

# Cast, direction blend perfectly for transcendent 'Equus'

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Something extraordinary happened in a Valley theater Saturday.

After the cast of *Equus* completed its curtain calls and retired backstage, the audience at the Little Theatre at Phoenix Theatre continued clapping. Even after the actors failed to return, the theatergoers applauded the empty stage.

They knew what they had seen, they may never see it again.

## 'Equus'

Reviewed Saturday at Little Theatre at Phoenix Theatre, 100 E. McDowell Road. Nearly Naked Theatre Company production continues through Nov. 30. \$12-\$14. Details: (480) 274-2432.

The combination of cathartic words, superb acting, brilliant direction and innovative design produced an experience that approached perfection - a moment for which no other word but "transcendent" applies.

To explain more than the bare bones of Peter Shaffer's plot would deny future audiences the chance of this impact. Martin Dysart (Charles Sohn), a psychiatrist, is persuaded to take the case of Alan Strang (Daniel Sykes), a 17-year-old stablehand who has blinded six horses.

The assignment couldn't come at a worse time for Dysart. He's gripped by a spiritual and moral crisis fully as terrible as that suffered by the youth.

As Dysart investigates Alan's family - an atheist father (Joe Kremer) in conflict with a fiercely Christian mother (Laura Durant) - and uncovers a tragic affair with a girl (Heather Massie), he discovers the truth behind the boy's horrific act.

The psychiatrist comes to realize that, like the boy's mother, he worships an old and dogmatic god (in his case, his profession) - one that cannot compete with the terrifying and seductive deity Alan has created in his mind and whom the teenager worships to the point of madness.

To save the boy's sanity, Dysart must destroy this new god. He must take away the very thing that makes Alan a unique human being and replace it with - what?

Sohn, a regular with Peoria's Algonquin Theater Company, gives the finest performance of his long career. Despite the part's enormity (he is never offstage) and Shaffer's overwhelming torrent of words, the actor doesn't falter. His compassion is never in doubt, his spiritual conflict never far from the surface.

If Sohn is good, Sykes is his equal, though he's only 18 and making his professional debut at a Valley theater. A graduate of the programs at Valley Youth Theatre and Childsplay, Sykes' portrayal of the tormented Alan is so delicately shaded, so potently realized, that it borders on the impossible for one so young. This is a major career in the making, and Phoenix is fortunate to see it at the start.

The rest of the actors (Kremer, Durant, Massie, Rebecca Siegel as a magistrate, Kara Eldridge as a nurse, Rick Shipman as a stable owner) are uniformly excellent - though special mention should be made of Christopher Mascarelli's Nugget. Although he portrays a horse, the actor creates a believable, ultimately frightening creature that is crucial to the tale.

Gregory Jaye's symbolic setting of cloth panels and wooden slats is transformed by Nykol De Dreu's atmospheric lighting into a stable, Dysart's office, Alan's home and a hospital. Bryan Schlegel's sound design is at its most dynamic when Alan blinds the horses.

It is all melded brilliantly by Damon Dering, Nearly Naked Theatre Company's founder and artistic director. He has shown promise in previous productions, but *Equus* marks his arrival as a defining force in Valley theater.

It's unlikely that everyone will agree with Shaffer's scathing attack on conformity, religious dogmatism and the medical profession. Others will be disturbed by the actors' frontal nudity and the seething, palpable sexual tension that underlies every moment of the play.

Yet nothing about *Equus* is gratuitous. If Shaffer offers few answers, he asks profoundly terrible questions. Audiences will find it an unforgettable evening.

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