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Middlebrowning the Avant-Garde: *Equus* on the West End¹

RYAN M. CLAYCOMB

In March of 2007, I took a group of West Virginia University students to London for Spring Break to see four plays and to tour the literary- and theatrical-history sites of the city. While other plays held more appeal for me (Martin Crimp's astounding *Attempts on her Life*) and others brought with them more cultural capital (the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Coriolanus* in Stratford), Peter Shaffer's play *Equus* was the most eagerly anticipated by the majority of my overwhelmingly female class. At the theatre, I saw that the demographic makeup of our class was entirely consistent with that of the rest of the audience, which skewed significantly younger and more female than other West End and Broadway productions I've attended. And the buzz of the production – a certain young, naked celebrity – dominated the lobby chatter. This effect was never clearer than during a moment in Act One, when Dysart, the psychiatrist (played by Richard Griffiths), asks his young charge to enact the personal ritual with the horse Nugget that leads to the play's central mystery: the boy's brutal blinding of six horses in the stables where he worked. The patient, Alan Strang (played by Daniel Radcliffe, star of the enormously successful *Harry Potter* film series) begins to walk the psychiatrist through the experience. At one point the following exchange occurs:

DYSART (*going back to his bench*) You take your shoes off?

ALAN Everything.

DYSART All your clothes?

ALAN Yes. (70)

At this moment, an audible collective gasp rose in the theatre and, from my vantage point high in the Grand Circle, I saw (and felt) virtually the entire audience shift forward in their seats. This is what they had come to see. Except that it became clear only moments later that Alan would only *mime* disrobing, and slowly, tentatively, the audience settled back into

their seats. The full visual pleasure of Radcliffe's newly buff body would have to wait, as the script indicates, for the next act.

Hence a popular classic of seventies theatre was catapulted into the postmodern culture industry of the new century, complete with media frenzy, mass-market draw, and a heightened sexualization of adolescence. Part of the appeal of the role for the young actor seems to have been the scent of legitimacy attached to *Equus*, revived at the Geilgud on West End for a three-month run. The play, originally produced in 1973 at the National Theatre at the Old Vic, appeared closely on the heels of the countercultural avant-garde of the 1960s, an avant-garde that clearly inspired the production's staging and its thematic concerns, if not its dramatic structure or its socio-political investments. The play itself shows influences from Japanese theatre traditions, work with masks, an attention to ritual, and nudity and explicit sexuality: influences themselves that might all be traced back through the sixties to what Peter Bürger calls the historical avant-garde of the early decades of the twentieth century. Yet, despite these trappings of the radical, *Equus* (as a performance text and as performance events in 1973 and 2007) is deeply implicated in the representational tactics of middle-class entertainment and in the reification of middle-class values. In particular, the play examines and eventually reaffirms the value of psychiatry – a profession that Michel Foucault shows is invested in Enlightenment-style epistemological projects of surveillance of the subject and medicalization of the aberrant (*Madness*) – and uses that lens to contain both deviance (mental and sexual) and the avant-garde tactics used to give that deviance representational form. Given the play's deep investment in bourgeois values of capitalist productivity, reason, and heteronormativity, then, it was ripe for this most recent, spectacularized production, a wholesale integration by specific and motivated cultural producers in publishing, theatre, and film, into a larger and more pervasive postmodern culture industry than even Horkheimer and Adorno would have imagined.

As text, performance, and pop-culture signifier, we can trace *Equus* – from its avant-garde influences through its middle-class anxieties to the middlebrow spectacle of the recent high-profile production in London – as a local example of a familiar (but not inevitable) narrative of dilution and recuperation of avant-garde aesthetics by a late-capitalist economic system of transnational media integration and commodification. The play itself, from its original production onward, pathologizes and contains the avant-garde as both mad and queer, recuperating it into a framework of liberal middle-class ethics and economics, an effort that is redoubled by this most recent production in text, in performance, and in the material context of the performance. In what follows, I will consider this play as an example of this recuperation narrative facilitated by the entanglements

of commercial theatre; the push and pull of the potentially resistant aesthetics of the avant-garde on the one hand, and the bourgeois social regime and postmodern expression of late capitalism (à la Adorno, Lukács, and Jameson) on the other; and as an effort to heteronormativize the sexual politics of the theatre in the interests of the capital value of its star and the publishing and film interests he represents. But even as this play in performance seems to help mark out the trajectory of the death of the avant-garde, it also troubles the waters of this story with traces of the residuum of a resistant, even queered, avant-garde that lingers beyond narrative containment and cultural co-opting.

***EQUUS*, THE MIDDLEBROW AND THE AVANT-GARDE**

While many in my audience clearly came to see Daniel Radcliffe in the buff, one wonders what the audience in the 1973 National Theatre production at the Old Vic came to see. On its face, the story of a psychiatrist's process of discovering the cause of a young man's horrific crime – the blinding of six horses – is a fairly conventional one. Dysart, the psychiatrist, agrees to treat the boy and discovers a repressed upbringing with an overly religious mother and a sceptical working-class father together with a fascination with horses that is rooted in both sexual and religious awakening. The boy finds a site for that awakening, we learn, through sexualized, even masochistic, midnight rituals with the horses at the stables where he works. After a young female co-worker encourages him to join her at an adult film, he is mortified to find and be confronted by his father. When the girl, titillated by the scene, entices Strang back to the stables, the boy's conflicted sexuality drives him mad enough to blind the horses there so they will not witness the acts he finds himself desiring. Throughout, we hear the psychiatrist narrating his own conflict – to leave the boy with his own worship (something Dysart feels sorely lacking in his loveless marriage and clinically cold career) or heal him to make him more compatible with the middle-class culture around him.

In his essay "Middlebrow Anxiety," David Savran takes on hierarchical notions of culture operating throughout the twentieth century as markers of both cultural and sexualized anxiety. Savran makes the unusual move of reanimating the racist and classist hierarchies of low-, middle-, and high-brow specifically for the purposes of historicizing and critiquing the artificial distinctions that they create, as well as the lingering anxieties that they provoke, long after the terms themselves have retired from fashion. I revisit these hierarchies here in order to explore two such lingering anxieties: first, my own critical anxieties about the containment of an avant-garde aesthetic within the culture industry; and second, the degree of sexual panic this play's thematized containment of the avant-garde enacts. Savran

observes that, in the middle decades of the twentieth century, middlebrow culture is to be contrasted with both lowbrow taste, “associated with a fraction . . . of the working class . . . who were usually seen as dupes . . . for . . . communism and fascism,” and highbrow culture represented by an educated elite within the bourgeoisie, “exiled, because of income level, from the upper classes” and distinguished from them by “a then old-fashioned avant-gardism” (5). Commercial theatre itself, Savran finds, is “[n]either high nor low – or rather *both high and low at the same time* – theatre has consistently evinced those characteristics that have historically been branded as middlebrow: the promiscuous mixture of commerce and art, entertainment and politics, the banal and the auratic, the profane and the sacred, spectacular and personal, erotic and intellectual” (15). One might say that, in this postmodern age, any cultural artefact is “too close to the skin of the economic to be stripped off and examined in its own right” (Jameson xv), and yet, as Savran suggests, theatre is particularly implicated in this tension, and *Equus* seems to illustrate this notion, present at its premiere, and amplified in the most recent West End production.

Directed by John Dexter and designed by John Napier, the 1973 National Theatre production was an enormous hit, transferring to the West End for a long run, running on Broadway for over a thousand performances, and earning Tony Awards in 1975 for best play and best direction, all of which guaranteed the play’s presence in community theatre seasons and undergraduate syllabi for years. In the previous decade, the offerings of the National Theatre at the Old Vic under the artistic direction of Sir Laurence Olivier had largely been the sort of productions that David Savran notes (“Middlebrow”) would have been perceived as upper-middlebrow (a term I unpack below): Shakespeare, classics of the intervening centuries, serious literary plays of the twentieth century. Forays into experimental territory were limited: Shaffer’s own *Royal Hunt of the Sun*, which treats the avant-garde in much the same contained and othered way as does *Equus* (Innes 228), was the company’s first new work. Peter Brook’s production of Ted Hughes’s translation of Seneca’s *Oedipus* is perhaps another example. But, by and large, the move to present “national culture” onstage as a remedy for a West End that was decidedly focused on producing “current” work was visible in the early rhetoric of the National Theatre.² *Equus*, then, fits neatly into the middlebrow paradigm Savran deploys. And if middlebrow describes the aesthetic sensibilities of the National Theatre, its commercial interests are not far off, since *Equus*’s being transferred to West End and Broadway spaces in the seventies affirmed its commercial viability.

Because of those contributions, that initial production has become famous, as much as a landmark moment in theatre design as anything

else, a design with entrancing power, organic yet imbued with the supernatural.³ *Equus* was a play that drew its power to astonish audiences from its use of experimental theatre tactics to invigorate a plot deeply tied to traditional narrative structures and cultural values. In this argument, I essentially follow the line of Christopher Innes, who notes that the play “borrows eclectically from the avant-garde,” whose “visual imagery is totally compelling” (Innes 228–9). In his short reading of Shaffer’s work, Innes identifies influences, direct and indirect, from Grotowski, Barrault, and Brook in the play’s “nudity, stylized theatricality and bare stage,” as well as in its “dream sequences and a scenic structure that cuts across the logic of time as well as cause and effect following the irrational associations of the subconscious, plus ritual chanting, stylized masks, and mythic archetypes: Apollo vs. Dionysus” (228). Indeed, much of the critical literature on *Equus* is concerned with centring the play’s use and consideration of myth and ritual rather than with the (vanishing) place of that ritual within late capitalist culture (see Despotopoulou; Mustazza; Lounsberry). We might add to this list of attributes Japanese forms used specifically to stage the effect of the horses: the rhythmic stamping of the Noh stage is echoed in the metallic hooves of the actors playing the horses; the revolve of the Kabuki theatre gives the illusion of motion during Alan’s ride on Nugget; even the mask work of the actors in wire horse masks brings to mind, among other traditions, early Bunraku puppetry.

And yet, for all that there are these surface avant-garde features, Innes argues that “the overall statement discredits [its] imaginative reality” (Innes 229). In the end, to Innes, the success of *Equus*, with its middle-class-affirming narrative, announced that “the avant-garde approach had, as it were, arrived, but in a watered-down and conventional form” (229). In this sense, even the 1973 production of *Equus* fits neatly into the narrative of the defused and diluted trajectory of avant-garde aesthetics, which Bürger, Paul Mann, and others have argued represents the failure of the historical avant-garde. Whether or not we agree with these eulogists of the avant-garde, we can see a tension between competing ideologies at work both in the play script and, even more clearly, in the recent West End production. Indeed, the contradictions embedded in Savran’s description of the middlebrow might be said to be embodied, to some degree or other, in Shaffer’s play. For example, Dysart posits the central tension between the boy’s fitness for a deadening modern society (the banal) and the ecstasy of his worship (the auratic). We might similarly find in the psychiatrist’s Apollonian/Dionysian divide a replaying of the erotic/intellectual divide. Indeed, even Dysart’s love of Greek antiquities (art) is contrasted neatly with his wife’s predilection for cheap souvenirs (commerce). Yet I would push this notion of competing ideologies further to argue not only that Shaffer’s play *exemplifies* a common narrative about the recuperation

of the avant-garde but that it is explicitly *about* the process of containing the avant-garde and its philosophical underpinnings within a middlebrow aesthetic and a bourgeois social outlook complicit with late capitalism.

Bürger argues that the bourgeois investments of western institutions of art are at this point historically inevitable, and to that end, commercial theatre (here in the form of *Equus* on the West End) must seem even more so. Elsewhere, Savran has argued that “[e]xperimental performance needs the idea of a staid, bourgeois theatre to oppose. At the same time, the commercial theatre needs the fantasy of a noncommercial realm of pure art that it can reject as esoteric and effete yet secretly imitate, and from which it draws inspiration and prestige” (“Death” 11). It is this tension between the commercial and the avant-garde, or between the lowbrow and the highbrow, that produces the anxieties played out onstage in *Equus*. Specifically, Savran notes the *anxiety* produced by the middlebrow, where, among other things, “fears about standardization, commodity culture, victimization, organized labor, and ‘mass man’ are routinely displaced onto women and the domestic sphere” (“Middlebrow” 8), a displacement I’ll discuss more fully below. Such fears incite a demand for highbrow and avant-garde cultural arbiters of taste and aesthetics to police the boundaries of cultural hierarchies.

While the grounds for highbrow anxieties about middlebrow incursions on the avant-garde may differ from the grounds for radicalist anxieties, those radicalist anxieties suggest resistance to an aesthetics of the theatre that might have been labelled alternately bourgeois and middlebrow at various historical moments and from various ideological positions. Certain Marxist lines of thought, notably those expounded by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in “The Culture Industry,” trace such representational tactics to a lamentable incursion of the market into the realm of culture, where artistic merit is replaced by sales figures as a measure of worth. They write,

Marked differentiations such as those of A and B films, or of stories in magazines in different price ranges, depend not so much on subject matter as on classifying, organizing, and labeling consumers. Something is provided for all so that none may escape; the distinctions are emphasized and extended. The public is catered for with a hierarchical range of mass-produced products of varying quality, thus advancing the rule of complete quantification. Everybody must behave (as if spontaneously) in accordance with his previously determined and indexed level, and choose the category of mass product turned out for his type. Consumers appear as statistics on research organization charts, and are divided by income groups into red, green, and blue areas. (97)

The culture industry becomes a path for initiating consumers into the logics of the market, the works produced by and for it, no more than

propaganda for full integration. In contrast, the avant-garde, for Adorno and the Frankfurt School, was historically a site of resistance to the machinations of the culture industry.

Yet we might usefully pause here to consider the notion of the avant-garde. There are, indeed, many historical avant-gardes – including the Dadaists and Surrealists embraced by Adorno and mid-century Cold War avant-gardes that revolved around such collectives as the Black Mountain School, the Living Theatre, and the Performance Group. Further, I follow Mike Sell in the notion that

[t]he avant-garde did not die during the 1960s, nor did it simply repeat the achievements and failures of the past in some kind of conceptually empty ‘neo’ gesture, as Bürger and a great many others contend. Quite the contrary, the avant-garde is still alive today and equipped with a self-consciousness informed by the kinds of penetrating critiques mounted against the avant-garde since the mid-1950s. (4–5)

Yet while we might say that the original production of *Equus* bore a formal resemblance to some features of earlier avant-garde performance practices and that it may even have shared critical cultural sympathies with some of those practices, its success on the stage of British national culture for a decidedly middle-class audience deeply compromised any stance of resistance we might otherwise have located there. And, even admitting the persistence of avant-garde movements into the present moment, the material circumstances surrounding these most recent productions of the play further obliterate most traces of a culturally and politically disruptive representational effect.

This fact might lead us to distinguish *avant-garde aesthetics*, with its attendant history of recuperation into dominant paradigms, from *vanguard politics*, a political stance that could just as usefully be played out in social-realist forms. That is, popular conceptions and less attentive criticism may treat the avant-garde merely as a set of structural features of artistic works. Indeed, the successful separation of experimental aesthetics from politics in an artwork may well be the defining feature of the co-opting of the avant-garde. We might, then, see this tension playing itself out along historical lines of debate about the avant-garde, through the well-documented debate between Adorno and Georg Lukács (see Bürger). While Adorno valued such tactics as the best possibility for disrupting market logic, Georg Lukács argued that the avant-garde was, instead, symptomatic of a bourgeois malaise, distracting from the kinds of realist representation that best points up abuse and rallies workers to revolt.

We might, therefore, be tempted to read the two theorists into *Equus* in an essentialist either/or proposition: either, on the one hand, the play’s use

of avant-garde representational tactics within a middlebrow narrative and theatrical framework serves merely to illustrate the inextricability of the avant-garde from middle-class socio-economic interests (the Lukács position); or, on the other, its use of the avant-garde unsettles the ideology of the play specifically and of commercially successful theatrical representation generally (the Adorno position). Then again, both perspectives might be put to use in examining a specific instance of the co-opting of an avant-garde *aesthetic* into the culture industry, not necessarily by the middle class generally, but by specific cultural agents.⁴ Here, I follow Savran's notion of middlebrow theatre as an ambivalent functionary of capitalist ideology broadly and of the culture industry more specifically, a functionary that both embodies and attempts to contain resistant discourse; *Equus* then, with its embodied avant-garde performance practices, can also be said to be working to contain those very practices. Innes's critique of *Equus* seems primarily based on an observation that the avant-garde tradition that he traces (and that the play invokes) is primarily one rooted in primitivism: "to return to man's 'roots,' whether in the psyche or prehistory" (3). For Innes, then, the play is a watered-down version of the avant-garde because it raises the spectre of primitivism more as an intellectual game than as a viable possibility and then ultimately abandons it. Similarly, Helene Baldwin argues that "[t]he play is soap opera; the direction is theater of cruelty plastered on over the plot" (126). Even Una Chaudhuri, in her defence of the play, acknowledges that the plot itself "seems to belong to a category firmly established . . . in eighteenth century 'bourgeois drama': the conflict between the individual – part free soul, part social product – and his society" (49).

In fact, what passes for the avant-garde in this play can be almost exclusively traced back to Strang's own delusional equine pantheon. The logic of time is disrupted only because Strang's story cannot come out coherently: the pathologized narrative must be teased out by Dysart as the reluctant agent of narrative coherence; the dream sequences and fantastical flashbacks result from the same pathologized narrative incoherence. The stylized theatricality revolves primarily around the representation of the horses themselves, whose sacral nature is conveyed through the extraordinary stage images created by the masks, costumes, and actors playing the horses. This heightened theatricality, including the mask work and ritual features that virtually every critic identifies, are almost exclusively the means of representing Strang's heightened sense of the horses, a sense that we come to understand as perhaps enviable but also no doubt the source of Strang's excruciating psychic pain. The climactic scene of each act, where the sexual tension is heightened, becomes, in the first instance, a playing out of the ritual and, in the second, a recognition of the incompatibility of his spiritual world with a normative heterosexual development.

Virtually every instance of theatrical representation that we might describe as avant-garde in aesthetic can also be read as evidence of Strang's pathology. Meanwhile, the play's entire narrative drive is devoted to the containment of that pathology (even as it occasionally mourns it). The play, then, can be easily said to be *about* the containment of the avant-garde itself, both in the plot's push to contain the primitivistic impulses of Strang's personal religion and in the staging's persistent tendency to pathologize the representational tactics that bring those impulses to life on the stage.

If we factor in Strang's family situation, such a reading is not only an *analogy* for classed representation but literally a story of class struggle, however sublimated that struggle may be. Inasmuch as Strang's pathology is implied to be, in part, the result of the rift between his parents, that rift can hardly be read on any lines other than class. His father is a man of decidedly working-class origins whose intolerance of religion is almost Marxist – work is shown to replace religion, as Dysart finds out when he visits the Strang home. “He works Sundays as well?” Dysart asks Mrs. Strang. “Oh, yes. He doesn't set much store by Sundays” (30). Alan's mother, on the other hand, has, if not an aristocratic lineage, then at least aristocratic impulses with her preference for “equitation” and her “grandfather [who] dressed for the horse” (49). When Alan lashes out at his mother, he derides her traditionally aristocratic association with horses and riders; he scoffs that “ladies and gentlemen aren't naked,” and that “[s]he'd have to put bowler hats on them! . . . Jodhpurs!” (96).⁵ While Strang's father has worked his way up into the middle class, we might read his mother as having married down into it. Strang, then, is the progeny of a destabilizing middle-class marriage of upper and lower class, and his own path is to resist the Weberian expectations of work and productivity implied in his despised (and to his mother, “common”) job at the electronics store. His impulse to primitivist worship, then, can be seen as an avant-garde rebellion against bourgeois expectations. Moreover, if the avant-garde is, as Lukács suggests, a symptom of bourgeois malaise, then Alan Strang is a pathologized avant-gardiste, whose recounted madness is the source of all of the most strikingly original imagery in the play.

Strang's madness may even be said to infect his psychiatrist. When Dysart recounts his own dream of ritual sacrifice to the audience, it is Alan Strang's face he identifies in the dream as that of his sacrificial victim. When his own desires for the sacred come to the surface, Dysart is haunted by *Equus*, Strang's god. Even these instances of the avant-garde – primitivist in cast, experimental in representation, and anti-professional-class in implication – are all catalysed by Strang's case and result in the advent of further thematic and technical trappings of the avant-garde: the fascination with Greek archetypes, the longing for what

Artaud and Brook would call the Holy Theatre, “the last forum where idealism is still an open question” (Brook 42). This play gives us the momentary illusion of opening up this very question, opening a space “where the invisible can appear and has a deep hold on our thoughts” (42), then emphatically closes that space out with Dysart’s decision to heal the boy through the therapy of narrating the fateful night. This choice stages the avant-garde specifically for the empirical gaze of the doctor and the bourgeois society for which he ultimately stands, a society further represented by the audience in the expensive seats beyond the proscenium.

Perhaps the only “avant-garde” staging tactic that cannot be traced directly to representations of Strang’s peculiar madness is the stage itself, mostly bare but for the psychiatrist Dysart narrating to the audience. When others join the action on the stage, they are primarily useful in laying out his case study. Other critics have identified the play’s open stage, where some productions (including Napier’s 1973 design) seat portions of their audiences, as fostering a participatory audience, as a way of bringing the audience into the action. I would argue precisely the opposite: that, in duplicating the form of the medical theatre, the play actually distances the audience intellectually from the experiential, offering a pathologized display of the avant-garde itself. Indeed, Shaffer even prescribes that seats be tiered “in the fashion of a dissecting theatre” (13). Petra Küppers, a theorist of performance and disability, identifies in the medical theatre the authority of “the diagnostic gaze of the medical practitioner [which] can roam freely across the displayed bodies of patients” (39). Similarly, the psychiatrist places his own medical conundrum on display for us, the students of his lecture, to puzzle out.

When we read this in light of Foucault’s work both on the panopticon and on madness (*Discipline; Madness*), it is difficult to avoid the historically loaded image of surveillance as a means of establishing and containing difference. While Foucault and Marxist analysis are not easy bedfellows, we can usefully connect the rise of the asylum – with its concretization of the discursive divide between madness and reason and the confinement of madness within a medicalized notion of mental illness (Foucault, *Madness* ch. 9) – to the eighteenth-century rise of the bourgeoisie. The medical theatre provides a way to embody the pathological – Küppers identifies it as one of the few sanctioned theatrical spaces for performing disability – while containing the subversive potential of madness and corodoning it off from the productive spaces of bourgeois commerce and consumption. The analogy holds for radical representation of the avant-garde in the always-middlebrow commercial theatre: a space may be created for experimental performance tactics, but that performance is already beholden to the circulation of capital.⁶ Foucault notes that “[i]n our era, the experience of madness remains silent in the composure of knowledge

which, knowing too much about madness, forgets it" (*Madness* xii), and earlier that "the Reason-Madness nexus . . . will follow [Western culture] long after Nietzsche and Artaud" (xi). Not coincidentally, Nietzsche and Artaud both hover vaguely around this play: Nietzsche through the revival of the Apollonian/Dionysian divide, and Artaud through the surface features of avant-garde staging. And yet, if the play invokes those voices of madness, it does so specifically to enact their containment.

But just as Dysart's medical theatre provides a space for representing the aberrant and the avant-garde, his job is to heal the madness of worship, to stop the pain of the boy, and ultimately to choose to perform his professional duty "responsibly" within the context of a bourgeois social structure and within the context of the juridical processes of the state (Strang's case is referred to Dysart by the magistrate). Several critics, Baldwin included, suggest that Dysart represents a critique of psychiatry that follows the argument of R.D. Laing and that the play ultimately espouses this critique. Indeed, Theodore D. George's analysis suggests that the play deploys the same Foucauldian frameworks to critique psychiatry as I use to critique the play itself. But while psychiatric methods may be under scrutiny, their end results are finally approved of both by the characters in the play and by the narrative drive toward wholeness itself. Dysart's decision, one the audience is led to believe is the right one, is to pry open a space for Strang's wild visions, staged using the theatrical language of experiment, only to reject them in favour of a vaguely distasteful but ultimately necessary status quo, one that has the blessing of the state, the medical profession, and the urban marketplace for labour: Strang will ride "multi-lane highways driven through the guts of cities," while "his private parts will come to feel as plastic to him as the factory to which he will almost certainly be sent" (108). Strang's madness – source of worship, passion, and for the audience, the avant-garde – will be subsumed by the workings of state and marketplace, even as the language of the avant-garde itself is subsumed by those workings in the form of this wildly successful play. In this way, the avant-garde is invoked as the theatrical form of madness (albeit a compelling one), bracketed off by the narrative conventions of the well-made play, bringing us to a coherent closure in which the doctor has surveyed, treated, and normalized the aberrant child in the interests of the state.

Indeed, the 2007 production of the play heightens the normalizing effects of the original production as described in the published form of the play. First, we might note the increased emphasis on the spectacle of surveillance. In the program for the 2007 production, designer John Napier (reprising his role from the original production) notes, "I've incorporated aspects of a building I know in Bedford Row. Inside is a chamber, surrounded by a gallery where the public used to watch the

anatomist carry out dissections. It feels very appropriate for *Equus*" (qtd. in Senter 4). The tiered architecture of the Gielgud Theatre in the West End serves to highlight the effect of the medical theatre, with Griffiths (as Dysart), comporting himself less like a worker in the trenches of the state mental health system and more like a rarified medical lecturer holding forth to the rapt audience. Far from the participation of an onstage audience alluded to by Innes, here we are entirely passive, left to take notes in a darkened house. Furthermore, a few staging updates – the absence of audience members around the stage, the removal of the actors from the stage's perimeter when not in the action, the change of set colour from natural wood to sound-stage black, the ominous, floating dry-ice vapours that drift across the stage – invoke any number of television mystery shows in which a narrator invites the audience to witness a curious but ultimately contained phenomenon of aberration. The effect is to minimize the impact of a given audience on a performance, to distance that audience, and to better contain the spectacle of the abnormal on the stage. While the earlier production might be viewed as at least open about class, here class is represented less ambivalently and less visibly: the costuming choices for all the characters are understatedly middle-class: jeans, khakis, casual dress slacks all around. Alan's working-class father is now in chinos and a polo shirt (a subtle, unintended irony, given the character's distaste for the equestrian), while Mrs. Strang's class status is defused as well, her upper-class pretensions displaced by casting an Irish actress whose accent is not hidden. Class tensions, then – a hallmark of twentieth-century British drama – are neatly swept under the rug for a smoother inculcation into the values of assimilation that the play ultimately embraces as inevitable.

While the production choices of the 2007 production serve to highlight the inevitability of a bourgeois logic, the way that this production was circulated within the theatre market (and the film and publishing markets as well) provides a tangible example of the discursive process represented within the play's narrative. Contextually, we must note the decidedly post-modern, late-capitalist commercial context of complex multinational media interrelationships, which, as Jameson notes, "bear something of the same relationship to Horkheimer and Adorno's old 'Culture Industry' concept as MTV or fractal ads bear to fifties television series" (x), an analogy that might apply as well to the two productions of *Equus* considered here. Specifically, the choice to stage the play, a staple of the repertoire of small theatres and community troupes, at the Gielgud on the West End already suggests the production's artistic investment in profit. While live theatre is not a mass-produced product, West End and Broadway productions are probably the most closely connected to a mass-culture marketplace, with their T-shirts and original-cast soundtracks. And there can

be little question that the crucial involvement of this production in the culture industry (and the real source of profit for the production) lay in the casting of Daniel Radcliffe as Alan Strang. Rumours of Radcliffe's casting appeared as early as December 2005. Many recognized the impeccable timing of the production itself, just months before the release of the Radcliffe-starring blockbuster film *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (which made the *Harry Potter* film series the largest grossing film series of all time) and the final book in the *Harry Potter* series (which set sales and printing records for its initial print run). Further, the fact that the play closed at the Geilgud when Radcliffe left the cast three months after it opened and that Radcliffe was to return to the cast on Broadway in the fall of 2008, when the next *Harry Potter* film was originally supposed to be released,⁷ confirms the entanglements of this production of *Equus* with ticket sales, Radcliffe's career, and the *Harry Potter* franchise. Indeed, the Harry Potter phenomenon has come to be seen, by some scholars of children's literature at least, as the very epitome of the effects of global capital on the arts, representing, if not a celebration of middle-class values, then at least a popular "middlebrow" entertainment *par excellence*.⁸ And while Frederic Jameson may, perhaps, consider this merely symptomatic of the postmodern imbrication of the cultural and the economic, the association of a staging of *Equus* with the crown jewel of the Bloomsbury publishing catalogue and of Time Warner's film offerings exponentially ups the stakes of the culture-industry investments in the theatrical production. Viewed this way, this production of *Equus* can easily be seen as simply another cog in the advance press for both culture-industry events.

Many initial stories on the move to cast Radcliffe as Strang focused not on the appropriateness to the production's artistic viability of casting Radcliffe, but on the appropriateness of the role to Radcliffe's career as a marketable commodity. The *Daily Mail*, for example, noted, "It's a clear signal that Radcliffe wants challenging roles and will not settle for frivolous exploitation of his name" (Bamigboye). That is, the casting choice seemed specifically designed to use the cultural capital of the "legitimate theatre" to establish Radcliffe's commodity value as an actor in the future. *Equus* offered the actor (and by extension, everyone who stood to profit from the *Harry Potter* empire) cultural capital in a way that commodified an avant-garde aesthetic, just as the play's narrative depicts a bourgeois containment of that aesthetic and of the resistant potential of avant-garde primitivism. This final incorporation of *Equus* into the marketing machine of film and publishing brings to its conclusion a trajectory that Innes, Baldwin, and others had already begun to trace in the original productions of the play. What Innes describes as a "watered-down" avant-garde is something perhaps more alarming: a total subsuming of an avant-garde

aesthetic into a global late-capitalist system of integrated media that the aesthetic aimed at resisting directly and ultimately thwarting.

QUEERING THE AVANT-GARDE

We might give to this line of argument another turn of the screw, to wonder (as does Savran) about our own anxiety about the middlebrow, with the elitist, masculinist tendencies of the highbrow avant-garde to deride the (decidedly female, if those in the theatre with me are any indication) pop-cultural appeal of both this play and its mass-market tie-in. Nonetheless, *Equus* remains a site for analysis of one story about the trajectory of subsuming an avant-garde aesthetic, first into the “compromised” space of the middlebrow theatre, and then into a larger culture industry aimed at market profits well beyond the play itself. Whether we view this process as anxiety-producing (or even inevitable) depends, to a certain degree, on whether one views the avant-garde as a resistant aesthetic stance (an Adornan perspective), or as arising from a desire to police certain aesthetic boundaries, based on a completely different set of (bourgeois) class anxieties (Savran’s perspective). Yet while Savran’s account of middlebrow anxiety may frame my own critical panic about *Equus* and the containment of the avant-garde, his analysis, in many ways, implicates the gender and sexual anxieties that the middlebrow incites. In considering two unabashedly middlebrow offerings, *South Pacific* and *Rent*, Savran locates a concern for “unnatural intercourse” in these musicals, along lines of race in *South Pacific* and the “perverse coupling of high and low, art and commerce, straight and queer, rich and poor” in *Rent* (“Middlebrow” 34). Indeed, his analysis cites the form of the musical itself in these two plays as “a shameless, miscegenating romance” that takes “a promiscuous pleasure” in its intermixing (34). Here Savran works to recuperate the middlebrow in *South Pacific* as a site of such promiscuous intercourse of anxiety-producing discourses, even as tastemakers cordon them off from “serious” theatre. The case is more complicated for *Rent*, which Savran identifies as “neo-avant-gardist,” drawing as it does on Puccini’s depiction of nineteenth-century bohemians (“the first avant-garde”) in *La Boheme* (37). *Rent*’s overt self-awareness as an attempt at postmodern play, Savran argues, “is the cause of considerable pain and anxiety because it is continually linked – both in the musical and in the discourse surrounding production – to the problematics of selling out” (38), a statement that might just as easily be made in this essay about *Equus*, particularly in its most recent incarnation. Ultimately, Savran suggests, the “hipbrow” aesthetic of *Rent* only offers the “empty gestures of rebellion” of characters “[d]isaffected with the possibility of political and social change” (46).

While *Equus* makes more earnest gestures towards both the idea of rebellion and the more serious “upper-middlebrow” theatre that Savran suggests is desired by tastemakers like Ben Brantley of *The New York Times*, it similarly invokes an intermixing: of aesthetic styles, of classed identities, of straight and queer, and, perhaps most shockingly, of human and animal. Here sexual anxiety is played out on multiple vectors, the most obvious of which is the way that the play pathologizes the homoerotic in much the same way as it pathologizes the avant-garde. Indeed, the avant-garde might be said to be pathologized *as* queer by the play itself. For example, Strang’s father suggests that his pathology is partly the result of an unnatural attachment to his mother: “They’ve always been thick as thieves. I can’t say I entirely approve – especially when I hear her whispering that Bible to him hour after hour, up there in his room” (33). That such an “inappropriate” mother–son relationship is connected to religious fervour (which we later learn is crucial to the formation of Alan’s equine pantheon) transposes a typical anxiety about the development of homosexual tendencies from the familial to the spiritual. This anxiety is heightened when Frank Strang connects this fervour to sexual deviance: “The boy was absolutely fascinated by all that. He was always mooning over religious pictures. I mean real kinky ones, if you receive my meaning” (34), a reference to sadomasochistic desire that is further heightened when Frank later returns to Dysart’s office to tell him of Alan’s beating himself while praying to the horse picture above his bed. That this is the same room where he and his mother earlier conferred on his religious education eroticizes the spiritual as queer, masochistic, and onanistic, all outside of a productive heteronormativity.

As if these connections weren’t enough, we get a more explicitly homoerotic source for Alan’s madness when he recounts the experience of his first horse ride, offered him by a “college chap” played by the same actor who plays the horse Nugget. The actor in this production, Will Kemp, exuded charisma and sensual appeal, an appeal doubled by Strang’s description of the scene, which is staged as Strang literally mounting and riding the horseman, so that the erotic overtones are unmistakable. Even as Dysart asks, “Was it wonderful?” (40), Alan rides in ecstatic silence. While the overtones are obvious, the sexuality is also hedged: Strang is not naked, and while the horse is presupposed to be naked, the actor wears a shirt over the brown track suit that otherwise creates the eerily mimetic effect of the horse: the most recent staging of the play forecloses the overtly queer sexuality that it comes to pathologize and then exorcise.

That scene is contrasted with the climatic scene of Act Two, when Strang is completely naked. Here, though, his nudity is not part of a ritual re-enactment of his rides with Nugget (which, as I noted at the outset, initially

frustrated my audience's visual desires) but rather is part of his tryst with Jill, the young woman who works at the stables with Strang and returns him there for their sexual liaison. Here, the actors playing Jill and Alan are both completely naked, and the drive of the scene is toward their consummation. Indeed, as Strang draws close to narrating the brutal events of that night, he diverts attention from the impending violence by claiming that he consummated the affair, which is represented onstage in the Gielgud production with a fairly explicit miming of intercourse, with Radcliffe's mounting his co-star and thrusting vigorously.

This was the scene that audiences had come to see. In the audience I was a part of, the theatre was rapt; the tension was palpable. And yet it is difficult to pinpoint the precise source of that tension. Two of my female students had brought opera glasses to the production and passed them back and forth hushedly. The father of the young woman who sat next to me (they were strangers to me), shifted uncomfortably in his seat. After the production, the sole young man in my class announced immediately after the show that he was now sure of his sexuality, and that he had found looking at the actress playing Jill (on this night, the talented Joanna Christie) to be quite satisfying. These responses are not difficult to read, perhaps, and they only represent a very idiosyncratic and informal sampling, but they underscore the visual pleasures – real and presumed – available in this moment, pleasures that reveal both heteronormative pleasure and heterosexual panic.

This rapt silence is disrupted when Dysart pushes Strang toward the truth of his story and Strang confesses *coitus interruptus*, the sex act short-circuited by the jealous surveillance of the other lover, Equus. Here Strang's bestial, homoerotic worship is posed as a direct obstacle to the productive heteronormative pairing of the play: he cannot progress with his "proper" coming-into-manhood because he cannot stand the gaze of the horses. Strang flies into a confused rage and blinds the horses, whose halogen-lit eyes are extinguished by the rampaging young man. Nor does simply blinding the horses right his course toward reproduction; he is instead driven to a fugue state that lands him in Dysart's care. Dysart's care, though, is hardly asexual. Dysart's marriage is hollow and meaningless, precisely the opposite of his relationship with Strang. In fact, Dysart figures these two relationships (his marriage and Strang's horse-worship) against one another: "I watch that woman 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!" (83; emphasis in original). Chaudhuri, in her Freudian reading of the play, notes that the "exalted celebration of libido is clear to Dysart as he gazes lovingly at it from the confines of his sterile marriage" (55). And desire is made even more explicit in Dysart's dream narrative, in which Strang appears as a ritual sacrifice.

Dysart's dream is interesting not just in psychoanalytic terms but also in terms of cultural analysis. The dream involves Dysart's sacrificing hundreds of children for "the fate of the crops or of a military expedition" (24). Though the other priests are expert at coolly dissecting children, Dysart turns green at the prospect, and his mask slips, derailing the entire ritual, and, one imagines, the entire society of the dream narrative. The thinly veiled symbolism here – Dysart's growing fatigue with the business of child psychiatry, the other doctors efficiently eviscerating their charges – is, nonetheless, curious within the larger arrangements of the play. While "worship" is configured around Alan Strang in opposition to the dominant cultural paradigm, the Dionysian ritual for Dysart is precisely the clean, efficient operation of normalcy, one figured more explicitly when Dysart declares himself the high priest of the God of Health, avatar of the Normal (65). Nonetheless, while Dysart's Hellenic dreams imagine him operating uneasily within an efficient system of cultural production (crops, military expeditions, etc.), we must take this against his own proclivities for Dionysian fetishes (he touches his statue of Dionysus for luck), as well as the phallic nature of the knife with which he is to eviscerate the children. His desire for Strang via therapy is not simply envy of Strang's eroticized worship; it is itself an erotic transaction, violent and phallic at once.

The Gielgud production seems to back away from these insinuations, though. First, we might note the early rumours that Kenneth Branagh was slated to direct and/or star opposite Radcliffe as Dysart (Benedict), an actorly pairing that might potentially have heightened the intergenerational sexual charge. It is not difficult, therefore, to imagine a production in which this potential eroticization of the doctor/patient relationship might come to the fore. This casting never materialized. Instead, the actor playing Dysart was Richard Griffiths, a complicated casting choice for two reasons. On the one hand, Griffiths had recently come off of a wildly successful run in *The History Boys*, in the role of Hector, the teacher whose career is undone by his unseemly contact with his young male students (Bennett).⁹ The other role that Griffiths brings to the play is his film role as Uncle Vernon in the *Harry Potter* films, a hateful character with no sexual dimension at all. This casting history defuses the sexual tension between Strang and Dysart almost entirely. Under the care of Griffiths's Dysart, Radcliffe's Strang is able to enjoy a warm, almost fatherly nurturing. The fans of the *Harry Potter* film franchise are able then to fulfil two fantasies: a fantasy of the asexual nurturing of Strang by Dysart, thereby preserving the image of a budding heterosexual star; and the fantasy of the reconciliation of Harry Potter with his blustering, hateful uncle, a reconciliation impossible in the world of the Harry Potter books and films. The dysfunctional family scene for both characters embodied by Radcliffe is reconciled in

the image of both characters played by Griffiths, and the erotic undertones are significantly defused.

We might surmise, then, that this West-End *Equus* further pathologizes the queer avant-garde for the fantasies of readers, young and old, of the lucrative *Harry Potter* film and book series. “The Scholastic Kids and Family Reading Report” (a research organization chart of exactly the type that Adorno and Horkheimer describe) reports an almost equally divided survey sample for boys and girls, and while readership actually slightly favours boys, the report does not break down readership by both gender and age. Given that roughly 75% of adult readership in the survey is female, we might speculate that the ratios begin to tilt toward girls (who are generally more active teenage readers) as they pass through adolescence (“Scholastic” 7). Here, then heterosexual female readers who largely make up the play’s audience can envision sexual fantasies with their hero, although in complicated ways. They can at last envision Radcliffe (whose musculature had noticeably developed for the play, a fact highlighted by promotional images) in an explicitly sexual way, something that has been possible with online slash fiction for years but has only now been made visually consumable.

But this sexualizing of Radcliffe’s image-body for a consuming public is more than just a way to reward Potterphiles with visual pleasure. It also positions Radcliffe for his post-Potter career, not only giving him the aura of legitimacy associated with a contained avant-garde, but also showcasing his sex appeal, a sex appeal that, to be valuable in the heteronormative film market, must be expressed in explicitly heteronormative terms. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that Radcliffe has since been fleetingly linked romantically to his understudy co-star Laura O’Toole. The *Daily Mail* article that breathlessly reports this development notes, at once, that “Radcliffe has been swamped by screaming female teenage fans at his recent premieres and induced even more hysteria when he admitted he was anxious to meet a girlfriend” but is completely coy about the nature of the relationship between the two actors, with phrases like “very close” and “budding friendship” peppering the report (Yaqoob). Of course, it is impossible to know what goes on behind closed doors between Radcliffe and O’Toole, and I have no interest in speculating on the authenticity of the pairing, except to say that a sceptical reading of these reported appearances fits neatly into a planned public-relations trajectory for Radcliffe, from child actor to young hunk, all within the space of a very auspicious 2007. So, while in the dramaturgy of the play, the frisson of queer pleasure is difficult to pathologize or contain entirely, this production and the mass culture machine around it seem to be working in concert to produce a desirable heterosexual male commodity for consumption by a largely heterosexual female population (that his image is also consumed by a gay

male population is more complicated but at least seems to serve to reinstate Radcliffe's masculine appeal).

CONCLUSION: THE AFTERLIFE OF THE AVANT-GARDE

In reading the material context of this production of *Equus*, I have invoked a narrative of the containment and co-opting of techniques associated with Bürger's account of the historical avant-garde, which ends a far cry from the vanguard politics theorized by Adorno and Lukács. There are several conclusions to be drawn here. Certainly, we can surmise that avant-garde tactics and vanguard politics are not necessarily conjoined. While there may be cases where vanguard politics are well served by other theatrical languages, from epic theatre to social realism, this case conforms to an already well-rehearsed narrative for the avant-garde, one that Innes describes as a dilution and that we can trace further in other examples, like the mask-work of Julie Taymor's *The Lion King*, a narrative that Paul Mann argues in *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* is over-determined (92). We might similarly find a familiar demonizing of queer sexualities, a heterosexual panic that is tied here, in interesting but not unpredictable ways, to middlebrow art production and bourgeois values. And we might ultimately despair at the vanishing horizon of new representational languages, whose potential to shock us into new ways of seeing is recuperated into a massive culture industry to which commercial theatre will be handmaiden for the foreseeable future; although, as Mike Sell reminds us, avant-gardes (many of them non-western) that elude these death narratives are proliferating. These are essentially pessimistic readings of this play; they are the ones I've dwelt upon and the ones that prompt us to mourn, albeit in complex ways.

But in doing so, I forget two things: the first is that the play mourns these facts, too, mourning that numerous critics take as an unambivalent critique of psychiatry itself. Although Dysart decides that a normal, passionless existence is better than the psychic pain that Strang experiences (again, madness medicalized), his final monologue acknowledges that passion and worship are lost in exchange for "Approved Flesh" (108). Even as Dysart suggests that Strang's bestial, homoerotic, avant-garde madness is the source of pain and is, therefore, incompatible with modern life, he also points to it as a source of pleasure – erotic pleasure, spiritual pleasure, and for the audience, sensory pleasure. Thus, even while, structurally, it follows a bourgeois narrative arc, *Equus* at the same time succumbs to a sense of tragedy, a sense of the loss of greatness that accompanies resolving the aberrant into the normal. Indeed, the last images from Dysart's final monologue are precisely what's lost: "The voice of *Equus* out of the cave – 'Why Me? . . . Why Me? . . . Account for Me!'" (108).

This is the second thing we must not forget: the after-image of the avant-garde. Like the return of the repressed that Savran identifies in *South Pacific*, “the triumph of a primitivized, folk culture whose allure will long outlast the intrusion of those American G.I.s” (“Middlebrow” 34), Alan Strang’s midnight rides on Nugget and the stamping hooves of Equus will resonate long after Dysart’s reluctant rationale for better living through psychology has been forgotten. While this individual play may labour to contain, pathologize, and recuperate a queer and resistant avant-garde back into productive middle-class culture, the theatrical images of madness linger, and they radiate beyond the bounds of the individual text or the individual performance. It is this radiation that pushes relentlessly against the played-and-replayed demise of the avant-garde, one that lingers subversively in the subconscious. Mann offers a glimmer of hope – albeit an abstracted, de-historicized one – by suggesting that the discourse of the death of the avant-garde is always incomplete and that “in this missing residuum is the death of the avant-garde belied” (7). He later elaborates, “The avant-garde work is only the trace of an impulse whose trajectory extends beyond, into the next work and beyond that,” and its death “should never be mistaken for the exhaustion of the energy that compelled [it]. The avant-garde exceeds cultural limits and recuperates its own excesses and still projects a further potential for excess that it can no longer represent” (143). Indeed, in describing the recuperation of avant-garde work, Mann also points to the persistence of the vanguard stance that it produced. Sell is sceptical about Mann’s generalized “residuum,” noting that “political art can do more than simply dissipate or disappear, and this can be made sense of without falling into the trap of separating practice from theory or radicalism from discourse” (51).

In the practice of this play we might look to Chaudhuri’s analysis, which (though not distinctly political) suggests that the horse-god Equus grows out of “the storehouse of irreducible, unfathomable images, images that defy domestication” and is “the ‘remainder’ of the Freudian equation” (54). Such an analysis suggests precisely this rippling radiation of the avant-garde. But she continues by asserting that the affective experience of the audience of *Equus* is, indeed, one of collectivity, “that it is not the defunct myths but living ones – like psychoanalysis – that will weld the group into collectivity and allow ritual participation,” and for her, this affective response runs counter to the bourgeois narrative and theatrical impulses surrounding the play’s plotting (58). I would argue the opposite: that the play seeks to pathologize other mythologies in favour of its own normalizing ones, a medicalized psychology chief among them, as ways of removing pain. Indeed, the magistrate’s declaration, “the boy’s in pain, Martin. That’s all I see. In the end . . .” (83), echoes Foucault’s

understanding of the state logic of reason, “which confines insanity within mental illness,” and “which, knowing too much about madness, forgets it” (Foucault xii). As the representative of state power, the magistrate convinces Dysart, and the audience, of the potency of Dysart’s nightmare: that psychology is healing, that the rituals of cultural productivity are necessary, and that madness, queer and avant-garde as it may be, is incompatible with bourgeois power. If *Equus*, as Freudian remainder, lingers beyond that totalizing ritual, challenging its efficacy, like the folk culture of *South Pacific* noted by Savran, we can only imagine it alongside both the cultural machinery of psychiatric normalization and the *Harry Potter* marketing juggernaut.

But if the seeds of the avant-garde can linger in specifically historical ways, against and despite the complicity of theoretical discourse in the death of the avant-garde, let me offer some experiential evidence of what this might look like in practical terms, terms that marry theory, practice, and pedagogy. My own first experience with *Equus* was to read it in an introductory theatre class as an undergraduate, where its imagery and its sexual energy struck me, though in no particular way. But while the normalizing narrative trappings I have described above fell away in my memory, it remained grouped conceptually with other texts and performances that participate in more openly resistant avant-garde aesthetics and politics: The Performance Group’s *Dionysus in 69*, Baraka’s *Slave Ship*, the writings of Artaud. In fact, I was surprised to find so much normalizing discourse in the play text when I returned to it as an adult. Similarly, the students who travelled with me have returned to this play, in part to revisit the brush with celebrity it offered, but also for the transformative theatrical vocabulary it offered them, a vocabulary they too associate with other plays I have introduced to them, including those above. It is this trace of the avant-garde, then – perhaps merely a spectral echo of the historical avant-garde of Adorno, perhaps a more concrete openness to radical representations and politics – that, while recuperated by the normalizing impulses of mass culture and bourgeois values in the work itself, ripple outward beyond the work. For my students, the experience of even this watered down, co-opted, heteronormalized, mass-marketed *Equus* returns them to the energy that historically arose out of a resistant vanguard stance and materialized in a theatricalized avant-garde aesthetic. That energy, which Mann theorizes is reanimated in the disappearance, the recuperation, and the death of the avant-garde, may be underground and subliminal. Yet Peggy Phelan has noted the ontological impulse of performance toward disappearance as being precisely the mechanism that drives its resistant potential to evade recuperation (148). If this is the case, then, the disappearance of the avant-garde *in performance* is doubly evasive. Who knows which student of mine, which

member of that West End audience will draw on it to strike out against the rational impulses of transnational capital in a late capitalist culture?

Yet the ritual of productive, middle-class normalization enacted by Dysart – the removal of difference – still affirms the smooth operating of the cultural machinery, and the material theatre functions as a multi-toothed cog in that very machinery: as audience members, we participate in that machine even as its rightness is confirmed for us. “The Scholastic Kids and Family Reading Report” wants to tell us that reading the *Harry Potter* novels is something of a gateway drug, an entrance into a long life of good-consumer book buying (even if it couches its results in the more palatable terms of a long life of reading, something I admit I cannot decry). So, I have argued that this West-End *Equus* is, in part, about the effort to contain the avant-garde, to inoculate audiences against the virus of its mad visions (and against queerness to boot), all while further inculcating the machinery of mass-culture entertainment consumption. But, instead of dwelling on the dark, viral implications that we have often been asked to associate with the queer, let me dwell on a newer sense of the viral and imagine that this (almost) contained avant-garde, a queer vanguard, can be, not an inoculation, but an initiation into the language of the avant-garde; and that, in turn, may lead one of my students – or any of the audience members at the Gielgud theatre – from the pleasure of a depoliticized set of avant-garde techniques forward to a new vanguard politics that invents its own theatrical language.

NOTES

- 1 I'd like to thank the participants of the 2007 ASTR Seminar, Vectors of the Radical, particularly Alan Filewod, Jon Sherman, Elin Diamond, and Penny Farfan for their feedback on an early version of this essay. Members of the WVU Faculty Research Group, including Brian Ballantine, Donald Hall, Timothy Sweet, John Ernest, Elizabeth Juckett, and Sandy Baldwin, also provided excellent suggestions. Finally, Mike Sell offered invaluable feedback and encouragement on bringing the article to fruition.
- 2 See, e.g., Kenneth Tynan's defence of the National Theatre to the Royal Society of Arts in 1968.
- 3 A note on methodology and the archive: in this analysis, I rely heavily on the printed text, in large part because the spectre of the original performance pervades the printed text, more so than is typically the case. The cultural investments of the original production show up quite clearly in the published text and the analysis will necessarily draw on literary interpretation. When I turn to the 2007 West End revival, I concentrate particularly on how this more recent production amplifies and complicates these investments. I use the text in this way in part because of its particular presentation as *an artefact* of the original production. Published as a preface to the play text, Shaffer's note explicitly indicates

that “[w]hat appears in this text is a description of *Equus* at the National Theatre in July 1973” (7). He specifically mentions that this move is a bow to the demand of potential consumers of the published text, who “mostly want to recall the experience they received in the theatre,” but also that, while “rehearsing a play is making the word flesh[,] publishing a play is reversing the process” (8). This curious question of the archive, here, in part justifies my tendency to turn to the published artefact but also suggests that this text is, in fact, primarily part of the archive of that production, rather than an *a priori* vision of some unrealized production. While Shaffer, in his note, is careful to comment on the dangers of locking a play into a specific stylistic approach (a danger that generally has held sway over the production history of this play), he is also careful to credit the imaginative contributions of Dexter and Napier to the play’s conception.

- 4 We might include, here, Shaffer himself, director Thea Sharrock, and designer John Napier, as well as London production company David Pugh Limited, Broadway Production company the Schubert Organization, and finally, exponents of the *Harry Potter* empire, including Bloomsbury Publishing in the United Kingdom, Scholastic Books in the United States, and Time Warner Films, which produces the *Harry Potter* film series.
- 5 It is worth noting that this is another instance where class and sex come up against one another: what Alan’s scorns in his mother is not just the classing of horses and horse culture but the disembodying of them, while he believes that a horse is “the most naked thing you ever saw” (49).
- 6 Chaudhuri offers a compelling defence of *Equus*’s Freudian themes, suggesting that the surface plot of discovering Alan’s motives masks a deeper experiential process for the audience. While her argument warrants consideration, ultimately she does not address (or purport to address) the relationship of the experimental staging tactics to the social structures that contain them.
- 7 The date of the release was pushed back to July 2009.
- 8 Jack Zipes is critical enough of the “institutional corporate conglomerates” that drive Harry Potter’s marketing to include the books in the title to *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children’s Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*. Interestingly, though, Philip Nel notes an ambiguity between the pervasive efforts to market the books and a generally anti-materialistic impulse in the books themselves, one that equates the kind of middle-class privet-hedged lifestyle that Strang’s parents might represent with the most unimaginative muggle (i.e., non-magical) identities.
- 9 Hector’s sexual interactions with the students are roundly condemned by the play, but he explains it away, not as sexual desire, but tellingly, as “more in benediction than gratification” (95). In *The History Boys*, intergenerational desire is decidedly unidirectional (the old man wants students who have a general distaste for the teacher’s fondling) and is met ultimately with disaster. In fact, all of the characters in that play who express homoerotic desire end up dead, crippled, or painfully isolated. Moreover, *The History Boys* is careful to leave physical contact completely unstaged. Even in video footage of the teacher’s leaving the school with his pupils riding on the back of his motorcycle, no sexual contact is shown. And certainly none appears onstage, except for veiled

innuendo. So, if we were to map the echoes of Hector onto *Equus*, we'd find only the spectre of an unrequited longing, one that Griffiths plays as asexual in nature. Entirely coincidentally, *The History Boys*, by then with a different lead actor, was the fourth play I attended with my students on this trip. This irony was not lost on my students, who noted the dissonance in the two roles.

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ABSTRACT: As text, performance, and pop-culture signifier, we can trace Peter Shaffer's play *Equus* – from its avant-garde influences through its middle-class anxieties to the middlebrow spectacle of the recent high-profile production in London – as a local example of a familiar (but not inevitable) narrative of the dilution and recuperation of avant-garde aesthetics by a late-capitalist economic system of transnational media integration and commodification. The play itself, from its original production onward, pathologizes and contains the avant-garde as both mad and queer, recuperating it into a framework of liberal, middle-class ethics and economics, an effort that is redoubled by this most recent production in text, in performance, and in the material context of the performance. But even as this play, in performance, seems to help mark out the trajectory of the death of the avant-garde, it also troubles the waters of this death-narrative with traces of the residuum of a resistant, even queered, avant-garde that lingers beyond narrative containment and cultural co-opting.

KEYWORDS: Peter Shaffer, *Equus*, avant-garde, Daniel Radcliffe, West End, commercial theatre