event,' by making that dreadful seem fascinating and even admirable. Dishonesty to the audiences, by trying to smuggle subliminal but virulent homosexual propaganda into them. Dishonesty toward the present state of the theatre, in which homosexuality can and has been discussed openly and maturely."⁸

This point of view is particularly interesting in light of the comparison with *Look Back in Anger*, because Osborne's play has also been analyzed in terms of its strong homosexual overtones. Indeed, psychiatric criticism of the play addressed the *ménage à trois* implications of the Porter household two decades ago. How else, some critics believed, could you account for the characters' behavior? Writing in *Modern Drama*, E. G. Bierhaus, Jr. has argued that the real lovers in the play are Jimmy and Cliff, and that while both of the women pursue Jimmy, he pursues only Cliff. "That Alison loses her baby and Cliff keeps his ulcers is symbolic: neither can give Jimmy what he needs."⁹

Uncovering homosexuality in literature, however, is often a shell game, and the degree of sleight of hand frequently vitiates the worth of the results. Once certain premises are established, almost anything is fair game. Perhaps Simon is accurate, and Bierhaus too, but there may be a more obvious answer to the apparent disdain with the ordinary which seems to infuse both *Look Back in Anger* and *Equus*.

Certainly the "angry young men" of the 1950's did not require a homosexual world view in order to see the failures of the welfare state, the outdated monarchy and the vanishing empire. Assaulting the commonplace was for Osborne and his contemporaries a thematic way of rejuvenating the English drama as well as tapping the *angst* that was so compelling in the surrealist experiments of Beckett and Ionesco. And the normal represented everything from the inequalities of the class system to the blunders at Suez. In its world view, then, *Equus* is an extension not only of *Look Back in Anger*, but also of John Arden's *Live Like Pigs*, Arnold Wesker's *Roots*, Harold Pinter's *The Lover*, and numerous other dramatic ventures which contrasted the passion of the abnormal with the drabness of the postwar English world, and which, consequently, have led to an often misplaced admiration of violence and aberration.

In the final analysis, the thematic issues in *Equus* sometimes seem muddled and confused not because the play is disguised homosexuality, but because it is part of an ongoing fascination with life as "passion," a fascination which also has its counterparts in English films and popular music. The current extremity termed "punk rock," for example, owes its lineage to the grittiness of the early Rolling

Stones just as much as *Equus* descends from *Look Back in Anger*. Iconoclasm has become institutionalized. The original "causes" are somewhat shrouded, but the rebellion goes on. Life as "passion" continues to be dramatic and highly theatrical, but after twenty years somewhat unsatisfactory as "IDEA."

Fortunately, like so many other English plays of the past two decades, *Equus* lives not by what it says but by the sparks that it ignites in its attempts to be articulate. And while Shaffer's dramatic traditions go back to *Look Back in Anger*, his theatrical tradition is closely linked to the experiments of a decade ago in the modes of Brecht and Artaud. For what is ultimately applauded in *Equus* is not its message but its packaging. Like spectators of *Marat-Sade*, audiences at Shaffer's play are frequently carried headlong into a vague kind of catharsis without a very clear knowledge of what they are experiencing or applauding. This is not, and has not been, an unusual occurrence in the contemporary theatre. It would be interesting to know, for instance, how many audience members have come away from *Marat-Sade* confused by the complex arguments of Peter Weiss's dialectic on revolution, yet enormously moved by the grotesque images in the play: the deranged inmates, the club-swinging nuns, the saliva, semen and revolutionary songs.

The "total theatre" of a decade ago was an exciting theatre. And it did play a large part in replacing a poetry of words with what Artaud called a poetry of the senses. *Marat-Sade* is the most famous of the total theatre experiments, because of the publicity surrounding its creation and its huge popular success outside the United Kingdom. But there were others of the same ilk. John Whiting's *The Devils* is a wonderfully theatrical play which rambles in its structure, avoids an obvious obligatory scene, and strains for "meaning" on a variety of levels. Ultimately, however, it works—or does not work—in terms of its theatrical effects: the possessed sisters, Jeanne's sexual obsessions, Grandier's torture. (Interestingly, Ken Russell focused on these very elements in filming Whiting's script.) In varying degrees, the same may be said of Edward Bond's *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, John Arden's *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*, Shaffer's own *Royal Hunt of the Sun*, and others.

It is from this theatrical tradition that *Equus* also draws, and it is this tradition which frequently convinces us that we are seeing and hearing something *important* because the images which bombard us are so exciting. *Equus* is an exciting play. The eerie music and equus noise are provocative and foreboding. The men as horses serve as a compelling theatrical invention which helps to intensify both the act-one curtain and the blinding sequence near the end of the play. The nude encounter between Jill and Alan is strikingly theatrical, as is the

physical setting of the drama which allows one scene to flow rapidly into the next.

But ultimately *Equus* is a schizophrenic play, because its theatrical fireworks cannot mask its muddled logic and tired philosophy. After sorting through what Shaffer has to say, it is tempting to dispense with the intellectual straining and experience the play on a more visceral level. After all, Alan *will* be better once he is cured. And Dysart, too, may yet survive his menopause and move on to a time and place where he can admire his own great gifts as much as his patients' horrifying illnesses.

NOTES

1. Sanford Gifford, "A Psychoanalyst Says No to *Equus*," *The New York Times*, 15 Dec. 1974, Sec. 2, p. 1, col. 7.
2. John Simon, "Hippodrama at the Psychodrome," *The Hudson Review*, 28 (Spring 1975), 97-106.
3. James Lee, "*Equus*, Round Three," *Exchange*, 2 (Spring 1976), 49-59.
4. James R. Stacy, "The Sun and the Horse: Peter Shaffer's Search For Worship," *Educational Theatre Journal*, 28 (October 1976), 325-337.
5. Robert Brustein quoted in John Simon, 103.
6. John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* (New York, 1971), p. 39. Subsequent references are from this edition of the play.
7. Peter Shaffer, *Equus* (New York, 1975), p. 94. Subsequent references are from this edition of the play.
8. Simon, 106.
9. E. G. Bierhaus, Jr., "No World of Its Own: *Look Back in Anger* Twenty Years Later," *Modern Drama*, 19 (March 1976), 53.