

THEATER

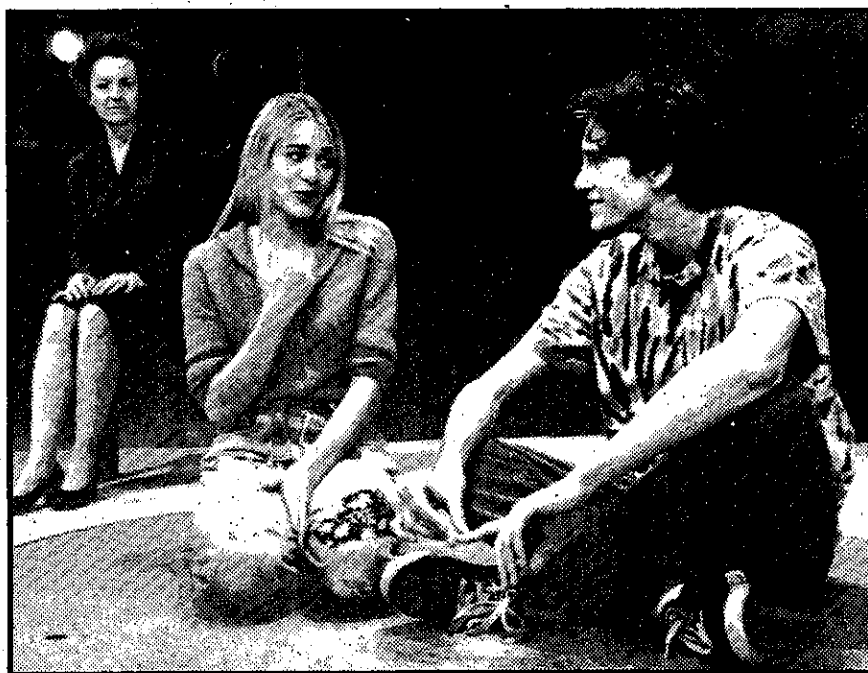
Children Of An Equine God

Deaf West's Challenging *Equus* Takes Liberties

BY NEAL WEAVER

In the introduction to his *Collected Works*, British playwright Peter Shaffer vividly recalls the impetus for *Equus* and "the shock of excitement when I first heard from a friend the bare...details of a dreadful story and an appalling crime....The boy was the son of very repressive and religious eccentrics; he had been seduced by a girl on the floor of the stable; he had blinded the [horses] in a panic to erase the memory of his sin and to prevent them from bearing witness to it before his parents." Shaffer was haunted by the story but found it impossible to write about. It seemed incredible that "a boy's first satisfactory sexual experience could lead...to such horrific violence—unless it had not been satisfactory at all. Unless...the presence of the horses had directly prevented that satisfaction. And why would that be—unless the horses themselves were the focus of some deep attachment which consummation with the girl would betray?"

So Shaffer imagined a boy, Alan Strang, who has somehow combined his own obsessive fascination with horses with his father's furtive inhibitions and his mother's rigid religiosity. The boy has fashioned a darkly passionate religion all his own, mingling Christian guilt with Dionysian ecstasy in the worship of the imperious and demanding horse-god Equus. Shaffer also provides Alan with a fitting antagonist: the psychiatrist Martin Dysart. Dysart is himself a divided man, longing for the exotic excitements of ancient religions, while trapped in professional routine, sexual sterility, and an arid marriage. He knows he must "cure" the boy, even if it means rooting out the most vivid and passionate elements of his being. Out of their personal collision emerges a searching examination of the conflicts between "normality" and passionate commitment, between unsatisfactory everyday existence



The calm before the storm

and the lure of a "psychotic" but richly satisfying personal belief.

Equus emerges as a thoughtful, disturbing, and altogether remarkable play, cast in the form of a psychiatric whydunit. From the moment when Dysart first encounters the boy, a withdrawn psychotic who communicates only in commercial jingles, his efforts to unearth the truth draw him further and further into the boy's complex and compelling inner world.

The production that's just opened at Deaf West Theatre is an exciting one, if not precisely the one Shaffer imagined. The play has been transplanted from its original English locale to Ventura County. It is, of course, performed by deaf actors utilizing American Sign Language, while speaking actors discreetly meet the needs

of hearing audiences. But the most radical change here comes via a gender switch. While Shaffer's plays have generally dealt with pairs of male antagonists (Atahualpa and Pizarro in *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, Mozart and Salieri in *Amadeus*), this production does not. Martin Dysart has been transformed into Maria Dysart, a woman psychiatrist working with disturbed children. Consequently, some of Shaffer's nuances are altered. The unstated but potent homoerotic aura that hovers over most of the playwright's work is dissipated, though not entirely dispelled.

As Dr. Dysart, actress Phyllis Frelich (a Tony Award winner for her performance in *Children of a Lesser God*) offers values and colors of her own. She artfully blends the doctor's professional zest with the con-

trolled anguish of a woman who envies Alan's vivid and intense emotional life even as she works to destroy it. She will not efface memories of Anthony Hopkins or Richard Burton in the role, but she adds a fine-grained nervous intensity. Olaf Axelsen, as Hector Salomon (Hester Salomon in Shaffer's original), wields less moral authority than the women who have played the role, because he courteously defers to a woman friend while they resolutely challenge a male colleague.

The lean and lanky, indeed almost coltish Aaron Kubey seems particularly appropriate for the role of Alan. Handsome but not pretty, he offers a gutsy and volatile performance, plumbing the boy's pain and anguish without losing his subversive humor. Lee Look and Harriet Hall, as the voices of Alan and Dysart, are loyal and self-effacing, lending their considerable talents effectively and unobtrusively. The other roles are handled with quiet authority, and all the design elements serve the author well.

Director Andrew Shea has articulated the play's complexities with a sure hand, moving easily from abstract to concrete, and blending the efforts of speaking and signing actors with tact and assurance. If there is a quibble, it's over his treatment of the play's famous nude scene. In previous productions, it's been designed to be shocking but not invasive. Here, proximity to the audience and harsh, undifferentiated white light destroy aesthetic distance, and the iconic nude becomes the painfully and personally naked. It's disturbing, as it's no doubt meant to be, but it leaves one more concerned for the actor than for the character. ■

Equus

At the Deaf West Theatre Company through March 24. For information call (213) 660-4673.

Los Angeles Reader



Los Angeles Reader February 23, 1996 |

Latest Reviews

Equus

Transformation is central to Deaf West Theatre's adaptations — gender-bending and language-stretching. This handsome production of Brit Peter Shaffer's 1973 *Equus* moves the play into the nineties and transforms the male psychiatrist — who, as narrator, is the play's central consciousness — into a deaf female. Due to the complications of translating ASL into its British equivalent, director Andrew Shea sets the action in California.

Award-winning actress Phyllis Frelich brings a poignant sensitivity to Dr. Dysart, the introspective analyst who's treating troubled adolescent Alan (played with vulnerability and adolescent angst by Aaron Kubey). Her inner conflict over helping the boy, who has blinded six horses, become "normal" takes on new levels of meaning in this combined signed and spoken presentation.

Although the acting is uniformly excellent, transplanting the drama into the present creates a thematic problem. The play is chiefly concerned with the spiritual void created by twentieth-century technological conformity. Given the global dimension of religious fundamentalism at the end of the twentieth century, compassion and tolerance, not religious fervor, are the current deficiencies in our world. (Susan Mason)

■ Deaf West Theatre, 660 N Heliotrope Dr. Voice: (213) 660-4673. TTY: (213) 660-8826. Thur-Fri at 8, Sat at 2 and 8, Sun at 2. Closes March 24.

LA WEEKLY FREE

LA WEEKLY FEBRUARY 23-FEBRUARY 29, 1996

THEATER NEW REVIEWS

EQUUS Deaf West's elegant production and smart adaptation has elevated this dated pop-psychological drama into something more intriguing. The popularity and status of Peter Shaffer's *Equus*, wherein a troubled boy creates a religion of oppression and eroticism based on his warped understanding of the Bible and his sexual attraction to horses, eludes me. The story begins after he blinds five horses (portrayed by metal-masked actors) and concerns itself with his psychiatrist, who can relieve the boy's pain only by relieving him of his passion. In director Andrew Shea's production, both the boy and the psychiatrist are played with extraordinary intensity by deaf actors Aaron Kubey and Phyllis Frelich (with speaking actors Lee Look and Harriet Hall playing their voices). The text has been translated into American Sign Language and set in modern-day L.A. (from Shaffer's British setting). The other major change is having a woman, Frelich, play the shrink, Dysart. This, along with the canny decision of casting the boy's parents (Paul Raci and Elizabeth Hanley) with hearing actors who've learned ASL, creates a fascinating subtext for the boy's isolation, his parent's defensive guilt over his horrible crime and his doctor's desiccated maternalism toward her charge. The horsey-girl Jill is sweetly played by a deaf actress — who also happens to speak — Deanne Bray. Unfortunately what is left beneath all this committed and compelling acting, seamless conceptualization and strong ensemble work is still *Equus*, a play which, with its superficial psychology and coldly high-tech design, undercuts the very passion it tries to explore. Deaf West Theater, 660 N. Heliotrope Dr.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; mats Sat.-Sun., 2 p.m.; thru March 24. (213) 660-4673, 660-8826 TDD. (Randeef Trabitzi)



Equus

We also recommend: *Acme Ball and Chain*, *All My Sons*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Big Time Jubilee*, *Biloxi Blues*, *Cereal!*, *The Collected Works of J. Edgar Hoover*, *The Dresser*, *End of the World Party*, *Equus*, *Family Secrets*, *For Entertainment Purposes*, *Goldfish*, *Goldfish: Chains Required*, *Guys and Dolls*, *Hellcab*, *The Homecoming*, *Hot 'N' Throbbing*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *Idle Wheels*, *Jacques Brél is Alive and Well and Living in Paris*, *The Lion in Winter*, *Love American Sunday*, *Mario Lanza Story*, *Matty: An Evening With Christy Mathewson*, *Nimrod Soul*, *Private Stories: Public Schools*, *Shauna Hicks and Her '60s Chicks*, *Three Tall Women*, *Tongue, Triple Play*, *Twist of Fate*, *Two (Men) for All (Seasons)*, *Valley of the Dolls*

"Equus" At Deaf West Theatre

By PAT TAYLOR

I was both honored and excited recently to be asked to review this production. "Equus" has long been one of my favorite plays, having first seen it in New York 20 years ago starring Tony Perkins, then later with Anthony Hopkins.

Written by Peter Shaffer, this timeless piece remains a captivating, compelling account of a young man who takes a poker and violently blinds six horses, and the puzzled psychiatrist whose quest it is to find out "why?"

A complex and beautifully written story, and "dream roles" for the two lead parts, it has been done all over the world, but never, I feel, more compassionately than in this production.

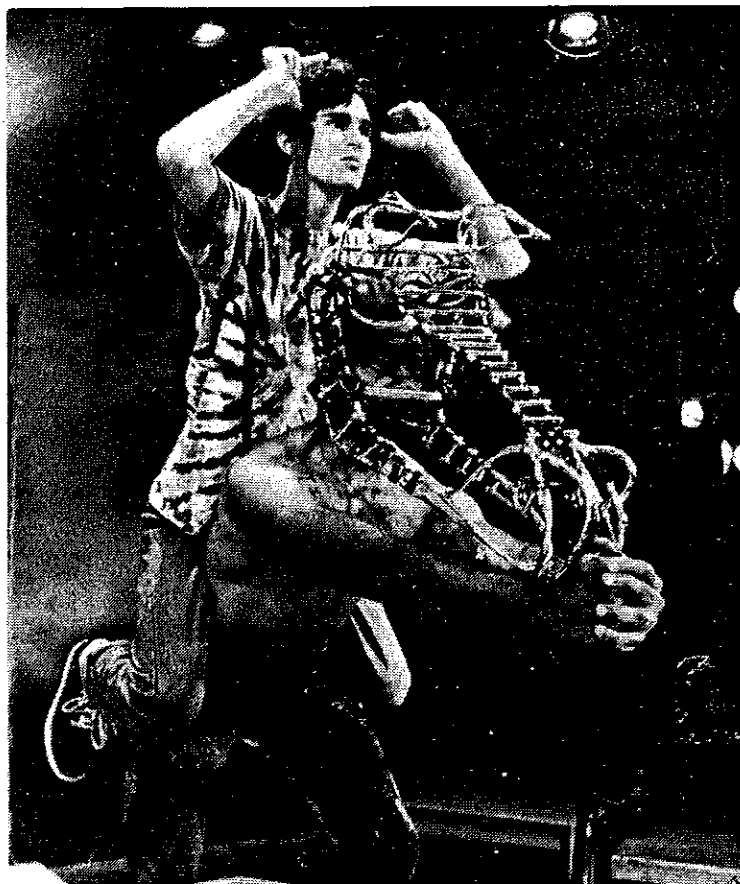
Directed insightfully by Andrew Shea, in a style that insures the enjoyment of both deaf and hearing audience members, and for the first time using a woman as the psychiatrist.

On a simple, stark, dramatic set by Robert Steinberg, we study the relationship unfolding between doctor and patient and realize the very thin line that exists between normalcy and insanity.

The two lead roles here are played by deaf actors with translators and the entire cast blends deaf and hearing actors, to offer us a breathtaking, magical evening of theatre.

As Alan, the deeply troubled boy, Aaron Kubey gave an awesome, wrenchingly touching performance. Images of Alan and lead horse Nugget, (beautifully played by Cisco X. Drayton) will long linger in the minds of all who see them.

As Dr. Dysart, Phyllis Frelich, a truly gifted actress, gave a performance so PERFECT, it's difficult to put into words. Without speaking, this woman was capable of inspiring her audience to share her every thought, feeling, failure and triumph. (She won a Tony on Broadway for "Children Of A Lesser God".) Her translator, Harriet Hall must be mentioned here, for an exceptionally expressive contribution in interpreting for Phyllis.



Aaron Kubey and Cisco X. Drayton (with mask).

Photo credit: Ed Krieger

Impressive work throughout by the rest of the cast. They are: Olaf Axelsen, as Hector Solomon, Catherine Richardson as nurse, Paul Raci as Frank Strang, Elizabeth Hanley as Dora Strang, John Kenton Shull as Harry Dalton, and Deanne Bray as Jill Mason. Other horses played by: Don Baer, Lindall Blake, Troy Michael Kotzer and Mary Ruth Summers.

If you have never seen theatre performed by deaf actors, you've missed a terrific life experience. It's mind expanding, heart moving and totally unforgettable! Treat yourself...Book a ticket quickly cuz they usually sell out...

Running Thursday, Friday & Saturday at 8...Saturday & Sunday matinees at 2, through March 24. Deaf West Theatre, 660 N. Heliotrope in L.A. (near Melrose and Normandy). For reservations, call (213)660-4673.

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• THE PERFORMING ARTS WEEKLY •

February 29 – March 6, 1996

REVIEWS

EQUUS *at Deaf West Theatre*

Reviewed by Paul Birchall

Director Andrew Shea's production of Peter Shaffer's elegantly wordy warhorse *Equus*, staged in American Sign Language with voice interpretation for the hearing audience, is shrewd and engaging—but it lacks the searching power and Kabuki-like elegance of some of Deaf West's past shows, especially last year's towering *Medea*.

On the surface, *Equus* is an odd choice for a troupe which specializes in performing sign-language shows. For one thing, much of Shaffer's psychological drama—in which a child psychiatrist is assigned to treat a troubled adolescent with a very unwholesome attachment to horses—is almost entirely verbal, not emotional. And the brisk pace Shea tries to establish sometimes falters a bit during the drama's intensely metaphorical monologues and intellectually show-offy dialogue.

Because British sign language is completely different from ASL, director Shea has set Shaffer's play in L.A. He's also changed the sex of the central character, Dr. Dysart, allowing the relationship between psychiatrist and patient some intriguing maternal overtones. Phyllis Frelich's wonderfully crisp performance (vocally interpreted with engaging passion by Harriet Hall) is funny, brittle, and tragically despairing, while Aaron Kubey's fascinatingly complex, entirely physical performance (vocally interpreted by Lee Look) has an innocently open quality that's actually heightened by his silence.

ASL is often used here for purposes other than mere communication: It also helps sketch the characters' personalities. The ASL of Alan's priggish parents, in unnervingly creepy performances by Paul Raci and Elizabeth Hanley, has a blunt working-class quality to it, while Alan and Dysart's intimate signing sessions create the sense that we're actually peering into the characters' minds. It's a closeness that's often missing in stagings of the play,

and it lends this production an undeniably unique depth.

"Equus," presented by and at Deaf West Theatre, 660 N. Heliotrope, Los Angeles. Feb. 18-Mar. 24. Voice (213) 660-4673, TDD: (213) 660-8826.

DRAMA-LOGUE®

VOL. XXVII. NO. 9

HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA

FEB. 29-MAR. 6, 1996

THEATRE REVIEWS

Equus*

Produced by Deaf West Theatre Company, 660 N. Heliotrope Dr., Los Angeles; (213) 660-4673 (Hearing) or (213) 660-8826 (TDD). Opened Feb. 18; plays Thurs.-Sat., 8; Sat.-Sun., 2; closes March 24.

On its basic level, *Equus* is the story of a child psychiatrist and her quest to help a young patient. The doctor's task is to uncover what has driven a seemingly normal young man to blind six horses at a stable one evening. Along the way, however, Dr. Dysart is forced to also explore and question more complicated and far-reaching issues of humankind. As she attempts to "fix" Alan, she is obliged to confront what normal really means. Who determines that? And who has the right to attempt to restore someone when they have strayed from what society deems as the norm?

It's a challenging and complex play, but one well served by a fine ensemble at the Deaf West Theatre. This production is made up of both deaf and hearing actors with focus placed equally. One eventually becomes so engrossed in the story that it becomes impossible to tell where the signing actor ends and the speaking one begins. That's certainly a tribute to the whole ensemble as well as to director Andrew Shea.

Phyllis Frellich as Dr. Dysart is fantastic. In a role normally played by a man, she offers a touching vulnerability and strength as she firmly encourages Alan to relive his terrible experience. Equally powerful is Harriet Hall as the voice of the doctor.

As her young patient Alan, Aaron Kubey is appropriately caustic yet disturbingly normal in appearance as he reveals the events of that horrible evening. He is inexplicably bound to these memories and struggles to find a way to release the terror that has



Phyllis Frellich and Aaron Kubey in Deaf West Theatre's 'Equus'

become part of his daily ritual. Lee Look is the touching voice of Alan.

Paul Raci and Elizabeth Hanley as Alan's parents are strong as well, neither one claiming responsibility for their son's actions, but feeling a twinge of guilt nevertheless.

There are so many layers making up this involved story, but director Andrew Shea has a handle on each, guiding the action with delicate focus and restraint. He and choreographer Cisco X. Drayton (who plays favored horse Nugget as well) have also crafted eerie sequences in which Alan's horses come to "life."

Set designer Robert Steinberg has created a stark, undecorated set, well lit by Rand Ryan. Maro Parian is responsible for appropriate costuming and (we can assume) the representative horse headpieces. Composer Charles Neuschwanger has created disturbing background music.

This is a hauntingly lovely production whose resonance fills the theatre even after the final lights are out. The actors, speaking and signing, move through it with care and raw passion.

***CRITIC'S CHOICE** —Amy Schaumburg

Los Angeles Times

FRIDAY, MARCH 1, 1996

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Revamped 'Equus' Exudes Emotional Power

THEATER BEAT

As the psychiatrist in "Equus" at Deaf West Theatre, Phyllis Frelich gives a performance so vivid and intense it offers the illusion of speech. But in fact she never utters a word onstage.

Director Andrew Shea took a gamble in tackling Peter Shaffer's Freudian tale about a hospitalized teenage boy, Alan Strang (a fiery Aaron Kubey), whose religious and erotic fixations led him to blind six horses. But the payoff is an elegant, emotionally wrenching adaptation of a famously difficult script.

The setting has been switched to Southern California from Britain, and Frelich plays Dr. Dysart, a role written for a male actor. Seamlessly introduced, the changes even encourage some new views of certain lines, including Dysart's self-diagnosis of "professional menopause" that masks a darker spiritual uncertainty.

Shea's brisk, spare staging enhances the script's considerable power. Abstract lines of perspective disappear into an infinite horizon in Robert Steinberg's minimalist set. Cast members do not exit but remain seated on either side of the stage, which allows for easier spoken interpretation of Frelich, Kubey and other actors using American Sign Language.

Yet Frelich is so marvelously expressive she needs little help. Garbed in a conservative chalk-stripe suit, the actress cuts a formidable figure; yet through exquisitely gauged gestures and expression she captures an interior anguish the lines only sketch. By the end, when Dysart's detective work has resolved one mystery and created another, this astonishing actress has left the viewer speechless.

—SCOTT COLLINS

■ "Equus," Deaf West Theatre, 660 N. Heliotrope Drive, Los Angeles. Thursdays-Saturdays, 8 p.m., Saturdays-Sundays, 2 p.m. Ends March 24. \$15. (213) 660-4673. Running time: 2 hours, 30 minutes.



ED KRIEGER

Phyllis Frelich as the psychiatrist in "Equus": Vivid and intense.

CALENDAR

Los Angeles Times

SUNDAY, MARCH 3, 1996

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THEATER

CRITICS' CHOICES

Equus (Deaf West Theatre, 660 N. Heliotrope Drive, (213) 660-4673, TDD (213) 660-8826). Peter Shaffer's drama about a psychiatrist treating a teen-aged boy who has blinded six horses. "A knockout performance by deaf actress Phyllis Frelich—cast in a role written for a male actor—powers this taut and emotionally wrenching Americanized version" (S.C.). Thur.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sat.-Sun., 2 p.m. Ends March