

entertainment

Equus a shattering psychodrama

By Colin Smith

Peter Shaffer's award-winning play *Equus* has at last been transcribed onto celluloid. As directed by Sidney Lumet (*Network*, *Dog Day Afternoon*), written for the screen by Shaffer himself, and starring Richard Burton and Peter Firth (both of whom give towering performances), the film is a perverse and shattering psychodrama that directly, subtly, plays on all psychological weaknesses possible in any audience. It has the power to send one staggering into the aisles.

The film operates on a story-within-a-story level, with a battered and nervous Dr. Martin Dysart (Burton) relating to us (talking directly into the camera) the story of a psychotic 17-year-old stablehand named Alan Strang (Firth) who stunned and horrified

the placid English countryside by committing an atrocious crime.

From there on we watch the doctor treat Alan to effect a cure on him, to make him remember the deed he committed.

The boy, who is not all that he seems, quickly picks up on the doctor's own psychological flaws, and plays on them. At this point "treatment" becomes a battle of the two souls, building up to a horrifying climax and denouement.

The jolting success *Equus* has is largely due to the complex symbol-metaphor script flow. The film's time-space sense is disturbed by numerous flashbacks and chronologically upset sequences (as in the beach scene with the adult Strang playing out a memory that occurred when he was a child.)

Shaffer and Lumet downplay the

visual images, symbols, metaphors, etc., for spoken ones; thus, the film's unreal prose shuffles *Equus* into the category of allegory. The scenario is so multi-layered, though, that one is consistently unsure of what allegorical point is being made.

Darker elements seem to be out in force here, as Shaffer's supraliminal script raises doubts about the functioning of the psyche, the boundaries of insanity, religion, the essence of existence... in this respect *Equus* is very much an existentialist statement.

Under the aegis of Sidney Lumet the powerful film, notably not for the squeamish or prudish, comes to life. His sturdy and self-effacing directorial style allows the elements of the script to emerge while producing uniformly excellent performances from the cast.



Dr. Martin Dysart (Richard Burton) comforts Alan Strang (Peter Firth)

Besides Burton and Firth, the notables include Colin Blakely as the boy's demanding father and Joan Plowright as his religiously-inclined mother; Harry Andrews as the stable manager; Eileen Atkins as the compassionate magistrate; and Jenny Agutter as the attractive woman who gets Alan his job in the stables.

Finally, other elements add immeasurably to the film. Maximum effects are extracted by John

Victor-Smith's meticulous editing, Oswald Morris' haunting photography, Richard Rodney Bennett's brooding score, and some exquisitely atmospheric lighting.

Despite its slow pace and lengthy 138 minutes, *Equus* is never staid or dull; it is a case of a uniformly excellent group of film people bringing a powerful scenario to the screen with the perfectionism and far-reaching impact.

'Pontiac' stalls as Davies switches gears in mid-play

By Jennifer Alley

Robertson Davies' new play *Pontiac and the Green Man* is a disappointment the public should not have to take from a mature artist like Mr. Davies, or any artist.

The machinery of the play is thin, and considering the admirable historic material, and the conflicts and achievements that Major Rogers' life presents, it is even thinner.

Roger is an English soldier and inventor of guerrilla warfare whose loyalty to the king and his officers conflicts with his respect and admiration for the Indians, and his awareness of the wrongs done to them. His play *Pontiac* (Pontiac) was written to make the English public aware — to politicize them.

None of this would you know from the play. Indeed the machinery of the play — that the Rogers' play *Pontiac* is introduced as evidence against him in his treason trial — is thin, and deservedly so, as it becomes merely a means and excuse for Davies to make comments and comedy about the theatre, actors and public.

Yet after a very short while we forget the place we are in, a treason court, for we are too busy laughing.

We enjoy ourselves immensely during the first act. Here, no one is permitted to take himself seriously (except Rogers, who conveniently keeps quiet), neither Judge, nor officers nor actors. The court gets involved in one way or another with the play, making fools of themselves and becoming very human in the process. There is one time when Huguenot Judge Cremaché chases Rev. Potter round the courtroom, with Potter fleeing for his life.

This, says Lieut. Col Prevost, is the result of the spell of the theatre — it turns everyone a bit mad. In Act I Davies' sense of humor and timing is very acute, and he shows himself a master of the genre.

Actually, Major Rogers is not spared either. Just as he makes a dramatic declaration on his case and King George's Commission, (hitherto never revealed) the bell rings for lunch and he is left kneeling in the middle of the stage.

We leave for intermission well satisfied with what we think is a comedy.

But in the second act suddenly we are expected to take the whole thing seriously — not the treason trial oddly enough, but Rogers and his play — and it is too late. We can't. It becomes boring.

As long as the play is comic, we

are too busy laughing to care that the characters are cardboard or that they talk too much and do little — in short that they are only mouthpieces or foils for the author's opinions and have no life of their own.

As soon as Davies changes the rules mid-play, from comedy to serious drama (a flaw in the piece and difficult to carry off) he is subject to the laws and expectations we have of serious drama, and he disappoints us.

His characters are one dimensional, have no personality, and do not develop. As comic characters of course, they were excellent, but here



Major Robert Rogers, the visionary green-uniformed guerrilla hero of the 1760's, met Pontiac during the French and Indian Wars. His advocacy of the Indian cause resulted in his being charged with treason and conspiracy. He died in a British debtors' prison in 1795.

badly flawed. (Honnymann, played by Tony Stephenson is the exception.)

Davies refuses to allow any of the rising conflicts in the play to break, another serious flaw, and we do not believe his scotch tape solutions. Neither the conflicts of Rogers and his wife, nor that of Rogers and Lieut. Col. Jones, or Capt. Lieut. de Peyster with both Rogers and his commanding officer are allowed to break.

In the second act, the problem that arises is not that of the hero Rogers and his narrower officers, but the question of the author's relation to the play and his characters.

And that is very boring to all but artists and theatre buffs — a very small percentage of the public.

Major Rogers ends up to be the quintessential misunderstood loner of an artist — that outdated and ego-satisfying convention of the romantics, and a much less interesting person than he was in the first act. At the end of act two he cries out in archetypal artistic identification "I am Pontiac". None of us believe him.

Perhaps it is really Mr. Davies crying out in the wings "I am Major Rogers", artistic and misunderstood by the public and critics. But I don't believe that either. In fact I think Mr. Davies is overindulged.

But why should he have any respect? After all, he was commissioned to write the play, and he got his friend Laurier La Pierre to perform in it (and very well too). Further everyone knows (at least Davies does) that the people are fools anyway, and especially critics. Indeed, Mr. Davies defends himself in advance from these fools in a scene there is no reason for — since it advances nothing in the play — unless Davies himself knew of his own plays' failures. So he doesn't have to listen to Bluestockings.

Indeed he doesn't. He could despite his novels, remain another hack playwright.

For the actors and Director Martin Hunter, no blame need be attached to them. It was a very good production. Particularly among the actors I noted Rod Beatties as G. Egerton, the romantic actor, Brenda Davies, as leader of the troupe, who balanced their comedy beautifully. Tony Stephenson's Honnymann was believable and even serious. Judith Hunter's Mrs. Rogers was insipidly ladylike and comically balanced. And Laurier La Pierre and Douglas Abel (Potter) were evenly matched.

Rosalind Goldsmith's Monnelia was balanced in comedy and coyness, and George Vanchuk was fine nicely absurd the soldier with a touch for comedy.

The scenic background was excellent — too good in fact for a poor theatrical troupe supposed to be low on costumes and scenery, and the mechanical marching at the beginning and end of the play, a good touch.

The defects are in fact the playwright's. Let us see if he can be bothered to do anything about them.

Pontiac and the Green Man plays til Nov. 5 at the MacMillan Theatre.

Livesay recalls '30s

"Right Hand, Left Hand" by Dorothy Livesay; Press Porcupine \$6.95 soft cover, reviewed by Eric Walberg.

What a period was the Depression! For those of us too young to remember it, Ms. Livesay (Dee) has provided an incomparable document covering the arts, the mores and the economics of the ten "lost" years, or rather our ten most important years.

Dee gives us a commentary (always meaty) on each of her "periods" of writing and politics, followed by relevant news articles, political polemics, stories, and of course poems. This novel format is demanded by the diversity of her many talents.

What struck me most among Dee's writing were her *essays* — the passion of the poet, the drive and commitment of the political radical are tempered and disciplined by the sober essayist.

For example, in 1936 Dee illegally entered a B.C. company town (read "concentration camp"), Corbin, and interviewed various strikers. Their story of police brutality and an inhuman plight jumps from the page with simple eloquence.

"This isn't Germany, but British Columbia, April, 1936," we are reminded. On the other hand, Blairmore, a neighbouring town, had previously won its union battle and had, as a result, elected Canada's first labour council slate. Its main street had even been renamed Tim Buck Boulevard!

The turmoil and anguish of a nation being awakened to a grim reality constantly hits the reader. What adds impact to her words is that the problems of the 1930s are the problems of today. Racism, unemployment, anticommunism... The list is unfortunately far too long.

Dee's poetry reflects and is inspired by these problems — *An Immigrant, Day and Night, Depression Suite*.

Her essays and articles are withering attacks on those who ignore these problems, as for example in her remarkable essay *Proletarianism in Canada*: "No. There is no proletarian literature

in Canada; but there is no Canadian literature either... Until we look to the people, and the industries, and the economics of our social set-up, we will have no original contribution to make."

Do not think that, with such emphasis on politics, Dee is without a sense of humour — she has some fun with novelist Morley Callaghan by juxtaposing a rather unfavourable view of her by him, with a rap on his knuckles by her, in a review of *They Shall Inherit the Earth*. Says Dee, "A hammer is being used to drive in a pin."

In many ways then, the timing of these memoirs could not be more appropriate — the battle for economic and cultural sovereignty is not a new one, but has its roots deep

The drive and commitment of the political radical are tempered by the sober essayist

in the Depression. It is a battle which Dee fought on all fronts — as labour activist, social worker, woman of letters, and communist.

Her work as a supporter of labour and unions is a struggle which is being renewed in a period of inflation and unemployment.

Much of her life during the latter half of the 1930s revolved around the support of the Spanish Republic, which today after nearly 40 years has begun to pick up the pieces after Franco's brutal reign.

Her search for a truly Canadian culture and her belief that it must be a people's culture are aspects of the "Quebec crisis" which must be faced. The recent republication of *Eight Men Speak* and other 30s work is no coincidence.

Her work and writing as a feminist make her a vital historic figure in the fight for women's rights, a battle which continues with renewed strength today.

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