

Sometimes a work of art comes along and smacks you directly across the face, as if to violently wake you from some philosophical slumber by way of only its pure brilliance. I can count on one hand the pieces that have done that to me across any and all art forms, and Peter Shaffer's *Equus* as produced by the Pittsburgh Public Theater is one of that truly select and happy few. I try to not be one to overdramatize or take any artwork too seriously, but director Ted Pappas and the top-to-bottom standout cast effectively grab you by the collar and force you to take it in, and to take a good long look at yourself as you do.

The plot of *Equus* starts off innocently enough, if a bit violently: 17 year old Alan Strang (Spencer Hamp) has taken a spike and blinded 6 horses in the stable where he works, and no one can understand why. Family lawyer Hesther Solomon (Lisa Velten Smith) is frustrated in any and every attempt to get a word out of the boy that doesn't come in the form of icy sing-song corporate jingles, and so Alan and his case are dumped into the hands of a renowned child psychiatrist, Martin Dysart (Daniel Krell, and stunningly so). The story branches out from the central support of Dysart and Alan's daily psychiatric sessions, played with a perfect tension by Hamp and Krell, interspersed with flashbacks and interviews with Alan's parents and employer, among others, all in an effort to comprehend the motivation of a teenage boy to lash out so specifically and brutally— through the eyes of the horse.

Not only does the plot enthrall, the staging and the acting are similarly captivating and effective. As in most productions of *Equus*, the horses are represented by men wearing metallic caged horse heads and hooves, a remarkably compelling and concise way of getting across the blurred lines between man and horse. Ben Blazer as Nugget, Alan's favorite horse, somehow gets a full range of emotion across while seemingly doing little but marching around the threadbare yet maximally effective stage, backed by five gigantic doors, to be used to chilling ends later on. Krell's interspersed soliloquies strike deep; no performance has gripped me to this degree, as he pours out emotion while remaining ever detached, right up to the breaking point. If you know *Equus* only from the hubbub surrounding Daniel Radcliffe's Broadway nudity (yes, that scene is here, and it is essential), or if you're a longtime fan, or really no matter what, see *Equus*. Hopefully it leaves you as it left me at the final curtain: jaw dropped, hands together in wholehearted applause.