



## Shaffer, Sir Peter (b. 1926)

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A psychological dramatist concerned primarily with the nature of human creativity and the costs that the creative individual pays in conformist, unimaginative contemporary society, Peter Shaffer emerged in the 1960s in the paradoxical guise of the century's last great poet of the numinous who was also capable of writing commercially successful plays that could be turned into equally successful films. Although Shaffer has not written about his sexual orientation in essays or discussed his homosexuality in interviews, homosocial--and in some cases explicitly homosexual--tensions infuse his work.

### Life and Career

Shaffer and his twin brother Anthony were born in Liverpool on May 15, 1926, to a Jewish real estate agent, Sir Peter Levin Shaffer, and his wife. He (along with Anthony, who would also become a successful playwright and screenwriter) attended St. Paul's School, London. After serving as a conscript in the coal mines during World War II, he matriculated to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he graduated in 1950 with a degree in history.

Shortly after leaving Cambridge, Shaffer moved to New York City, where he supported himself through a series of odd jobs (bookstore clerk, airline ticket salesman, acquisitions librarian). Frustrated to find no more satisfying employment, he returned to London where he worked initially for a music publishing firm, and then as a music and literary critic.

This early confusion in direction, however, had two important consequences for his life and career. First, his early fascination with Manhattan led, once he was able to afford to do so, to his maintaining residences in both New York and London, and dividing his time annually between them. And, second, his professional involvement with music allowed him to place the experience of creating or listening to music at the center of plays like *Five Finger Exercise*, *The Private Ear*, and, most notably, *Amadeus*.

Toying with the possibility of having a literary career, Shaffer first wrote murder mysteries. *The Woman in the Wardrobe* appeared in 1951 under the pseudonym "Peter Antony." Two subsequent novels--*How Doth the Little Crocodile?* (1952) and *Withered Murder* (1956)--were coauthored with twin brother Anthony. Although both brothers abandoned the genre early on, its conventions inform many of the plays that each would later write--most obviously Anthony's *Sleuth* (1970) and the film scripts that Anthony wrote from three novels by Agatha Christie: *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974), *Death on the Nile* (1978), and *Evil under the Sun* (1982).

The influence of the detective genre on Peter's plays is more subtle. A metaphysical mystery, which the protagonist struggles to comprehend, lies at the heart of almost every one of Shaffer's plays.

For example, Pizarro is eager to discover if the Aztec king is genuinely a god capable of rising from the dead in *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*. An overworked provincial psychiatrist struggles to understand why a teenaged boy blinded six horses in *Equus*. In *Amadeus*, aged composer Antonio Salieri tantalizes the

audience with the possibility that he murdered fellow composer, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, thirty-two years earlier. In *The Gift of the Gorgon*, Philip Damson must learn that his estranged father's death was not a tragic accident, but a suicide. And the final act of *Lettice and Lovage* is framed as a solicitor's inquest into an assault that occurred after the close of the previous act and which the audience is at a loss to understand.

Similarly, a private detective, engaged by a businessman to trail the latter's possibly adulterous spouse eventually reveals to his client the mystery of the heart's longing in *The Public Eye*, while a fortune teller uncovers the lies that people tell others and, more importantly themselves, in *White Liars*.

In many of these cases, the secrets that people conceal pertain to homosexual desire, as will be discussed below. But across his canon, Shaffer is concerned with the creative nonconformist's struggle to discover new beliefs and standards of behavior after inherited systems of value are exposed as illusory and fail to satisfy his or her need for emotional stimulation and spiritual transcendence.

Shaffer was nearly thirty years old when he decided that theater would be his life's profession. After cutting his teeth writing several television and radio dramas, he was thirty-two years old when he achieved his first significant success with *Five Finger Exercise* (1958).

A drawing room drama indebted to such masters of the "well made play" as W. Somerset Maugham and Terence Rattigan, the play depicts an upper-middle-class household in which a young, spiritually dispossessed German tutor arouses the romantic longing of both an unhappily married middle-aged woman and her sensitive, sexually rebellious college-aged son. Acting on his frustrated homoerotic desire, the son betrays the guileless tutor, ensuring that the latter is exiled from a relatively comfortable family circle to which the expatriate--ashamed of his own father's Nazi past--yearns to belong.

The play's drama of veiled yet competing sexual tensions initially attracted a strong gay following. In his autobiography, *Young Man from the Provinces: A Gay Life before Stonewall* (1995), Alan Helms--who at the time was dating Larry Kert, the original Tony in *West Side Story*--writes of a gay party attended by the chorus boys from Kert's musical and "the whole *Five Finger Exercise* crowd, who brought along [the play's director] John Gielgud."

Following *Five Finger Exercise*, Shaffer embarked on a string of black comedies that skewer the 1960s sexual revolution that earned London the sobriquet "swinging." In *The Private Ear* (1962), a sensitive young man who responds warmly to classical music attempts to entertain an uneducated young woman who is more attracted to his shallow, conceited, sexually rapacious office mate. The one-act was paired with *The Public Eye* (1962), another one-act in which a deliciously unconventional private detective piques the emotional interest of the woman whom he has been hired to spy upon by her narrowly conventional husband.

Both plays deal with the need to find joy in a modern, aimless existence--"not eternal joy, or even joy for a week," as the detective, Julian Christoforu, puts it, "but immediate, particular, bright little minutes of joy--which is all we ever get or should expect."

Similarly, in *White Liars* (1965), Shaffer uses the visit of two band mates to a fortune teller in a dilapidated, off-season seaside resort to reveal not only the anguished confusion that is at the heart of the 1960s search for sexual freedom, but also the lie that informed earlier generations' supposed clarity regarding "what they were--what they wanted!"

Shaffer paired *White Liars* with *Black Comedy* (1965), a bumptious farce that adopts the ploy of illuminating the stage when the lights in a London flat are out during a power failure and putting the stage

in darkness when the lights are supposedly on--a device that allows Shaffer to distinguish between the carefully groomed social facade that people present to others and the reality of their cloaked or repressed desires.

Thea, who enters her former lover's apartment unseen amidst the chaos caused by the blackout on the very day that Brindsley and his fiancée are entertaining the fiancée's socially conservative father, became the first of Shaffer's glorious female Lords of Comic Misrule. (The part was written expressly for Maggie Smith, who had worked with Shaffer in *The Private Ear* and *The Public Eye*, and for whom he would later write *Letting It Go*.)

*The Battle of Shrivings* (1970, heavily revised four years later as *Shrivings*) proved a transitional effort of sorts. Like *Five Finger Exercise*, the play is a domestic drama that has at its heart the tension between a young man and his father. But, like the farces that followed *Five Finger Exercise*, the play also questions the integrity of one of the prevailing 1960s social movements--in this case, the peace demonstration. Unfortunately, audiences missed the farcical comedy that they had come to associate with Shaffer, and were put off by the subtlety of the moral debates that took place on stage. *The Battle of Shrivings* became the first of Shaffer's plays to fail commercially.

With *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* (1964) Shaffer became associated with the newly formed National Theatre under the direction of Sir (later Lord) Laurence Olivier, and embarked upon a period of extraordinary creativity in which he used extravagant sound and mime, and relied upon ritual enactments that reveal both the religious dimension of theater and the modern desire for worship, to create a "total theater" along the lines proposed by influential theorist Antonin Artaud.

In *Royal Hunt*, conqueror Francisco Pizarro figures as the modern person torn between the loss of faith in a god who has become irrelevant and the aching need to believe in some new figure guaranteeing transcendence.

*Royal Hunt* was followed at the National by the equally successful *Equus* (1973), which questions modern society's reliance upon emasculating codes of normalcy as a psychiatrist, who is haunted by the lack of passion in his own life, is called upon to treat a teenaged boy who developed a private worship of horses that bordered on the ecstatic.

And in *Amadeus* (1979), Antonio Salieri--who had achieved fame and fortune in his day as the imperial court's official composer while his genius rival, Mozart, languished in poverty and died in madness--conducts a one-sided debate with God about the nature of spiritual effort and grace.

In these three productions, Shaffer was particularly fortunate in his directors, John Dexter and Peter Hall, and in the designers who created such mesmerizing theatrical effects as the illusion of the Spanish army climbing the Andes in *Royal Hunt*, or the wire-framed heads and hooves worn by actors in velvet costumes that offered the hypnotic impression of a stable of horses in *Equus*.

Dominic Shellard reports that the extraordinary success of Shaffer's three plays saved the struggling National Theatre, putting the newly opened and woefully underfunded institution on a firm financial footing, as well as identifying it as a source of breathtakingly original theater.

The plays won professional acclaim and personal fortune for Shaffer as well. All three triumphed in New York following their London success, and were made with varying degrees of success into films, with *Amadeus* (1984) winning Academy Awards as Best Picture, for F. Murray Abraham as Best Actor, and for Shaffer himself for Best Adapted Screenplay.

Shaffer closed this stage of his development with *Yonadab* (1985), a play that used the biblical narrative of Amnon's rape of his half-sister Tamar to explore the psyche of "a cynic lured for a moment into the possibility of Belief: an anguished figure caught between the impossibility of religious credo and the equal impossibility of perpetual incredulity," as Shaffer wrote in his preface to the published text of the play.

He returned to the farcical mode of the 1960s with the highly successful *Lettice and Lovage* (London, 1987; New York, 1990), in which Maggie Smith played a tour guide exasperated "to live in a country that wants only the Mere," and who seduces her fact-obsessed supervisor into reenacting with her the most dramatic moments in English history.

Shaffer returned to the tortured epic mode of *Royal Hunt*--and to his own roots as an undergraduate history major--with *The Gift of the Gorgon* (1992), in which the illegitimate son of a famous playwright who hopes to write his late father's biography must learn about the "Sacred Gift of Vengeance" that is at the heart of both ancient social custom and his father's Artaudesque plays. Unfortunately, like *Yonadab*, *Gift of the Gorgon* proved a commercial failure, after which Shaffer seems to have retired from the stage.

Shaffer's dividing his time each year between New York and London is responsible for a professional pattern that began in the 1970s in which his plays premiered in London, but oftentimes were significantly revised before they reached New York, making the latter productions the definitive texts even though the London scripts had often already appeared in print.

Most famously, *The Battle of Shrivings* (London, 1970), which had not fared well in its initial form, was heavily rewritten with a reduced number of characters and a sharper conflict as *Shrivings* (New York, 1974). Likewise, Shaffer improved the thematic focus of *Yonadab* when it moved from London to New York. And, perhaps of greatest consequence, when *Lettice and Lovage* opened in New York it had a radically different ending that was more in keeping with the festive nature of the comedy.

Shaffer's willingness to continue revising his plays--and the generosity with which he credits his directors, set and costume designers, and actors--suggests the extent to which he considers theater to be a vital, organic process that relies upon collaboration at every level.

Shaffer has always retained a low profile personally. A heart attack suffered shortly before *The Gift of the Gorgon* premiered in 1992 seems to have contributed to his subsequent reduction in productivity. Although *New York* magazine announced in June 2006 that Shaffer "is completing a play on [gay composer Peter Ilych Tchaikovsky]," no such production has since emerged.

Instead, Shaffer has been represented on the professional stage by revivals of *Amadeus* (London, 1999; New York, 2000) and *Equus* (London, 2007; New York, 2009), the latter starring "Harry Potter" film actor Daniel Radcliffe, whose nudity in the final scene filled the theater every night with audiences eager to see what pundits referred to as the actor's "magic wand."

The flatness of both revivals unfortunately led a number of reviewers to question whether Shaffer's plays were not part of a cultural moment that had passed.

In 2001, Shaffer was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II for his service to British theater.

### **Rejecting the Mere**

Shaffer's plays deal with the absence of wonder, and a corresponding absence of worship, in the contemporary world.

In *Equus*, a child psychiatrist is called upon to treat a teenaged boy who blinded six horses with a metal spike. His sessions with the boy reveal that when forced to live in a commercialized world in which advertising jingles function as hymns and brand names become the gods worshiped by devout consumers, the boy, Alan Sprang, created for himself an alternate religion that centered upon the majestic strength and beauty of a horse whose all-seeing eyes eventually fill him with guilt.

Alan's refusal to worship "the god Normal" fills the social authorities with such revulsion that they demand that he be sacrificed, much as ancient theater insisted upon the sacrifice of a scapegoat to ensure the restoration of social order following a crisis. In the course of the treatment program, Dr. Dysart is forced to contrast his own joyless yet supposedly sane existence with the boy's ferocious rejection of a world that is "utterly worshipless."

At the end of their break-through session, Dysart recognizes that Alan's "cure" will free the boy of the pain that drove him to blind the horses, but will also force him to live without passion: "with any luck his private parts will come to feel as plastic to him as the products of the factory to which he will almost certainly be sent" after release from the juvenile detention facility. But Dysart also recognizes that he himself will spend the remainder of his life tormented by the knowledge of how devoid of passion his own existence is.

This conflict between Passion and Normalcy, between Creativity and Conformity, is at the heart of every Shaffer play. In *Five Finger Exercise* teenaged Clive's description of education as "the process of being taken in by surprise" is at odds with his businessman father's manufacture of sturdy, cheap furniture and disdain for the "arty-tarty boys" with whom Clive associates.

A similar need to be "taken in by surprise" drives Bob--who finds the daily grind of working in an office to be a "blasphemy" against the sacrament of life--to listen to classical music in *The Private Ear*, much as Belinda allows herself to dally from a distance with the deliciously unconventional detective hired to follow her after she finds that marriage to stodgy Charles is causing her to "dry up."

To save herself from drowning "in middle-class mediocrity," Sophie refashions herself as a gypsy fortune teller with a romantic past in *White Lies*. Mark's "incapacity for Immediate Life" leads him to destroy the peace center in which his estranged son has taken refuge in *Shrivings*. And, in *Whom Do I Have the Honour of Addressing?* (1989)--the last of Shaffer's radio plays--a middle-aged woman, who takes pride in her accuracy and efficiency as a typist, escapes the "dowdiness in England" in general, and the "dreariness" of her own life in particular, by moving to self-indulgent, hedonistic southern California.

As Shaffer's career progressed, he seems to have grown increasingly aware of the tragic consequences of the loss of wonder. *Royal Hunt* dramatizes the brutality with which Spanish Christians imposed their authority upon the native people of Peru who were filled with a natural reverence for the cosmos and whose society was founded upon a deep faith in the divinity of their king. The play enacts the destruction of joy in the modern world.

Similarly, in *Amadeus* Shaffer places on stage a man who is so painfully conscious of his mediocrity that he attempts to destroy the one member of his generation who seems to be divinely gifted, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. As the play closes, Salieri blesses the audience ("Mediocrities everywhere--now and to come--I absolve you all!"), in effect implicating them in his destructive and self-serving actions.

And in *Yonadab*, a civil war that sets brother against brother and son against father is the result of the title character's unsuccessful attempt to escape the bounds of mediocrity and experience a transcendence that is as much spiritual as it is sexual.

Shaffer's examination of the creative individual's need to transcend what Lettice disdainfully terms "the

Mere" makes his later plays statements about the nature of theater. Lettice's determination to transcend the "mere" is dramatized in the gloriously farcical opening scene of *Lettice and Lovage* in which she leads three successive groups of visitors through a National Trust home. On each tour she further exaggerates the history of the house until, finally, she has discarded the entire of her factually accurate and officially sanctioned presentation, and delights her tour group with a fantastic narrative entirely of her own making.

Lettice's imagination was first stimulated by her mother, who acted the male leads in the Shakespeare plays that her troupe performed in France, and whose best role was Falstaff. In a post-war world that "gets uglier by the minute," Lettice's mother's productions were "dedicated to lighting up the world, not dousing it in dust." Lettice is eventually challenged by her friend-antagonist Lotte to use her dramatic skills to "light up in the Present! Reveal the ugliness for what it is!" by leading guided tours of the modern architectural abominations that destroy the nobility and charm of historic London.

More disturbingly, in *Gift of the Gorgon* playwright Edward Damson believes that in a world where "people prefer the shrivelled stuff--reflections of their own shrivelled lives," it is the duty of the playwright "to be extreme. To astound his audience--and, if necessary, appall it." Scenes from Damson's plays are enacted in the course of Shaffer's drama, Damson's theatrical work offering a terrifying commentary on his private life.

Like *Royal Hunt*, *Equus*, and *Amadeus*, *Gorgon* dramatizes a character's drive to loose the bonds of pedestrian modern life and live mythically. The demands that Shaffer's dramaturgy makes upon his audience are, finally, his attempt to stimulate their otherwise passive imaginations through the operations of "total theater."

By rejecting their contemporaries' preference for box-like buildings, pedestrian music, and commercial success, Shaffer's protagonists take part in a process that Lettice celebrates in the toast that she offers Lotte: "Enlargement for shrunken souls--Enlivenment for dying spirits--Enlightenment for dim, prosaic eyes."

### **Shaffer's Male Couples**

The rejection of the "mere" is most often figured in Shaffer's plays as the rejection of a socially acceptable yet, ultimately, deeply unsatisfying sexuality. Although he has never made homosexual experience the immediate subject of one of his plays, Shaffer--like his contemporaries Edward Albee and Stephen Sondheim--possesses a genius for exposing the lies upon which the illusion of normalcy is founded.

Shaffer queers sex even under heteronormative circumstances, as when Alan stands in the dark embracing the horse "like a necking couple" in *Equus*; when the idealistic and socially hapless protagonist hopes for something other than a "mod" relationship with Doreen in *Private Ear*; or when in *Public Ear* the private detective is able to establish a more intimate relationship with his client's wife than the husband himself enjoys, even though the private detective and the wife never touch or speak.

In *Amadeus* Salieri is shocked by the uninhibitedly erotic and gleefully scatological nature of Mozart's relationship with his wife, Constanze. And the eponymous protagonist of *Yonadab* seeks to challenge the existence of God by facilitating Amnon's rape of his half-sister. Salieri and Yonadab are but two of the numerous voyeurs who appear in Shaffer's plays, and who are disturbed by the sexual behaviors that they witness yet from which they are unable to look away.

In *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, *Equus*, *Amadeus*, and *Yonadab*--plays in which the protagonist bonds with a same-sex antagonist who holds a radically different view of the world or represents an alternate way of life--Shaffer creates a homosocial world that borders on the homoerotic.

Pizarro and Atahualpa, Dysart and Alan, Salieri and Mozart, and Yonadab and Amnon complement and complete each other in intriguing ways. What is more, apart from Clea and Brindsley in *Black Comedy*, and Helen and Edward in *Gift of the Gorgon*, Shaffer does not seem interested in representing successful

heterosexual relationships. Protagonists like Gideon, Dysart, Salieri, and Yonadab evidence little or no sexual drive towards women, and the women in these plays (Lois, Jill, Constanze, Tamar) function largely as pawns in power games between men.

John Clum has gone so far as to call Pizarro and Dysart "closet pederasts." "Reflecting on my early experience as a rapt audience member at John Dexter's productions of *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* and *Equus* helped me understand the homoerotics of theater," Clum writes. "Dexter's highly theatrical productions foregrounded the homoerotic dimension that was repressed in the script itself. The productions kept one's visual focus on the lithe, often partially clad youth, in *Royal Hunt* on Atahualpa and even more in *Equus* on the boy, who was clearly presented as the object of the psychiatrist's--and the audience's gaze."

As Clum notes, both *Royal Hunt* and *Equus* "ended with a vision of an older man standing or kneeling by the prone body of a young man, lamenting what he had lost."

Reviewing the original production of *Royal Hunt*, Robert Brustein--never a fan of gay elements in contemporary drama--observed even more tartly that "by the end of the play . . . , the whole brutal struggle [between the Spaniards and the Incas] has degenerated into a fraternal romance between a lissome young redskin and an aging lonely paleface--a relationship which is illuminated less by Artaud than by Leslie Fiedler in his essay 'Come Back to the Raft Again, Huck Honey.'"

Explicit homosexuality appears in the background in Shaffer's early plays. In *Black Comedy*, for example, protagonist Brindsley Miller's neighbor, Harold Gorringer, is a middle-aged homosexual dandy who has furnished his apartment with Regency chairs, a chaise longue, and a Wedgewood bowl sitting atop a Queen Anne table. Harold clearly has a yen for the dashing, heterosexual Brindsley, and seems to feel more betrayed by Brindsley's keeping news of his engagement to Carol private (and, thus, dashing Harold's hope of sexually enjoying the neighbor for whom he has been cooking and cleaning) than he is by Brindsley's surreptitiously furnishing his own apartment with Harold's prize collectibles in order to impress Carol's father.

But more often, homosexuality is the secret to be uncovered, the mystery at the heart of the play. In *Five Finger Exercise*, for example, Clive is devastated when he proposes traveling on holiday with Walter and is gently rebuffed. The nature of Clive's feelings for Walter is never articulated, but powerful sexual undercurrents inform Clive's exchange with the handsome German.

Likewise, in *White Liars* Frank and Tom each try to manipulate the other by paying separate visits to a fortune teller in the attempt to bribe her into later delivering a specific fortune to his band mate. The audience is led to believe that the two men are interested in the same girl, whom each hopes to gain for himself through a subterfuge. But at the play's climax, Tom chokes to admit, rather, that he hopes to drive the girl out of their lives and have Frank "stay with me. In--my--bed."

And at the close of *Shrivings*, Mark reveals that his saintly friend Gideon was able to renounce coitus with women because "the only sex Gideon ever really enjoyed was with boys . . . . Slim brown boys with sloping shoulders. He used to chase them all over Italy on our walking tours [as students]. And then, of course, the guilt would chase him."

*Whom Do I Have the Honour of Addressing?* climaxes with an unsuspecting middle-aged secretary's discovery of a sexually graphic video made of the sadomasochistic engagement of popular film actor Tom Prance--the angel-faced, twenty-four-year-old heart throb whom she idolizes--with his louche male body guard and manager. When Angela and Tom first met, she was taken with his correct use of the pronoun "whom," which she interpreted to be an indication of the natural gentility that lies behind the bad boy persona that he assumes in his movies. But the graphic nature of the videotape reveals to her the

animalistic sexual rage that lies behind or beneath Tom's well-mannered observance of linguistic convention.

Like the exchange that opens Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ("Who's there?" "Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself"), the title of Shaffer's radio play succinctly focuses for an audience the impossibility of our ever fully knowing or understanding another person. Human identity remains a complex mystery, not the least because of the tension that exists between the facade that one presents to a judgmental society and the haunting reality of one's sexual need.

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