

DRUMMER REVIEW

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Gay Pop Culture Series: Fetishes

Peter Shaffer's *Equus*: A One-Horse Open Sleigh by Jack Fritscher

- This entire review "*Equus*, A One-Horse Open Sleigh" is also available in Acrobat pdf.
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AUTHOR'S HISTORICAL CONTEXT INTRODUCTION



DRAFT VERSION



Written October 17, 1978, and published in *Drummer* 25, December 1978. This piece eventually led to the “copyright wars” in *Drummer*, as well as to lightening up the view of S&M and leather as part of abnormal psychology. Sometime before that, however, in 1974, I fell in love with playwright Peter Shaffer’s *Equus* which I saw on Broadway starring Anthony Hopkins who won a Tony for his portrayal of a psychiatrist who tries to penetrate to the heart of the abnormal psychology of erotic fetish. Horses in literature are always the symbol of passion—often unbridled passion. The role of Doctor Dysart gave Hopkins a reputation for intensity that led him on to play two monsters: Hannibal Lecter and Richard Nixon, the man most hated by gays, and many more than gays, in the ’70s. After Broadway, in 1977, Hopkins himself directed the touring production of *Equus* which opened in Los Angeles and traveled to San Francisco thus exposing *Drummer* readers to the drama in both cities as it had in New York. I liked Peter Shaffer’s play for its probing analysis of the kinds of erotic fetish that interested me, and which I would eventually try to introduce into *Drummer* where I labored to take the “abnormal” out of the “abnormal psychology” wrongly associated—I thought—with erotic fetish, at least in gay leather culture.

One pioneering gay article that had alarmed pioneering me—as much for its truth as well as some of its misunderstandings of the normal psychology of leather—was Richard Goldstein’s very detailed feature article, “S&M: The Dark Side of Gay Liberation,” published in *The Village Voice*, July 7, 1975—just two weeks after the virgin publication of *Drummer* #1 on June 20, 1975! For eight years, I had been living the life Goldstein was describing in New York, so I felt I could make valid assessment of his observations of people, places, and scenes I knew intimately. My 1968 novel *Leather Blues* certainly had what seemed to be sexual situations of abnormal psychology that in the world of that

book were not abnormal, but wonderful. Goldstein's article, which I have never seen any other analyst specifically mention as seminal to leather theory, stuck with me, and, in fact, in many ways drove me into Drummer with the mission of countering some of his observations, which I kept hung on the wall over my desk; for if Goldstein was correct in being a bit uptight about S&M, much in mid-decade leather culture needed to be analyzed and re-thought and presented in a more sex-positive way to the public, and I thought Drummer the perfect forum for that evolution and discussion in the midst of erotic entertainment. That to me was the self-aware essence of gay pop culture in Drummer. I've always wanted my writing to start in the reader's head and work its way down. I thought Richard Goldstein brilliant for writing about the emerging leather world: "It's almost as if gay culture has taken on the Yeatsian task of creating its own rough beast—the leather man." God knows. He was right.

Anyway, at the earlier production in New York which David Sparrow and I attended, the audience settled in quickly as Hopkins took the stage and began to conquer row upon row of theater fans—except in the second row, where two women who had come in late were rattling jewelry and fluffing clothing a good ten minutes into the play. They were quite annoying to everyone. For me, theater should be as reverent as a church; and no matter how often I go, every time I end up next to some mouth-breathing drunk, or some cellophane crackling candy-eater who has to click open and click closed a purse with each piece, or, once, a woman eating maraschino cherries who threw the stems onto the floor, which meant inevitably one of the stems landed between my sock and the inside of my shoe.

Anthony Hopkins obviously felt the same way. At the eleventh minute of the noise, he was standing stage front and center delivering a quite dramatic monolog when finally he simply stopped, and stood frozen. At first, this seemed part of the play, but the pause lasted too long, and then longer, and the audience realized something was up. Hopkins became bigger even than life on the stage, simply standing still, until the entire theater silenced itself, until finally the two women silenced themselves. Finally, in the deafening silence, only a siren of an ambulance outside passing by, Anthony Hopkins, actor, stepping out of character, said, "If you are quite sure you are settled in now, we will continue the play." Of course, the theater burst into applause, and those two women sank down into their seats very small. I love theater scenes, or I should say scenes that take place in theaters, so I included one with Katharine Hepburn in *Some Dance to Remember*.

In 1977, as well, the film version of *Equus* brought Richard Burton a Best Actor Oscar nomination, and Peter Firth a Best Supporting Actor nomination. This intensely fetishistic and gay-themed play about abnormal psychology was on everyone's mind. So *Equus* seemed a remarkable pop-culture hook into psychology that I thought would entertain Drummer readers, especially if they could, with an introduction, read a scene from the script.

Naturally, to open the article I hooked the horse theme to cowboys, to cars named Mustang, and to Marlboros. I was impelled to write this piece because I had on file from photographer Efren Ramirez five shots of two very homomasculine models with horses. Both models, Castro Street regulars, wore thick mustaches and one of them was upholstered with chest and torso hair archotyping the attractiveness of nonfat bears.

Actually, I was also impelled by another case of "abnormal psychology" which was trying to become a part of my life. One of the other photos published with this article was of a Los Angeles friend of mine chained in western gear onto a very "Equus" saddle. He went by the name of "Cowboy" and his scene—the one he searched every face he

cruised for—was to be taken out to the desert, made to dig his own grave, and then be laid down in the hole tied in bondage, while he was shot to death with six-guns, wounding first his arms and legs, slowly working toward the deadlier body parts. He was actually rather famous at the time for wanting this scene, as much as he was well known as a producer on Sally Field's television series, *The Flying Nun*. I thought that "Cowboy's" case was quite typical within the S&M scene, and that *Equus* might reflect some insight onto such erotic desire. I published other of these photographs of Cowboy in the *California Action Guide*.

The hitch with this piece was that when I put it on publisher John Embry's desk, leaving the task to him to secure permission to quote an excerpt from *Equus*, he neglected the legal necessity because his style under his pseudonym "Robert Payne" was to reprint many articles he wanted—lifted principally from straight men's magazines—regardless of copyright. He scooted by on the premise that no one really watched or cared what was printed in the gay press that was so far off the straight media radar that no one would catch him. Actually, Peter Shaffer did notice, and sent *Drummer* a scathing letter about excerpting *Equus* without permission.

This "*Equus* Incident" warned me to the core of my being to protect my copyright regarding every photograph and word I wrote for *Drummer*. Immediately before this, the international copyright law had changed, and the recommendation to writers was to insist that publishers put the writer's copyright at the end of each article. I introduced that as a policy at *Drummer*, as this *Drummer* 25 illustrates throughout. Sam Steward, who had suffered copyright violations in the 1950s and 1960s, was happy to see me paste in his copyright notice at the end of his story, XXX in *Drummer* ##.

In many of the issues, publisher John Embry physically pulled the copyright notices from the paste-ups of the articles because he said "they look awkward on the pages." (I'd have A. Jay, the art director, glue them back down; Embry would pull them off again. In turn about, I hated the campy cartoon balloons Embry pasted down on perfectly erotic pictures, thus ruining the erotic heat with camp, and the next day, he'd have A. Jay paste them down again. A. Jay never lost his sense of humor about all this. See *Drummer* 107, August 1987, for my obituary salute to the patient saint of an artist, A. Jay, Al Shapiro, who also exited *Drummer* because of creative differences with John Embry.) In truth, John Embry—like every snookering publisher—hoped to own everything ever printed in *Drummer* so his Alternate Publications could follow the magazine up with book publishing featuring reprinted material for free. Copyright stood in his way. And so did I as copyright's enforcer. Eventually his disregard for copyright was one of the principle reasons why I quit my job as editor in chief of *Drummer*.

Long before *Drummer*, in 1968, I hadn't written *Leather Blues* to give the copyright to some porno house like Evergreen Press and I wasn't going to surrender my intellectual property to Embry at *Drummer*. When Anthony DeBlase bought *Drummer* and when Brush Creek Media began with *Bear*, I handed the publishers an agreement, which they signed, acknowledging that they had one-time rights only, and all copyrights remained mine. I mention this here, because for years this has been my constant message to writers, especially young desperate writers: never sell or give away your copyright. — Jack Fritscher, July 28, 2002

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Gay Pop Culture Series: Fetishes

**Peter Shaffer's *Equus*:
A One-Horse Open Sleigh
by Jack Fritscher**

Fetishes, like passion, interest DRUMMER men because most DRUMMER readers are intensely fetishistic. You know what you like. You know how to signal for it. You know how to get it. Peter Shaffer's *Equus* examines with feeling and understanding not only fetishes in general, but in particular the macho identification with horses.

MY FRIENDS FLICKA, BLACK BEAUTY, & NATIONAL VELVET

Horses are always symbols of passion: Brando is carried off by Liz Taylor's runaway stallion in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, because Marlon is in love with Robert Forster who rides bareback naked throughout that film, the stallion riding and neighing in *Ryan's Daughter* carries Chris Jones to a girl who never says nay; Catharine Deneuve in *Belle du Jour* is yanked from a horse-drawn carriage, tied and whipped and covered with *merde*. (The film had subtitles.)

Peter Shaffer's *Equus* is excerpted here for purposes of pop cultch review, especially for the pop-macho sub-sub-culture of male fetishism which is still the most closeted area of otherwise liberated gay lives. Straight advertising uses horses continually: Mustangs, Colts, Pintos, Mavericks, English Leather, Wells Fargo Banks stage coaches, Raintree Moisturizers, Big Red chewing gum, and--of course--the grandsire of them all: MARLBORO.

Gays have no special corner on the horse mystique. But Gay Rodeos notwithstanding, horses are very special for reasons as simple as cowboys, mounted police, and Pegasus flying a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.

Besides, they feel good between your legs.

FETISH SOURCE

Shaffer's *Equus* psychiatrist, Doctor Dysart, asks pertinent questions about the source of anyone's fetish. How and why do we become lovingly, maddingly, passionately hung up on leather, rubber, sneakers, pex, feet, jockstraps, or white cotton teeshirts washed in Bold 3 detergent? The litany of fetishes is endless. And *litany* is the operative word. Fetishes, before all, were originally religious ornaments. Today, a fetish is a wonderful fixation.

A fetish is that one thing that even if you don't totally NEED it in bed, you'd certainly PREFER it to be there as part of the sex trip. So Shaffer's Dysart goes after the roots of fetish preference.

EQUUS' MAIN QUESTION

Doctor Dysart, with hangups of his own, asks the basic question: "A child is born into a world of phenomena all equal in their power to enslave. It sniffs--it sucks--it strokes its eyes over the whole uncountable range. Suddenly one strikes. Why? Moments

snap together like magnets, forging a chain of shackles. Why? I can trace them. I can even, with time, pull them apart again. But why at the start they were magnetized at all--just those particular moments of experience and no others--I don't know. *And nor does anyone else.*"

Equus, you see, is the story of a boy, Alan Strang, who blinds six horses. At least, on the surface, that's the story wrought from a true occurrence in England, Land of Fetishes. Beyond the "story," however, lies the plot. The plot lines, the questions raised, are part of the lives of gay men who retain *a sense of Real Worship*: men who worship the bodies of other men; men who adore their God, Cock; men who take communion off one another in ritual encounters of High Sensuality and, sometimes higher, transfiguring, transcendent PAIN.

Dysart says to his friend Hester about Alan: "Look...to go through life and call it yours--*your life*--you first have to get your own pain. Pain that's unique to you....that boy has known a passion more ferocious than I have felt in any second of my life. And let me tell you something: I envy it.

HESTER: You can't.

DYSART: (*vehemently*) Don't you see? That's the Accusation! That's what his stare has been saying to me all the time. '*At least I galloped! When did you?*' ...That freaky boy tries to conjure the reality! I sit looking at pages of centaurs trampling the soil of Argos--and outside my window he is trying to *become one* in a Hampshire field!...I watch that woman (Mrs. Dysart) knitting, night after night--a woman I haven't kissed in six years--and he stands in the dark for an hour, sucking the sweat off his God's hairy cheek!"

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