

Equus: Play and performance

by Ted McGee

The Stratford Festival gave theatre-goers something to look forward to when it announced that it would mount a production of Peter Shaffer's *Equus* as part of the '97 season. This was a play that took London by storm when first staged in 1973, and two years later the New York production won the Tony Award for Best Play. This was a play by the author of *Amadeus*, which Stratford had produced so elegantly and forcefully in 1995 that it was reprised in 1996 and continued to play to full houses.

But I had more than the average theatre-goer's excitement about the prospect of seeing *Equus* for I have read and re-read, taught and talked about the play almost every year for the past twenty.

Shaffer's own work on *Equus* began in 1971 with the report of a crime, a boy's blinding of six horses, and the feeling it engendered in him. He set out to make that terrible deed comprehensible, and he does, in well-established psychological terms—in the concept of time, the theory of learning, the therapeutic strategies, the formative influence of family, the gradual revelation of Alan Strang's passionate (and passionately religious) secret life.

But while Alan's deed becomes comprehensible in the play, the very foundations of Dr. Dysart's beliefs are shaken. The case stirs up "subversive questions," questions that challenge his work and marriage, his values and integrity. The play

begins with Dysart's personal upheaval and it ends there: "I need—" says Dysart at the close, "more desperately than my children need me a way of seeing in the dark. What way is this? ... What dark is this?" Framed by Dysart's soliloquies as it is, *Equus* is his play.

The Stratford production emphasized this aspect of the play by casting Brian Bedford, one of the "stars" of the Festival company, as Dr. Dysart. Bedford's Dysart was surprisingly comic—providing wry, sometimes self-deprecating, sometimes satiric, humour. As a result, this production extended the play's consideration of laughter by prompting considerable laughter in the audience.

The staging also intensified the emotional power of the story. For audience members seated on stage, the increasingly intimate revelations of Alan and the raw physical power of the actors playing the horses had an unforgettable immediacy. The passion with which Alan worshipped *Equus*, his "god-slave," was captured by a revolving platform that formed part of the set, a platform that spun round faster and faster as Alan came to the climax of his ritualistic ride on *Equus*.

These elements of the production—the comic touches, the power of the actors' bodies, the value and versatility of the simple set—taught me things about the play that I had never seen, might never have seen. For most of this year's students, it was the representation of the horses that they appreciated for the first time. With their highly stylized, bright, tough headgear and hooves, they became what Shaffer wanted, "a stable of Superhorses to stalk through the mind," to make comprehensible Alan's passionate worship, and his terrible deed, and his tumultuous impact on Dysart. 🍷

Why Wah?

Charlene Diehl-Jones, a professor of English at the College, has just published a book on Canadian poet Fred Wah. Asked why she's interested in Wah, she says that in his writing, and particularly in his book *Music at the Heart of Thinking*, which was the subject of her thesis, "Wah torques language in very provocative ways, edges towards what I was trying to articulate about the otherness of language, the way language is always also carried by the signifying power of the voice."

Diehl-Jones' monograph, *Fred Wah and His Works*, is part of a series of books published by ECW Press in Toronto. Canadian Writers and Their Works, as the series is called, "fills a desperate need for a comprehensive information bank on poets and fiction writers in Canada," according to the *University of Toronto Quarterly*.

"The collection is invaluable because it brings together biography, bibliography, general criticism, and detailed analysis of each writer's work." Each monograph has the same structure: there's a biographical section, a section on tradition and milieu, a section on critical context, then a section on the writer's works.

"Wah has always been really experimental," says Diehl-Jones, "in his styling and also in his sense of the connection between writing and living. Many of his books have been published by really small presses, sometimes self-published, run off on those ancient awful mimeographs and then decorated thoughtfully. He's always been really involved in making writing a possibility where he is, not getting swept into that Canadian notion that real writing happens elsewhere. I admire that about him." 🍷



Photo: Doug Hall

Ted McGee, a professor of English at the College, is a member of the Board of Directors of the Stratford Festival. In November '97, he gave a group of 60 St. Jerome's grads and students a "refresher course" on *Equus*, a play he's taught for twenty years, before a matinee performance of the play at Stratford. Here are his thoughts on the play and the performance.

