

could see every step coming, step after step, like a dark figure walking down a hall toward a certain door. I knew where he was heading for, I knew where he was going to end. And I sat here many afternoons asking myself why, being an intelligent man, I was so powerless to stop it. I even went to a certain old lady in the neighborhood, a very wise old woman, and I told her, and she only nodded, and said, "Pray for him . . ." And so I—waited here.

EQUUS

by Peter Shaffer

ACT I, SCENES 19, 20, 21

The setting is a psychiatric hospital in England. But the real locales explored in this play are the minds of Martin Dysart, a disillusioned psychiatrist, and Alan Strang, his seventeen-year-old patient. Alan has committed a baffling and cruel crime: late one night he entered the stable in which he worked and blinded six horses with a metal spike. Dysart, feeling useless and weary of a life with neither passions nor goals (suffering from what he calls "professional menopause"), is assigned to be Alan's psychiatrist. Dysart pursues the normal course of treatment with this most unusual boy, but soon finds himself envying Alan the intensity of his feelings and his ability to yield completely to the dictates of his passions. The therapy is designed to make Alan normal, able to take his place in a civilized society. Yet Dysart believes that this normality can be achieved only by cutting away from Alan something vital and precious.

The play has a number of theatrical conventions: the central square serves as office, stable, field, etc.; Dysart, at times, speaks his thoughts directly to the audience; the horses are played by actors in suggestive costume pieces. (For scene-study purposes, the actor playing Alan may wish to create the horses through his imagination.)

In the following scene Alan enters for his regular therapy session. The action continues through the scene changes.

Alan rises and enters the square. He is subdued.

DYSART: Good afternoon.

ALAN: Afternoon.

DYSART: I'm sorry about our row yesterday.

ALAN: It was stupid.

DYSART: It was.

ALAN: What I said, I mean.

DYSART: How are you sleeping? *Alan shrugs.* You're not feeling well, are you?

ALAN: All right.

DYSART: Would you like to play a game? It could make you feel better.

ALAN: What kind?

DYSART: It's called *Blink*. You have to fix your eyes on something: say, that little stain over there on the wall—and I tap this pen on the desk. The first time I tap it, you close your eyes. The next time you open them. And so on. Close, open, close, open, till I say Stop.

ALAN: How can that make you feel better?

DYSART: It relaxes you. You'll feel as though you're talking to me in your sleep.

ALAN: It's stupid.

DYSART: You don't have to do it, if you don't want to.

ALAN: I didn't say I didn't want to.

DYSART: Well?

ALAN: I don't mind.

DYSART: Good. Sit down and start watching that stain. Put your hands by your sides, and open the fingers wide. *He opens the left bench and Alan sits on the end of it.* The thing is to feel comfortable, and relax absolutely . . . Are you looking at the stain?

ALAN: Yes.

DYSART: Right. Now try and keep your mind as blank as possible.

ALAN: That's not difficult.

DYSART: Ssh. Stop talking . . . On the first tap, close. On the

second, open. Are you ready? *Alan nods. Dysart taps his pen on the wooden rail. Alan shuts his eyes. Dysart taps again. Alan opens them. The taps are evenly spaced. After four of them the sound cuts out, and is replaced by a faint, metallic sound, on tape. Dysart talks through this, to the audience—the light dims around him—while the boy sits staring at the wall, opening and shutting his eyes.* The Normal is the good smile in a child's eyes:—alright. It is also the dead stare in a million adults. It both sustains and kills—like a god. It is the Ordinary made beautiful: it is also the Average made lethal. The Normal is the indispensable, murderous God of Health, and I am his priest. My tools are very delicate. My compassion is honest. I have honestly assisted children in this room. I have talked away terrors and relieved many agonies. But also—beyond question—I have cut from them parts of individuality repugnant to this god, in both his aspects. Parts sacred to rarer and more wonderful gods. And at what length . . . Sacrifices to Zeus took at the most, surely, sixty seconds each. Sacrifices to the Normal can take as long as sixty months. *The natural sound of the pencil resumes. Light changes back. To Alan.* Now your eyes are feeling heavy. You want to sleep, don't you? You want a long, deep sleep. Have it. Your head is heavy. Very heavy. Your shoulders are heavy. Sleep. *The pencil stops. Alan's eyes remain shut and his head has sunk on his chest.* Can you hear me?

ALAN: Mmm.

DYSART: You can speak normally. Say Yes, if you can.

ALAN: Yes.

DYSART: Good boy. Now raise your head, and open your eyes. *He does so.* Now, Alan, you're going to answer questions I'm going to ask you. Do you understand?

ALAN: Yes.

DYSART: And when you wake up, you are going to remember everything you tell me. All right?

ALAN: Yes.

DYSART: Good. Now I want you to think back in time. You are on that beach you told me about. The tide has gone out, and you're making sandcastles. Above you, staring down at you, is that great horse's head, and the cream dropping from it. Can you see that?

ALAN: Yes.

DYSART: You ask him a question. "Does the chain hurt?"

ALAN: Yes.

DYSART: Do you ask him aloud?

ALAN: No.

DYSART: And what does the horse say back?

ALAN: "Yes."

DYSART: Then what do you say?

ALAN: "I'll take it out for you."

DYSART: And he says?

ALAN: "It never comes out. They have me in chains."

DYSART: Like Jesus?

ALAN: Yes!

DYSART: Only his name isn't Jesus, is it?

ALAN: No.

DYSART: What is it?

ALAN: No one knows but him and me.

DYSART: You can tell me, Alan. Name him.

ALAN: Equus.

DYSART: Thank you. Does he live in all horses or just some?

ALAN: All.

DYSART: Good boy. Now: you leave the beach. You're in your bedroom at home. You're twelve years old. You're in front of the picture. You're looking at Equus from the foot of your bed. Would you like to kneel down?

ALAN: Yes.

DYSART, *encouragingly*: Go on, then. *Alan kneels.* Now tell me. Why is Equus in chains?

ALAN: For the sins of the world.

DYSART: What does he say to you?

ALAN: "I see you." "I will save you."

DYSART: How?

ALAN: "Bear you away. Two shall be one."

DYSART: Horse and rider shall be one beast?

ALAN: One person!

DYSART: Go on.

ALAN: "And my chinkle-chankle shall be in thy hand."

DYSART: Chinkle-chankle? That's his mouth chain?

ALAN: Yes.

DYSART: Good. You can get up . . . Come on. *Alan rises.* Now: think of the stable. What is the stable? His temple? His Holy of Holies?

ALAN: Yes.

DYSART: Where you wash him? Where you tend him, and brush him with many brushes?

ALAN: Yes.

DYSART: And there he spoke to you, didn't he? He looked at you with his gentle eyes, and spake unto you?

ALAN: Yes.

DYSART: What did he say? "Ride me?" "Mount me, and ride me forth at night?"

ALAN: Yes.

DYSART: And you obeyed? *Pause.*

ALAN: Yes! *Pause.*

DYSART: How did you learn? By watching others?

ALAN: Yes.

DYSART: It must have been difficult. You bounced about?

ALAN: Yes.

DYSART: But he showed you, didn't he? Equus showed you the way.

ALAN: No!

DYSART: He didn't?

ALAN: He showed me nothing! He's a mean bugger! Ride—or fall! That's Straw Law.

DYSART: Straw Law?

ALAN: He was born in the straw, and this is his law.

DYSART: But you managed? You mastered him?

ALAN: Had to!

DYSART: And then you rode in secret?

ALAN: Yes.

DYSART: How often?

ALAN: Every three weeks. More, people would notice.

DYSART: On a particular horse?

ALAN: No.

DYSART: How did you get into the stable?

ALAN: Stole a key. Had it copied at Bryson's.

DYSART: Clever boy. *Alan smiles.* Then you'd slip out of the house?

ALAN: Midnight! On the stroke!

DYSART: How far's the stable?

ALAN: Two miles. *Pause.*

DYSART: Let's do it! Let's go riding! . . . Now! *He stands up and pushes in his bench.* You are there now, in front of the sta-

ble door. *Alan turns upstage.* That key's in your hand. Go and open it.

Alan moves upstage, and mimes opening the door. Soft light on the circle. Humming from the Chorus: the Equus noise. The horse actors enter, raise high their masks, and put them on all together. They stand round the circle—Nugget in the mouth of the tunnel.

DYSART: Quietly as possible. Dalton may still be awake. Sssh . . . Quietly . . . Good. Now go in. *Alan steps secretly out of the square through the central opening onto the circle, now glowing with a warm light. He looks about him. The horses stamp uneasily: their masks turn toward him.* You are on the inside now. All the horses are staring at you. Can you see them?

ALAN, excited: Yes!

DYSART: Which one are you going to take?

ALAN: Nugget. *Alan reaches up and mimes leading Nugget carefully round the circle downstage with a rope, past all the horses on the right.*

DYSART: What color is Nugget?

ALAN: Chestnut. *The horse picks his way with care. Alan halts him at the corner of the square.*

DYSART: What do you do, first thing?

ALAN: Put on his sandals.

DYSART: Sandals? *He kneels, downstage center.*

ALAN: Sandals of majesty! Made of sack. *He picks up the invisible sandals, and kisses them devoutly.* Tie them round his hooves. *He taps Nugget's right leg: the horse raises it and the boy mimes tying the sack round it.*

DYSART: All four hooves?

ALAN: Yes.

DYSART: Then?

ALAN: Chinkle-chankle. *He mimes picking up the bridle and bit.* He doesn't like it so late, but he takes it for my sake. He bends for me. He stretches forth his neck to it. *Nugget bends his head down. Alan first ritually puts the bit into his own mouth, then crosses, and transfers it into Nugget's. He reaches up and buckles on the bridle. Then he leads him by the invisible reins, across the front of the stage and up round the left side of the circle. Nugget follows obediently.* Buckle and lead out.

DYSART: No saddle?
 ALAN: Never.
 DYSART: Go on.
 ALAN: Walk down the path behind. He's quiet. Always is, this bit. Meek and milk legs. At least till the field. Then there's trouble. *The horse jerks back. The mask tosses.*
 DYSART: What kind?
 ALAN: Won't go in.
 DYSART: Why not?
 ALAN: It's his place of Ha Ha.
 DYSART: What?
 ALAN: Ha ha.
 DYSART: Make him go into it.
 ALAN, *whispering fiercely*: Come on! . . . Come on! . . . *He drags the horse into the square as Dysart steps out of it.*
Nugget comes to a halt staring diagonally down what is now the field. The Equus noise dies away. The boy looks about him.
 DYSART, *from the circle*: Is it a big field?
 ALAN: Huge!
 DYSART: What's it like?
 ALAN: Full of mist. Nettles on your feet. *(He mimes taking off his shoes—and the sting)* Ah!
 DYSART, *going back to his bench*: You take your shoes off?
 ALAN: Everything.
 DYSART: All your clothes?
 ALAN: Yes. *He mimes undressing completely in front of the horse. When he is finished, and obviously quite naked, he throws out his arms and shows himself fully to his god, bowing his head before Nugget.*
 DYSART: Where do you leave them?
 ALAN: Tree hole near the gate. No one could find them. *He walks upstage and crouches by the bench, stuffing the invisible clothes beneath it. Dysart sits again on the left bench, downstage beyond the circle.*
 DYSART: How does it feel now?
 ALAN, *holds himself*: Burns.
 DYSART: Burns?
 ALAN: The mist!
 DYSART: Go on. Now what?

ALAN: The Manbit. *He reaches again under the bench and draws out an invisible stick.*
 DYSART: Manbit?
 ALAN: The stick for my mouth.
 DYSART: Your mouth?
 ALAN: To bite on.
 DYSART: Why? What for?
 ALAN: So's it won't happen too quick.
 DYSART: Is it always the same stick?
 ALAN: Course. Sacred stick. Keep it in the hole. The Ark of the Manbit.
 DYSART: And now what? . . . What do you do now? *Pause. He rises and approaches Nugget.*
 ALAN: Touch him!
 DYSART: Where?
 ALAN, *in wonder*: All over. Everywhere. Belly. Ribs. His ribs are of ivory. Of great value! . . . His flank is cool. His nostrils open for me. His eyes shine. They can see in the dark . . . *Eyes! (Suddenly he runs in distress to the farthest corner of the square.)*
 DYSART: *Go on!* Then? *Pause.*
 ALAN: Give sugar.
 DYSART: A lump of sugar? *Alan returns to Nugget.*
 ALAN: His Last Supper.
 DYSART: Last before what?
 ALAN: Ha ha. *He kneels before the horse, palms upward and joined together.*
 DYSART: Do you say anything when you give it to him?
 ALAN, *offering it*: Take my sins. Eat them for my sake . . . He always does. *Nugget bows the mask into Alan's palm, then takes a step back to eat. And then he's ready.*
 DYSART: You can get up on him now?
 ALAN: Yes!
 DYSART: Do it, then. Mount him. *Alan, lying before Nugget, stretches out on the square. He grasps the top of the thin metal pole embedded in the wood. He whispers his god's name ceremonially.*
 ALAN: Equus! . . . Equus! . . . Equus! *He pulls the pole upright. The actor playing Nugget leans forward and grasps it. All the other horses lean forward also, all round the circle, so that each places a hand on the rail. Alan rises and walks right back to the*

upstage corner, left. Take me! (He runs and jumps high on to Nugget's back. Crying out:) Ah!

DYSART: What is it?

ALAN: Hurts!

DYSART: Hurts?

ALAN: Knives in his skin! Little knives—all inside my legs. Nugget mimes restiveness. Stay, Equus. No one said Go! . . . That's it. He's good. Equus the Godslave, faithful and true. Into my hands he commends himself—naked in his chinkle-chankle. He punches Nugget. Stop it! . . . He wants to go so badly.

DYSART: Go, then. Leave me behind. Ride away now, Alan. Now! . . . Now you are alone.

ALAN, he stiffens his body and raises his hand ritually: Equus—son of Fleckwus—son of Neckwus—Walk. A hum from the Chorus. Very slowly the horses standing on the circle begin to turn the square by gently pushing the wooden rail. Alan and his mount start to revolve. The effect, immediately, is of a statue being slowly turned round on a plinth. During the ride, however, the speed increases, and the light decreases until it is only a fierce spotlight on horse and rider, with the overspill glinting on the other masks leaning in toward them. Here we go. The King rides out on Equus, mightiest of horses. Only I can ride him. He lets me turn him this way and that. His neck comes out of my body. It lifts in the dark. Equus, my Godslave! . . . Now the King commands you. Tonight, we ride against them all.

DYSART: Who's all?

ALAN: My foes and His.

DYSART: Who are your foes?

ALAN: The Hosts of Hoover. The Hosts of Philco. The House of Remington and all its tribe!

DYSART: Who are His foes?

ALAN: The Hosts of Bowler. The Hosts of Jodhpur. All those who show him off for their vanity. Tie rosettes on his head for their vanity! Come on, Equus. Let's get them! . . . Trot! (The speed of the turning square increases.) Stead-y! Stead-y! Stead-y! Stead-y! Cowboys are watching! Take off their Stetsons. They know who we are. They're admiring us! Bowing low unto us! Come on now—show them! Canter! . . . CANTER! He whips Nugget.

And Equus the Mighty rose against All!

His enemies scatter, his enemies fall!

TURN!

Trample them, trample them,

Trample them, trample them,

TURN!

TURN!!

TURN!!!

(The Equus noise increases in volume. Shouting.)

WEE! . . . WAA! . . . WONDERFUL! . . .

I'm stiff! Stiff in the wind!

My mane, stiff in the wind!

My flanks! My hooves!

Mane on my legs, on my flanks, like whips!

Raw!

Raw!

I'm raw! Raw!

Feel me on you! On you! On you! On you!

I want to be in you!

I want to BE you forever and ever!—

Equus, I love you!

Now!—

Bear me away!

Make us One Person!

(He rides Equus frantically.) One Person! One Person! One Person! One Person! (He rises up on the horse's back, and calls like trumpet.) Ha-HA! . . . Ha-HA! . . . Ha-HA! (The trumpet turns to great cries.) HA-HA! HA-HA! HA-HA! HA-HA! HA! . . . HA! . . . HAAAAA! (He twists like a flame. Silence. The turning square comes to a stop in the same position it occupied at the opening of the Act. Slowly the boy drops off the horse's back to the ground. He lowers his head and kisses Nugget's hoof. Finally he flings back his head and cries up to him.) AMEN! (Nugget snorts, once.)