THE MALE, NUDE, CELEBRITY BODY:
DANIEL RADCLIFFE IN PETER SHAFFER’S EQUUS

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ABSTRACT

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In February of 2007, Daniel Radcliffe, then 17, began his run as Alan Strang in the revival of Peter Shaffer’s 1973 play *Equus*. In this play, Radcliffe had his first major stage role, and in the final, climactic (and extended) scene, his character Alan Strang was completely nude. The actor who has played the iconic Harry Potter for nearly half of his life, whom we have seen grow from an 11-year-old boy to the young man he is today, stripped naked, his limp penis on display for the audience and, thanks to camera phones, anyone searching on the internet. Daniel Radcliffe’s celebrity, his youth, and the spectacle surrounding his naked body have all had tremendous impact on how *Equus*, a 1973 play about worship, madness and desire, was received; this thesis is interested in the questions how, why, and to what end. *Equus* is a complicated play, and the inclusion of a celebrity with child star status complicated it further. It further commercialized a play that paradoxically uses avant-garde techniques to reify the status quo. However, I think that all of these complications do not put us at odds with the themes of *Equus*; instead, they reinforce them. Thus, I argue that the 2007 and 2008 revivals of *Equus* starring Daniel Radcliffe were, though commercialized and steeped in celebrity culture, highly effective in remaking a 1973 relic into an insightful contemporary investigation of passion, madness, and what each of us may have made our personal gods.
For my family, who always knew I could do it.
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Chapter One: Introduction

“Harry Potter is all grown up,” newspaper articles and reviews proclaim. “I saw Harry Potter’s penis,” bloggers crow. These statements are, of course, patently false, given that Harry Potter is a fictional character that no reporter can meet or fan can ogle in person. The person to whom these writers refer is Daniel Radcliffe, the British actor who has played Harry Potter on film since he was 11. In February of 2007, Radcliffe, then 17, began his run as Alan Strang, one of the leads in Peter Shaffer’s play *Equus*. This revival of *Equus* (which first debuted in 1973) enjoyed considerable success during its tenure in the West End and then moved to Broadway in September of 2008. *Equus* was Radcliffe’s first major stage role, and one of the reasons that it became such a cause for sensational comment is that in the play, in the final, climactic (and extended) scene, the character Alan Strang is completely nude. The actor who has played the iconic Harry Potter for nearly half of his life, whom we have seen grow from an 11-year-old boy to the young man he is today, strips naked, his limp penis on display for the audience and, thanks to camera phones, anyone searching on the internet.

This production of *Equus* has been a curiosity and a sensation (and perhaps commercially viable at all) in large part due to the casting of Daniel Radcliffe as lead Alan Strang. Daniel Radcliffe is globally famous because of his work as Harry Potter. Critics, at least (and I count myself among them) believe that a good part of *Equus’* audience comprised Harry Potter fans interested in the spectacle of Daniel Radcliffe’s
naked body.¹ As we cannot but know of his work as Harry Potter, we have certain expectations of Radcliffe. The *Harry Potter* books and movies are immensely popular, and we have witnessed Radcliffe’s development on film. For the role in *Equus*, he sculpted his body (really unnecessary, since nowhere is it indicated that Alan Strang must be buff), stripped naked, and in doing so attempted to shed his Potter self and his child star status.

In the performances of this production of *Equus* that I attended in London and New York, I witnessed, and was part of, an audience certainly responding to Shaffer’s theatrical brilliance but also waiting for the climax—Alan’s abreaction, his reenactment of the crime, and Radcliffe’s exposed penis. In this thesis, I’m interested in not just the spectacle of the male nude body, but the spectacle (more specifically) of the male, nude, celebrity body. I’m also interested in how the role that shaped Daniel Radcliffe—the role of Harry Potter—has shaped this production of *Equus*. Certainly, the roles and experiences an actor has affect whatever role he subsequently takes on, but the phenomenon of *Harry Potter* and the way it complicates readings of this revival of *Equus* goes far beyond the stage work of actor Daniel Radcliffe. Harry Potter, Daniel Radcliffe, and Alan Strang are intrinsically linked in the minds of audience members, and in this thesis I wish to tease out how that linkage affects and is affected by the play. Though it is, of course, impossible to look inside the minds of each audience member, I will draw upon my own experience of audiencing the play and draw from the wealth of discourse surrounding the production, which is, almost without fail, centered around a “Harry Potter grows up” narrative. Finally, this thesis explores how *Equus*, affected as it is by

¹ See, for example, Sarah Lyall’s 2007 *New York Times* article “The Tale of Harry Potter and the Naked Role” and Ryan M. Claycomb’s 2009 *Modern Drama* article “Middlebrowning the Avant-Garde: *Equus* on the West End.”
Daniel Radcliffe’s child star and celebrity status, is an example of the tension between commercialization and avant garde aesthetics. Daniel Radcliffe’s celebrity, his youth, and the spectacle surrounding his naked body all have tremendous impact on how *Equus*, a 1973 play about worship, madness and desire, is received today; this thesis is interested in the questions how, why, and to what end. Thus, I offer a way toward understanding these questions.

**Background**

The narrative of a child star known for a role as a boy wizard becoming a man onstage is a compelling one, and allows for a unique examination of the influence of pop culture on theatre and, perhaps, of theatre on pop culture. However, before such an examination is undertaken, I would like to bring to the fore the play and how this play develops Peter Shaffer’s theory of drama. Daniel Radcliffe as Alan Strang is interesting in and of itself, but must also be understood as part of a larger whole—the production history of a play that, though dated, still seems to have resonance for contemporary audiences. Peter Shaffer conceived of *Equus* in the early 1970s, when a friend mentioned in passing an alarming crime he had heard about a disturbed young man who had blinded a stable of horses. Though Shaffer could never find out any more information about the crime, or even confirm its veracity, the idea took root, and he sought to write a play that would explore why a young man would possibly do such a thing. The final product, *Equus*, was written and staged in 1973 to critical acclaim. The 1973 National Theatre production was directed by John Dexter and designed by John Napier (who scenic designed the revivals as well). The play was a success in the West End and moved to
Broadway, where it played for over a thousand performances, earning Tony awards in 1975 for best play and best direction.

*Equus* is a memory play, told through the eyes of psychiatrist Martin Dysart, who is asked to treat a boy, Alan Strang, who has committed the outrageous crime of blinding six horses. Alan is the 17-year-old boy at the center of the play’s “why-done-it” mystery. We know from the beginning that he has blinded a stable of horses, and that he’s been sent to psychiatrist Martin Dysart by a sympathetic magistrate (Hesther Saloman) in lieu of prison time, but we don’t know why he did what he did until the very end. When Alan first comes to the psychiatric hospital, he refuses to talk to Dysart, singing advertising jingles at him instead. As time passes, Dysart slowly gains Alan’s trust by playing a game with him wherein they take turns asking each other questions, which must be answered. Through this give and take and clues Dysart gathers from interviews with Alan’s parents, we learn that Alan was raised by parents who tried to instill in him different and conflicting worldviews. When Alan was young, his mother Dora read to him from the Bible and told him religious stories, against the express wishes of his father Frank, an avowed atheist and socialist. As a child, Alan was most taken with stories that combined religious and equestrian imagery. When a picture of a bloodied Christ being crucified that Alan had on his wall was taken away by his father and replaced by a portrait of a horse, the connection between religion and horses became even more pronounced in Alan’s mind. He began to chant in front of the horse picture and whip himself with a wire hanger. He created a religion from his fantasies, including a kind of worship during which he would ride a horse bareback in a field (which he called the field of Ha Ha) naked, leading eventually to climax. The combination of worship and sex is of particular
interest to Dysart, whose life lacks both. Dysart wonders if curing Alan is the right thing to do—he would take away Alan’s pain, but also his sense of worship and the divine. As we get further into the story, we finally learn what prompted Alan’s crime. Jill, a girl he met at the horse stable when he worked, asked Alan to go with her to a pornographic movie theater. While there, they encountered Alan’s father, which was both disturbing to Alan and also somewhat freeing, once he learned that his father was a man, just like any other man, with sexual desires of his own. Buoyed, Alan accepts Jill’s offer to go somewhere more private. Unfortunately, she chooses to take him to the stables, the temple to his horse gods. They embrace and take their clothes off, but Alan cannot complete the act. He imagines the eyes of his god Equus watching them, and he sends her away. He grows distraught and, in a fit of violence, takes up a spike and stabs out the eyes of all the horses in the stable. As he enacts his crime for Dysart, we are to understand that this abreaction has “cured” him, in a sense. By working with Dysart, Alan will be able to reenter society. In the closing monologue, however, Dysart asks us to consider whether becoming part of “normal” society is any saner that Alan’s nighttime worship. In a larger sense, Equus is a play about how and to what people are bound, and the way that people try to extricate themselves from these constraints. Alan, the boy at the center of the story, is in psychological chains; Alan’s “god,” Equus, is in chains; and the man sent to help Alan is in metaphorical chains as well. Shaffer implies that worship is the only thing that can loosen these bonds, but in a society that offers no compelling manner of spiritual expression, even worship cannot free us. In fact, in Shaffer’s plays, worship, all worship, not just the normative, socially accepted kind, leads to destruction. Throughout the play, we see characters flexing against the chains that bind them, whether
those chains are externally imposed or internally constructed. However, despite the ways in which characters fight to be free, in the end, we have a broken boy, a blinded “god,” and a doctor with a metaphorical bit in his mouth.

*Equus* is not a play that documents a struggle against a monolithic oppressive authority; it is instead an exploration of the many ways in which we are all trapped by outside forces and personal resignations. Shaffer deliberately shows how his characters are trapped and then skillfully shows us that their condition is not peculiar to those onstage. We come to see that it is our condition as well. Modern society has failed us, Shaffer is saying, and in the face of this failure we are as desirous as Alan and as impotent as Dysart. We watch as Shaffer’s characters try desperately to break free; however, at the end of the play the chains are intact, the status quo restored. Before taking on the role of Alan Strang, Daniel Radcliffe had his own professional “chains.” He was seen solely as Harry Potter, and not just Harry Potter, but the *boy* Harry Potter. The role of Alan Strang has been a way for him to break free of that character identification, or at least it has been a way for him to loosen the character identification, which can perhaps never be fully broken. He will always be, in some sense, Harry Potter. Daniel Radcliffe in the role of Alan Strang has interesting implications both for engaging Peter Shaffer’s theory of drama, which straddles an avant-garde and commercial theatre divide, and for the actor’s career trajectory. I think it also has fascinating implications for studies of audience reception and the signification of celebrity in the early 21st century.
Key Research Questions

An exploration of the male, nude, celebrity body will be my way in to larger questions of celebrity signification and audience response. When Daniel Radcliffe first steps onstage as Alan Strang, we don’t yet see Alan Strang, and we don’t see Daniel Radcliffe, exactly. We seem to see something much more complicated—Radcliffe as Potter as Strang. The semiotic entanglement of Daniel Radcliffe/Harry Potter/Alan Strang obviously complicates the audience’s reading of the play and the actor’s body. My guiding research question for this thesis, the umbrella question that covers questions about child stardom, the celebrity body, the ghosts celebrities bring with them on stage, and what happens at the intersection of celebrity culture and avant-garde aesthetics is: How? How does the global phenomenon of Harry Potter, embodied by Daniel Radcliffe, affect our understanding of a 1973 play about ritual, worship and madness? Additionally, why and how has this production of Equus been marketed and received differently than perhaps a production from the 1970s?

In this thesis, I argue that the casting of Daniel Radcliffe is actually a reinforcement of the themes in the script, rather than simply a cynical commercial strategy that takes away from the message of the play. The stage represents a field or a psychiatrist’s office, both places of refuge and/or transformation for Alan Strang, and the theatre is a place of refuge and/or transformation for audience members; additionally, this space also serves these purposes for other players involved in the production. For example, this role is a transformative one for Daniel Radcliffe and the trajectory of his career. He shows his manhood and becomes something new—an adult actor of serious fare. Also, Radcliffe’s performance as Alan Strang, horse-blinder, subsequently queers
our understanding of Harry Potter, a blurring which I think also benefits the *Harry Potter* franchise. Whether or not the timing of *Equus* in terms of the release dates of the Harry Potter movies is coincidental or purposeful, it is effective. Harry Potter had been, up until the point when Daniel Radcliffe went onstage as Alan Strang, a sexless child—powerful, yes, but through no doing of his own. A spell was thrown at him as an infant that gave him importance, but not anything of which he yet had ownership (perhaps an existential coincidence akin to how Daniel Radcliffe started playing Harry Potter at age 11, when he was but a boy).

However, death enters Harry Potter’s world at the very end of *Harry Potter and The Goblet of Fire*, the fourth movie in the franchise, which was released in 2005. There we see a 14-year-old Harry devastated at his loss, a child first confronted with death (excluding his parents’ deaths, which happened when he was too young to remember). In the first three *Harry Potter* movies, people are not killed, but frozen or locked away. In the *Goblet of Fire*, an innocent boy is murdered. *The Goblet of Fire* is a very important turning point in the septet. Death enters the movie franchise in 2005, and two years later (right before the release of the fifth film, in which Harry Potter has grown up significantly because of his experience with death in the fourth film) Daniel Radcliffe does *Equus*, thus allowing a darkness and a kind of sexuality into the Harry Potter cultural phenomenon.

**Significance**

To date, there has only been one scholarly article written about this production of *Equus*: Ryan M. Claycomb’s “Middlebrowning the Avant-Garde: *Equus* on the West
End,” published in Modern Drama in the spring of 2009. Claycomb’s focus is the middlebrow bourgeois worldview of Shaffer’s play that he considers dressed up in avant-garde clothing and sold to an unwitting audience of teenage girls there to see Daniel Radcliffe in the buff. There is much in Claycomb’s article with which I agree, and his study is an important resource for my own. However, I think that this production of Equus deserves a more in-depth study and a slightly different focus because, though it is certainly a pop-culture phenomenon (as Claycomb asserts), it is also an artistic achievement ripe with meaning. This production offers many areas of investigation of particular interest to scholars concerned with the meaning(s) made by the actor’s on stage body and the intersection of theatre and pop culture. My thesis explores these subjects and also serves as a defense of the producers’ decision to cast Daniel Radcliffe in this role. I consider Daniel Radcliffe’s casting to be not just interesting, but also artistically effective, and in this thesis I look at how and why this might be the case.

I saw Equus in London in the summer of 2007. The show was receiving favorable reviews and audiences were packing the house in order to get a glimpse of Daniel Radcliffe of Harry Potter fame. I saw a matinee of the show, and it was nearly sold out. I sat on the edge of my seat the entire time, amazed at how seamlessly the playwright and director had employed every theatrical element at their disposal. The lights, staging, set, sound, blocking, and acting were spot-on. The images were effective and affecting. In the final, climactic scene when Alan enacts his crime, I sat tense, still and silent, my breath held. When Alan collapsed in a heap, his abreaction complete, I could hear an audible intake as the audience started breathing again. The entire spectacle was immensely powerful. However, when I returned to school and started studying the text in earnest, the
play (at first, at least) lost its power. I found Dysart’s arguments unconvincing. I found Shaffer’s views on madness and psychiatry dated. I was almost angry—I felt like I had been manipulated into believing that which, in my normal, day-to-day life, I didn’t. The text in my hand was emphatically not the powerful piece that I saw onstage. And yet something in the work had held me enthralled. I couldn’t escape feeling that this relic from the 1970s, starring two actors from a series of films based on books about a boy wizard, still held incredible resonance today. However, it functions differently than it did in the 1970s, and, excepting Claycomb and the play’s reviewers, no one has attempted to explain how or why in a scholarly forum.

**Literature Review**

In the 1970s and 1980s, Peter Shaffer’s plays were immensely popular with audiences, theatre reviewers and scholars. Audiences were impressed by Shaffer and director John Dexter’s realization of their joint theatrical vision in *Equus*. Critics and scholars began paying close attention to the way in which Shaffer’s plays were a critique of contemporary society and its worshiplessness, and in the way that Shaffer attempted to use theatricality for transformative effect. When the first scholarly piece about Shaffer was published in 1976 in *Educational Theatre Journal*, a peer-reviewed journal, the author, James Stacy, wrote that

> Shaffer aims to arouse in his audience the same doubts [as his main characters] and send them looking for new meaning. In the spectacle of *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* and *Equus* he attempts to make the theatrical

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2 Daniel Radcliffe (Harry Potter) plays Alan Strang and Richard Griffiths (Harry Potter’s Uncle Dursley) plays psychiatrist Dr. Martin Dysart.
experience a total, ritualistic involvement of the senses, the mind, and the spirit. He discounts conventional religions and other bands as detrimental because they lock men into predetermined, structured worships and lives without the reality of self: the multiplicity of self, which demands a multiplicity of ideas. (Stacy 337)

Critics have explored these themes in Shaffer’s works since the first performances of Shaffer’s first plays and through the production and publishing of all his major works. There was a flurry of Shaffer scholarship in the late 80s and early 90s as critics attempted to come to conclusions about Shaffer based on what is seen as his trilogy of thematically connected major works: The Royal Hunt of the Sun (1963), Equus (1973) and Amadeus (1979).

Gene Plunka discusses Shaffer’s treatment of worship and his use of myth-making at length in Peter Shaffer: Roles, Rites, and Rituals in the Theater, writing,

Through ritualistic theater, Dysart, as well as the audience, is able to appreciate the freedom expressed in primitives like Alan Strang. Shaffer uses total theater as a means to distinguish Alan’s primitive existence from a more socialized means of worship. The ritualistic elements of the play tie together the sexual, sociological, and psychological motifs effectively. (171).

Doyle W. Walls, in a highly influential and oft-cited article titled “Equus: Shaffer, Nietzsche, and the Neuroses of Health” analyzes the play’s treatment of worship using Nietzsche’s Birth of a Tragedy Apollonian vs. Dionysian dichotomy, with Alan Strang (the strange) representing Dionysian ecstasy and Dr. Dysart (think dies-art) representing
Apollonian restraint. The themes of worship, madness, and ritual and Shaffer’s intense theatricality were the primary focus of the critics writing at the peak of his popularity. Those themes, though well-mined, are essential to my study, which looks at how this particular production reflects them.

After Shaffer published his three big dramas, he turned back to comedy, writing *Lettice and Lovage* in 1987. Though *Lettice and Lovage* revisits some of Shaffer’s favorite themes and contains some of his familiar motifs, it was seen by critics as a minor work, and, after his 1993 play *The Gift of the Gorgon* was less than a success, scholars lost interest, and very little has been written about Shaffer in the past 15 years. However, with *Equus* recently enjoying huge success, it seems appropriate to look closely at how and why *Equus* still seems to be so popular with audiences. Reviewers of the current revivals have noticed problems with the play similar to the ones I cited earlier. For example, in terms of how the play has dated, *New York Times* reviewer Ben Brantley wrote,

> You can hear every metaphor falling into place with an amplified click, just as the psychological clues to the detective-story aspect of the play seem to be announced with the equivalent of a suddenly illuminated light bulb…. There’s no question that *Equus* has dated, particularly in its presentation of psychiatric investigation (something Mr. Shaffer humbly admits in a program note). But taking it too seriously might not be the best way to serve it in revival. This version had no crackling artificial fire to match the annoying smoke that kept rising through the stage floor.

(Brantley, “In the Darkness of the Stable”)
Sarah Lyall, in her piece for the *New York Times* titled “Onstage, Stripped of All That Wizardry” wrote, “Equus is a momentous play for people who came of age in the 1970s. Revelatory, even revolutionary, at the time, it now somewhat quaintly recalls that era’s debates about sanity and madness, with lengthy discussions of the virtues and limitations of therapy” (Lyall, “Onstage”). The use of the word “quaint,” with its negative connotation, seems to me to imply that the production no longer has anything new to offer us except in the person of Daniel Radcliffe. Though I think that the celebrity casting does offer us something new with which we can discern new meaning(s), I don’t think that is all the play has to offer. In the following chapters, I first analyze what the play did for Daniel Radcliffe, and then discuss what Daniel Radcliffe might have done for the play.

**Methodology and Organization of Study**

My first step in this process was my initial viewing of the production in London in May of 2007. Though I was not at the time studying *Equus* in earnest (and did not know that I someday would be) and thus did not take notes during the performance, I have what I soon afterward wrote about the experience and my and my companion’s impressions of the audience and the performance. After I became enamored with the play in performance, I then studied the text of *Equus* and the scholarship about the play and Shaffer’s other dramas. In works like Gene Plunka’s 1988 *Peter Shaffer: Roles, Rites, and Rituals in the Theater*, Madeleine MacMurraugh-Kavanagh’s 1998 *Peter Shaffer: Theatre and Drama* and articles by Barbara Lounsberry in *Modern Drama* and *Peter Shaffer: A Casebook*, scholars have teased out the themes of madness, worship and ritual
in Shaffer’s plays and the effects of Shaffer’s explicit theatricality, which owes a great
debt to the avant-garde, which I will discuss further in Chapter IV. I used sources such as
these to supplement my own reading of the literary text and the conclusions I came to
about Peter Shaffer’s ultimate project. This close reading of the text culminated in an
undergraduate capstone thesis, which tracked imagery in the text that contributed to the
themes of freedom, abandon, and oppression and argued for a theory of what Peter
Shaffer thinks the theatre can and cannot do.

Though I was still interested in exploring Equus for my master’s thesis, my
scholarly attention shifted away from the text to the particular productions of Equus that I
experienced and the way that the casting of Daniel Radcliffe in a lead role affected my
reading of the play and the way that it had been portrayed in the media, both “old” and
“new.” I read articles in the New York Times about the production when it moved to
Broadway and took notice of the Harry-Potter-grows-up narrative common to different
authors through different forms of article (interview, review, feature). Internet searches
revealed that celebrity blogs like dlisted.com and perezhilton.com and fan blogs devoted
to Daniel Radcliffe specifically were overwhelmingly focused on the nudity of the play
and on analyzing, in minute detail, Radcliffe’s body. Surreptitiously taken photographs
were posted and judged. Legitimate publicity photos were also posted and commented on
because in these photos, Radcliffe posed shirtless, leaning against a white horse. The
photos were cropped so that Radcliffe is only visible from the waist up, the effect being
that he appears naked. In fact, un-cropped full-body versions of these photos (penis and
all) are also available on the internet, although there is speculation on these blogs that
Radcliffe’s torso is Photoshopped onto someone else’s lower body. I grew intrigued by
the cultural phenomenon of this production and decided the production contained issues worthy of further study, with my focus now being on the audience and the effects of celebrity on the reading of the play. In order to further my study, I saw the play in New York on the last day of its Broadway run and took copious notes.

In order to fully explore how the phenomenon of Harry Potter might affect a contemporary reading of the play, I turn to audience reception theory to give me a framework through which I analyze the play and its cultural context(s). Audience reception theory is rooted in reader-response theory, which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in opposition to New Criticism. The proponents of New Criticism, which was first developed in the 1920s and reached its zenith after World War II, asserted that a text was self contained and that the meaning of a text could be found by performing a rigorous close reading and not by considering, for example, the text’s historical context. It stressed the analysis of formalist techniques in order to derive meaning; considering the intent of the author or the affect of the text on the reader were both fallacies to be avoided.3 Reader-response theory, advanced by scholars such as Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser in the 1960s and 1970s, was instead interested in the relationship between the reader and text, with the emphasis on the different ways that a reader contributes to the text during her reading. Audience-reception theory, which came a bit later, adds to the reader/text exchange the complex contributions that an audience makes to the production of meaning during a play or performance. Marvin Carlson’s “Theatre Audiences and the Reading of Performance” in *Interpreting The Theatrical Past: Historiography of Performance* (1989) and Susan Bennett’s *Theatre Audiences* are two works that build on

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3 For more on the intentional and affective fallacies, see W.K. Winsatt’s 1954 *Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. 
reader-response theory for the theatre, among other things, and are particularly helpful to scholars of audience reception and meaning-making. Carlson pointed out at the time of his writing that, though much work had been done on theories of production,

Almost no organized work [had] been done on the other end of this process—what an audience brings to the theatre in the way of expectations, assumptions, and strategies which will creatively interact with the stimuli of the theatre event to produce whatever effect the performance has on an audience and what effect the audience has upon it.

(“Theatre Audiences and the Reading of Performance” 97).

Susan Bennett’s 1990 book *Theatre Audiences* considers audience reception by positing a theory of inner and outer frames that can be read at their points of intersection in order to begin to understand the complex phenomenon of audience meaning-making.

In addition to audience-reception theory, I engage celebrity theory and body theory in order to better understand the complicated play of elements that might affect the reading of these productions of *Equus*. In chapter two, “Child Stardom and the Male, Nude, Celebrity Body,” I explore the phenomenon of child stardom and the discourse surrounding the nudity in the play. I thereby track popular discussions about “Harry Potter’s penis,” critical narratives about how the nudity indicates that “Harry Potter” is growing up, and scholarly theoretical works about the meanings reflected or constructed by the male, nude, onstage body. By explicating the child star and male nudity aspects of the play, I firmly establish the revival of *Equus* as an early-21st century phenomenon, thus laying the groundwork for following chapters, in which I discuss how the play functions in the contemporary moment.
In the third chapter, “Celebrity and Audience Reception,” I explicate the Harry Potter/Alan Strang/Daniel Radcliffe phenomenon by applying Bennett’s theory of frames to an analysis of celebrity and its effects on meaning-making. I also compare the characters of Alan Strang and Harry Potter and argue that though Daniel Radcliffe’s movement from Potter to Strang results in a “seamed” fit, rather than a seamless one, the play does not require seamlessness, and the play actually benefits from a marked collision between the characters. In the fourth chapter, “Daniel Radcliffe and Equus’ Tensions,” I first do a brief close reading of the Equus text in order to tease out some of the most important themes that could resonate with contemporary audiences. I then analyze how these themes are affected by celebrity casting, arguing that the tensions inherent in Shaffer’s work and in the negotiation between commercial and avant-garde theatre are, for better or for worse, heightened by Daniel Radcliffe’s role in the play. In the final chapter, I weave the themes of the preceding chapters together and call for a close and considerate analysis of “pop-culture theatre” that neither dismisses the celebrity nor condescends to the audience that this kind of theatre might attract.

**Limitations**

Though I was not able to do a pre- and post-show survey of audience members to gauge their preconceptions going into the show and their reactions afterward, I rely on my own perception of the show, reviews, and the kind of self-reporting done on the internet by bloggers. I also limit any investigation of the Harry Potter phenomenon to what is evident in the film adaptations of the books. My purpose is not to do a textual comparison of *Harry Potter* and *Equus*, though I shall investigate images and themes
common to the films and the play. I will also, unfortunately, not be able to delve into the ways that other actors in the play were “read” against the backdrop of celebrity. For example, Richard Griffiths played Uncle Dursley in the Harry Potter films and is well-known in the theatre world. His story is an interesting one; however, I will be focused on Daniel Radcliffe and Equus. Equus is a complicated play, and the inclusion of a celebrity with child star status complicates it further. For example, it further commercializes a play that paradoxically uses avant-garde techniques to reify the status quo. Daniel Radcliffe’s casting also encourages speculation about the intentions of the producers and even the actor himself in accepting the role—after all, theatre is a business, and Daniel Radcliffe’s casting was a boon to Equus just as Equus furthered Daniel Radcliffe’s career. I think, however, that all of these complications do not put us at odds with the themes of Equus; instead, they reinforce them. Thus, I argue that the 2007 and 2008 revivals of Equus starring Daniel Radcliffe were, though commercialized and steeped in celebrity culture, highly effective in remaking a 1973 relic into an insightful contemporary investigation of passion, madness, and what each of us may have made our personal gods.
Chapter Two: Child Stardom and the Male, Nude, Celebrity Body

*Equus* obviously functions differently in the early 21\textsuperscript{st} century than it did in the 1970s, just as any revival will “work” for an audience in a different way than the original production because of the different players involved and the different frames of reference available. In this chapter, I investigate how Daniel Radcliffe’s status as a “child star” affects our understanding of Alan Strang, a role that required an exhibition of his nude body. An analysis of how the role of Alan Strang functions in the trajectory of Radcliffe’s career leads in later chapters to an explication of how an audience’s understanding of the play might change based on our understanding of Radcliffe’s child star status and the celebrity culture that helped to produce him. Drawing on the research of Jane O’Conner, whose book *The Cultural Significance of the Child Star* has been instrumental in my understanding of Daniel Radcliffe/Harry Potter as cultural phenomenon, I show that Daniel Radcliffe’s status as a child star is transgressive, and the role of Alan Strang and the exhibition of his body is a reaction to the status of the child star in this moment in time. Furthermore, the act of showing his exposed penis is a transgressive act in and of itself. Daniel Radcliffe’s tenure as Alan Strang was transformational—it served as a kind of rite of passage, wherein he left childhood behind and became a man. The public quality of this act is part of our insistence as a culture on the symbolic nature of the child star, and our investment in watching and recording as child stars, especially ones with considerable cultural significance, navigate the passage into adulthood. Daniel
Radcliffe’s casting in *Equus* can be seen as a case study in how celebrity in general and child stardom in particular are both valued and managed in the early 21st century.

Though I cannot speak to Daniel Radcliffe’s motivation for accepting the role of Alan Strang, I can observe that the role has served to help him shake the child star label while avoiding the much-dreaded “former child star” label. Radcliffe’s portrayal of Alan Strang, with its accompanying nudity, also led to a frenzy of media attention, and in this chapter I examine how the popular press has framed the production’s nudity, and how this framing is very often part of a growing-up narrative. Finally, in this chapter, I discuss how the nudity in the play is transgressive because it is male nudity, not just because of the youth or celebrity of its star. However, the youth and celebrity of its star does contribute to the status of the nudity as “melodramatic,” in Peter Lehman’s terms, a category of male film and stage nudity that is peculiar to the turn of this century and which I will explore later in this chapter. The melodramatic nudity of this production of *Equus*, with its intrinsic transgressiveness, allowed Daniel Radcliffe a transformational space wherein he could publicly announce his manhood. Daniel Radcliffe’s celebrity, his status as a child star, and the way that the nudity in the play has been portrayed in the media have all served to heighten not only *Equus*’ appeal to a contemporary audience, but also its themes of transgression and recuperation. Though, when *Equus* closed, Radcliffe would still be known for his role as Harry Potter, the experience of *Equus* allowed him to loosen those bonds of identification, just as Alan Strang attempted to loosen his through his worship.
The Transgression of Child Stars

According to Chris Jenks in the book *Transgression*, transgression is that which “exceeds boundaries or exceeds limits” (7). Additionally, he writes, “Transgressive behaviour does not deny limits or boundaries, rather it exceeds them and thus completes them. . . . Transgression is not the same as disorder; it opens up chaos and reminds us of the necessity of order” (7). In *The Cultural Significance of Child Stars*, Jane O’Conner asserts that the very existence of child stars transgresses the values we attribute to childhood in the Western imagination, namely that children should be “submissive to adult responsibility, nonresponsible and economically non-contributing to the family” (15). We hold child labor, in particular, to be anathema and we value education as a virtue, yet we allow children to leave school in order to spend long days working in the entertainment industry. In her book, O’Conner asks why and comes to the conclusion that, in part, the child star functions as an emblem of a fraught relationship with the idea of childhood our culture holds during this time. Child stars seem to embody not what we value in children, but rather what we value in adults. Since child stars blur the line between child and adult, experience and naiveté, dependence and independence, they transgress social expectations for child behavior:

[The child star is] effectively a child who has crossed the fundamental line between childhood and adulthood by working, being economically independent, and having a career without having reached adulthood either chronologically or having passed through the liminal stage of adolescence. Such a position . . . is a transgression of a crucial social boundary in our
society and as such renders the transgressor in a dangerous zone of ambiguity somewhere between childhood and adulthood. (O’Conner 81)

As Jenks points out, we cannot know what behavior is acceptable without delimiting transgression, and child stars embody transgression. They are children, but not quite. They are commoditized, sexualized and “adultized.” We wonder how they could ever lead a normal life after their experiences in the business; we watch horrified and/or delighted as they crash and burn because it affirms our vague feeling that the child star isn’t quite right, according to O’Conner:

The child star is a dangerous person indeed, challenging the intrinsic legitimacy of the balance of power in our society. If they have missed out on the rite of passage to adulthood the first time round, then they had better prove they have made amends for that by going through some kind of identity crisis or publicly shared trauma in later years if they want to be accepted as full members of society. (83)

This idea of public crisis or trauma may fund an understanding of the effect that the role of Alan Strang might have on Daniel Radcliffe’s career and image. Daniel Radcliffe has grown up in the public eye. For nine years he has been intrinsically linked to the role of Harry Potter (himself a child star of a sort, at least in the wizarding world). Daniel Radcliffe is an interesting case study—he personally has not yet exhibited an identity crisis or publicly shared trauma; instead he took to the stage in the guise of Alan Strang and portrayed someone else’s identity crisis and trauma. What was his own, however, was his body. His personal public rite of passage happened when he exposed his naked body. His body and penis, belonging to/being his, Daniel Radcliffe’s, and not Harry
Potter or Alan Strang’s, helped him shortcut straight to adulthood, without going through the growing pains other child stars have exhibited. Doing so invites us to take him seriously as an adult actor. After *Equus*, we can. According to O’Conner, “Transitions are by default transgressive as they are always a step into the unknown and away from the boundaries of the old life” (83). Daniel Radcliffe steps through adolescence and into legitimate actor territory, but to do so is a transgressive act for the already transgressive child star. His transition is, of course, also transgressive because it involves full-frontal male nudity.

**Harry Potter Grows Up**

The body of Alan Strang/Daniel Radcliffe/Harry Potter is one of the main sites of negotiation in the production, and for my purposes, it is important to understand how the naked body becomes spectacle in the play—not just because it is a celebrity body, but also because it is a male body, and thus, its nakedness is generally taboo. According to Peter Lehman, in his book *Running Scared*:

In a patriarchal culture, when the penis is hidden, it is centered. To show, write or talk about the penis creates the potential to demystify it and thus decenter it. Indeed, the awe surrounding the penis in a patriarchal society depends on either keeping it from sight . . . or carefully regulating its representation. . . . I would go so far as to suggest that the dominant representation of phallic masculinity in our culture depends on keeping the male body and the genitals out of the critical spotlight. (30)
When the penis does enter the critical spotlight, as it has with the occasion of this revival of *Equus*, I believe it overwhelms other narratives. The “Harry Potter grows up” narrative found in the critical reviews and elsewhere is essentially the “Harry Potter grows up because he shows his penis” narrative. The penis functions as a semiotic signifier, the ocular proof of him growing up. Both critics and the public at large are preoccupied with the fact of Radcliffe’s penis. A quick Internet search turns up nearly countless blog entries and personal reviews about the nature of Radcliffe’s penis. It has been photographed, surreptitiously filmed, and acutely judged. Radcliffe has responded to critics’ judgment of his penis with jokes and deflection. Though Radcliffe asserts that the “emotional nakedness” of the role of Alan Strang is more daunting than the physical nakedness, he does admit that being nude onstage is not entirely comfortable. He suffers, he says, from the “Michelangelo’s David Effect,” which he discussed with James Lipton of “Inside the Actors Studio” on an episode that aired November 24, 2008. Radcliffe said, Michelangelo’s David is facing Goliath, in the famous sculpture, which is why his parts aren’t probably looking the best that day. That’s pretty much what happens to me onstage. My friend said to me, he said, “Are you ever worried about getting an erection onstage,” and I said “No, that would be great.” In fact, rather the opposite takes place.


When Radcliffe says that getting an erection onstage “would be great,” it is intended to make the audience laugh, which it does. Peter Lehman asserts that joking about the penis is one of the only acceptable ways of talking about it at all in our society. Radcliffe has to justify his penis; he has to explain it away, or at least clothe it in jest. The press has been
constant in its attention to the nudity of the role. Most of the literature about this production has been produced in the popular press, in newspapers and magazines. These features and reviews have centered almost exclusively around a Harry Potter grows up narrative which they in turn helped to perpetuate. This inability to view the play without a Harry Potter lens is evident even in the clever headlines editors choose to accompany the newspaper stories and magazine articles, for example:


“No Potter Horseplay from Radcliffe, Just Fine Acting,” (*The Guardian*, 28 February, 2007). And, most hyperbolically,

“Has Daniel Radcliffe Killed Harry Potter?,” (*The Guardian*, 26 February, 2007). This last article, by Xan Brook, is particularly important for my purposes because it is about whether or not Daniel Radcliffe has been successful in shedding his Harry Potter status. Xan Brook decides that no, Radcliffe’s destruction of Harry Potter is not complete. Rather he states, “Harry Potter’s days are clearly numbered. Daniel Radcliffe is merely helping him on his way.” It’s interesting to me that Brook puts this growing up in such violent terms, as if Radcliffe has to perform metaphorical murder in order to grow up. To grow up, he must kill the boy by literally showing his manhood to the world? Because of the transgressive nature of the child star and the transgressive nature of the act of showing one’s penis, the moment of exhibition becomes, in Peter Lehman’s word, “melodramatic.”
The Melodramatic Penis

When Equus debuted in 1973, reviewers and critics mentioned the nudity in the play without dwelling on it. The nudity was only important insofar as it reinforced and embodied the themes of lust, ritual, madness and worship in Shaffer’s play; the actual penis of the actor Peter Firth was not given much critical attention. Thirty-four years later, in reviews of the revival starring Daniel Radcliffe, the nudity is paramount. Actually, the nudity becomes his nudity, given that the fact that there is also a naked woman onstage is left unremarked. There is an easy explanation for the way in which the male, nude body has taken over other discourses in the popular media—in this revival, the male, nude body belongs to an international celebrity with “child star” status. However, I think that there is something not just about the person that the penis belongs to but also about the way that the penis is and has been framed in the late 20th and early 21st century. In 1973, Alan Strang’s penis was artistic and casual; in 2007 it was melodramatic. Lehman uses this term to describe the nudity in late 20th century works such as Neil Jordan’s film The Crying Game and David Henry Hwang’s play M. Butterfly. In these works, the nudity hinges on a dramatic “reveal” similar to the one that happens in the second act of Equus. In the first act, Alan mimes his disrobing. In the second, he actually takes his clothes off.

According to Lehman, author of “Crying over the Melodramatic Penis: Melodrama and Male Nudity in Films of the 90s” and editor of the anthology Masculinity: Bodies, Movies, Culture, discussions of men and the male body are often caught in a dichotomy not unlike the mother/whore dichotomy which colors so many representations of women: “At one pole, we have the powerful, awesome spectacle of
phallic masculinity, and at the other its vulnerable, pitiable, and frequently comic collapse” (26). Of course, Alan Strang's “collapse” is more than pitiable, it is immensely traumatizing. It is proof of the pathology of his desire. His failure to achieve erection leads to his crime against the “god” whose watchful eyes inhibit him. He is unable to achieve the “awesome spectacle of phallic masculinity” and the consequences are dire. Though there are and have been other models on offer, the majority of representations of the penis seem to fall into one of these two categories: the porn star or the comic impotent. According to Lehman:

This polarity not surprisingly also structures much of the representation of the penis in those rare instances when it is represented. The oft-noted requirement that porn stars be well endowed stems from the manner in which hard-core porn attempts to represent the male as an awesome, phallic spectacle. . . . [H]ardcore porn generally minimizes or even totally elides flaccid penises, favoring an emphasis on large erections. (“Melodramatic” 26)

Lehman cites some major reasons for the difficulty of representing the penis in our culture. First, there is a gap between the penis and the phallus: “The privileged signifier of the phallus most easily retains its awe and mystique when the penis is hidden. The sight of the actual organ threatens to deflate and make ludicrous the symbolic phallus” (“Melodramatic” 27). Also, blatant or even unconscious homophobia can drive the desire to regulate representation of the penis—men can be afraid of deriving pleasure or finding themselves fascinated by representations of the penis. Therefore, representations of the penis are carefully regulated so that they fall into acceptable discourses: medical, artistic,
pornographic, or comic. Representations outside these discourses, like the full-frontal male nudity in *Equus*, fall into a category that is disturbing to our desire to regulate the penis; they are “melodramatic.” Daniel Radcliffe’s flaccid penis in *Equus* is not pornography in the way we might think of it, or the way Peter Lehman defines it; rather, Daniel Radcliffe’s nudity is a kind of pornography of reality—the penis in its normal state. The sight of the flaccid penis is less sexual but perhaps more startling. This kind of nudity falls into the third category that Lehman posits—the “melodramatic penis.”

Representations of the penis that fall into the melodramatic category “on the one hand challenge conventional representations, and on the other hand constitute a troubled site of representation that contains disturbing contradictions” (“Melodramatic” 26). Why has the melodramatic penis made its appearance at the turn of this century? According to Peter Lehman, it is because the penis has been hidden so long that it has become the last cultural taboo. “The media typically maintain a tense contradictory relationship with such taboos: on the one hand, there are cultural imperatives for respecting the taboo, and, on the other hand, there are the journalistic and artistic motives for breaking the taboos by creating new images which bring attention to themselves, sometimes in shocking ways” (“Melodramatic” 28) But haven’t we broken this taboo already? What, you might ask, about plays such as *Hair*, which featured full-frontal nudity, quickly followed by *Tom Paine* and *Oh! Calcutta*? In the late 1960s and 1970s, “The whole notion of making such a big deal out of frontal male nudity was suddenly ancient history, part of another era. This coincided with a larger cultural climate of late 60s’ and 70s’ casual male nudity that had faded by the 90s. The melodramatic revelation of the penis is the polar opposite of casual” (“Melodramatic” 29). One theory about why casual male nudity had faded by the
90s is that because of the AIDS crisis, casualness in nudity and sexuality was restigmatized. The penis had to be re-hidden. Thus, its revelation in film or drama, especially if the revelation did not fall into an accepted discourse, was particularly shocking—the addition of a dramatic “reveal” increases the melodramatic nature of particular examples of full-frontal male nudity in contemporary works.

The debut of Equus was part of the casual nudity culture of the 70s. While Equus’ nudity was not exactly casual, it was enough of a nonissue that it was rarely commented on by reviewers. The nudity was important, but it was seen as adding to and reinforcing the themes of the play. The nudity was not shocking to an audience prepped by the casual nudity of plays such as Hair. However, this way of considering onstage nudity had faded by the 1990s, according to Lehman. The exposed penis in the 2007 revival of Equus is shocking not just because it belongs to Daniel Radcliffe, but because it occurs in an environment in which representations of the penis have become melodramatic. In the revival of Equus, the staging of the disrobing scene is not melodramatic, and sticks quite closely to the stage directions in the script:

JILL: Take your sweater off.

ALAN: What?

JILL: I will if you will.

(He stares at her. A pause. She lifts her sweater over her head; he watches—then unzips his. They each remove their shoes, their socks, and their jeans. Then they look at each other diagonally across the square, in which the light is gently increasing.)

ALAN: You’re…You’re very…
JILL: So are you… (Pause.) Come here.

(He goes to her. She comes to him. They meet in the middle, and hold each other, and embrace.) (Shaffer 101)

The two undress quickly and then stand there awkwardly as you might imagine two teenagers would. The revelation that happens onstage is not particularly melodramatic; the way the scene is experienced in the audience is. When I saw the play in New York, at the start of the scene in which the young couple ends up naked, the audience, whether they had read the play or not, knew that something was about to happen. There was a sharpening of focus. The people around me became still. The written scene itself is fraught with tension. The knowledge that soon Harry Potter, the child star, would be naked only heightened the tension. And then, seemingly out of nowhere, ushers appeared in the aisles, moving slowly and silently, turning their heads and looking with keen eyes for cell phones out to take pictures of the naked, flaccid penis, pictures that would, of course, be posted later on the internet and surreptitiously judged. The lightening-quick dissemination of images in the internet age and proliferation of blogs ready and willing to minutely judge Daniel Radcliffe’s manhood has also contributed to the melodramatic nature of the turn of the century productions’ nudity.

**Passing Judgment**

Daniel Radcliffe’s penis has been a source of intrigue in legitimate newspapers and gossip blogs alike. For example, in a *New York Times* feature article about the London performance, author Sarah Lyall quotes theatergoer Erin Tobin as saying, “It was a little weird at first, seeing Harry Potter right there on the stage, without his pants, or
indeed any of his clothes” (“The Tale of Harry Potter and the Naked Role”). Lyall writes, “Tobin says she and her friends were all kind of ‘freaked out’ about seeing his . . . well, seeing him naked. ‘We still think of him as an 11 year old boy.” Wendy Krekeler, 20 said: “I thought, Wow, he must have been working out” (“Naked Role”). This interest in Radcliffe’s body extended to innumerable blog entries about the subject. Michael K. of the gossip blog dlisted.com’s entries about Daniel Radcliffe and Equus are particularly interesting:

I've already written a review on what I thought of Daniel Radcliffe's peen's Broadway debut in “Equus” and now OMG BLOG has posted some actual footage of his magical wand casting spells on the audience. It looks like from the front row you could see his little weenus a lot clearer. I originally gave his skin stick mixed reviews, because I couldn't see it that well, but now I see that it gave a three-dimensional performance full of layers and colors. When DanRad gets all excited and shouty, his peen stands up and hops around with him. I'm sure his peen's little lips were even reciting the words with him. It's a true thespian through and through. (“Harry Potter’s Peen in Motion,” November 10, 2008)

Though many bloggers, like Michael K., have judged Daniel Radcliffe’s penis by looking closely at pictures, which perhaps prompted Radcliff’s “Michelangelo’s David” comment, one very interesting blog post came to my attention that took issue with the sexualization of Daniel Radcliffe and nude pictures the blog’s author, Katherine Coble, had been sent, pictures she, at least, believed to be real. The pictures in question are ones widely available on the internet; they were derived from legitimate publicity photographs
from the London production. However, the legitimate publicity photos show Daniel Radcliffe only from the waist up. He is shirtless, reclining against a white horse.

The widely disseminated internet images that the blog’s author is discussing show the same, but include his body from the waist down, as well. He is fully naked, his penis on display. Since it is highly unlikely that the producers of *Equus* would require Radcliffe to pose nude only to later crop out half his body, I find it hard to believe that the photographs are actually of Daniel Radcliffe’s penis. I find it much more likely that his torso was Photoshopped onto another person’s lower body. Despite the fact that these photographs are most likely fakes, they became an internet sensation. In response to these photographs, blogger Katherine Coble wrote a February 26, 2007 post titled “What I Have Against Dan Radcliffe’s Penis” in which she asserts, “I think it may be old-fashioned of me, but I do believe there is a time and a place for sex and the expression of sexuality. I think now is perhaps not the time and Harry Potter newsgroups are perhaps not the place for Dan Radcliffe’s sexuality to be so overtly explored.” Her main objection is that Radcliffe represents Harry Potter, a character from a series marketed to children and young adults. It is important to note that these fake representations as well as the images circulated from stealth shots from cell phones taken during the production potentially circulate images that could be deemed child pornography, given that Radcliffe was seventeen when *Equus* opened in London. Though the age of consent for sexual activity is sixteen in the U.K., the age of consent for appearing in pornography is eighteen. The fact that these images have been disseminated without fear of the sender

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4 For a timeline of events and Radcliffe’s age at film and play production, see the addendum at the end of this section.
or receiver being considered a child pornographer says something about how celebrities are commodified; we feel more entitled to see nude pictures of a celebrity 17-year-old than we do of any other 17-year-old Londoner.

**Harry Potter’s Penis**

In response to Coble’s “What I Have Against Dan Radcliffe’s Penis” blog post, a reader with the tag name “grandefille” commented about another aspect of “Harry Potter’s” sexuality she found particularly troubling, a scene in the fourth Harry Potter film that has rarely been discussed:

I was completely ooked out by the bath scene in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* because he is still a child. It alarmed me that the director chose to linger so creepily on Myrtle trying to peek (which was not the tone in the book), and it was clearly to pander to the “Hey, Dan, Boxers or Briefs” crowd. Those actors are all still children, and capitalizing on their nascent sexuality is sickening. (“What I Have Against Dan Radcliffe’s Penis” February 27, 2007)

I think that “grandfille’s” comment is of particular interest, because it further highlights the way that child stars are sexualized and commoditized for the consumption of fans. In this case, however, Daniel Radcliffe is fourteen, even younger than he is in the *Equus* promotion photographs. The characterization of Daniel Radcliffe/Harry Potter in *The Goblet of Fire* also marks a turning point in his development in the filmic world, a development that comes to fruition in the world of *Equus*. In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Harry is fourteen years old. His hair is longer and shaggier than in previous
movies. His voice is a bit lower; his face a bit more angular. Harry’s concerns are more adult as well. In the opening scene of the movie, we see Voldemort kill an old caretaker with the Aveda Kadavra spell—the first time we’ve seen death represented in the film franchise. When Harry accompanies the Weasleys to the Quidditch World Cup, the festivities are marred by an appearance by the Deatheaters, Voldemort’s followers, who march through the campgrounds, destroying everything in their wake. The Deatheaters wear ominous black cloaks and black pointed, Klan-like hoods to conceal their identity. A dark force has infiltrated Harry’s world, which was dangerous but somewhat insulated by the magical walls of Hogwarts. He also, for the first time, exhibits a budding sexuality—he has a crush on Cho Chang and has to navigate his first school dance. The film (and the book it is based on) centers on the Tri-Wizard Tournament, in which someone has entered Harry, though he is not the requisite age of 17, the age of adulthood in the wizarding world.

Harry passes his first mission in the Tri-Wizard Tournament by getting a dragon’s egg away from a dragon. The egg holds somehow the clue to the second challenge. The problem is that when Harry opens the egg, a deafening screech emanates. Harry cannot figure out how to make sense of the clue, until he gets a clue himself from Cedric Diggory, the other Hogwarts champion. Cedric tells Harry to take the egg to the prefect’s bathroom on the fifth floor. “It’s not a bad place for a bath,” Cedric says. “Just take your egg and mull things over in the hot water.” The next shot is a close up of faucets pouring out multi-colored water and luxurious bubbles. Next we see the whole bathtub, which is the size of a small swimming pool, and the golden egg in the forefront. We see that Harry Potter has slipped into the bathtub to his waist, his back to us. As he slips into the water,
he finishes removing his robe. We get a glimpse of his bare back, then he turns toward the camera and puts the robe on the side of the bathtub.

The bubbles cover Harry to his chest. He tries opening the egg again. The same loud screech emanates. Suddenly, Harry hears the squeaky voice of Moaning Myrtle, the ghost of a teenage girl who lives in the plumbing. “Hello Harry,” she says. “Long time, no . . . see.” As she delivers this line, Myrtle keeps her eyes on his body. She draws out the “o” in “long” and raises her eyebrows at “see.” He is naked and vulnerable, covered only by bubbles, which he tries to gather around himself. Myrtle giggles and dives her ghostly form into the bathtub, as Harry tries to cover himself with bubbles. She tells him to open the egg underwater and they both duck under. When Harry emerges, having deciphered the clue, Myrtle sits next to him and congratulates him on figuring it out so quickly. She comes closer and closer to Harry as he inches away from her. Myrtle says it took Cedric ages to figure the clue out. “Almost all the bubbles were gone,” she says as she looks pointedly down toward Harry’s crotch. She giggles again and nuzzles up to his chest, as he leans away.

In this scene, Harry Potter’s nakedness is a source of intrigue. Moaning Myrtle functions as a stand-in for the teenage girls in the audience. Though Harry Potter is still an innocent, we catch a glimpse during this scene of the way in which Daniel Radcliffe the actor is maturing. Moaning Myrtle’s twittering attention to Harry Potter’s naked body would have been obscene in an earlier film; it would have meant an older girl was looking with desire upon a child. This scene indicates an important transition in Harry Potter’s development: it is acceptable, now, to express intrigue in Harry Potter (and the actor Daniel Radcliffe) as a sexual being. However, this interest cannot be fully
embodied. Harry Potter never gets to kiss Cho Chang in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. The only “being” who gets access to Harry Potter’s privates is a ghost. Thus Harry Potter’s privates are alluded to but elided. They occupy a safe, twittering space where an audience of young people can feel safe.

There is, however, an important shift that happens between the fourth and fifth movies, however. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (the fifth movie), Harry has matured significantly. Cedric Diggory is killed at the end of the fourth movie—again, this is the first time death has entered Hogwarts. The Harry Potter of *The Order of the Phoenix*, the fifth movie, is downright angst-ridden. He is tortured over Cedric’s death and decides to start a club to teach his fellow students how to fight the Deatheaters. This Harry is brooding and virile. This Harry gets to kiss Cho Chang. This Harry is also released after the London run of *Equus*.

**Daniel Radcliffe and the Adult Role**

Daniel Radcliffe has grown up in the public eye. He first appeared before us as an 11-year-old boy in the 2001 film *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, and given that there has been a new movie released every year or two since, we have seen him grow up on screen. At present, there are two Harry Potter movies left before the series will be complete (the seventh book will be split into two movies due to its massive size). Until July of 2011, Daniel Radcliffe is still Harry Potter. However, when he took the role of Alan Strang in Peter Shaffer’s *Equus*, he took the role of a character who, on the surface at least, is the polar opposite of Harry Potter. Harry Potter is a paragon of virtue; Alan Strang is a horse-blinder. Harry Potter has close friends and an extended support system;
Alan Strang is comfortable only around the horses he worships. Harry Potter is steady; Alan Strang is mad. In “The Tale of Harry Potter and the Naked Role,” Lyall writes,

Harry and Alan could not be more dissimilar as characters, even if both “come from quite weird backgrounds,” as 13-year-old Ella Pitt, another recent theatergoer, put it. (And no, she declared, she was not too young for all the nakedness, swearing and sexuality.) Both characters have unresolved issues related to their parents: Harry, because his are dead, and Alan, because his have driven him insane.

Putting aside for a moment the question of whether *Equus* is appropriate fare for a 13-year-old, this girl does present an interesting case study: For her, Daniel Radcliffe has been Harry Potter most of her life. In taking on such a risky role, Daniel Radcliffe was chipping away at his Harry Potter image and his “child star” status. It cannot be easy for a child star to announce to the world that he or she is grown up, or nearly so, and should be considered an adult in the public eye. If an audience connects with a character played by a child star, there is, perhaps, a resentment attached when the child star leaves that character behind. However, it is necessary if an actor wishes to be a working, adult actor, and not a relic.

One potential shortcut to proclaiming one’s adulthood is to show one’s adult body, of course, since the development of the body and sexuality are one way that we become obviously adult. Another route a child star can take to distance the childhood casting is to take on a serious dramatic role, especially a dark dramatic role. Daniel Radcliffe found just such a role in Alan Strang, with the added benefit of male nudity, as disrobing in public adds risk and is a sure indicator of seriousness in an actor, as long as
the nudity is not salacious but instead is artistic. Any hint of salaciousness or gratuitous nudity would obviate his claims of being a serious actor. In Radcliffe’s case, though, in *Equus*, he shows, literally, his manhood and performs the “public trauma” that we require of child stars wishing to become adult stars, thus moving neatly through the liminality of adolescence in a single evening, and opening himself up to the possibilities that may lie beyond Potter. The transgressions of Alan Strang and Alan Strang’s eventual recuperation into “normal” society allow Daniel Radcliffe, with his child star transgressiveness, to recuperate his image and move forward in his career. However, *Equus* should not be considered simply a vehicle for Daniel Radcliffe’s professional growth. The spectacle that accompanies Radcliffe because of his child star and celebrity status makes the theatrical in *Equus* more theatrical, the final, climactic nude scene even more intense because of the high stakes involved for the actor onstage and the audience, who must in one evening change as well. The audience must learn not to see Radcliffe as a boy any longer; they must see him as an adult or else they must consider themselves child pornographers. Thus, the (no longer a) child star and the changes he creates in his audience reflect the themes of transgression and recuperation in *Equus* and his male, nude, celebrity body reflects the high stakes and intense theatricality of the work.
Chapter Three: Celebrity and Audience Reception

As noted in chapter two, the role of Alan Strang was transformative for Daniel Radcliffe, allowing him to move beyond his child star status and establish himself as an adult actor of serious fare. However, while Radcliffe the actor may have been attempting to shed his Harry Potter persona, the producers and director seem to have been capitalizing on it. Daniel Radcliffe brought to Equus a sizable fan base, and though the audience was most likely not made up solely of Harry Potter fans, his celebrity seems at least to have been both a major draw and a lens through which the audience received the play. These elements have been remarked upon often by critics and in the popular press. For example, in Sarah Lyall’s feature for the New York Times, “The Tale of Harry Potter and the Naked Role,” she wrote that some in the audience came to see Richard Griffiths, famous in his own right, but that “then there are the Radcliffe fans, who have watched the actor negotiate the rocky path of adolescence right before their eyes. . . . Try as they might during the performance, they cannot completely dePotter their minds.” This collapse between Harry Potter, Daniel Radcliffe and Alan Strang is apparent in the comments of some of the people that Lyall interviewed; for example, Emily Bunch, 21, said, “I thought, Harry Potter, where are your glasses?”

While it might be difficult if not impossible to determine how much the connections between Equus and Harry Potter are purposeful, I attempt to track potential connections that could affect the way that an audience might read a performance by employing Marvin Carlson’s notion of “ghosting.” In The Haunted Stage, Carlson uses
the term “ghosting” to describe the way our previous experiences come to influence our understanding of a new experience in the theatre. He writes:

[Theatre] is the repository of cultural memory, but, like the memory of each individual, it is subject to continual adjustment and modification as the memory is recalled in new circumstances and contexts. The present experience is always ghosted by previous experiences and associations while these ghosts are simultaneously shifted and modified by the processes of recycling and recollection. (2)

One of the most striking ways that ghosting occurs, according to Carlson, is in the body of an actor we associate with a previous role or roles: “The recycled body of an actor, already a complex bearer of semiotic messages, will almost inevitably in a new role evoke the ghost or ghosts of previous roles if they have made any impression whatever on the audience, a phenomenon that often colors and indeed may dominate the reception process” (The Haunted Stage, 8). Given Carlson’s notion, I am led to ask, has Harry Potter become so iconic that it ghosts our understanding of Equus? Moreover, there is, of course, the peculiar sensation of having not one, but two characters from the Harry Potter movies onstage in this production. There are also the poster, program and advertising images that surround the revivals—Daniel Radcliffe’s naked torso masterfully morphed into the straight-on view of a horse’s head, which recalls the way that some characters in Harry Potter can morph from human to animal and back. In this chapter, I track the way in which the celebrity of Daniel Radcliffe and the ubiquitousness of Harry Potter may have bled into the experience of audiencing Equus. First, I examine the theoretical models on offer for understanding the creative function of theatre audiences and then
explicate some of the many cultural elements, most significantly celebrity, that may have come into play during the audience’s coproduction of meaning for these particular productions of *Equus*. Finally, in this chapter I look at how the celebrity and the character are not made congruent and argue that the connection between Alan Strang and Daniel Radcliffe is obviously seamed, rather than seamless. This seamed fit is not a detriment to the production, however; in fact, it reinforces themes in the play.

**Theatre Audiences**

A performance certainly affects an audience; however, it is important to examine how an audience might affect a performance, as well. The changing nature of the audience from minute to minute and performance to performance makes it both difficult and important to consider the audience in any explication of a performance as text. Theatre, of course, responds to its audience on a moment-to-moment basis—performers often hold for laughs, for example. Well-known actors are sometimes applauded when they first walk onstage, making apparent the fictiveness of the world of the play and the reality of the actor as actor and not character. Though it seems obvious that an audience affects a performance, it is nonetheless difficult to explain how, why and to what end. In *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, Susan Bennett undertakes these questions. She articulates what shifts from page to stage and notes the complexity of engaging this process when she writes,

> No two theatrical performances can ever be the same precisely because of this audience involvement. In much contemporary theatre the audience becomes a self-conscious co-creator of performance and enjoys a
productive role which exceeds anything demanded of the reader or the
cinema audience. Beyond this, the many components of theatre—director,
actor, theatre building, lighting, seating, and so on—intercede between
text and reader. Their involvement necessarily complicates the theoretical
model. (Bennett 21)

Bennett gives an in-depth analysis of the existing theories of reading and viewing,
including audience-reception theory, which is particularly important in order to better
understand the multiple layers of meaning in the performance-as-text of the 2007 and
2008 revivals of *Equus*. Audience reception theory is based on reader-response theory,
which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a response to the stranglehold New Critics
appeared to have on literary criticism. Reader-response theory changed the loci of
meaning-making from the text to the reader. According to Mary Louise Pratt in
“Interpretive Strategies/Strategic Interpretations: On Anglo-American Reader-Response
Criticism,”

Reader-response criticism and pedagogy clearly capitalize on the culture’s
intense focus on self-knowledge and self-observation, and on the validity
now accorded to personal and intuitive knowledge. Students come to us
trained, like ourselves, in observing their own responses, in talking about
them, and in considering them important . . . this is an improvement over
formalism, if only because it is true, among other things, that readers make
meaning. (27)

As Pratt contends, it is true, among other things, that readers (or audience members, in
our case) make meaning, and that the meaning they make is based in no small part on the
experiences they bring with them to the reading or audiencing. For example, a person who has read *Equus* before will audience a production of it in a different way than someone for whom the story is brand new. A person who is friends with one of the players will experience the play differently than someone who has never seen any of the players before. Though reader-response theory has perhaps been eclipsed by subsequent theories, and is best understood in the specificity of its historical moment, its offshoot, audience-reception theory, remains relevant to scholars interested in theories of audiencing. Performance studies opened up reader-response theory to the theatre, according to Susan Bennett. She writes that theatre performances complicate reader-response theory, since a literary work is a fixed and finished product not directly influenced by its audience.

In *Theatre Audiences*, after she analyzes the existing theoretical models for reading and viewing, Bennett proposes her own theory, which is influenced by reader-response theory and semiotics, among other things. Her theory employs the idea of inner and outer frames and incorporates considerations of the elements that make performance as text different than a written text. The term “frame” can be confusing, as it is also used by social theorists such as Erving Goffman to describe the ways in which we perceive and structure social situations. For the purpose of this study, I instead employ Bennett’s usage of the term, which is a heuristic for considering the different elements of a performance and how these elements, and the audience member’s experience, interact and play with each other. This method is not intended to privilege one frame over another, or to imply that the frames must be penetrated in order to get at some truth, but rather to give us a working metaphor for the very complicated interaction between the
performance and our perception of it. For Bennett, the outer frame contains all the
cultural elements that create and inform the theatrical event and the inner frame contains
the dramatic production in a particular playing space. The audience’s role, according to
Bennett, is carried out within these two frames and, perhaps most importantly, at their
points of intersection: “It is the interactive relations between audience and stage which
constitute production and reception, and which cause the inner and outer frames to
converge for the creation of a particular experience” (139). The audience makes meaning
at the convergence of these frames and, in the case of Equus, the outer frame is heavily
influenced by the phenomenon of Harry Potter and the celebrity of its child star.
Additionally, the outer frame consists of the images of Daniel Radcliffe’s naked torso,
the reviews of the play in the newspapers and the discussion of his penis in the blogs.

The inner frame consists of, among other things, Shaffer’s text, the design of the
production, and the stage in the playing space. Bennett’s theorizing also includes
consideration of the liminalities of the theatrical experience, the comings and goings of
the audience, how they got to the theatre, where they’re going next, the lobby, the ushers.
As I mentioned in chapter two, during a performance of Equus that I attended, during the
nude scene, ushers appeared seemingly out of nowhere and stood in the aisles on the
lookout for patrons taking illicit photographs, which gave the experience an added layer
of meaning. Even if Daniel Radcliffe had succeeded in making the audience “forget” that
he was Daniel Radcliffe and had become, seamlessly, Alan Strang, the moment the
ushers entered the space we were reminded of his celebrity status and the fact that his
nudity was a commodity—people on the internet would be eager consumers of such
pictures. Obviously, these elements all affect an audience’s experience and, according to
Bennett, “As liminalities are always ideologically encoded, consider how the audience’s expectations of the theatrical event as a whole are accordingly shaped” (11). Of course, celebrity is an obvious kind of overcoding, to use Bennett’s word, of meaning that occurs during a performance in which a well-known actor is featured.

**Celebrity and the Outer Frame**

According to Marvin Carlson, audiences are at least as drawn to a production by their previous experience of the actor(s) as they are by the name of the play or playwright: “One need only look at the advertisements and advance publicity for the plays in any new season on Broadway to see the power of this dynamic at work . . . Any actor familiar enough to be featured in the advance advertising will inevitably bring associations to the minds of a potential audience” (*The Haunted Stage* 69). Daniel Radcliffe was certainly familiar enough to bring associations in the minds of audience members, but it is important to note that Daniel Radcliffe is almost exclusively known for his role as Harry Potter, so there is a sort of semiotic entanglement between Daniel Radcliffe, Alan Strang and Harry Potter. The “frame” the audience has is of Harry Potter, not really even of Daniel Radcliffe. Marvin Carlson writes that for actors known for television and/or movie work, the mass circulation of these other media makes it highly likely that even an active theatregoing public may bring to an actor’s newest theatrical creation associations drawn more for that actor’s work in the mass media than onstage. Often this ghosting is actively encouraged by the production's publicity program, hoping to draw
to the theatre audience members who have enjoyed the work of a particular actor on television or in films. (Carlson, *Haunted 70*)

In the case of *Equus*, the publicity materials were heavily skewed to feature Daniel Radcliffe, even though Martin Dysart (played by Richard Griffiths) is the protagonist of the play. Some newspaper ads showed a shirtless and buff Daniel Radcliffe looking intently into the camera. As I’ve noted, the billboards and program associated with the production show Radcliffe’s naked torso morphed into the shape of a horse’s head seen straight on. These ads both announce Radcliffe’s role in the production and his newfound virility, which I discussed in chapter two. They are designed to capitalize on Radcliffe’s celebrity and his child star status—the new, muscular, adult Daniel Radcliffe is different from our notions of the boy Harry Potter, which makes us pause and captures our attention.

These publicity and marketing elements might draw some of Daniel Radcliffe’s extant fan base to the theatre to see the production, and these images, along with the memory of Daniel Radcliffe in other roles, are present in the minds of the audience members as they view *Equus*. According to Bennett, “With the presence of a ‘star’ on stage, the audience is inevitably aware of a double presence, and it is generally the case, to a greater or lesser degree, that the audience is reading the actors’ performance alongside the work being performed” (Bennett 152). In the media, Daniel Radcliffe’s performance in *Equus* was often read in direct comparison to his performance as Harry Potter. It is certainly not unusual that reviewers would comment on the performance of one of the lead players; in fact, a reviewer would be remiss if she left that information out. However, many of these reviews do not simply focus on the quality of Daniel
Radcliffe’s work in *Equus*, they remark on the ways that the character Alan Strang is alike or different than the character Harry Potter and how Radcliffe navigates the switch from one character to the other. In other words, these reviews reveal a remarkable emphasis on the outer frame. For example, Ben Brantley of the *New York Times*, wrote: “The young wizard has chosen wisely. For Alan Strang is, in a sense, a tidy inversion of Harry Potter. Both come of age in a menacing, magical world where the prospect of being devoured by darkness is always imminent. The difference is that for Harry that world is outside of him; Alan’s is of his own creation” (“In the Darkness of the Stable”). The meaning that Brantley made of the play was directly influenced by Daniel Radcliffe’s film career; indeed, Brantley saw Alan Strang as a “tidy inversion” of Harry Potter. The use of the word “tidy” indicates to me that Brantley saw the ghost of Harry Potter in the performance of *Equus* as something that could be contained and integrated into his understanding of Alan Strang, even though he considered the characters inversions, or opposites.

**Horizon of Expectation**

Ben Brantley’s meaning-making happened in the intersection between the inner frame, which contains Alan Strang, and the outer frame, which contains Harry Potter. For Brantley, there was a mirror image, an inversion at the point of intersection. Another way to consider how the Harry Potter phenomenon affected audiences’ reception of *Equus* is to employ reception-theory theorist Hans Robert Jauss’ notion of the “horizon of expectation,” which Marvin Carlson explicates in “Theatre Audiences and the Reading of Performance”: 
[In 1982’s *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*], Jauss wishes to emphasize the importance of the reader without giving way to total subjectivism and for this purpose emphasizes a “specific disposition” of an audience, “which can be empirically determined and which precedes the psychological reaction as well as the subjective understanding of the individual reader.” The empirical disposition is provided, according to Jauss, by a “horizon of expectations,” itself based upon three factors—“the familiar norms or the immanent poetics of the genre,” the “implicit relationships to familiar works of the literary-historical surroundings,” and “the opposition between fiction and reality.” (Carlson, “Theatre Audiences” 83)

Jauss was interested, for one thing, in being able to determine or account for the ways in which a work is “read” differently in different points in time. If we can establish a particular audience’s horizon of expectations, we can determine, for one thing, how the work adheres to or deviates from that horizon, thus giving us a sense of how predictable or how radical a work is in that historical moment. In the next chapter, I will concentrate on the first of the factors that influence an audience’s horizon of expectation, “the familiar norms or the immanent poetics of the genre,” in order to examine how *Equus*’ avant-garde elements function for a contemporary audience. In this chapter, however, I wish to look at how the audience’s horizon of expectations involving Daniel Radcliffe specifically might have influenced their experience of audiencing *Equus*, and will concentrate on the second and third of Jauss’s factors.
For example, an audience’s horizon of expectations is based on “implicit relationships to familiar works of the literary-historical surroundings.” The most obvious works of the literary-historical surroundings which would influence an audiencing of *Equus* are the Harry Potter films. The disparate works by Peter Shaffer and J.K. Rowling, a seemingly unlikely literary pair, are bound together in the body of Daniel Radcliffe and his portrayal of the boy wizard and the adolescent horse-blinder. The horizon of expectations of an audience for *Equus* that was familiar with Radcliffe’s previous work would find the play to be at a far aesthetic distance from the popular book and film franchise. For one thing, as noted in chapter two, the body of the actor common to both was altered and sculpted for the play. Radcliffe had “adultized” himself for the role. He was no longer the child wizard. Additionally, the structure and subject matter of *Equus* is a far cry from the structure and subject matter of *Harry Potter*. *Harry Potter* is a very familiar hero’s journey story. *Equus* is a memory play that delves deep into the psychology of protagonist Martin Dysart and the disturbed boy he treats. There are no heroes or villains in Shaffer’s world. All are implicated, all are troubled—not just the boy who commits the crime. The discrepancies between the world of Harry Potter and the world of Alan Strang would create a discrepancy between the audience’s horizon of expectations, which is based on the known role of Harry Potter, and the new reality that includes the theatrical event of *Equus*. Thus, there is a kind of shock that challenges the audience’s horizon of expectation, and then the audience’s horizon must begin to shift.

Similarly, *Equus* demonstrates a marked “opposition between fiction and reality;” both the reality of the audience members’ lives and the alternate reality of Harry Potter are in opposition to the fictive world of Shaffer’s creation. Though Harry Potter is a
fiction as well, it has already been incorporated into the audience’s horizon of expectations, and should be considered part of their “reality,” as it were. In opposition to the reality that includes a knowledge of the Harry Potter phenomenon is Shaffer’s *Equus*. *Equus*, since it is a memory play, occurs in two different locales at once. On the one hand, *Equus* is set in a psychiatric hospital in southern England, a place that could indeed exist in the “real world.” However, *Equus* is also set in Dysart’s mind. He is telling us the story. We also have access to Alan’s memories as well—he conveys them to Dysart and they are acted out onstage before us. Stylized horses dance and carry Alan around the stage. They wear steel masks and their eyes are red lights. This world is emphatically not like the “real world,” and challenges an audience’s horizon of expectations in this way as well, a kind of nudge often given by stylized theatre of this kind. The audience’s expectations of Radcliffe and the kind of world in which he might reside are upended by *Equus*, thus intensifying the way the play might be received by a contemporary audience. It is because of the audience’s horizon of expectations going into *Equus* that the production is successful, not in spite of it.

**Collision or Congruence**

According to Marvin Carlson, “In terms of dramatic illusion, ghosting can clearly work in either a positive or negative way, and celebrity provides a particularly powerful example of this” (Carlson, *Haunted* 89). In some cases, the ghost or ghosts an actor brings with him or her onstage can enhance the experience of the new production. Either the ghost is incorporated into the new role in a productive way or the discrepancy between the ghosted role and the new one is so great that it functions, in effect, as an
alienation effect, which could create, depending on the play, a positive or a negative interpretation. Michael Quinn, in his article “Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting,” is particularly interested in the phenomenon of ghosting and celebrity. He writes that every acting event contains within it some relative and in-flux blend of performer, acting figure and character, and that in acting events that feature celebrities, the performer can come to dominate the blend:

[Celebrities] bring something to the role [that] keeps them from disappearing entirely into the acting figure or the drama. Rather, their contribution to the performance is often a kind of collision with the role, sometimes hard to accept, but sometimes, too, loaded with the spectacular energy that an explosive crash can release. (Quinn 155)

Quinn doesn’t offer his own examples of performances that created this “explosive crash,” so I offer Daniel Radcliffe’s performance in Equus as one such explosion. The boy wizard hero Harry Potter collides against the mad horse-blinder Alan Strang in the shared body of Daniel Radcliffe. Even the audience’s experience of Radcliffe’s body is a collision of memory and expectation with reality—in our mind’s eye we see a succession of Harry Potters—four Harry Potters, to be exact—at ages 11, 12, 13, and 14. The buff body before us represents something entirely different. The bodies of Harry Potter and Alan Strang are clearly different, and there are other important ways in which the characters are different as well. Harry Potter is a noble figure; Alan Strang is pitiable. Harry Potter is orphaned but has an extensive support network; Alan Strang has both of his parents and yet is completely alone.
Quinn writes, “When celebrity and role more clearly collide, then two kinds of effects are possible. Either the celebrity is perceived as meeting a challenge, as achieving a stretch—a personal growth that provides a pleasure of audience approval to augment the drama—or the celebrity might be perceived as ‘out-of-place,’ miscast at best, at worst an overreacher” (Quinn 158). In the case of Daniel Radcliffe and Equus, the first seems to be the case, at least in the popular press. Michael Billington of the Guardian (London) wrote in his review of the play: “Forget all the prurient press speculation about Harry Potter’s private parts. The revelation of this revival is that Daniel Radcliffe really can act, proving that his screen appearances as JK Rowling's boy-hero are no flash in the magic pan” (Billington, “Equus Theatre Review”). In the article by Sarah Lyall about the London performance, she comments, “Equus opened last week, and the consensus so far is that Mr. Radcliffe has successfully extricated himself from his cinematic alter ego. Considering that playing Harry Potter is practically all he has done in his career, this is no small achievement” (Lyall, “Naked”). Radcliffe can act; he can do more than Harry Potter. However, the fact that he can stretch to accommodate the role of Alan Strang does not mean that there is no collision between audience expectation and his performance, it simply means that the audience seems to take pleasure in the discrepancy between his former role and his current one. According to Quinn, “The aesthetics of celebrity are not only psychological but structural: the apparent stability of the star provides a landmark against which the unfolding scenes of the drama can be judged. Celebrities come equipped with an intertext that includes several levels” (Quinn 158).

Quinn argues that in the kind of theatre considered “good art” in the post-Romantic West, the convention of naturalism is upheld and that, “Celebrity threatens to
subvert this traditional structure in a number of ways” (155). Marvin Carlson, however, does not agree with Quinn that there is necessarily a clash between celebrity and referentiality. He writes that, certainly, celebrity works in opposition to the illusion of theatrical naturalism, but that it is questionable that such an illusion is ever really achieved. He goes on to say:

In terms of reception, and indeed of illusion, the question seems to me not so much one of whether or not an actor’s celebrity affects an audience’s reception of a role (surely it normally does) but, rather, whether an actor's celebrity is naturally congruent to the role or . . . can be persuasively made congruent. (*Haunted* 86)

I argue that the complicated celebrity combination of Harry Potter/Daniel Radcliffe is not naturally congruent with the role of Alan Strang, but that it is incongruent in a way that offers a wealth of messages to unpack, messages that ultimately adds a richness to *Equus* that deserves our critical attention. Because of the celebrity onstage, the theatrical experience was, in my opinion, heightened. It was more theatrical. There was an inherent tension between the actor and his role that added to the already tense show. We were never unaware that Daniel Radcliffe was Daniel Radcliffe, but the kind of disappearing into a role that is valued in realistic theatre is not necessary for Shaffer’s plays, which are highly stylized, decidedly non-realistic works. That is not to say that Shaffer attempts a kind of Brechtian critical distance; instead he creates characters with whom we are meant to identify to the point that we experience their ritual and their pain. Since we come to the theatre already having a relationship with Alan Strang (via our relationship with Harry Potter via the body of Daniel Radcliffe) our concern for him is more intense. When
Daniel Radcliffe/Alan Strang takes off his clothes, our attention doesn’t focus like a laser simply because of a salacious interest in a celebrity’s body, though that is part of our fascination with this scene, to be sure. Rather, or to some extent, at least, we pay close attention because during this scene we see a naked, vulnerable body, a body in peril, and it is the body of someone with whom we have had a relationship for many years.

According to David Giles in *Illusions of Immortality: A Psychology of Fame and Celebrity*, our reception of stars on screen goes beyond mere identification. In fact, we form relationships with the people on screen. This phenomenon is known as “para-social interaction,” a term that was coined in an article in the journal *Psychiatry* in the 1950s. The authors of this article argue that “media consumers form relationships with media characters, albeit unilateral relationships, that affect us in ways that resemble any other relationship with a person” (Giles 3). The para-social relationship that many audience members may have had with Harry Potter/Daniel Radcliffe gave the role of Alan Strang an added poignancy. For example, in the feature about the London performance, Sarah Lyall writes that many in the audience “have watched [Radcliffe’s] Harry Potter fly through the air, forget to do his homework, talk to snakes, smite people with his magic wand, stay up past his bedtime and suffer any number of traumatic near-death experiences” (“Naked Role”). She goes on to quote Katelyn Gill, age 20: “After we saw the play, we were like—Oh my God—we'll never be able to see Harry Potter in the same way again!” Our potential regard for Alan Strang because of his relationship (through Daniel Radcliffe) with Harry Potter is only one layer of added meaning in an already richly layered production and reception process, however. Rebecca Gavrila astutely
points out another way that Daniel Radcliffe’s casting added a new dimension to the play in a review of Equus for Theatre Journal:

The revival of Equus was a powerful theatrical experience with a strong cast and dynamic staging. Whether the play needed to be revived prompts a different question: after thirty years, does the play offer anything new for an audience? In many ways, the collision of Equus with celebrity consumption adds to Shaffer’s text. The combination of obsession, sexuality, and adoration becomes as much about Alan Strang's relationship with his horses as it does about an audience’s flocking to see a production that features nudity, sexuality and celebrity—qualities that clearly continue to define the revival of Peter Shaffer’s Equus. (Gavrila 676)

Our unilateral relationship with Harry Potter mirrors Alan Strang’s unilateral, worshipful relationship with his horse god. Strang’s worship is dangerous; perhaps our “celebrity consumption” is just as dangerous.

Peter Shaffer’s Equus is a play about the way that people navigate themselves through a confusing, modern world and Shaffer’s characters are none too adept at it. Similarly, perhaps the kind of celebrity worship that brought Harry Potter fans into the theatre was an added source of tension in the production-as-text, an added layer of meaning to unpack. The tension that occurred as Alan Strang challenged the audience’s “horizon of expectation” for Daniel Radcliffe also adds to the audience experience of the production. The ghost of Harry Potter made us hyperaware of what was happening to Alan Strang’s body onstage, and of course, as Umberto Eco says, “The audience’s awareness of actor as actor works to a greater or lesser extent in marking at all times the
fictiveness of the stage world” (Bennett 66). The magnification of the fictiveness of the stage world emphasized Shaffer’s non-realistic, stylized brand of theatre. In this case, the meaning made at the intersection of the inner and outer frames seems to have been heavily influenced by the outer frame, and this outer frame skewed heavily to the celebrity of Daniel Radcliffe and the ghost of Harry Potter(s) audience members brought with them to the theatre. I think that this intersection between theatre, celebrity and pop culture gives theatre scholars interested in theories of production and reception a particularly rich experience to unravel and unpack.
Chapter Four: Daniel Radcliffe and *Equus*’s Tensions

With the addition of a celebrity with child star status in the player ranks, *Equus* took on layers of meaning that were not present in (or perhaps added layers of meaning to) the original productions. The celebrity culture that surrounded the 21st century revivals was certainly different than the context of the 1970s productions. However, in many other, inner-frame kinds of ways, the original and the revivals were remarkably similar. For the 2007 and 2008 revivals, *Equus* was not significantly reimagined from its 1970s incarnation in any way. In fact, John Napier, the designer of the original productions, designed the revivals as well. Since the play was not significantly changed for the revivals, either in script or in design, we have an opportunity to observe how a play from 1973, without update (save the addition of a celebrity with child star status in one of the lead roles), may work in the 21st century. The outer frame changed; the inner frame stayed the same. Many critics noted the ways in which the play had obviously dated. *New York Times* reviewer Ben Brantley wrote, “There’s no question that Equus has dated, particularly in its presentation of psychiatric investigation (something Mr. Shaffer humbly admits in a program note)” (“In the Darkness of the Stable”). Peter Shaffer updated his program note in 2008 for the revival, as Brantley mentioned, writing:

Writing *Equus* was a most thrilling experience for me. For many years, I hesitated about permitting it to be revived on a large scale, partly because I was convinces that psychiatric techniques and practice had changed quite a bit since I wrote it. But finally I had to acknowledge that all plays “date”
in one way or another, and that it was really time that this one, which had
made such a stir at its first appearance, might still be found relevant and
indeed welcome 35 years later. (Shaffer “Equus program note”)

In response to the play and how it might have dated, Michael Billington of the Guardian wrote in his review that the strong performance of the leads helped to “camouflage the fact that Peter Shaffer’s ritual drama sometimes betrays its early 1970s origins” (15).

Billington does, however, praise the “exciting spectacle” of Shaffer’s work.

Reviews of these revivals echo each other—the play is dated, the metaphors obvious, the ideas about psychiatry passé. In her Theatre Journal review, Gavrila posed a series of questions: Why has a play that has not been reimagined or updated created such interest? Is it the dark subject matter? The chance to re-engage a text that’s critical of psychiatry in our “post-Prozac” era? Or, she asked, was it “rather the strange paradox of an audience attending a production that explored the nature of worship, lust, and blindness for the purpose of seeing an international teen star in his stage debut—a debut that required both nudity and simulated sex?” (Gavrila 675). In fact, though, as I have argued previously, I certainly believe that the casting of Daniel Radcliffe was a major draw of Equus and one of the reasons the revivals were such successes, I also believe that the play itself has a certain appeal that audiences respond to as well.

Even as critics both then and now have bemoaned the script, they agree that the show “works” because of its intense theatricality and spectacle. Audiences have responded well to the play, and that has led to a tension between critical response and audience reception. In this chapter, I explore some of the tensions inherent in Equus and attempt to answer some of Gavrila’s questions. There are deep tensions in the Shaffer’s
work itself and tensions between Shaffer’s highly theatrical style with its nod toward the avant-garde, and the play’s upper-middle class ennui and commercial appeal, both then and now. First, I analyze the play’s tensions, what the characters are working through onstage, in order to get a sense of what it is about *Equus* to which audiences might be responding. Then I problematize certain readings of the play by expanding the frame to include the cultural moment(s) in which *Equus* was operating. Finally, I incorporate the casting of a celebrity with child star status into my analysis of the play in order to give a portrait of how the play might be functioning or understood at the intersection of theatre and pop culture at the beginning of the 21st century.

**Alan’s Demons, Dysart’s Dilemma**

_Equus_ has resonated with audiences since its debut in 1973. It resonated with me when I first read it in high school and again then when I saw it in London and in New York. The play has more power on stage than it does on the page, though I do think that it is important to understand some of the tensions at work in Shaffer’s script in order to understand how the themes of the play, the “inner frame,” work for a contemporary audience. For one thing, Shaffer has created characters with whom we can identify. Alan has done a loathsome thing, but he is not a loathsome character. We feel pity for him. He is mad, but we understand, at least somewhat, why. Alan is trapped as, maybe, many of us are. Though Dysart romanticizes Alan’s pain, Alan, in fact, appears to want Dysart’s help. He doesn’t want to go back to the horses and back to the field. According to Shaffer scholar Madeleine MacMurraugh-Kavanagh, “Releasing elemental, natural man, worship is seen to liberate passions which circulate beyond the margins of surveillance—passions
which destroy as surely as they create” (MacMurraugh-Kavanagh 81). Indeed, Alan engages in an ultimately destructive kind of worship of his own creation to which he has given himself, body and soul. Yes, he has “passion,” but there is no indication that he wishes to remain trapped by his passions. He seems to want to be free of them. We are to understand that blinding Equus didn’t free him completely, and neither could Dysart’s deft psychiatric treatment. As Dysart says in his closing monologue: “He’ll be delivered from madness. What then? He’ll feel himself acceptable. What then? Do you think feelings like his can be simply re-attached, like plasters? Stuck on to other things we select?” (108). Alan’s abreaction may have helped him exorcise his demons and perhaps someday to reenter society, but by doing so he’s only substituting one god for another. Perhaps he will hurt no more, but regardless, Alan is still chained. His worship was all he had, and it wasn’t enough to break him free.

Alan is certainly not the only character in the play who is in “chains.” The man who helps kill Alan’s myth is deeply conflicted about his role in the “god’s” murder. Equus is, of course, the story of a psychiatrist examining his own gods, the gods of “Normality” and “Health” and the role that the doctor plays in Alan’s potential loss of worship. According to C.D. Innes, in Modern British Drama, 1890-1990, “Dysart comes to recognize that he is sicker than the patient he is required to heal, [and] we realize (with him) that intellectual detachment disguises sterility, and that taking away the boy’s pain means destroying the fundamental need for worship” (Modern British Drama, 410). It is certain that Dysart’s interactions with Alan have led him to a deep personal crisis about his chosen profession. After Dysart meets Alan, Dysart has a dream in which he is a chief priest in Homeric Greece, wearing a wide gold mask and performing some sort of child-
sacrifice ritual. This dream certainly speaks of Dysart’s professional uncertainty, the sneaking suspicion he has that what he’s doing in the name of science and health might be more harmful than good.

Shaffer’s characters search for meaning and wish and try desperately to be free, but whatever they do, whether it be constructing a new myth or questioning an entire profession, it is never enough, considering the madness of the world and the chains that constrain us. When *Equus* was first produced, many critics responded to these themes. Walter Kerr, in his 1974 review for the *New York Times*, wrote:

> We feel a desperate need these days for new icons, images, clothed symbols that will help us come to terms with the “dark cave of the psyche,” the cave that thousands of years of reasoning haven’t quite lighted after all. The closest I have seen a contemporary play come—it is powerfully close—to reanimating the spirit of mystery that makes the stage a place of breathless discovery rather than a classroom for rational demonstration is Peter Shaffer’s remarkable *Equus.*” (Kerr “A Psychiatric Detective Story of Great Skill”)

*Equus*, onstage, is a work of immense power, and the audience is asked to observe, think, and, above all, witness and experience the rituals being enacted. We are meant to recognize ourselves onstage, in the characters engaging their demons in the railed square set on a circle in the center. This circle represents a sacred space. It is Dysart’s office, and the Field of Ha Ha where Alan performs his rites. It is also the altar upon which madness is excised and worship enacted. The intense theatricality of the work suggests that Shaffer is saying something about the nature of the theater and society’s need for some manner of
ritual. He’s saying that the theatre, as well as the psychiatrist’s office and the field, is a place of exorcism and enactment. It is a place where we can all come to terms with what we’ve each made our own personal god, how we worship, and how we might be complicit in the madness of the world around us.

_Equus Today_

I would argue that the world has not become any less mad in the 37 years since _Equus_ first debuted, and, thus, arguably, the play’s themes remain relevant. It is true, though, that _Equus_ has aged and functions differently today than it did in the 1970s, despite the themes in the inner frame that might still speak to us. For example, _Equus_’ portrayal of psychiatry is the most obvious indicator of _Equus_’s datedness and the historical moment of its original conception. By the time of the _Equus_ revivals, R.D. Laing’s brand of “anti-psychiatry” had been out of fashion for decades. Even at the time of _Equus_’s original production, the play’s views on psychiatry were controversial. In 1974 psychiatrist Sanford Gifford wrote a response to _Equus_ for the _New York Times_ that lambasted the play: “By weaving together many clinical syndromes, therapeutic methods and psychoanalytic clichés, Shaffer presents us with a fictitious piece of psychopathology” (1). Gifford paints the main themes of the play, which had been applauded by other critics, in a completely different light, saying:

To [Dysart] the boy’s delusional rituals are a fascinating work of art—a sentiment which echoes R.D. Laing’s once-modish sermons about respecting our patients’ psychotic productions as creative acts, as higher, more authentic forms of “truth.” In contrast to this idealization of
psychosis, normality is made dreary by becoming represented by the middle-class liberal magistrate, who points out how distressing and maladaptive the symptoms are for the boy himself. (Gifford “Psychiatrist says Nay to Equus”)

The issues that Gifford raises in the 1970s are even more problematic today, since we are even further removed from the particular brand of “anti-psychiatry” with which Dysart seems to be struggling. If these themes are dated, are Shaffer’s larger themes of ritual, passion, and transformation dated as well? Does the play still “work”?

In a 2007 article for the *Guardian*, Adam Phillips writes that a revival of *Equus* is long overdue; that it was an important and passionate play that was and could again be tremendously powerful and affecting. He continues,

And yet *Equus*—and this is one of the many things that make it so powerful—is not so much a play about passion, a play extolling the passionate life of violent desire, but a play about what happens to people when passion becomes their object of desire. . . . What has to have happened to people to make them believe that what they lack is passion? What are we asking passion to cure us of? These are the play’s questions, more visible now, I think, than they were when it was first performed. *Equus* was a play that, in a sense, suffered from its timeliness. Its revival could show us that it was a spectacularly subtle play as well as a spectacularly theatrical one. (Phillips “*Equus* Review”)

Adam Phillips, at least, believes that *Equus* remains relevant, that is still has something important to say. He also believes that we can learn something new about the play from
its revival, which is an assertion with which I agree. I also agree with Phillips that *Equus*
is a spectacularly theatrical play; however, I would substitute the word “complicated” for
“subtle.” Peter Shaffer wrote a successful, ambitious play. The play, however, is also
problematic, and has been problematic since its inception. I previously mentioned the
controversy over the play’s portrayal of psychiatry. Psychiatry is not the only element of
*Equus* to which critics have reacted negatively. In a 1975 article for the *Hudson Review*
titled “Hippodrama at the Psychodrome,” John Simon wrote:

> The play pullulates with dishonesty. Dishonesty toward its avowed
> purpose, the explication of a “dreadful event,” by making that
dreadfulness seem fascinating and even admirable. . . . Dishonesty toward
> normality (whatever that is), by making its representatives and defenders,
> for the most part, pathetic or unappetizing. . . . *Equus* fails all the causes it
> seems to espouse, except for the dubious cause of spectacular theatricality.
>
> (Simon 106).

This “spectacular theatricality” makes us believe that, which upon reflection, perhaps we
don’t or oughtn’t. Though I do not agree with the most vitriolic of the assertions that
critics like Gifford and Simon made, I do think that *Equus* is problematic, and I think that
the problems in the play have been brought into high relief because of the nature and
circumstances of the revivals, especially the addition of an “outer frame” drenched in pop
and celebrity culture. The problems can be identified in the inner frame, but they become
more apparent when intersected with the outer frame of pop culture and celebrity
signification.
Commercializing the Avant-Garde

As I mentioned in Chapter Three, the first of Jauss’ factors that influence an audience’s horizon of expectations is “the familiar norms or the immanent poetics of the genre.” An avant-garde or artistically revolutionary theatre piece will have a great deal of aesthetic distance from the familiar norms of the genre. Of course, the broader one’s theatre-going experience, the broader one’s horizon. Equus may seem revolutionary in its form to someone less familiar with stylized or experimental theatre. In fact, Peter Shaffer’s Equus owes a great debt to the avant-garde; with its ritualistic movements, sounds, and mime, it makes a definite nod to Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty. In Avant Garde Theatre, C.D. Innes also identifies the influence of Grotowski, Barrault and Brook in Shaffer’s work in the use of these techniques (228). For the purpose of this thesis, I accept Ryan Claycomb’s necessarily reductive use of the contested term “avant-garde.” He writes,

[Equus] 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 Burger calls the historical avant-garde of the early decades of the twentieth century. (100)

However, though the aesthetic techniques might be similar, Equus is not itself avant-garde. Equus straddles the line between the experimental and the commercial theatre;
with the inclusion of Daniel Radcliffe, *Equus* straddles the world of celebrity, tabloids, and pop culture as well.

In “Death of the Avant Garde,” David Savran argues that “experimental performance needs the idea of the 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” (Savran 11). In a chapter titled “From the Margins to the Mainstream,” C.D. Innes writes in *Avant Garde Theatre* about the way that *Equus* flirts with an avant-garde aesthetic without actually challenging the status quo:

> [In *Equus*], significant issues have been raised, but only as a form of intellectual titillation. The audience’s desire for archetypal significance—itsel perhaps an indication of avant garde interests filtering through into public consciousness, or expressing the same reaction against contemporary materialism that has motivated the avant garde exploration of the primitive—has been satisfied without disturbing them on any fundamental level. . . . *Equus* was a worldwide success. The avant garde approach had, as it were, arrived, but in a watered-down and conventional form. (Innes 229) 6

*Equus* certainly draws from experimental performance practices in order to stage its highly stylized, non-realistic elements and uses mythic archetypes and chanting to stress

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6 As noted before, in his 1973 *New York Times* review, Walter Kerr speaks to this desire for “archetypal significance”: “We feel a desperate need these days for new icons, images, clothed symbols that will help us come to terms with the “dark cave of the psyche,” the cave that thousands of years of reasoning haven’t quite lighted after all.” (Kerr, “A Psychiatric Detective Story of Infinite Skill”)
the ritualistic nature of the performance. In the 2009 *Modern Drama* article “Middlebrow ing the Avant-Garde: *Equus* on the West End,” Ryan Claycomb asserts that, “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” (100). For example, though psychiatry is a problem in Shaffer’s world, it is ultimately reaffirmed; after all, Dysart does “cure” Alan. There are questions about whether or not Dysart *should* cure Alan, but there is never any doubt that he *could*. In the end, heteronormativity is affirmed as well; Alan’s sexuality is reigned in and we are to understand that someday he will be able to have a “normal” relationship with a woman. Claycomb writes,

> 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. (Claycomb 100)

The material context of the play, of course, includes consideration of the celebrity of Daniel Radcliffe, the sensationalism of his youthful nudity, and the ghost of Harry Potter.
These elements, peculiar to the play’s revivals, heighten the tension between *Equus’* nod toward the avant garde and its entrenchment in the commercial theatre. With the inclusion of the casting of Daniel Radcliffe, the avant-garde elements seem overpowered by these commercial concerns and bourgeois obsessions. After all, the Harry Potter books and films are firmly associated with the pursuits of the middle class. Additionally, though the books and films seem rooted in middle class values, there is a kind of lowbrow element in the tabloids and blogs that also ghosts this production, thus seemingly contributing even more to *Equus*’s status as a commercial product and not as a kind of “high art.”

However, understanding *Equus* as an artistic and commercial product entails a more complicated analysis than applying this simple either/or equation permits. Claycomb sees the play and its production history as an example of the ways that the avant-garde is diluted and appropriated by the commercial theatre:

*[T]his play [is] 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 on the other. (Claycomb 100)*

*Equus* is an example of this kind of push and pull as resistant aesthetics get incorporated into the mainstream or are put in service to the exploration of a kind of middle-class ennui and the reification of middle class values. However, as Savran pointed out, there is a kind of false but necessary divide between experimental and commercial theatre. They require each other’s presence for their respective definition; they borrow from each other,
as well. *Equus* does not fall into one category or the other; *Equus* is an example of a “both/and” response to the question of how a play such as this must be considered and categorized. Daniel Radcliffe’s celebrity brings the tensions between the avant garde and the traditional theatre into high relief, and I think that *Equus* embraces such frictions. *Equus* makes us consider what and how we worship; the addition of pop culture to that issue is perfectly reasonable and perhaps it is a necessary issue we must question in this moment of time. We cannot escape the web of information and technology that has become a normal part of our world any more than Alan or Dysart can escape from their webs of cultural influence and the pressure to conform to normality.

**Why This, Now?**

As I mentioned before, in her *Theatre Journal* review, Rebecca Gavrila asked the questions: Why has a play that has not been reimagined or updated created such interest? Is it the dark subject matter? The chance to re-engage a text that’s critical of psychiatry in our “post-Prozac” era? Or, she asked, was it “rather the strange paradox of an audience attending a production that explored the nature of worship, lust, and blindness for the purpose of seeing an international teen star in his stage debut—a debut that required both nudity and simulated sex?” (Gavrila 675). A simple answer to each of Gavrila’s questions is, “yes.” Daniel Radcliffe created interest. Daniel Radcliffe’s nudity created interest. The subject matter created interest. The prospect of a revival of a popular, serious “straight” play in the West End or on Broadway created interest, as well. Play production is a risky business, and of late, musicals seem to fare better financially than straight plays.
Additionally, the revival of *Equus* happened at a time when people who saw it the first time around could see it again, 30-odd years later, as a new generation of theatergoers were brought into the fold. The celebrity of its star and the nudity in the script were certainly a draw for some audience members; the remembrance of *Equus* past may have been a draw for others. Whatever brought them into the theatre, I think that they saw a play of power and resonance. Perhaps the tension between critical and audience reception, which I will explore further in my next and final chapter, is in some part because of the differing horizons of expectation between the consumer and the critic. Regardless, *Equus* remains relevant, even where it is dated. Certainly, the celebrity casting brought out some of the aesthetic and political tensions in the play, but I think that these tensions are in line with the themes of Shaffer’s work.

Daniel Radcliffe’s casting made the play more theatrical through his celebrity; the commercial nature of his stardom also heightened the tension in the play between commercialism and experimentation. Even though, as I said above, *Equus* is not an avant-garde work and might be using avant-garde techniques to reify middle class values, I think that there is undeniably a purposeful theatrical experience hewn from this mixture of experiment and enterprise. Claycomb also allows that the play is more complicated than those who are most cynical about it believe it to be: “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” (Claycomb 101). Traces of the avant garde ghost the revivals of *Equus*, and even such specters of avant garde aesthetics can linger long in the minds of audience members—even after the
ghosts have left the stage. For Claycomb, it was noticing the “theatrical vocabulary” and enthusiasm the play engendered in his students that led him to argue that though *Equus* is ultimately reactionary it nonetheless provides an introduction or an initiation to the avant-garde, the effects of which might enduringly ripple through those who attended the play simply because of its celebrity connection. For me, the play gave me proof that plays should not just be read. *Equus* on the page struck me as obvious and banal. On stage, it was electrifying. The commercial side of the production may have brought me to the theatre, but the seductive ghosts of the avant-garde in the play were powerful enough to compel me toward scholarly inquiry.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

On February 8, 2009, *Equus* closed on Broadway. At the end of the play, the players came back onstage, carrying bouquets of straw (quite appropriate for a horse-themed show) and embraced each other. Daniel Radcliffe escorted a very old, frail man onstage as well; Peter Shaffer had attended the closing of the show. Shaffer’s shuffling gait and bent-over posture was shocking; I suppose I imagined him younger, though I’m not sure why. Shaffer was born in May of 1926 and was, at the time of this performance, 82 years old. When all the players were onstage, Radcliffe spoke up, quieting the audience, which was giving a standing ovation. Radcliffe said that it was a privilege to be part of the Broadway community and introduced Shaffer, who took a small bow to thunderous applause. Then Richard Griffiths spoke up, and with just a few words of thanks, launched into a recitation of Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken.” The poem is longer when recited than it seems looking at it on the page, and at the end of each stanza there was a brief pause before Griffiths went on. After the last lines, “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— / I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference,” he gave an affable grin, a slight nod of acknowledgement to the audience and then said nothing else. The audience members around me looked slightly baffled, but we all applauded enthusiastically when he finished.

There was a general feeling of goodwill in the air—the players were smiling and crying and holding each other. Daniel Radcliffe took control of the stage, despite Shaffer’s appearance and Griffith’s poem. He was Alan no longer, and not Harry Potter
either, as he might have seemed when he first came onstage, given our experience that evening and our new found understanding of him. He seemed, onstage in that moment, himself. Daniel Radcliffe is much smaller than one might think. This fact was made even more noticeable during the curtain call, when everyone, production crew included, came onstage. He was easily the smallest in the bunch. But he had a kind of authority that reminded me of, well, Harry Potter, though Radcliffe seems to have more humor than Potter. During the curtain call, with all the different people on stage, I was once again struck by the fact of Radcliffe’s body. His small, toned body was a stark contrast with Richard Griffiths’ large, soft body with its enormous belly. I thought back to the play I had just seen—the difference in their bodies gave Dysart’s dilemma an extra poignancy. Dysart envies Alan Strang his spiritual abandon; with this casting, it seems the envy might be of Alan’s agile and lithe body, as well. Griffiths’ Dysart was unable to spiritually ride in the field of Ha Ha; he could not physically ride, either. Even during the curtain call, with its rituals that remind the audience of the fictiveness of the stage world, my mind was tuned to the ways that the actors’ bodies influenced their work and the ways that we received them. And, of course, the curtain call itself made apparent the ways that actor, character, and all the characters the actor has played before become palimpsestic signifiers located in and on the actor’s physical body.

According to Stanton Garner in *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama*, “Jointly claimed by actor and character, the body onstage is also implicated in the real and the imaginary that underlie the twinnness of dramatic fiction. . . . [U]nlike the represented body in film, the body's living presence on stage asserts a physiological irreducibility that challenges the stability (and separability) of
representational levels” (44). For example, Garner notes, “Like mimes and dancers, actors train to bring physiology under control, but the body's recalcitrant physiology breaks through in perspiration, vocal congestion, a cough, an itch” (44). In Daniel Radcliffe’s case, he had to make sure that his penis behaved according to the script as well. It seems that his body’s recalcitrant physiology never broke through in that manner, never gave him an inappropriate erection, though perhaps some of the interest in his performance was in the off chance that his body might misbehave, that his body would betray him in some way.

**Daniel Radcliffe in Peter Shaffer’s Equus**

In this thesis, I used the fascination in the media with Daniel Radcliffe’s nude body as my way in to explore larger questions of celebrity and signification. At the beginning of this study, I asked how a celebrity with child star status baring his nude body onstage might affect the revival of a 1973 play about madness and worship. Among other things, I asked—how did the phenomenon of Harry Potter affect *Equus*? How did *Equus* work for Daniel Radcliffe and in the ongoing trajectory of his career? How were the play and its young star portrayed in the media? In the following chapters I attempted to answer some of those questions. In the second chapter, I focused on the cultural context(s) that contributed to the interest in Daniel Radcliffe in *Equus*, most notably his status as a child star and the nudity in the play. I explored the function of the child star and argued that by going onstage and publicly acting out trauma and by showing his adult body, Daniel Radcliffe was able to neatly move through adolescence and attempt to establish himself as a serious adult actor. In chapter three I focused on Radcliffe’s
celebrity and how the ubiquity of Harry Potter might affect an audience’s understanding of Peter Shaffer’s 1973 play. I used Susan Bennett’s work on audience reception to explore how perception of the play might change given the layer of celebrity added to the outer frame for this revival. I argued that the discrepancy between the characters of Harry Potter and Alan Strang, brought together in the body of Daniel Radcliffe, led to a tension that potentially benefited the play. In the fourth chapter, I looked at some of the tensions in Shaffer’s work and how the celebrity culture surrounding these revivals contributed to a tension between middle-class ennui and avant-garde aesthetics, among other things. I argued that this tension did not take away from the success of the play, but rather that the celebrity culture highlighted some of Shaffer’s themes, thus intensifying the effect of the play for a contemporary audience.

Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to defend the producers’ decision to cast Daniel Radcliffe as mad horse-blinder Alan Strang because I think that his celebrity made it easy to perhaps unintentionally condescend to the audience he might have helped draw to the theatre. For example, in Ryan Claycomb’s *Modern Drama* article, he writes that *Equus* was the play most “eagerly anticipated” by his students, who were mostly female, on a trip to London: “And the buzz of the production – a certain young, naked celebrity – dominated the lobby chatter” (99). The use of the word “chatter” is, I think, meaningful—his description of his class and the pre-show talk brings to mind a group of twittering, star-struck girls. Perhaps there were twittering girls at performances of *Equus*, though I didn’t see any at either of the performances that I attended. Even so, *Equus* was, in my opinion, a meaningful theatrical experience, one that stayed with me long after I left the theatre. I undertook this project to understand why. I came to the conclusion that
Equus worked in part not in spite of Radcliffe’s celebrity but because of it and the tension it caused. The ghost of Harry Potter added something to the production, something that had been explored in the media, but which also deserved to be explored by scholars. The interest in the media about the nudity, in particular, led me study the ways that celebrity affects audiencing. The celebrity culture that produced the interest in Equus also produced added tension in Shaffer’s already tension-filled play.

While the theatrical experience was heightened by Radcliffe’s celebrity, however, the script remained the same. The audience-reception theories that might have contributed to an understanding of how Harry Potter might have affected Equus can also help us understand the way that Equus has been portrayed by many critics—that the spectacle works but the ideas are passé. In “The Spectator in Drama/Drama in the Spectator: Peter Shaffer’s Equus,” Una Chaudhuri responds to the kind of “schizophrenic” response critics have had—separating the ideas and texts of the play from its staging—saying, essentially, that Equus is good theatre but bad drama. Chaudhuri says that saying that Equus is “bad drama” on the basis of the staleness of its intellectual ideas is shortsighted: “It may be an example of a critical failure to distinguish between what a play says (or seems to say) and what it does to the spectator” (52). Susan Bennett responded to Chaudhuri’s analysis in Theatre Audiences, writing that Chaudhuri looked to an “archetypal paradigm at work in Equus, not merely as a theme or an explanatory mechanism, but as something directing the spectator's experience.” (Chaudhuri 1984: 292). Her analysis does perhaps account for the gap between the box-office and critical reception of this play, but
more importantly the reading promotes a spectator-oriented criticism. The description of how a play works on a spectator—rather than of what it means—can supply the terms our criticism needs in order to erase the gap between theory and its object. (14)

By looking to the spectator, we can better understand how or why a piece works in a particular moment in time; despite its datedness, *Equus* worked in this moment in time perhaps because of the addition of Harry Potter to the mix. In fact, in Claycomb’s article, he ends with an analysis that attempts to bridge the gap between theory and its object, essentially saying that despite *Equus*’ problematic politics, the way it affected his students could not be easily dismissed.

**What Happens Next**

Daniel Radcliffe has finished shooting the final *Harry Potter* film and is moving on to other film projects. Within weeks of this writing he will begin shooting *The Woman in Black*, which is an adaptation of the suspense novel by Susan Hill. Already, the newspapers are asking whether the boy wizard will be able to shake his Harry Potter role. Geoff Boucher of the *Los Angeles Times* writes, “Daniel Radcliffe’s next magic trick will be his hardest—can he successfully disappear into a new starring film role after a decade as Harry Potter?” (“Ghostly Tale Spells a New Phase for Radcliffe,” D5). He goes on to wonder, “*The Woman in Black* will get a major spotlight due to its star, but some of it will be the glare of skepticism. Will Radcliffe’s face—so familiar after a decade of ‘Potter’ lunch boxes, pajamas and action figures—make some moviegoers snicker when they should shiver?” This article brings up the same concerns some critics had when
Radcliffe’s *Equus* role was announced. Perhaps the questions are still valid, since this will be his first major *film* role since the Potter films, but still the article leads me to wonder how long Radcliffe will be defined by his Potter status.

Daniel Radcliffe will be returning to Broadway in early 2011 as the lead in *How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying*, a musical. The role will perhaps lead to more clever headlines in the media that allude to Harry Potter. It will be interesting to see what narrative emerges—will the story of *How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying* be a continuation of the “Harry Potter grows up” narrative? Or has Daniel Radcliffe really been able to shake that characterization, for the theatre, at least? Will that production be dogged by complaints that his casting is a ploy, or was he able to prove himself as an actor with *Equus*? It will be interesting to see what will happen next. And the move is an inspired career choice for Radcliffe. After playing a hero and a madman, a musical seems like a good way to broaden his acting horizon. Further research might investigate how that production was framed, and whether, perhaps, the ghost of Alan Strang lingered over Daniel Radcliffe’s latest project.

Because of my work on this thesis, I will likely be hyperaware of how Radcliffe’s future projects are portrayed in the media. I will continue to be interested in his work. Writing this thesis, however, has also led me in a slightly different direction that I would someday like to pursue. Attempting an analysis of how a product of the 1970s “works” in the contemporary moment has led me to larger questions about how we value and manage dated texts. *Equus*, for example, was not in this case and is not generally produced as a “period” piece. The players were not dressed in 1970s garb. And yet it is most definitely a product of its time. How far away from a work’s debut do we have to be
before we must either present it as a period piece or reconceptualize it so that it becomes more relevant to a contemporary audience? Does it depend on the play’s language? Its cultural references? The ideas and themes involved? Questions such as these are immensely interesting to me, and will perhaps influence my future research.
Addendum: **TIMELINE**

(US film release dates unless otherwise noted)

1989, July 3: Daniel Radcliffe born (current age 21)

1997, June 30: Book 1: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* UK release

1998, September 1: Book 1: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* US release

1998, July 2: Book 2: *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* UK

1999, June 2: Book 2: *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* US

1999, July 8: Book 3: *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* UK

1999, September 8: Book 3: *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* US

2000, July 8: Book 4: *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* released simultaneously in the UK and US

2001, November 16: Film 1: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* US release (Daniel Radcliffe age at film’s release date: 12)

2002, November 15: Film 2: *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (13)

2003, June 21: Book 5: *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* released

2004, June 4: Film 3: *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (14)


2005, November 18: Film 4: *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (16)

*First movie in which a character dies*
2006, September 26: Radcliffe parodies himself on an episode of *Extras* (17)

2007, February 27: *Equus* opens in the West End (17)

2007, June 9: *Equus* closes in the West End (17)

2007, July 11: Film 5: *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (18)

*First screen kiss*


2007, September 7: *December Boys* release (Radcliffe plays Maps) (18)

2007, November 11: *My Boy Jack* (Radcliffe plays Jack Kipling) (18)

2008, September 25: *Equus* opens on Broadway (19)

2009, February 8: *Equus* closes on Broadway (19)


**FORTHCOMING:**

2010, November 19: Film 7: *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* Part 1 (21)

2011, July 15: Film 8: *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* Part 2 (22)
Works Cited


