

Nearly Naked excels in "Equus"

By MAX McQUEEN

Get Out

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With "Equus," Nearly Naked Theatre almost fully realizes its mission of "producing the Valley's most provocative and thought-provoking theater." It's about time.

When Damon Dering founded Nearly Naked in 2000, the actor/director/producer clearly wanted to fill the gap left by Planet Earth Theatre's sudden closure.

Unfortunately, Dering seemed so focused on his new theater's mission that he selected plays that served an agenda, not audiences. The dearth of patrons suggested perhaps there was not much interest in obscure works such as Michel Bouchard's "Lilies" or even "Salome's Last Dance," a play about Oscar Wilde's scandalous "Salome."

With last year's "Torch Song Trilogy" and this fall's "The Shape of Things," we saw signs that Dering and his colleagues were starting to serve the plays instead of the dictates of a mission statement that's subjective at best, and presumptuous at worst. In so doing, Nearly Naked spun a masterful production of "The Shape of Things." "Equus" bests that "Pygmalion" take on modern romance with a compelling revival of Peter Shaffer's 1975 Tony winner for best play.

Without its frank, full-frontal nudity, "Equus" would be easy for most theaters to reject. Shaffer's unsettling drama could not be construed as a nice night out on the town, not with a plot pegged on a devout stable boy who blinds a barn full of horses. And that's just the start. The lad then becomes a flesh-and-blood rope in a tug of war between his parents, the courts and a psychiatrist who's having his own crisis of faith.

The success of "Equus" rides on the shoulders of Dr. Dysart, a middle-aged psychiatrist in a comfortable, unchallenging practice.

Actually, the play's psychological journey is more his than the boy's. Dering has the perfect actor for this tough role in Charles Sohn. He gives a well-rounded portrait of a man of science trying to find explanations for behavior beyond reason. He's deliberate. He avoids clichés. Most important, he humanizes a play void of any truly likable characters.

As the British lad obsessed with horses, Dan Sykes is the walking tabula rasa required of the role. At least for Act One, anyway. Ever so slowly, the boy's blank-slate personality gains depth through hypnosis-induced flashbacks, emotional outbursts and a cautious romance with a fellow horse lover (languorous Heather Massie). Sykes engages all of the above with a natural mix of youthful curiosity and hesitancy.

Dering gets uneven support from his secondary players. For instance, Rebecca Siegel comes across as genuine as a magistrate deeply concerned about the boy's well-being. On the other hand, Laura Durant seems at arm's length from her side, yet pivotal, role as the troubled boy's mom. It's as if she's divorced from her character's tirades. Joe Kremer is equally disjointed as the boy's taciturn dad.

Dering's crew makes excellent use of the cramped quarters at Phoenix Theatre's Little Theater. Designer Greg Jaye turns the stage's back wall into a bank of stables, usually holding six men and women acting as the horses of the play's title. Whether empty or filled with equine figures, the stables are an ever-present reminder that horses are never far from the boy's disturbed mind.

Nykol de Dreu's lighting streams across the set in crisscross patterns, effectively suggesting a cathedral's ethereal light. This attention to detail is telling and illumines Dering's attention to the play's otherworldly undertone, not just its highly charged drama. For at its heart, "Equus" is about that place where the spirit, flesh and mind intersect. It's a crossroads that has baffled humans since time began. "Equus" doesn't provide clear directions. But at least it asks the right questions.

"Equus," by Peter Shaffer

Who: Nearly Naked Theatre

When: 8 p.m. Wednesday, Friday and Saturday

Where: The Little Theater at Phoenix Theatre, 100 E. McDowell Road

How much: \$12-\$14 Info: (602) 274-2432

Grade: B+