

# ALLEY THEATRE



# EQUUS

**A TEACHER'S GUIDE**

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# Audience Etiquette

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For many of your students, a visit to the Alley may be their first theatre experience. It may be helpful to discuss what they can expect or to have other students relay their own experiences about theatre productions they have seen. Another important point to review is the difference between live theatre and watching a movie or television.

## *Noise*

Live theatre means live actors who can hear not only what is happening on the stage, but in the audience as well. While laughter and applause at appropriate times are appreciated by the actors, excessive noise and talking is not. Any sort of distracting noise—humming, sighing, chewing gum, or carrying electronic devices—is discouraged. Cell phones, chiming watches and pagers must be turned off during the performance .

## *Applause*

Applause is used to acknowledge the performers and to voice appreciation or approval. Traditionally, applause comes before intermission and at the performance's conclusion. These intervals are usually signaled by dimming the lights on stage and bringing up the house lights. A curtain call in which the cast returns to the stage for bows usually follows a performance. Applause is not expected every time the lights are dimmed or between scenes.

## *Cameras*

The use of recording equipment of any kind is not permitted in the auditorium before, during or after the performance. Furthermore, the Alley reserves the right to confiscate any laser pointers seen inside the auditorium. Visiting the theatre should be an entertaining activity, but it is also one, which requires consideration for fellow audience members as well as the actors on-stage. Unnecessary noise disturbs everyone. Knowing what is expected of you as a member of the audience can make the theatre experience more enjoyable for all involved. The approximate running time of **EQUUS** is 1 hour 15 minutes. There will be one intermission.

# Synopsis

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Martin Dysart, a child psychiatrist in England, fantasizes about going to Greece and living a passionate life. When a disturbed teenager, Alan Strang, who has blinded six horses with a hoof pick is brought to him for therapy, Dysart both solves the mystery of the crime and learns about fervent passion and worship from the boy. Dysart works to "normalize" the boy but struggles over the compromise between 'normalcy' and worship and (sexual) vitality - both of which are missing in the doctor's own personal life. His reasoned, studied psychiatric techniques are countered by the Alan's ecstatic and irrational state of mind. As Dysart begins to unravel the boy's erratic behavior, he finds that his own rational beliefs have begun unraveling as well.

Dysart helps Alan work through his obsession, in which he identifies his horse-god Equus with the Christian Trinity, but his envy of Alan's passion forces him to consider the cost of socialization. He remarks, "when Equus leaves - if he leaves at all - it will be with your intestines in his teeth . . . I'll give him [Alan] the good Normal world . . . and give him Normal places for his ecstasy . . . Passion, you see, can be destroyed by a doctor. It cannot be created."

## Biographical Information

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### Peter Shaffer

Peter Shaffer and his twin brother Anthony were born on May 15, 1926, in Liverpool, England, where Shaffer later attended prep school. In 1936 his family moved to London, where Shaffer attended Hall School and St. Paul's School. From 1944 to 1947, Shaffer worked in a coalmine, having been conscripted as one of the "Bevin Boys," essential workers in service to the country, organized by Ernest Bevin, Churchill's Minister of Labour. Shaffer found coal mining an arduous occupation that, he states, gave him great sympathy for the way many people are forced to spend their lives.

Shaffer then attended Trinity College in Cambridge, where he and Anthony co-edited the student magazine *Grantha*; he received a B.A. in History in 1950. During the following year, Shaffer, under the pseudonym Peter Antony, penned *The Woman in the Wardrobe*, the first of his three detective novels. He co-authored the second and third - *How Doth the Little Crocodile?* (1952) and *Withered Murder* (1955) - with Anthony, who went on to write the enormously successful mystery *Sleuth*. It is interesting to note that

Peter Shaffer's reverence for the structure and characters of the detective novel is apparent in many of plays, *Equus* included.

In 1955, Shaffer wrote the television play *The Salt Land*; the following year, he quit Boosey and Hawkes and decided to "live now on [his] literary wits." From 1956 to 1957, Shaffer worked as a literary critic for the weekly review *Truth*; his *Balance of Terror* appeared on television, and *The Prodigal Father* was broadcast on the radio. 1958 marked the production of Shaffer's first stage play, *Five Finger Exercise*, directed by John Gielgud in very successful runs in both London and New York City; the play won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for the best foreign play of the 1959-60 season.

From 1961 to 1962 Shaffer incorporated his love for music (which, not incidentally, surfaces in such plays as *Five Finger Exercise* and *Amadeus*) into a stint as music critic for London's *Time and Tide*. In 1962, a double-bill of Shaffer's high comedies *The Private Ear* and *The Public Eye* was staged in London. A year later, he wrote a screenplay for William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* with British director Peter Brook. *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* premiered in 1964 and soon moved to London's National Theatre; Sir Laurence Olivier then commissioned *Black Comedy* for the National Theatre's 1965 repertoire. At this time, Shaffer began dividing his time between living in Manhattan and England, and in 1967 *White Lies* (one year later revised as *White Liars*) opened with the U. S. premier of *Black Comedy* in New York.

Shaffer wrote three major stage plays in the 1970s: *The Battle of Shrivings* (1970), *Equus* (1973), and *Amadeus* (1979). Included among the numerous awards Shaffer has won in his career are the 1975 Tony and 1975 New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play for *Equus*, as well as the 1981 Tony and 1981 Outer Critics' Circle Award for Best Play for *Amadeus*. For his film adaptation of *Amadeus* in 1984, Shaffer won the 1985 Oscar for Best Screenplay. Following the success of *Amadeus*, Shaffer's biblical epic *Yonadab* premiered at London's National Theatre in 1985. In 1987, Shaffer was awarded the prestigious honorary title of Commander, Order of the British Empire. That same year, Shaffer wrote the comedy *Lettice and Lovage* for actress Maggie Smith; a revised version was produced in London in 1988 and New York in 1990. Shaffer returned to the radio in 1989 with the BBC-aired play *Whom Do I Have the Honor of Addressing?* Shaffer's *The Gift of the Gorgon* was produced in London in 1992, the same year in which he won the William Inge Award for Distinguished Achievement in the American Theatre. In 2001, he was knighted by the Queen of England to become Sir Peter Shaffer.

# The Classical Tradition

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## Tragedy and the Hero

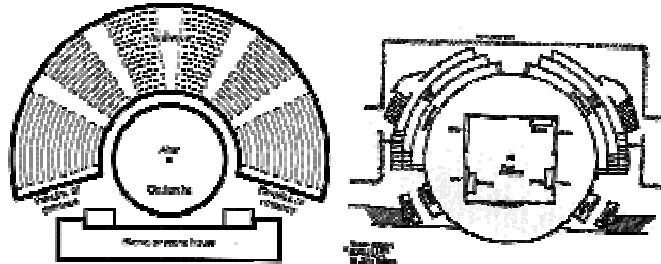
The tragic form originates in Classical Greece (as does the term itself, meaning ‘goat-song’) as part of the rituals performed in honor of the god Dionysus. Although the word is often used loosely to describe any sort of disaster or misfortune, it more precisely refers to a play (or novel) that probes the questions concerning the role of man in the universe. The atmosphere surrounding these early performances was more like that of a religious ceremony than entertainment. There were altars to the gods, with priests in attendance, and subjects drawn from legends, myths, and history. To begin with, tragedies were recounted by movement and song performed by a chorus. The poet Thespis is credited with becoming the first ‘actor’ by introducing a prologue and speeches in which he exchanged words with the leader of the chorus – the first tragic dialogue. The plots of the Greek tragedies traced the stages by which the protagonist (of typically noble birth) became involved in an inescapable situation and in the end confronted by a fate that ensures an unhappy outcome. The experience often reveals the unsuspected human dimensions of grandeur in extreme circumstances and ennobles as well as chastens the audience. The Aristotelian tragic structure involves a tragic flaw (hamartia) that ultimately brings about a change from ignorance to knowledge (anagnorisis or recognition) often accompanied by a reversal of fortune (peripetia). In some of the plays (i.e. - *Oedipus Rex*) some scholars point to pride (hubris) as the cause of the protagonist’s downfall. In others, the reasons are more complex and, in some of the plays (like *Medea*) the protagonist is not brought low at all, but exalted while the tragedy befalls others. What the plays all say is that man can learn through suffering; the chorus in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* says this twice. The capacity to learn through suffering is the distinguishing characteristic of the tragic hero. Ask your students to consider the ways in which the protagonists of *Equus* conform to and diverge from the classical conception of the tragic hero.

## The Chorus

The chorus was a group of actors who described and commented upon the main action of a play with song, dance, and recitation. They probably moved and spoke as a group, either in unison or each taking different lines in the choral odes, which came between scenes of the play. Originally, the chorus comprised of 50 men and dominated the performance of tragedy until the time of Aeschylus, who added the second actor and reduced the chorus to 12. As the importance of actors increased, the choric function tended to have less importance to the plot, until at last they became mere decorative interludes separating the acts. During the European Renaissance, the role of the chorus was revised. For example, in Elizabethan England the chorus often designated an individual who performed prologues, epilogues, and perhaps other speeches. In *Equus*, Shaffer created a chorus of horses who produce the “Equus noise” - a kind of choral chant made up of voices and sounds. In some productions of *Equus*, all the actors stay on

stage throughout the entire performance – as the chorus did in ancient Greece. Individual characters evolved from the purely choral (dithyrambic) form and, from extant classical plays, we know the chorus usually represented a group of the common people (i.e. - the “city council” in *Oedipus Rex*, the women of Thebes in *Medea*) whose passivity contrasted the activity of the protagonists; this juxtaposition formed the central artistry of Classical tragedy.

## Space



(L to R) A Classical Greek theatre, the original *Equus* set from 1974

Greek tragedies were performed in massive, outdoor theaters (the Theatre of Dionysus at the Acropolis is the best-known). The actors and chorus appeared on a large, circular, flat playing space at the bottom of the theater (the orchestra), with the audience looking down on them from three sides. The scene-building or skene formed a backdrop to the action as well as a place for mask and costume changes. It developed into a two story structure with columns and doors for entrances and exits. Since these plays were performed in broad daylight, with no lighting to focus attention on the stage, the audience became part of the drama. In one sense, the design of the Alley’s production alludes to classical Greek theaters by incorporating tiered audience seating on the stage to create a heightened sense of participation.

## Dionysus and Apollo

Additional images of Classical Greece are conjured by the thematic conflict between the rational and irrational. Respectively, Dysart and Alan embody the poles of the old binary opposition between Apollo and Dionysus. The god Apollo came to represent the virtue of man’s faculty for logical assessment whereas the god Dionysus (originally a god of fertility as much as wine) became a symbol of his irrational impulses. The cult of Dionysus won many female converts (Bacchantes) but met with great resistance from men, so the Apollonian/Dionysian conflict could also be taken to represent received notions of stereotypically ‘normal’ male (logical) and female (intuitive) behavior. Shaffer frequently uses oppositional duality in his work: in *Amadeus*, he pits the cool, pedantic composer Salieri against the immature genius of Mozart; in *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, Shaffer likewise illustrates the conflict between the conquistador Pizarro and the Incan king Atahualpa. As we analyze Shaffer’s take on yin-yang duality in its various forms, it is worth noting that he himself is a *twin*: his brother, Anthony Shaffer, is the playwright of *Sleuth*, *Whodunnit*, and *Murderer*.

# The Horse in Mythology

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The image of the horse is recurrent symbol of grace and power in human culture. Its earliest known appearance is in Paleolithic paintings like those in the caves of Lascaux, making horse images among the earliest and most common forms to appear in human art and myth. The earliest humans probably hunted the ancestors of modern horses for food but later domesticated them along with pigs, cows, sheep, and goats. Horses exerted a powerful influence on human life, as a source of farming power, land transport, and military conveyance. By the time *The Iliad* was written down, the human relationship with domesticated horses had been established for about 7,000 years. The Trojan War was reputedly won by the armies of Greece by hiding soldiers in the belly of a wooden horse which was then taken within the city walls of Troy. In mythology, winged Pegasus is a symbol of justice and righteousness. As noble mount, carrying knights into battle and kings to their thrones, as working companion in fields, on range and road, as subject of sculpture, painting, ritual and drama since prehistory, the horse has worked its way deep into human psychology. An anguished horse is a central image in Picasso's monumental anti-war mural *Guernica*. In the blended form of the centaur, man and horse are united in a way that suggests lust and the bestial, while, sometimes, conferring equine attributes of grace, power and dignity on the human half of the pairing. At the end of the first act of *Equus*, Alan mounts one of the horses, crying "Make us One Person!"

## Psychiatry

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The term psychiatry is derived from two Greek words meaning 'mind healing.' Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, mental illness was most often seen as demonic possession, but it gradually came to be considered as a sickness requiring treatment. Modern psychiatry has roots in the work of J. Connolly in England who advocated a more humane approach to mental illness. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, research, classification, and treatment of disorders had gained much momentum. Psychotherapy evolved from its origins in spiritual healing. The psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud dominated the field for many years and did not receive a serious theoretical challenge until behavior therapy and humanistic psychology were developed in the mid-1900's. Psychoanalysis, which pursues a greater awareness of the patient's internal conflicts, continues to be dominant in psychiatric practice. The psychoanalytic movement originated in the clinical observations of Freud. Observation of neurotic patients indicated that when the sources of the patients' impulses were brought into consciousness during hypnosis, the patients showed improvement.

Observing that patients would talk freely without hypnosis, Freud evolved the technique of free association. Using this process, Dysart encourages Alan to say anything



that comes to mind, without regard to assumed relevancy or propriety. Difficulty in making associations was regarded by Freud as repression of painful experiences. In the majority of the cases from his early practice, the events most frequently repressed dealt with disturbing sexual experiences. Thus, he hypothesized that anxiety was a consequence of the repressed energy associated with sexuality.

Free association and hypnosis provided a way to interpret dreams, slips of the tongue, forgetfulness, and other mistakes in everyday life. These investigations formed the foundation of his conception of the personality consisting of the id, ego, and superego. The id is the unconscious reservoir of drives and impulses derived from the genetic background and concerned with the preservation and propagation of life. The ego operates in conscious levels of awareness, concerned with the tasks of reality: perception, cognition, and decision-making. The superego consists of an individual's environmentally derived values (societal and familial morals); it serves as a censor on the ego's function. Although his theories are no longer in practical use, Freud's work is seen as a watershed in modern psychiatry. The contemporaneous use of operating theaters in medical training is evoked by the element of the set that incorporates on-stage audience seating (in addition to the classical allusions noted earlier).

Peter Shaffer's writing of *Equus* was specifically influenced by the theories of psychologist R.D. Laing. One of Laing's central ideas about human psychology is that, to some extent, the concept of mental illness is a shared idea constructed by society. Labels like "schizophrenic" and "psychotic" may describe a physical or biological condition but are also ways of re-imagining the healing function of the doctor/patient relationship as an adversarial relationship in which the doctor, as representative of Normal society, tries to impose society's definition of Normal on the patient. This suggests that many people society considers "insane" are merely people who are responding in socially unacceptable (not sick) ways to the same pressures, stresses and biological processes which affect us all. If the insane are then treated by doctors who are only interested in making them Normal the doctor may, in the process, destroy something that is fundamental to that person's individual personality.

# Follow-up Considerations

- What are some of the other means by which society encourages its members to be “normal”? What is “normal” and who determines it?
- Both Alan and Dr. Dysart suffer tragic circumstances in *Equus*. Alan’s tragedy is the more obvious, but in what way does Dysart suffer a ‘fall from grace’?
- Who would you consider the chief protagonist of the play? To what extent (if at all) are Alan and/or Dysart tragic heroes?
- How does having an audience on stage with the performers affect the performance? In what ways did the reactions of the people sitting across from you affect the way you felt about what was happening on stage?
- Consider the relationship between the Classical Greek and Judeo-Christian images in the play.
- What reasons would a playwright have for using a chorus in a modern play? Does the “horse chorus” of *Equus* function like the chorus in other Greek plays you have studied?
- Why are the Horses in Shaffer’s play such a powerful presence? How might this be related to the horse’s importance in art and myth since prehistoric times? Aside from the obvious practical considerations, what is the theatrical impact of costuming a human actor as a symbolic horse, rather than putting real horses (or more realistic horse costumes) on stage?
- Compare and contrast the Alley production with the film of *Equus*. What are the (dis)advantages of each medium in telling the story?
- Consider the ways in which psychiatry has changed in the last 30 years. How might modern methods in psychiatry have altered the telling of *Equus*?