

IMPRESSIVE ACTING AND STAGING TURNS LOCAL "EQUUS" STELLAR

"EQUUS"

Nearly Naked Theatre, Little Theatre at Phoenix Theatre
Phoenix, AZ

Peter Shaffer's complex psychological thriller, "Equus," is a tough play to produce. To do it well brilliant acting and careful direction are a must. The play is talky, gets weighed down in spots with too much psychiatric banter, plus the requirement that a revelatory scene be staged with full frontal nudity provides any theater company tackling it with many challenges.



But these challenges are handled superbly by the Nearly Naked Theatre in a well acted and thoughtfully staged production now at Phoenix Theatre's Little Theatre.

Shaffer based his 1973 play on a real incident. A stable boy, Alan Strang, blinds six horses with a metal spike for no apparent reason. Martin Dysart, a middle-aged English psychiatrist, takes on this very disturbed boy. Dysart uses several less than conventional psychiatric approaches to unlock Alan's mind to discover his confused sexuality, repressed spirituality, his bent toward bestiality, and what violence means in his life.

Because of his bond with animals, Alan fails when he is seduced by Jill, another stable employee. We also learn how Alan's dysfunctional family may have aggravated Alan's strange behavior. His overprotective and uptight mother, Dora, struggles to know what to do to help her son, while his hypocritical father, Frank, doesn't know how to relate to his son.

The play leads to a climactic moment when Alan disrobes and has a physical liaison with his favorite horse, Nugget. He's ashamed and blinds the animals. It's a multi-dimensional exploration of a confused life. The play is amazingly timely as young people today seek violent ends to their uncertainty.

Director Damon Dering's staging starts slowly and methodically as Dysart begins to explore Alan and as he is pulled into Alan's web of charm. As Dysart begins to get the upper hand, the staging grows more intense leading up to the climactic scene with the horses that is staged with tugging emotion. The nudity becomes integral to the scene and sensationalism never is apparent as the boy and the horse communicate.

Later, during Alan's failed sexual liaison with Jill, another nude scene grows naturally out of the relationship's intensity. By the play's end, Alan seems destined to conquer his confusion thanks to Dysart's helpful counseling.

The play would never have the emotional power it requires without the fine cast Dering has assembled. At the center are Charles Sohn's reasoned but occasionally emotional Dysart and Daniel Sykes' stunning performance as Alan. Sykes is confident of his control initially as he manipulates Dysart's explorations with an innocent charisma. As the truth about his actions is revealed, Sykes shifts to intense passion that makes his Alan moving. It's an amazing performance for this actor who just turned 18.

As Hesther, Dysart's confidant, Rebecca A. Siegel provides Dysart with rationality when he threatens to abandon his new patient. Laura Durant is appropriately confused by the

complexity of her son's mental ailment. Durant acts from the heart, just the way this well-meaning but troubled and extremely edgy woman reacts to life's complexities. Joe Kremer's Frank is a man afraid of emotion. Christopher Mascarelli as Nugget conveys the animal's thoughts with quiet physical brilliance. If the production has a failing it is the faltering British accents which rarely sound natural and aren't well sustained throughout the performance.

"Equus" is an important and probing play that is delivered with impeccable theatrical panache by Nearly Naked Theatre. This is a troupe to watch. "Equus" plays through November 30. For tickets, call the Nearly Naked Theatre box office at 602-274-2432. Grade: A