



Equus

Jenny Ivers

Why do people do the things they do? It's a question the world's greatest philosophers, theologians, scientists and doctors have been debating for centuries. And it's a question right at the heart of Peter Shaffer's award-winning play *Equus*, which is currently enjoying a revival tour across the country's theatres.

It hit the headlines last year when Harry Potter star Daniel Radcliffe stripped naked for the lead role of Alan Strang – a disturbed teenager who is brought to a psychiatrist for analysis after committing a shocking crime. Strang, a horse lover who has violently blinded six horses, proves to be one of Dr Martin Dysart's most challenging cases.

Throughout the first act the audience is enticed into the puzzle as pieces from Strang's childhood and upbringing are picked up by Dysart. The young Strang has been caught up in an ideological struggle between his 'religious' mother and atheist father, which comes to a head when the latter – in a fit of rage – tears down a picture of the suffering Christ from his son's wall.

To placate the boy, Mr Strang replaces it with a photo of a horse, whose enlarged piercing eyes – staring straight into the camera – dominate the picture. It's a decisive moment from which Alan exchanges worshipping the Christ with a perverted passion for horses, culminating in the harrowing blinding episode.

Equus interrogates the practice of psychiatry as Strang is psychologically and physically stripped bare before our eyes. The nudity is not gratuitous and serves to illustrate the layer-by-layer

uncovering of the complex mental mystery. Dysart, who is having something of a professional crisis, questions the purpose of his practice which is able to cure Strang of his psychotic passion but unable to replace it with anything life-giving. The young man is left exposed, naked and empty.

As I watched a gripping and maturely-acted performance of *Equus* at Sheffield's Lyceum theatre, the following verses from Paul's letter to the Romans ran through my mind:

Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen. (Romans 1: 21-25)

We are all worshippers, and who or what we worship drives our behaviour. *Equus* highlights the devastating consequences when God is ousted from his rightful place and replaced by an unworthy substitute. What the play is unable to provide is true knowledge of the God who sets us free from slavery to idols, covers our shame and gives us life in all its fullness.