

The Homoeroticism Behind the Ha Ha

Nearly Naked Theatre's *Equus* at Phoenix Theater's Little Theatre (For a map to location, click [this link](#))

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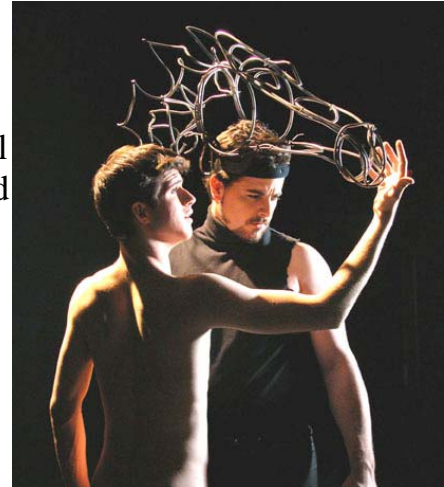
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Reviewed 11/8/02

Nearly no one does the brilliant, disturbing *Equus* anymore, and that's a shame. That's why it's perfect for Director **Damon Dering** and the alternative **Nearly Naked Theatre**. Mr. Dering's long awaited dream production of *Equus* commands the stage with not a single recognizable cut to **Peter Shaffer's** extensive exploration of passion, realizing a homoerotic vision that seethes beneath the text, making something new out of something nearly three decades old. In doing so, the production that he offers is an awakening, a reinvention of an ancient tale that has the power and the majesty of a noble steed slicing through new fields. What he is able to draw from his cast and designers is proof that passionate theatre is best when it's a collaborative effort. The overwhelming orgy of vision and thought choreographed by Mr. Dering is made complete by every member's uninhibited contributions.

The tale, set in a provincial children's psychiatric hospital in England, centers of the unraveling of a psychiatrist, Dr. Martin Dysart, as he treats teenaged Alan Strang, accused of blinding six horses with a metal spike at the stable for which he works. Already besieged by doubts about his profession and its dubious results, his journey into the motivations of this horrific act shed flickering torchlight onto the demons of normalcy. Dysart comes to see the influences of religion, politics, familial relations, and sexual repression that have given rise to Alan's "abnormal" passion. These take the form of his worship of a horse god and the rite of Ha Ha.

Dysart begins to crack under revelations best kept from practitioners of the psychiatric arts.



While the play was originally performed with long sequences of nudity, and a healthy dose of sexuality infused into the production, subsequent retellings have sewn it back up with their own levels of repression. Underwear and cut sequences have emasculated the revelations. Not so with Mr. Dering's production, which revels in its nudity, and expounds on the horses' place in the script. His costume design for the horses moves in directions of homosexuality and BDSM, widening focus on already implied intentions. What he offers does not feel manipulated or grafted on, but well

reasoned and relevant. His direction is precise, allowing for a seemingly spontaneous fluidity, yet is obviously choreographed like a dance. The pacing feels as carefully timed and measured as an aria.

While the opening struggles with Shaffer's extensive-though-necessary exposition, once the battle lines are drawn between Dysart, Alan and his dark overlord, and the story unwinds back in time to the origins of the act with the first incredible, starkly magical presentation of the horses, the play becomes riveting. It is on the backs of two strong performers, **Charles Sohn** and **Daniel Sykes**, that the play hits its stride. Mr. Sohn, always a treat, captures Dysart's clipped exterior and his roiling doubts beneath with masterful understanding. In a role that could be prone to overpresentation, he reigns the tirades and rides the character arc gracefully. Mr. Sykes is quite a find. He not only plays the dour side of Alan with just enough of a twisted lip of mockery, he enthusiastically embraces the wanton abandon of his character's worship. This role asks you to give everything you've got, and is treacherous to those who withhold even a small part: Mr. Sykes reaches the heights and we are the beneficiaries for it.

No small measure of the success of this show rests on the actors playing Nugget and the other horses. **Christopher Mascarelli** has gone beyond an imitation of horsey movements, creating a Centaur of equal equine and human proportions. His is a jealous lover with a horse's head and fluid movement, choreographed to excellent effect by **Kim Parmon**. So it is with the remainder of the horse chorus (**Sarah Chapman, Brian Eaggleston, Kara Eldridge, Nicholas Goehner** and **Matthew Harris**), who were still finding their matching rhythms on opening night, but presented a haunting quintet of leather-clad specters.

As Alan's family, **Joe Kremer** and **Laura Durant** are not quite as strong as the leads and chorus. Mr. Kremer captures Alan's uptight father Frank and his rigid ways well, but perhaps for textual reasons, never quite resounds in the role. Ms. Durant initially seems to play more at Dora's fluttery, jumpy ways, although she absolutely aces the character's all-important monologue in the second act with a brilliant mix of self-delusion and self-flagellation. As the lone non-matronly feminine presence in Alan's life, **Heather Massie** is a chipper and bubbly Jill. Amongst the dourness of the other characters and situations, Jill alone represents socially acceptable vibrancy and sexuality, and Ms. Massie glows in the role. **Rebecca Siegel** is wonderful as Magistrate Hesther, playfully and intellectually flirting with the poor, lost Dysart. While **Rick Shipman** is good as the curt stable-owning Harry, it is as the energetically pacing porn theatre patron that he shines, utilizing only his hilarious physicality.

The design element is every bit the equal of the impressive cast. **Gregory Jaye's** set excellently evokes a stark stable while still allowing for the confines of Dysart's

cluttered office and other locales. **Nykol De Dreu's** lighting is simply brilliant considering her dependence on 36 dimmers in the small space. She expresses the drabness of normal life while brilliantly coloring the passion of the world of the gods. **Bryan Schlegel's** sound design is of professional quality, although I question his one choice for the crucial sounds of the blinding of the horses. Kudos are in order for **Jay Templeton's** horse mask design.

The strength of the last four productions of Nearly Naked Theatre has me reeling. I never believed that stuffy, artistically conservative Phoenix could actually support a company of this challenging type. The sold-out opening night crowd, which included host Phoenix Theatre's Artistic Director Michael Barnard, has surprised me. It's heartening to know that such quality and vision has the chance to flourish in what I thought to be hostile climes.

Production Details:

Equus by **Peter Shaffer**

Nearly Naked Theatre

The Phoenix Theatre Little Theatre (For a map to location, click [this link](#))

(602) 274-2432

November 8th - 30th, 2002