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## *Equus*: A Case for Censorship?

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## EQUUS: A CASE FOR CENSORSHIP?

Abe J. Bassett

Because the peak period of shock of Peter Shaffer's *Equus*, one of the most frequently produced plays of the past ten years, has long passed, the controversy that surrounded the Wright State University Theatre production in 1984 was totally unexpected and unexpectedly intense. The consequences of the controversy included the introduction of a state law to limit presentation of plays with sexual conduct, the endangerment of a prestigious \$ 150,000 award to the Department of Theatre Arts, and even the threat of reducing the University's budget.

*Equus* is a gripping story of Alan Strang, a deeply troubled seventeen year old, who has inexplicably blinded six horses, and psychiatrist Martin Dysart, who seeks to relieve the boy of his extreme anguish and self-torture. After weeks of psychoanalysis, Alan, under hypnosis, is able to relive the events immediately preceding the blinding. In a flashback that occurs in the stable, Alan's young companion Jill encourages him to disrobe with her. They embrace, but intercourse cannot be consummated because of what the presence of near-by horses symbolizes to Alan. Jill leaves, and Alan blinds the horses. The recalling of these events, in a tense and climactic scene, produces a catharsis for Alan and a resolution for the play.

*Equus* was chosen for production specifically with George Grizzard in mind as the psychiatrist, Martin Dysart. Because of its adult subject matter, the play is a difficult one for audiences as well as producers. The question of performing the play as written, with its nude scene, revolves on whether or not the nudity is truly necessary. Does it grow out of the play in a logical and natural way? Would the impact of the play be lost if the nude scene were not done? Can the nudity be presented in a tasteful and meaningful manner, or will it be exploitative and sensational? Can overall production quality override possible objections?

These questions were debated by the faculty at Wright State University and given a great deal of thought by myself, both as director of the play and chair of the Department of Theatre Arts. I consulted reviews and critical analyses of the play by others, and spoke with colleagues at other colleges and universities, including those who had successfully performed the play with the nude scene intact. I also considered the absence of negative reaction in previous University Theatre productions with nudity such as *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *Veronica's Room*.

All Wright State University acting majors are required to audition for every production, but for *Equus*, only volunteers could audition for the roles of Alan and Jill. After the first audition and before the final selection, the intention to present the nude scene was reaffirmed to the actors. The two students finally selected were Dayton residents who knew that family and friends would be in attendance. Both had spoken with their parents about the play and received parental understanding, if not parental blessing.

Rehearsals began, and I came to understand more fully how the climactic nude scene is essential to the whole of the play. A chief concern was whether or not the young actors could make the nude scene effective. We were in the third week when we first rehearsed it. Because of my own inexperience in dealing with nudity in plays and my concern for the sensitivities of the actors, I called a special Saturday morning rehearsal with only George Grizzard, Alan, Jill, the stage manager, and me present. Initially there was some tension, but it quickly dissipated and the rehearsal was successful. I was able to reaffirm emotionally what I knew intellectually: the nude scene, which has the potential to be erotic, is not, and no prurient interest is likely to be developed by the audience. The dramatic tension is so great, the revelations that are about to be made so important, the commitment of the actors so strong, that the minds of the audience would not be diverted from the scene's significance by the nudity. Thus, I became fully committed to producing the play as written. The actors became more relaxed and proceeded to solve problems associated with the last ten days of rehearsal.

When the nude scene occurred on opening night, the reaction from the audience was one of total concentration, some surprise, and apparent acceptance. The same reaction was repeated for all twelve performances. Several congratulatory letters arrived the week after we closed. One patron, a family therapist, having overheard some negative comments in the audience, wrote: *The nude scene was tastefully and artistically done. Beyond that, it is the patrons' choice to view the play. It is they who must own responsibility for their choice to attend an adult play with nudity.*

In the next several weeks, I received one objecting phone call from a person who had not seen the production and two notes from patrons who said they did not approve and would not be renewing their subscriptions the following year. But for *Equus* the negative responses were more than matched by positive comments from those who had seen the play. The earlier decision to announce in the season advertising campaign and in all news releases that the play would contain nudity presumably kept away from the theatre those people who were likely to take offense, and it prepared mentally those who did come.

The show had ended, George Grizzard had returned to Hollywood, and the next production, *The Comedy of Errors*, had opened and closed, when a letter was published in the *Dayton Journal Herald* criticizing the nudity in *Equus*. The writer was Colonel Wade M. Jackson, U.S.M.C. (Ret. ), a season subscriber, who took issue with the use of tax dollars to produce plays that contain nudity performed by teenage actors: *Is nude play acting by teenage college students, before a public audience, at a state tax-supported university necessary, wholesome, or even proper?*

*Recently, my wife and I attended the Wright State University stage production of Equus, which included such a nude performance.*

*This play was directed by Abe J. Bassett, Ph. D., chairman, Department of Theater Arts at Wright State. With the exception of our [sic] professional actor in the principal role, the actors were Wright State students. There was one scene in Equus during which a boy and girl appear nude. This scene began when she initiated the idea of taking off their clothes. After the disrobing there was embracing while standing and subsequently while reclining. There was no intercourse on stage; however, in later dialogue with another actor, the boy stated that he put it all the way in her.*

*There is a thoughtful article in the current issue of Human Events titled "Art, Social Responsibility, and Teen-Age Pregnancy" which Wright State trustees should read.*

*We may question whether our Wright State officials are being socially and morally responsible to Ohio citizens whose taxes pay their salaries.<sup>1</sup>*

The fundamental syllogism of Jackson's letter is: Wright State University presented a play with nudity. The nudity involved two teenage actors. Therefore, this will lead to an increase in teenage pregnancy. More simply stated, the argument is: stage nudity causes teenage pregnancy. The underlying assumption of the letter is that nudity is another sign of the decline of morality in society. The underlying purpose of Jackson is to improve morality by correcting this specific incident.

The students, at first angered by the letter, were later greatly amused, finding the assertion that they would be corrupted an absurdity. They noted the irony that none of the major actors, including Alan and Jill, were teenagers. And they doubted that our highly educated audience, with an average age in the forties, could be corrupted by a few moments of nudity on the stage. But no amount of levity could possibly frighten away those who were offended by the play, nor predict the depth of their feeling or the tenacity with which they would pursue their deeply held convictions.

The same day Jackson's letter appeared, a lady who had not seen the play, nor read it, called to complain. She talked for forty-five minutes, saying she not only wanted the resignation of Abe Bassett but that of University President Robert J. Kegerreis:

Question: *Please tell me what your objections are to this play.*

Answer: *Well, it's the nudity! You force a boy and girl, your students, to get up on that stage and take off their clothes in front of a crowd of people. It's horrible to make them do that in order to earn a degree.*

Question: *Are you offended by nudity in general or just in this play?*

Answer: *There is NO WAY you can justify nudity. It's obscene and sinful, and everyone who is a real Christian knows that. And think of the effect on the audience. It's horrible.*

Question: *Are you under the impression that this nude scene was erotic or sexually exciting?*

Answer: *Yes, of course. It had to be! My husband told me that there is NO WAY that young man could not have an erection!*

Question: *What? Did you say erection?*

Answer: *Yes. There is NO WAY any man could take off his clothes and embrace a nude woman without getting an erection!*

Question: *If I could convince you that the young man did not get an erection and that the nude scene was actually not erotic or sexually stimulating, nor was it meant to be, would it make any difference to you?*

Answer: *No. It's still nudity. It's still wrong...I also don't understand why your police didn't know about this play.*

Question: *Police? You mean our campus police?*

Answer: *Yes, when I called them they said they didn't know it was going on. They should have known about it. They should have raided the theatre and thrown you all in jail!*

Question: *But this play and its nude scene are not unlawful.*

Answer: *Nudity should be against the law. It used to be. I think you should be in jail.*

The caller carried forth on threats to inform others. She duplicated a circular that contained the original letter to the editor, and headlined it:

*Is this the way we want our tax dollars spent! We want our schools to be honorable and deserve our respect. What a way to guide our youth. Where is our administration? Please reply promptly.*

The notice was sent to dozens of church groups, not only in the surrounding Miami Valley but throughout the state. Suddenly, letters were written to the Wright State University Board of Trustees, the Ohio Board of Regents, Chancellor William Coulter, Governor Richard Celeste, many legislators, and to newspapers and radio stations. Some letter writers, in fact, copied all members of both the Ohio House of Representatives and the Ohio Senate.

Since few of the letter writers had seen the production or read the play, their information came from previous letter writers and editorialists, Jackson photocopied an excerpt of *Equus* found in *Theatre Year Book*, : 1974-75<sup>2</sup> (pp. 152-153), referring to it as an *egregious example of dramatic obscenity, pornography, and perversion*. The Concerned Citizen for Community Values later referred to this same source, saying: *The dialogue and stage directions in this synopsis contain foul words and depict explicit male/female nakedness in three [sic] 'love making' scenes. The dialogue contains a slurring reference to a concept which is sacred to Islamic, Jewish, and Christian religions. The dialogue also describes a young boy's sexual attraction to a male animal. Another letter writer asked the Governor how,...in view of the million or so abortions and the alleged thousands of rape cases in your country annually...is it necessary to use taxpayer supported activities for the purpose of arousing the biological urge of our population.*

A letter to members of the University Board of Trustees held them accountable for *grossly allowing the morality of the student body to decline* and demanded their collective resignations, but not before, as their *last official duty*, they fired Abe Bassett. A letter to a local State Representative demanded *cutting the appropriations money to the University*. A state representative wrote a terse letter to me, noting: *There is no need for further comments or explanations since [Col. Jackson's] letter says it all ... The very future of education and the future of our country cries out for corrective measures so that this will not happen again.*

A local clergyman said the production of *Equus* was *irresponsible* and against the *community standards of decency*. He blamed our production for the *personal and social devastation being perpetrated in our society today by illegal pornography*, and said that instead of working for the *redemption of society* we were *contributing to its decay*.

A high ranking local official of the Catholic church, after an exchange of letters, refused to be brought into the controversy, writing *I am satisfied with your response and I wish you the best of success*

*in the work that you are doing. Three weeks later, however, he wrote to the Governor saying it concerns us that Dr. Bassett has little concern for, or interest in, the ethical and moral values of their productions.*

Jackson, unrelenting in his efforts to reform the University, appeared in person before the Board of Trustees to present his case. He wrote many letters to the Governor and the Chancellor, and appeared on local television to deliver a guest editorial. He enlisted the aid of the National Federation of Decency which *is officially supporting my position and will publicize this...coed pornography in their print and broadcast media.* N. Burnett Magruder broadcast a condemnation of the University, hoping that its action *will not be another 'Berkeley in the Sixties.'* In Louisville, *Liberty Radio* entitled their editorial *Strange Fires in the Buckeye State.* The strange fire is in the *'academic groves' of one of its leading universities...where public display of nudity ... represents erotic license rather than civil liberty under the protection of the First Amendment.* Wildmon of the National Federation for Decency, on his radio broadcast, said, *such an incident will probably be repeated and the moral climate will continue rapidly downhill.* In a handwritten note on the editorial sent to the Chancellor, Wildmon indicated that Moral Majority Report and Christian Heritage Center would both publicize their positions on this *co-ed pornography.* Jackson reported to the Governor that the *Equus* issue would be on the agenda for the *May Symposium and the September National Consultation on Pornography and Obscenity.* Articles appeared in newspapers around the state and outside the state. One taxpayer in Dubuque, Iowa, remarked, *We are in trouble, aren't we?*

Jackson chided the Chancellor for *providing a 'gift wrapped' campaign issue* to the Governor's political opponents. And to the Governor he argued that Wright State, *by this avant-garde pioneering, has quite unnecessarily placed your administration in a defensive no-win position.* A State Representative in House Bill 333 sought to amend the Ohio Revised Code to prevent sexual conduct in play production: *No state university or college that receives any state funds for its support shall knowingly authorize or permit the exhibition on its campus of any dramatic presentation, including, but not limited to, a play or a public performance that contains any scene involving sexual conduct.*

In early April, Wright State's student newspaper, *The Guardian*, published a story about The Department of Theatre Arts application for recognition in the State's innovative Program Excellence program. The Department had become the University's only representative and was a finalist among some 150 programs. The news of the Department's potential garnering of an award that carried a monetary sum of up to \$200,000 gave Jackson a subject for another letter to the *Journal Herald*: [The Program Excellence program] *may actually reward college officials and programs which are undermining moral, ethical, and spiritual standards on tax supported university campuses. Ohio citizens should demand the Governor ... cancel the awards for excellence program.*

Other writers picked up the theme, and state and university officials were under increased pressure, with most attention focused on the Governor and the Chancellor. As the May 11 announcement date for the Program Excellence winners approached and the pressure intensified, word came that, according to President Kegerris, *some of the Regents staff members ... were tremulous about giving an award indicating academic excellence to a program that created this furor.*<sup>3</sup> The situation was made more complicated because the then acting Chancellor of the Board of Regents was a candidate for the full-time job, *and he was trying to work out new, more supportive relationships with the Governor, and we had a Governor who had other controversies to deal with.*

Though some letters were written to the *Journal Herald* more than one year after the first letter appeared, the majority of the attacks on *Equus* took place between March 5 and June 1, 1984. There were some supportive letters to the editor of the *Journal Herald*, taking exception with Jackson's initial broadside. Under the headlines *Nude scene legitimate in Wright State play*, a grandmother who attended with her daughter and granddaughter, admitted, ... *there was a shock effect to the nudity, but...it was certainly in no sense provocative or lewd as Mr. Jackson infers. The only other choice then would have been to not present the play and that would have been a loss to Dayton, for Equus is a very powerful psychological drama and it was superbly done by the Wright State cast....I think censorship of the arts is wrong, and it makes no difference whether it is a state supported school or not. It is good taste that should prevail, and in this case I think it did.* Another theater goer wrote to the paper under the headline *Nudity not provocative*, pointing out that the serious tone of the play would preclude anyone from *being titillated by the nude scene*. He concluded by saying there are many ways in which a citizen can help to combat the prevalence of births out of wedlock, but *eliminating the nude scene out of a very serious play will have no effect.*

I was asked to speak to the University Board of Trustees to give my perspective on the *Equus* controversy. I argued that *Equus* was a work of art, which is not to be confused with reality. *Art exists, I said, for the purpose of revealing the truth about the world of reality. Actors learn to separate themselves from the characters they portray even though sometimes the audience fails to make this distinction. Acting may bring to the actor a degree of understanding about the character; the character never takes over the personality of the individual actor.* I went on to say that virtually every play we have done has some material with the potential to offend someone in the audience. Producing *Sweeney Todd* does not mean we favor rape and cannibalism, *Guys and Dolls* is not an endorsement of gambling, and *The Runner Stumbles* does not encourage love affairs between nuns and priests.

The Board of Trustees was supportive, although as President Kegerreis later recalled, *there was a sort of a rueful hope on the part of a couple of trustees. Why do we need this kind of trouble...with all of the thousands of plays to choose from, why do we choose a play that is going to inflame anybody?* President Kegerreis and Provost Michael R. Ferrari both delivered lengthy explanations of the issues to the Board and used the controversy to help educate the trustees *on the way the University looks at these things.*

Provost Ferrari confirmed the absence of pressure from the Board of Trustees to do anything, in part because of the reputation of the department. *There was no question in the minds of any of those board members, including one who is a clergyman, that the Theatre Arts program has maintained a set of high production standards, and the performance of Equus was a class act.*<sup>4</sup> The president affirmed he or the University would never attempt to censor the selection of play titles. His point of view about the controversy was greatly tempered by his perception of the play. *I thought, he said, and still do, that Equus was a marvelously crafted play, an absorbing drama, and the kind of thing a good theatre department ought to tackle. So it isn't that I was neutral; I was positive.*

Chancellor Coulter, responding to letters written to him and to the Governor, wrote that *to deny faculty and students the opportunity to see...Equus, one of the most dynamic plays of contemporary theatre...would be to deny the academic freedom*<sup>5</sup> *which is at the heart of our university system.* Later, the Chancellor assured another writer that the Governor and the Regents are concerned with the moral and ethical development of young people, *but we cannot be in a position to impose one set of ethics or*

values as censorship would suggest. Families, the clergy, educators, and peers all play important roles in shaping those values.

President Kegerreis, who thought the Chancellor's letter was *near perfect*, responded to each of those who wrote to complain of the nude scene, often opening with the statement, *I assume that you did not see the play, which is a rather well-known and successful dramatic production. I want to tell you a little about it.* The President, adopting a most conciliatory and respectful approach to those who wrote, nonetheless found himself *so aggrieved, so annoyed, so injured* by the *outlandish things* said by those who had not read or seen the play. Provost Ferrari, in his letters to those who complained, wrote that the nude scene was *decidedly asexual and non-provocative*, and he found it *difficult to believe anyone could have been subjected unknowingly to the nude scene.*

The announcement on May 11 that the Department of Theatre Arts had been granted a \$150,000 award as part of the State's Program Excellence program seemed to mark the end of intense confrontation, although letters continued to arrive for several months.

One year later, the Provost, taking a retrospective view, did not think the *Equus* episode hurt the University, but admitted the presence of those who still *carry some concerns that this production should not have been permitted to occur as it did.* But the Provost did comment that the overwhelming attitude was that the nude scene was *appropriate, well done.* President Kegerreis's assessment, however, was that the controversy did have a negative impact on the University: *Anytime you have an issue in which it is very simple to condemn the University and very complicated to explain the way the University looks at that issue (given the historic and philosophical underpinnings for the University's position) you are almost bound to lose in the arena of mass communication.*

However, the President balanced this perception with the evaluation that *In internal terms, it almost strengthens the University...It recalls for us some of the reasons why there is a University. To have us tested, every once in a while, on the basis of free speech, or academic freedom, or the right of free assembly (that we have embodied, more conspicuously and more self-consciously in University life than any other institution) is good for us.*

When I was invited to speak with the University Board of Trustees, I concluded my remarks by presenting a draft of a letter I suggested could be used in responding to the people who asked them to *do something about Equus.* *It is our position not to interfere in matters dealing with academic or artistic freedom. The faculty involved in the production, and in other endeavors of the University, have not set out with the intention of promulgating immoral activity, nor have they acted illegally. It is the function of artists and scholars to present ideas and conduct research that are sometimes on the leading edge of thought. It is their purpose to present to the community ideas of differing points of view, even when these ideas and points of view may offend or upset segments of our community. The University Theatre does not promulgate any specific moral, religious, aesthetic, or political philosophy, but presents the human condition in an attempt to enlighten humanity. We affirm the right of our scholars and artists to pursue their inquiries and believe that the greater good of society is served.*

Through their actions and words, the concepts of this letter were endorsed by the Provost, President, Board of Trustees, Board of Regents, Chancellor, Governor, and by many of our state legislators. The consequence of the *Equus* episode is that Wright State University, an institution only twenty years old, has weathered a crisis and grown stronger.



## Endnotes

1 *Journal Herald*, Dayton, Ohio, March 18, 1984, p. 14. Except where noted, all subsequent quotations are from original and photo-copied letters and editorials in possession of the author.

2 Jackson is referring to *The Best Plays of 1974-1975*, edited by Otis L. Guernsey, Jr.

3 Interview with Robert J. Kegerreis (now President Emeritus), May 24, 1985.

4 Interview with Michael R. Ferrari, Provost, Wright State University (now President of Drake University), May 23, 1985.

5 Col. Jackson, of course, rejected academic freedom as *not relevant*, because *there is no suggestion of restricting scholarly research, analysis, or discussion of contemporary Broadway theatre presentation. This argument would be relevant only if you believed 'academic freedom' included actual or simulated participation by college students in obscenity, pornography, or depravity for the entertainment of public audiences.*