A Horse and His Boy

There are few stories that warm the heart more than the story of a horse and his rider. Over the years, people have been treated to such stories as My Friend Flicka and Black Beauty. In these stories, a boy or girl develops an appropriate friendship with a horse and it changes him or her forever. These stories often feature some resistance from the horse or some agitator who does not approve of the horse, but they always work out in the end. Peter Shaffer, the English playwright best known for his masterpiece Amadeus, was obviously a little sick of the warm horse stories of old, so he wrote a play called Equus. Equus takes the story of “a horse and his boy” to a newer, sicker level.

Equus tells the story of the child psychiatrist Martin Dysart and his newest patient Alan Strang. Alan is referred to Dysart by his friend Hesther Salomon (a magistrate). Dysart is too busy at Rokesby Psychiatric Hospital (his place of work) and says he does not have time for new patients, but he changes his tune when he hears what Alan did to land himself in Hesther’s court. “He blinded six horses with a metal spike” (Shaffer, 12). After a brief argument with Hesther, Dysart decides to have Alan stay at Rokesby for treatment. He meets Alan, who does nothing but sing TV jingles at first, and tries his best to get to know him.

As time goes by we learn a great deal about the complex boy that is Alan Strang. He comes from a household divided by religion (his mother is religious, his father is an atheist), loves horses (despite a predisposition to blinding them with spikes), works at a stable (where he blinded the horses), and likes a girl named Jill Mason (who got him the job at the stables). But it is not so much the current things in Alan’s life that interests Dysart. It is his past.

Alan first saw a horse on a beach when he was very young and fell absolutely in love with them. His interest in horses developed when his mother told him the Latin word for
horse: “equus.” While Alan currently has a poster of a horse hanging across from his bed at home, it was not always there. Originally a “reproduction of Our Lord on his way to Calvary” hung there (Shaffer, 39). His mother bought it for him and it hung on his wall for a long time. Then, after a fight about religion, Mr. Strang tore it down. Alan was very sad for a long time, but as soon as Mr. Strang replaced the picture of Jesus with the horse poster, Alan calmed down. As Alan got older he spent a great deal of time at a riding stable. A girl named Jill Mason noticed him and got him a job at the stables on weekends. After a long period of tiptoeing around, Jill and Alan went on a date, on the very night when he blinded the horses.

Alan’s history does not offer any insight into his state of mind on the surface, but as Dysart delves deeper, it becomes oh too apparent what Alan has on his mind: horses, nothing but. After discovering that the poster of the horse was not always there, Dysart asked to see the old poster and compare it to the horse one. Much to his dismay, the horse and the figure of Jesus had the same eyes. This was in and of itself not too interesting, except when Mr. Strang came forward with something he had witnessed a year and a half earlier. Mr. Strang saw Allen in his room chanting the genealogy of a family of horses. The line began with Prince (the horse in Alan’s favorite story) and ended with Equus. As Alan reached the end of the line, he “took a piece of string out of his pocket. Made up into a noose. And put it in his mouth. And then with his other hand he picked up a coat hanger” and began beating himself with it (Shaffer, 47).

After hearing about Alan’s beatings and the possibility that, even though he said he never rides the horses, he rode them at night, Dysart decides the best way to get to the bottom of this is to hypnotize Alan. In hypnosis, Alan reveals that when he saw a horse for the first time that day on the beach, it spoke to him. And its name was Equus and he lived in all horses. And Equus was the horse in the poster at the foot of his bed. And Equus was in the horses at the stable where he worked at. And Equus begged Alan to ride him, and so he obeyed. As
Alan goes on to describe what he and “Equus” would do at night (including Alan riding him naked), it becomes more and more apparent that Alan has projected Jesus Christ onto Equus, and therefore onto all horses.

After Alan snaps out of his trance he does not want to talk anymore. Only a few days later when Dysart gives him a truth drug, which is actually a sugar pill, does Alan open up and reveal the rest of his story. He and Jill finally went on a date, to an adult film. As luck would have it, they ran into Alan’s father at the cinema. They all left, but Alan did not take Jill home as he said they would, they went to the stable instead. They were about to have sex, but all Alan could see was Equus. He could not even kiss her as time passed. Finally, she left and he was left alone with the horses. They were mocking him and saying they would never leave him and always be watching him. So, in an attempt to stop them from watching him, Alan took a spike and blinded them all, all six of them. At long last, Alan reveals his motive for blinding the horses and then suffers what can best be described as a psychological meltdown. And so it ends.

Shaffer finished Equus in 1973 and it was first “presented by The National Theatre at The Old Vic Theatre on 26 July 1973” with Alec McCowen as Martin Dysart and Peter Firth as Alan Strang and was directed by John Dexter (Shaffer, 1). Of the original production, reviewer Albert E. Kalson said “Equus provides the one evening of passion that is currently available to London theatergoers trapped by the late-summer doldrums of the waning season” (Kalson). After its success, the play also attracted such stars as Anthony Hopkins, Anthony Perkins, and even Leonard Nemoy for the Broadway production (“Equus (play)”). It was revived in 2006 and starred an Asian Pacific cast (including George Takei as Dysart). The most recent and notable revival was in 2007 starring Daniel Radcliffe (aka Harry Potter) as Alan Strang. This caused controversy because the role required a then underage Radcliffe to appear naked
onstage. It started in West End in London and then moved to the Broadhurst Theatre on Broadway (keeping Radcliffe as Strang) where it will run until February 2009 (“Equus (play)”).

By far, the most interesting incarnation of Equus is the production put on by second graders at Franklin Elementary School. It was boiled down to thirty minutes and they cut out all the sexual undertones, but it still had the horse-blinding (“Second-Graders Wow Audience”).

The film Equus, directed by Sidney Lumet, began production in September 1976 and was released in the U.S. on October 16th, 1977 and starred Richard Burton as Martin Dysart and Peter Firth as Alan Strang. Firth (who played Alan during the first run of the play) was not the original choice for the role. Evidently, Richard Burton thought the boy they had originally cast was too tall to play a 17-year-old. Also, even though the play stars primarily English actors and is set in England, they filmed it in Toronto, Canada for tax purposes (IMDb).

Peter Shaffer, who also adapted his play Amadeus to the silver screen, also wrote the screenplay for the film Equus. Because the man who wrote the original play wrote the screenplay, much of the dialogues is taken word for word from the original play. The treatment of Dysart’s monologues is even similar. Both in the play and the film Dysart breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience. One of the most obvious things that worked very well in the film, but not so well on the stage, is the representation of the two posters that hung on Alan’s wall. In the play they are only described, but in the film they are shown, and they are very powerful. We can see that the pictures portray Jesus and the horse very closely. Both are chained in a similar fashion, and both have the same looking eyes, which can explain Alan’s confusion.

Another difference is the actual use of sets. The stage is limited to one or two backdrops, but in film they are allowed to have actual sets like the stables and Dysart’s office. Another difference is how the flashbacks are portrayed. Yet another difference was how Alan acted with
the horses in the film. The film shows Alan when he first takes a tour of the stables. He is in absolute awe. There is simply no way to show that on the stage and maintain the emotional resonance it has in the film.

The biggest and most important difference between the play and the film is the blinding of the horses. In the play, actors wore tracksuits and a horse head made out of leather and steel. They were “stabbed” with an invisible pick and acted accordingly. In the film, prosthetic horse heads are used and we see them get stabbed in the eyes by the spike. All of the changes made to the play for the film (despite stylistic reasons) were made because more can be done with a film than with a play. It is easy to simulate horses being blinded using prosthetics and special effects than it is to do any such thing on the stage. It is also much easier to show us something than have to explain it to us.

The dramatic themes of Equus are complex to say the least. One of them is religion. Religion divided Alan’s house and ultimately, it was probably his downfall. If his mother and father had not been so divided about religion, he would not have gotten mixed signals about it. If Mr. Strang had not ripped the poster of Jesus off his wall and replaced it with a poster of a horse, he never would have experienced such confusion that made him think a horse was God.

Another theme is sex. Alan had what some would call an inappropriate relationship with the horses at the stable. He beat himself while looking at his God. Alan’s sexual fascination with horses coupled with his religious confusion ultimately caused him to have a psychotic break.

Self-examination is also a dominant theme in the play. Dysart’s experience with Alan causes him to examine not only Alan, but himself. He ultimately questions why he does what he does. The idea of Equus haunts him and makes him question everything about himself and those around him. Do his patients really need him? Is he bound in chains yearning to be free?
The theme of self-examination being the most dominant (as demonstrated in Dysart’s monologues) suggests that Shaffer is trying to get us to examine ourselves. There is nothing worse in life than waiting too long to fix it. One must not wait for an Alan Strang to pass by and make him think about his life.

Despite the play being spectacular in every way, the film version does a better job of telling the story. Not having seen the play it is difficult to make this choice, but a few things spring to the mind. Dysart’s monologues in the film are far more thought-provoking and real than on the stage. The portrayal of the posters in Alan’s room is perfect in the film but almost impossible on the stage. While the use of actors wearing masks and tracksuits is somewhat innovative, nothing beats the real thing. Nothing gives more realism to the story of Alan Strang than blinding actual (or pretty close to actual) horses on the screen.

All in all, the story of Alan Strang is an extremely complex one. He was a religious boy who believed that a horse was God. He could not stand God watching him all the time, so he blinded him. It’s a twist on the old story of a horse and his boy done in an absolutely perfect provocative way.
Bibliography


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