

THE ABILITY TO LISTEN

Asen Terziev

Equus by **Peter Shaffer**, translated by **Zdravko Mitkov**, directed by **Stayko Murdzhev**, set and costume design by **Elitsa Georgieva**, original music by **Petar Dundakov**, choreography by **Stanislav Genadiev**

Cast **Malin Krastev, Sevar Ivanov, Stanka Kalcheva, Svetoslav Dobrev, Gergana Hristova, Nia Krysteva, Petar Dochev, Yaroslava Pavlova, Alexander Hadzhiangelov, Nikolay Lukanov, Yulian Petrov**

Youth Theatre – Sofia, premiere 18th February 2017

The staging of *Equus* at the Youth Theatre was among the unanimously acclaimed theatre events of the 2016/17 season. Proof for that might be the 2017 *Askeer* Award for best production, as well as the production being part of the programs of all major theatre festivals in the country: ITF *Varna Summer*, *Stage at a Crossroads*, *Apollonia* and others; as well as the numerous positive comments (by critics and journalists) in the printed press and on the internet. I watched the production for the first time at its premiere in February, while this review is the result of my second viewing in December – more than a half an year later when all anxieties around the premiere and first reactions have been cooled down and when the audience in the auditorium is no longer dominated by journalists or critics. My aim here is not to make a comparison between the two evenings. I am starting from here only because the second viewing only confirmed and deepened the first impressions and the pleasure of the first. The staging of Stayko

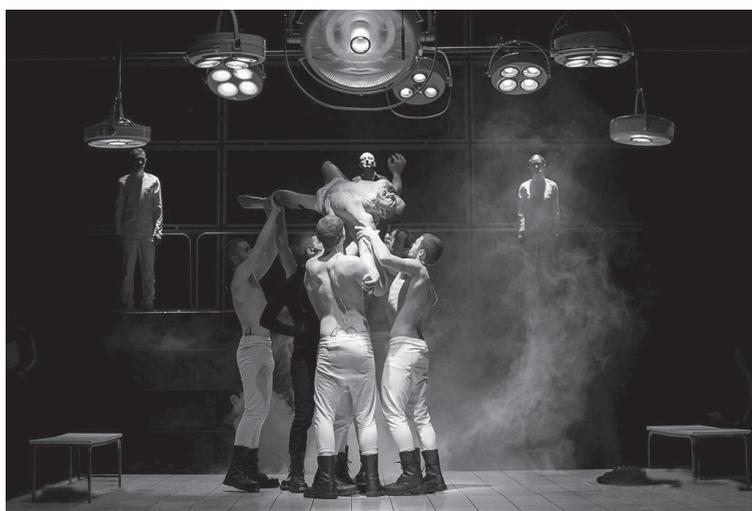
Murdzhev is has a stable composition and is marked by talent, professionalism and devotion. *Equus* is a show full of life and energy, which can be felt in the auditorium and which I hope will not diminish soon.

For Peter Shaffer's play both statements can be true: it is "difficult" or it is "easy" to watch. After being written in 1973 the play became a hit at the National Theatre in London, and after that on Broadway. Later the director Sidney Lumet made it into a film. It received many prestigious awards – Tony Award, Drama Desk Award, Outer Critics Circle Award, New York Drama Critics Circle Award. Its life on the theatre stage did not end there and it continued to be put on the stage. Celebrities such as Anthony Hopkins, Anthony Perkins, Richard Burton, Peter Firth, Tom Hulce and recently, Richard Griffiths and Daniel Radcliffe, have been testing their acting strengths in the roles of the psychiatrist Martin Dysart and his patient Alan. As for the latter, Griffiths and Radcliffe, their taking part in the play caused a lot of commotion in the press, which

found sensational the fact that two actors, who have been loved by the youngest viewers thanks to their participation in the Harry Potter movies are now taking the roles of a sexually frustrated shrink and a young offender. Today, beyond the purely tabloid noise (incited more by the actors' fame, rather than the disturbing elements of the play itself) *Equus* remains a play, whose enduring impact cannot be explained only through the notions of shock and scandal. Sex and violence have turned into truisms in the contemporary theatre and film industry. The public is accustomed to nudity and cruelty and surely anyone has come across more than once to a plot, constructed around the matrixes of *Equus*: a psychiatrist and a patient so fixated on each other, that they subtly reverse their roles; an introverted teenager whose escapist strategies towards reality get him lost in his own fantasies; a father and a mother so engulfed in playing the social role of parents, that the human connection with their child gets destroyed. Stories like these allow for the exploration of more abstract and universal problems which are present in *Equus* too: the blind and inextinguishable force of sexual energy; the suffocating conformity and falsity of social roles; the erosion of the mind and the eruption of the unconscious; the faith of the spirit and the desires of the flesh seen as converging modalities of the same crave of the individual to transcend into something bigger and stronger than himself.

Still, the plot is only one of the ways to ap-

proach *Equus* and it holds only a partial answer to the question of where the play's attractive power lies. Peter Shaffer created the plot in an attempt to think over the deep impressions which a real crime had left on him. From the papers he learned about the crime of a boy, who had blinded some horses and created the story about the 45 year old psychiatrist Martin Dysart, struggling to penetrate the soul of 17 year old Alan Strang and figure out what made him brutally stab with a steel spike the eyes of six horses, which he had been tending as a helper in the stables. Coming to know more and getting deeper and deeper into the wild fantasies of the horse-obsessed boy, the adult man finds himself forced not only to bump into the secrets in the boy's dysfunctional family, but also to face his private nightmares and the emptiness of his own family life. Cutting deep as a skillful surgeon he manages to reach the throbbing center of the boy's mind and to understand what has inflamed it. He seems to be prepared for the reality of the pain, but not for its intensity. Unexpectedly for him, its high frequencies make him notice his own dullness, the dead lift of his normalcy. As he



Photographer Gergana Damyanova

Equus

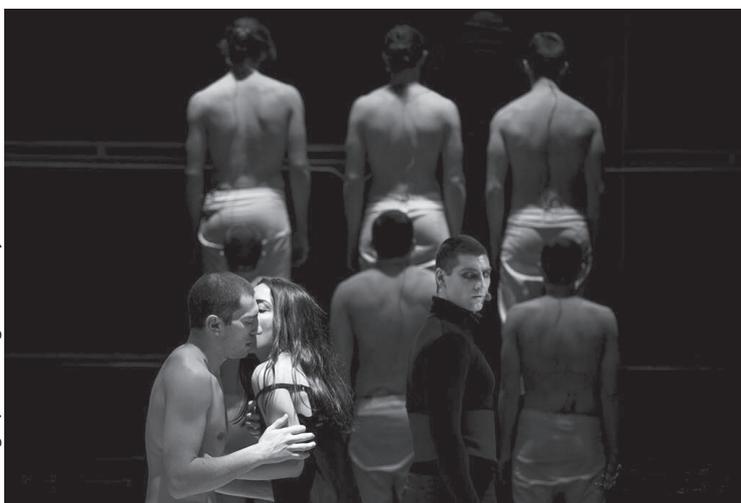
confesses to his friend and confidante, the court magistrate Hesther Salomon: "Look... to go through life and call it yours – *your life* – you first have to get your own pain. Pain that's unique to you... But that boy has known a passion more ferocious than I have felt in any second of my life. And let me tell you something: I envy it."

Thus the play's plot simultaneously has the shape of a psychotherapeutic session and of a well written psychological thriller, full of suspense and *peripeteia*. In it the roles of doctor and patient, of the mad and the sane, of the criminal and the victim get repeatedly reversed. Shaffer's mastery stands out very much on the level of the plot. The dramaturgic economy of *Equus* is remarkably well done: as in a good detective story here nothing is accidental and all the characters take part as much as they contribute to the solving of the main mystery – why the boy blinded the horses? Each scene reveals some secret and points to the key for the next one. The tension accumulates as an avalanche and the culmination becomes more and more frighteningly near and unavoidable. At the same time no character in the play is being re-

duced just to a mere function of the criminal plot. Shaffer creates psychologically dense and complex characters, who don't lend themselves easily to one-sided interpretation. Episodic characters such as Alan's parents or Jill – the girl who seduces him, or the owner of the stable, or judge Hesther – friend and colleague of doctor Dysart, and even the briefly appearing figure of the young rider from Alan's memories, who then is symbolically embodied in his favorite horse Nugget – all these characters are portrayed with a lot of detail. The playwright's eye and precision for the characters' mannerisms and idiosyncrasies, their private gestures and phrases, their ways of confessing or joking goes beyond the stereotypes of the social roles (such as doctor, patient, parent, lover, friend, employer etc.). It seems as if the author deliberately makes it hard for the reader/spectator to take sides with anyone of them. Indisputably one of the most problematic themes in the play is concerned with morality, with what is allowed and what is forbidden. But this theme is not viewed through the static of reached assessments and judgments, but in the dynamic of per-

petually renewable conflicts and contradictions, which are hard to resolve. For example, the father, who with his commonsensical materialism sees his son's crime mainly as a displacement of sexual energy, loses all credibility when he has to confess to the psychiatrist, that he has actually never been able to speak frankly about sex with the boy. Unlike him,

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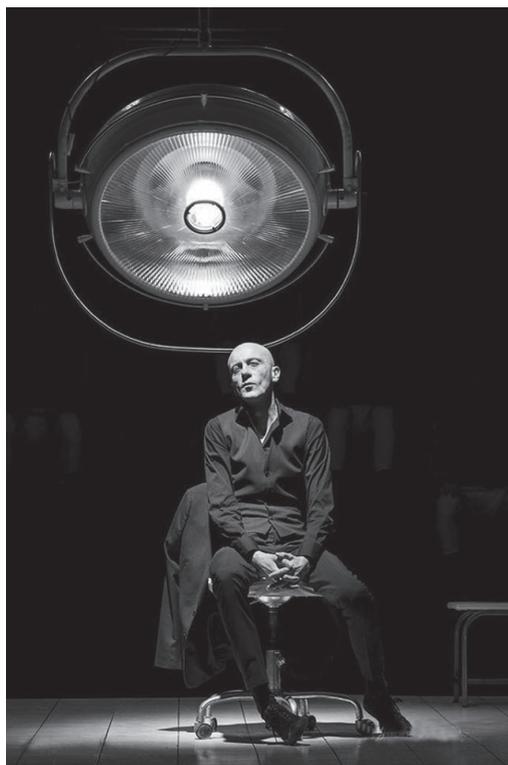


Equus

the mother with her idealistic religious devotion is much more sincere and open in the beginning when talking with her son, but it is that same religiosity which makes her more and more alienated from him and in the end she cannot see the child as a human being, but only as a body, possessed by satanic forces.

Beside the plot, most interesting in *Equus* is the purely theatrical mould in which the play has been shaped and it seems to me that it is that, which keeps its power alive. *Equus* is one of those dramatic texts which very strongly and vividly *imagine and contain* the future theatrical performance. It is a play, which is highly self-conscious of its theatricality and manifests it openly. In this play for the playwright the questions of *what* happens in the plot and *how* this happening is being presented are both of equal importance. Such questions often reach beyond the dramatic form and evoke the performance. The text is full of stage-directions for the set, for the lights, for the sound – all the materiality of the theatre stage.

The space where the action takes place is charged with theatrical ambiguity. From the very beginning the author mentions that most of the action takes place in a psychiatric hospital, but the directions how it should be represented on the stage get more and more abstract: "A square of wood set on a circle of wood. The square resembles a railed boxing ring... Above the stage hangs a battery of lights, set in a huge metal ring...". Thus the arbitrariness of the space is being given simultaneously as a code for reading and a code for watching. A staging which would present on the stage a realistic medical cabinet or, vice versa – a staging, which shows only abstract geometric forms, would flatten



Malin Krastev (Dysart) in *Equus*

Photographer Gergana Damyanova

the text's playfulness, would deaden the vitality of the theatrical language, which always shows things for what they are, but also for what they could stand (they are never just one thing or the other). Peter Shaffer allows this, overtly theatrical in nature, fluidity to flow through the whole dramaturgical structure. He prescribes that all actors should be present all the time, sitting on benches, surrounding the acting area, as if witnesses or members of an ancient chorus. He insists that the actors playing horses do not try to imitate horses, but to wear masks made of silver wire, hiding their faces. He wants, at moments, his characters to address the audience directly, which goes against the conventions of psychological theatre, where the actors pretend that the audience is not there.

Time is also theatrically conditioned. If we were to follow the logic, then the action should be unfolding during a few days (or even months – the play does not specify and the chronology remains vague), but on the stage everything happens simultaneously. Time is psychological as if in a dream, where everything is blended in the immediate totality of the delirium.

The strength of the production at the Youth Theatre is in the quality of attention with which the text of the play has been transferred to the stage, keeping its entire theatrical complexity. The director Stayko Murdzhev has cut and condensed the plot within round 90 minutes running time, without harming anything essential in it. The story is the same and the polyphony in the characters' relations is followed in its subtlety. It is a production, which feels like an *in-depth reading* of the play – with all means available and on every level. It is a production in which everything *works* – acting, *mise-en-scene*, set design, musical score... Elitsa Georgieva's set design is original and spectacular and also true to Shaffer's stage directions. It is conceptualized in black and white: the black uplifted podium center stage is enclosed by black platforms with stairs on which the performers are sitting; the semi-naked athletic boys/horses are all white, with the only exception of a black body, standing in the middle of their row; the black of Dysart's clothes contrasts with the whiteness of Alan's patient dress. Many lamps are hanging from above like in operation room and the whole amphitheatrical organization of the space resembles an arena and an anatomical theatre. Petar Dundakov's music is at times soothing and meditative, at times full of aggressive and fast rhythms. In it we can feel various leitmotifs – the leitmotif

of the horses and the dreams, the leitmotif of the girl and the love, and in-between them we can hear the alarming cry of a horn-call. Maybe this cry is the one for which Shaffer himself writes – the *Equus Noise*, the acoustic image which fuses the bodies of horse and rider and the presence of animal, human and God. The choreography of Stanislav Genadiev freely follows the stage directions – “Animal effect must be created entirely mimetically, through the use of legs, knees, neck, face...”, and creates a score of sudden convulsions and shivers, which rush as currents through the bodies of the boys, playing the horses. The trance rhythm of the horses' dance sweeps Alan away. It is a dance which seems to electrify the air and make it bigger. Without being imitative, the intense gestures and movements of the dance suggest things, which only the body can know: the touch and feel of naked skin and hair, the blows on the flesh and its resistance, the letting fall and the gripping of bodies, the getting of body over body, the fast breathing, which feels like a rush of adrenalin. Through the movement the performance gives the fullest and most direct expression of what words could only approximate: the sheer energy of desire, for which the body is nothing but a conduit.

Some of the most outstanding scenes in the show are purely physical, musical and visual, yet the most complex score is the psychological one, the one which traces the movements in the souls. In this view the whole cast is very powerful and harmonic. *Equus* is a production in which no part is left behind in the background, and this is mainly due to the work of the actors and the director. Malin Krastev gives a very convincing portrayal of doctor Dysart with all his changing masks – the professional

psychiatrist with his controlled gestures, grave facial expressions and soothing voice and the self-ironic intellectual, the good friend and the trustful husband, who can be funny and open-hearted. Dysart's counterpoint is Alan, played wonderfully by the actors Alexander Hadzhiangelov and Sevar Ivanov, taking turns in the role. What was most interesting for me here was that these two young actors, who are so different from each other, were actually striving to create a unified character, who transcends their differences. While watching the production twice with both of them, my instinctive drive to compare them vanished very fast. The whole structure of the part is so solidly built and well thought-through that the variations in the appearances, characterizations and nuances seemed as extra quality, instead of weakness. Both actors play Alan very expressively and intensely from the inside and from the outside. The presence of the actors is dominated by morbid anxiety, self-defensiveness and aggression – their portrayal of Alan is of someone taken out of a strait jacket, who can be calmed down only when being held, no matter with or against his will. Alan's gestures quickly turn into attack, his intonations quickly rise to shouts and screams. This turbulent internal state is complemented by some of the most challenging choreographic movements and the actors Alexander Hadzhiangelov and Sevar Ivanov endure the role of Alan as athletes in emotional and physical sense.

The acting presence in the supporting roles is dense and intense. The actors show each character from various angles: we see the mother (Stanka Kalcheva) in her religious fanaticism, but also with her genuine

love and honesty; the father (Svetoslav Dobrev) with his healthy common sense, but also with his blind hypocrisy; the girl Jill (Nia Krysteva) with her exaggerated and fake posturing as a seductress, but also with her purity of a girl in love; the magistrate Hesther (Gergana Hristova) with all her stubbornness of an ambitious lawyer, but also with her intuitive altruism of a woman, who can be compassionate and supportive. The other actors from the ensemble, who have only episodic roles, also impress with the thoughtful and expressive lines of gesture and behavior in their acting. Generally the production is impressive with the accomplished harmony of each stage element, which, as a whole, makes more balanced the presentation of the text, where the focus falls exclusively on the themes of dissonance and disturbance. With these last two words I would also like to evoke associations for the process of listening, for concentrated attention and communication. In *Equus* Shaffer's characters are endlessly talking, explaining and interrogating each other, but their ruthless scrutiny leads only to new accusations. It is only when they start to listen to each other, that the conflicts seem to begin to withdraw. The psychiatrist reaches the boy's heart not because of his skills to investigate and manipulate, but because he can listen. I think that the crew of the Youth Theatre has succeeded in listening to the play too.

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*Translated by
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