

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

Equus

Peter Shaffer

Theatre Royal, Newcastle, and touring
(2008)

In the [West End production](#) of *Equus* the play was overshadowed, in the public mind at least, by the presence (and nudity) of Daniel Radcliffe as the disturbed central character, Alan Strang. In the tour it has been the presence of pop star Lily Allen's brother Alfie making his stage debut in the same part. This is a shame as it distracts attention from the play itself which, more than thirty years later, still has the power to shock and move.

Allen handles the part well. He has a brooding presence with the capacity for violence always near the surface, breaking out - verbally at any rate - on occasion, and he well conveys Alan Strang's tortured soul.

Simon Callow would seem to be an odd choice to play the psychiatrist Martin Dysart. At the National Theatre production at the Old Vic in 1973 the part was played by Alec McCowen, who was replaced by Colin Blakely when it transferred to the Albery in 1976. Richard Burton was Dystart in the 1977 film version and Richard Griffiths played him in last year's revival at the Gielgud. It is not a company into which Callow would seem to fit easily. And indeed he does give a different slant to the part: Dysart's obsession with Greece and his unsatisfactory relationship with his wife assume a greater significance in Callow's interpretation and there is an anguish here stronger than that which I remember in previous versions. However there are moments when he verges on the actory, in that one felt he was *acting* rather than *being* Dysart.

The supporting cast is strong with Colin Hurley and Helen Anderson particularly moving as Alan's tortured parents, torn between their horror at what their son has done and their self-recrimination.

Fin Walker's movement work has given us really effective horses (played mainly by dancers). John Napier's design (a variation on the original seen at the Gielgud) is simple but very effective, aided by David Hersey's lighting. Gregory Clarke's sound, too, makes a major contribution.

Thea Sharrock's direction keeps the narrative line clear through the somewhat complex structure and the play's dynamic is nicely judged, building inexorably to the two climactic moments, at the end of each act, so that, as the lights faded to black, the audience sat stunned.

Although it is 35 years since its first performance, the play has not dated one jot (although Shaffer has made some changes to the text to replace words which would have dated it). As an exploration of what seems to be senseless, indeed mindless, violence, of the kind which would attract horrified headlines even now, the play still resonates.

At Newcastle until 29th March, then touring to Aberdeen, Cardiff, Sheffield, Brighton, Bradford, Bath, Malvern and Richmond.

Philip Seager [reviewed](#) this production in Sheffield, as did Allison Vale in [Bath](#)

Reviewer: [Peter Lathan](#)