Review Of The Play Essay, Research Paper

Martin Dysart , child psychiatrist, is on a quest to discover why a confused, passionate 17 year old boy named Alan, has savagely blinded six horses with a spike. The discovery of this forms Peter Shaffer s brutal play Equus .

Equus , meaning horse in Latin, was performed by State Theatre of South Australia and directed by Marion Potts.

Although written in the 1970 s many of the issues raised are highly relevant to today s audience. The emotional impact of the play remains intact and continues to intrigue and mystify its audiences as powerfully as it did in the mid-seventies, if not more so.

Alan Strang, played by Damon Gameau, is the only son of an opinionated but inwardly-timid father (Bob Baines) and a genteel, religious mother (Vanessa Downing). He has been sent to a psychiatric hospital by Hesther Salomon (Kate Roberts) after blinding six horses with a metal spike. Hesther convinces Dr. Dysart to take Alan as a patient and “cure” him so that he may return to society as a well-adjusted and “normal” individual. Dysart begins to “normalize” Alan, all the while feeling that though he makes the boy ’safe’ for society, he is taking away from him his worship and sexual vitality- both of which are missing in the doctor’s own personal life. We slowly discover Mr. Dysart actually envies Alan the sexual worship he has experienced. As Dysart exposes the truths behind the boy’s demons, he finds himself face-to-face with his own.

The play is centered around symbolic use of masks and staging. The set, sound, costumes and solid performances of the actors all contributed in making the performance a stimulating one, but also one that provoked the audience to explore and examine issues such as obsession, mental illness, religion and sexuality.

The superb cast contributed a great deal to the performance, in particular the exceptional performance of one of the main characters, Martin Dysart.

Martin Jacobs, as Dr. Dysart, wonderfully portrayed the character’s inner conflict. He specifically conveyed Dysart’s growing discontent with particular elements of his life including his work and marriage, so that we clearly understood the origin of his envy. While Jacobs occasionally addressed the audience, we always felt that we were actively involved in his recollection of Alan s treatment. Jacobs made Dr. Dysart very controlled in his movement which helped to suggest his upper class upbringing. One distracting element of his performance was his inclination to rush his final monologue as it was rather wordy and parts were missed. Alan Strang was played successfully by Damon Gameau who clearly represented Alan s obsession with the horse in an exceptionally challenging role. His used of twisted movement allowed us to have an insight into Alan s mind. Both Damon Gameau and Martin Jacobs gave incredibly moving and powerful performances. Their relationship onstage was extremely convincing and their performances complimented each others style.

Justin Kurzel s set design has remained fairly true to the original script but has been updated to give the play a more modern appearance. A large, circular, black rotating stage put a ring around the majority of the action and provided a functional way to divide scenes. The large mythological looking horse painted onto this part of the stage, in white, almost appeared to glow, which made a striking feature. In the background a huge, black, semi-transparent curtain displayed diagrams of horse body parts such as a skull and leg, which symbolizes Alan s enthrallment with the animal. The horse skull is shown with no eyes, a chilling representation of the atrocity Alan committed.

The choice of staging was practical and aided the performance, and the backdrop contributed effectively to the mood and atmosphere of the play.

The lighting design by Nigel Levings was minimalist in approach but still managed to create a mysterious and disturbing environment. White lights were projected onto the transparent sheet to reveal the Equus chorus behind it, which looked eerie and captivating. Spotlights highlighted key moments in the play, such as when Alan and Jill, the provocative girl who seduced him, (Lucy Slattery), were in the barn together and also when Alan was blinding the horses. The lights assisted in making the actors stand out more, but were basically kept simple. Powerful sound and lighting aided in the effect of the eye-piercing scene. Bold flashing lights and loud dramatic music and sound effects combined to achieve a terrifying, thrilling climactic scene.

Costumes were simple, yet suitable. The costumes that stood out the most were the Equus chorus who were all horses. In the original script it specifies that the horses must wear track-suits of chestnut velvet, whereas Kurzel has them dressed in modern brown tight vinyl pants with no tops showing the human physique as well as making them look horse-like. The proud, prancing, witnessing horses were boldly masked with wire framed helmets, allowing the actors own face to be seen. Large metal shoes, representing hooves made an alarming noise as they clomped on the wooden stage, adding to the supernatural atmosphere.

State Theatre South Australia has given this dramatic event a respectable and solid showing making the performance of Equus an emotionally taxing and fascinating play. Equus explores questions about what is normal and to what extent society will go to normalize people (or to lock them away somewhere if they can’t be normalized).

When Equus gallops away he leaves you questioning the existence of passion and exuberance in your own life. State Theatre South Australia s performance was solid and hauntingly conveyed the central message of Shaffer’s most acclaimed work- passion for one’s worship, in whatever form that worship manifests itself