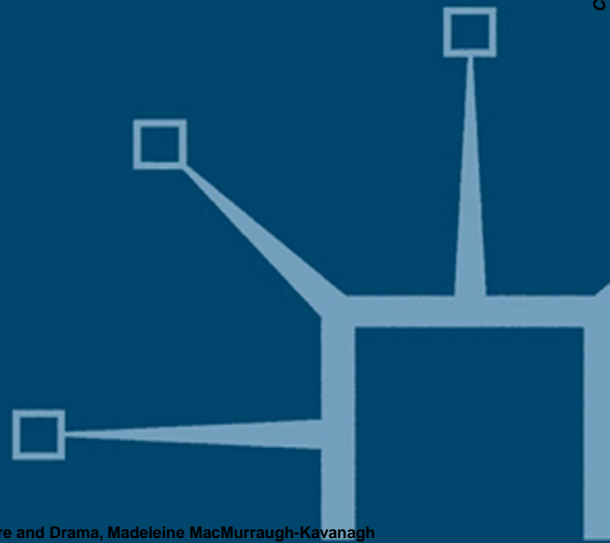


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# Peter Shaffer Theatre and Drama

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M. K. MacMurrough-Kavanagh



# PETER SHAFFER: THEATRE AND DRAMA



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M. K. MacMurrough-Kavanagh





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## For my Mother



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# List of Plays and Play Premieres

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- The Salt Land* (television drama), 8 November 1955 (ITV).
- The Prodigal Father* (radio drama), 14 September 1957 (BBC Radio).
- Balance of Terror* (television drama), 21 November 1957 (BBC);  
27 January 1958 (CBS).
- Five Finger Exercise*, 16 July 1958, Comedy Theatre, London.  
2 December 1959, Music Box Theater, New York.
- The Private Ear* (with *The Public Eye*), 10 May 1962, Globe Theatre,  
London. 9 October 1963, Morosco Theater, NY.
- The Public Eye* (with *The Private Ear*), 10 May 1962, Globe Theatre,  
London. 9 October 1963, Morosco Theater, NY.
- The Merry Rooster's Panto*, 17 December 1963, Wyndham's Theatre,  
London.
- The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, 7 July 1964, National Theatre at  
Chichester. 26 October 1965, ANTA Theater, NY.
- Black Comedy*, 27 July 1965, National Theatre at Chichester.  
12 February 1967, Ethel Barrymore Theater, NY (with *White Lies*).
- White Lies* (with *Black Comedy*), 12 February 1967, Ethel Barrymore  
Theater, NY. 21 February 1968, Lyric Theatre, London (*White Lies*  
revised as *White Liars*).
- The Battle of Shrivings* (revised as *Shrivings*, 1974), 5 February 1970,  
Lyric Theatre, London.
- Equus*, 26 July 1973, National Theatre, at the Old Vic Theatre,  
London. 24 October 1974, Plymouth Theater, NY.
- Amadeus*, 2 November 1979, National Theatre, London.  
17 December 1980, Broadhurst Theater, NY.
- Yonadab*, 4 December 1985, National Theatre, London

*Lettice and Lovage*, 27 October 1987, Globe Theatre, London.

25 March 1990, Ethel Barrymore Theater, NY (revised as *Lettice & Lovage*).

*Whom Do I Have the Honour of Addressing?* (radio drama), May 1989 (BBC). 19 November 1996, Chichester.

*The Gift of the Gorgon*, 5 December 1992, The Pit Theatre, Barbican Centre, London.

# Preface

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I was first introduced to the plays of Peter Shaffer by a truly inspired teacher when I was in my mid-teens; I have never forgotten the impact these dramas had on me and the areas of thought and feeling they opened. With the necessary exams passed and with further studies embarked upon, I continued to return over and over again to the texts, each time finding some new reverberation or meaning in the words. It is the intention of this book to communicate some idea of the sheer pleasure to be gained from a reading of these plays, and to suggest ways in which this pleasure can be deepened by placing them in the contexts of academic debate and of the theatrical imagination.

The reader's knowledge of these plays at the level of plot (gleaned from a reading of the work or from seeing performances of it) has been assumed in this book. Given the tight word-limit in operation here, it makes little sense to provide outlines of stories when words can be spent on more valuable analysis. To understand the ideas presented here, then, readers should read or view the plays first. Viewing the film adaptations of them will be of little help as the film scripts often bear scant resemblance to the stage versions of these plays.

This book is divided into nine chapters, each taking a specific theme in Shaffer's work, discussing its relevance, and applying the ideas outlined in the preliminary section to two or three plays from his canon. The plays are not discussed in chronological order but are introduced into chapters when their impulses or themes have a direct relevance to the analysis. Dealing with the plays chronologically would hamper discussion of the major themes at stake and would preclude the drawing of interesting parallels between two plays (as in Chapter 4) simply because they happened not to follow one from the other in date order. The book is therefore organized around broad areas of debate rather than around a sequential analysis of individual plays.

Beginning with general topics of interest, the book first discusses Shaffer's life and writing career and places him in the context of post-1945 British theatre. Critical assessments of him are also summarized in this introductory chapter. Chapter 2 continues with the

general and investigates Shaffer's use of the theatrical environment; this section incorporates some basic and necessary discussion of Shaffer's apparent debt to two of the most significant theatrical theorists and practitioners of the twentieth century – Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht.

The book then moves towards more specific themes and topics in Shaffer's drama beginning with the much discussed theatrical pre-occupation, communication. Here, discussion of Shaffer's earlier plays (*Five Finger Exercise*, *The Private Ear*, *The Public Eye* and *Black Comedy*) is applied to the ideas raised. Chapter 4 then looks at the related emphases on dysfunction, identity and alienation in these plays, drawing a comparison between two of Shaffer's protagonists, Mark Askelon of *Shrivings* and the eponymous Yonadab.

Chapters 5 and 6 (the centre of the book) both deal with *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, *Equus* and *Amadeus*. These are, of course, Shaffer's most famous plays and are the most frequently performed and studied – one good reason for devoting two chapters to the analysis of them. In the first, Shaffer's use of religion and myth and the idea of 'worship' are themes that predominate; in Chapter 6, these themes are again featured in a discussion which views the plays as clear demonstrations of Shaffer's theatre of conflict and disjunction. The crucial debates centring on the Apollonian-Dionysian impulses in Shaffer's drama are addressed here.

Chapter 7 introduces a theme that has not been sufficiently explored in criticism of Shaffer's plays: that is, the role of the female protagonist in his drama. Here, discussion begins with a brief consideration of this playwright's female protagonists through the years, and then focuses on two plays in which female presence is at last fully registered and realized: *Lettice and Lovage* and *Whom Do I Have the Honour of Addressing?*

In Chapter 8, Shaffer's connection between myth and morality is explored in an extended analysis of Shaffer's most recent full-length play, *The Gift of the Gorgon*. An entire chapter has been devoted to this drama because there is, at present, little published discussion of it for students or playgoers to refer to. Finally, the conclusion presents a brief discussion of the cinematic adaptation of Shaffer's plays and offers a framework in which Peter Shaffer's work for the theatre can be understood and, above all, enjoyed.

Readers will, it is hoped, emerge from this book with a clear understanding of the way in which Shaffer's theatre 'works' both theatrically and dramatically. It is also hoped that students and

*Preface*

playgoers alike will respond to an insight that stands central to Shaffer's work; that is that 'meaning' is not purely intellectual, but resides, above all, in emotional and psychological territories of experience.

I would like, finally, to express my warm thanks to Peter Shaffer for co-operating with such generosity in the writing of this book. During a particularly hectic period of his life, his courtesy never flagged as, even in a less busy man, it surely had a right to do. Both he and his plays have made the writing of this book an enlightening and extremely pleasurable experience.

MADELEINE MACMURRAUGH-KAVANAGH

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My thanks, in addition, to Charmian Hearne at Macmillan who has been so supportive of me as a writer and whose professional eye has steered me calmly through the publishing process.

In addition, I would like to thank Ron Knowles at Reading University for encouraging me to write this book and for his assistance in making the initial approach to Macmillan. His advice and help has been much appreciated over the years that I have known him. I would also like to thank Brian Edgar, an extraordinary and gifted teacher, who first introduced me to these plays and who taught me to think in mature terms about literature and history.

Finally, my heartfelt thanks to my family and friends. To my mother in particular, my special thanks for her generosity, love and support over the years: she is a remarkable woman without whom I would have achieved nothing. And to Mark, of course, for his kindness and patience.



# 1

## Introduction

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A member of an elite group of dramatists including Harold Pinter, Alan Ayckbourn, and Tom Stoppard, Peter Shaffer is an internationally recognized and highly acclaimed writer who occupies a privileged position in contemporary British theatre. His work has been consistently performed for over 30 years in subsidized and commercial, metropolitan and provincial, professional and amateur arenas; his plays have scooped the top theatrical and film awards and the world's finest actors scramble for roles in his dramas which are guaranteed to play to packed houses wherever they are performed. The extraordinary popularity of Peter Shaffer's work in front of worldwide audiences is, in short, nothing less than a cultural phenomenon.

Since his emergence as a dramatic writer of formidable theatrical intelligence in 1958, certain characteristics of his writing, which alert us to the reasons for this popularity, have sharpened and developed. With his first 'serious' full-length stage play, *Five Finger Exercise*, he demonstrated a control over dramatic dialogue and a verbal dexterity that has remained a constant feature of his style; linked to this is his comedic flair (evident in the 'darker' plays as well as in his 'lighter' work) which incorporates Machiavellian irony, Wildean wit and Ortonesque farce as well as word-play and one-liners. In an era where articulacy is drifting into extinction, Shaffer's drama satisfies a hunger for crafted dialogue that leaves his audience craving for more.

His plays are 'crafted' pieces in more senses than this alone. Noting that Shaffer expresses a predilection for the term '*Playwright*' (with its connotations of artistry and workmanship), Simon Trussler suggests that it is as a '*maker*' rather than merely as a 'writer' of plays that Shaffer 'has made a distinctive contribution to contemporary theatre'.<sup>1</sup> This contribution lies in the insistence we find in these dramas on the principles of the 'well made play' where structure and development are central to the writer's concerns. In Shaffer's case, this becomes integrated with a musical



sensibility, as is clearly revealed in the playwright's statement: 'I like plays to be like fugues – all the themes should come together in the end'.<sup>2</sup> In the very construction of his plays, then, Shaffer consistently demonstrates a control over character and situation which suggests an earlier, more literate drama from which contemporary theatre has perhaps strayed too far.

Connected with this skilful dramatic technique is another audience-pleasing accomplishment: the ability to weave a compelling story. Shaffer is an undisputed master of 'telling tales', forcing the audience into involvement with his dramas through detective-story suspense, human identification, and the presentation of complex conflicts. The playwright is fully aware that story-telling is central to the dramatist's art, stating 'It is my object to tell tales; to conjure up the spectres of horror and happiness [...] to perturb and make gasp: to please and make laugh: to surprise'.<sup>3</sup> This, he understands, is the role of the dramatist in whatever medium he/she is working, but in the theatre, where all drama relies on human interest, it assumes a position of priority. An audience gripped by a story, played out live before them, never forgets the experience: it is little wonder that Shaffer's audiences return for more and more.

This playwright's dramatic skills do not end here: we should also consider his unusual generic dexterity where farce or satire appear as natural forms for him to write in as do tragedy or Epic. Further, his writing moves easily between the stage, the page, the television screen and the cinema as if the techniques required for each were equally automatic to him. Nor does he refuse a dramatic risk, frequently rejecting the comfortable or easy expectation audiences may have of his work and presenting them with something entirely different. He confounds their preconceptions, challenges their 'facts' and their attitudes, and startles with unexpected dramatic moments and potentially unfamiliar themes. Such a high-risk dramatic strategy leads Walter Kerr to label Shaffer a 'gambling man', a writer who seems not to care about 'what kind of chances he takes': these 'chances' usually pay off in spectacular fashion.<sup>4</sup>

So far, discussion of the popularity of Shaffer's plays in front of audiences has focused on his dramatic 'craft'. Equally central to his appeal, however, is his theatrical intuition. Above all else, and despite his work in other media, Shaffer is a writer for the theatre whose dramas find their ultimate meaning in this environment

alone; returning to the 'craftsman' metaphor, Shaffer himself alludes to this when he states his desire to 'make theatre, to make something that could only happen on stage'.<sup>5</sup> With the ability to utilize every resource available to him in this arena (lighting, music, choreography, communal atmosphere, and so on), Shaffer involves his audience *imaginatively* in his drama where metaphor, allusion and illusion prevail. For this playwright, it is not enough that the audience should respond purely intellectually to his work; it is his desire that they should be caught up in, and surrender to, the magic and the mystery that differentiates live theatre from any other dramatic experience. The emotional and the psychological realms are therefore of paramount importance to his theatre where the unconscious must be triggered for its significance to be fully registered. Every staging device has, over the years, been wielded by Shaffer to these ends, while his recurrent dramatic themes of the search for worship and the conflict between reason and instinct pitch the intellect at a level where more primitive and more elemental territories of imagination and experience can be accessed. It is for this reason that John Russell Taylor describes Shaffer as a 'theatrical thinker', a dramatist who is able to create plays into which the communal imagination of the audience flows.<sup>6</sup>

All of which helps us to understand Shaffer's popularity with international audiences over a 30-year period. Simultaneously, and perhaps paradoxically, it also provides clues as to why he has consistently met with critical hostility, particularly from English academics and commentators. For these critics, Shaffer's very popularity seems suspicious since it hints at an accessibility that apparently implies intellectual hollowness and a tendency to pander to the audience. As a result, a constant refrain in critical reactions to Shaffer over the years has been the charge of superficiality and the complaint of 'popularism' which, of course, carries darker connotations than the still dubious label 'popular'. His success has, moreover, been attributed to his directors (notably John Dexter), with the implication that the weaknesses in Shaffer's dramas are consistently concealed by theatrical masters.<sup>7</sup> Further, critics have complained of a certain pretentiousness in Shaffer's style, arguing that his rhetoric blinds audiences to insufficiencies in terms of ideas in his plays: meanwhile, the charge that he abuses historical 'fact' has been a long-standing criticism of his work, though critics have frequently had to backtrack hastily on this charge when Shaffer's material has been validated by concrete evidence.<sup>8</sup>

The result of this critical antipathy to Peter Shaffer's work is that a curious split has opened up between audiences who flock enthusiastically to his plays and critics who habitually denigrate them.<sup>9</sup> A situation has evolved in which it is not somehow 'correct' to 'admit' an admiration for this playwright, as though, when we do so, we are revealing that we are members of some misguided mass who have been duped by rhetoric and stage effects. However, when we examine this issue more thoroughly, it appears that critical hostility to Shaffer's plays seems to be based on little more than cultural snobbery; since his dramas appear not to be 'political' in the manner, for example, of David Hare or Howard Brenton, critics feel that their approbation must be withheld as if this is the standard by which all else is measured. In addition, if audiences respond in droves to the work, if it is not 'difficult' to respond to, the critical establishment seems to feel that there must automatically be something 'wrong' with it. This is, of course, a wholly illogical situation which is based on a mistrust of commercial triumph above all else (Shaffer comments that the British Press 'can't stop talking about money').<sup>10</sup> One reason why Shaffer's plays may have received a far less antipathetic critical reaction in the United States is surely that America is not known for its suspicious attitude towards success. In the States, popularity is an indication that the playwright has done his work well: in England, 'popularity' is still taken as an indication that the playwright has, literally, 'sold out'. For Shaffer himself, however, popular success simply means that 'the problems one has tried to solve have in some ways been solved', and 'validation' has resulted.<sup>11</sup>

None of this is to argue that Shaffer's plays are without problematic elements and the playwright is himself aware that certain weaknesses dog his writing. Following the failure of *The Battle of Shrivings* (his first commercial flop), he was alerted to the 'danger in my work of theme dictating event', while 'a strong impulse to compose rhetorical dialogue was beginning to freeze my characters into theoretical attitudes'.<sup>12</sup> He therefore admitted the 'justness' of the critical verdict, though he detected 'none at all in the palpable pleasure with which it had been delivered'.<sup>13</sup> So while flaws do mark this drama (and it would be futile to argue otherwise), it is nevertheless true that the critical evaluation of it is often far from balanced and is frequently delivered with an ill-disguised relish. Shaffer has, however, had over 30 years to become used to this reaction and to understand that, with drama, it is what happens in front of audiences, rather than what happens in newspapers and journals, that finally matters to the play-

wright: after all, as Shaffer emphasizes, his drama is written 'for the public', and is realized 'with the public'.<sup>14</sup>

A brief biographical survey of the playwright's life and career may be useful at this point. Peter Shaffer was born, together with his twin brother Anthony, in 1926 in Liverpool. His family was middle class and the sons were educated in Liverpool and later in London where the family moved when Peter Shaffer was ten years old. Following school years at St Paul's, Shaffer was conscripted as a Bevin Boy in 1944 and spent three years working at a coal mine; as he told Brian Connell in 1980, this experience gave him 'an enormous sympathy and feeling of outrage in contemplating how a lot of people had to spend their lives'.<sup>15</sup> Between 1947 and 1950, Shaffer studied History at Trinity College, Cambridge, spending much time co-editing the student magazine *Granta* with his brother. Simultaneously, the brothers were embarking on their fledgling career as writers of detective stories, the first of the three novels they produced, *The Woman in the Wardrobe*, being published in 1951 under the pseudonym 'Peter Anthony'. Asked in later years why he was reluctant to publish under his own name, Shaffer responded: 'I had a sense that I wasn't going to continue as a detective writer [...] I just felt that I would rather reserve whatever writing I did of a more serious nature for my own name'.<sup>16</sup>

The second of the detective novels, *How Doth my Little Crocodile?*, was published in 1952 by which time Peter Shaffer had left England to live and work in New York for three years between 1951 and 1954. Taking a variety of jobs including a bookseller in Doubleday's, a salesman in a department store and a librarian in the New York Public Library Acquisitions Department, Shaffer appears to have drifted from job to job, feeling slightly on the edge of life, and trying to gather the courage to commit himself to a career as a full-time writer. One problem that Shaffer had to overcome in deciding on a life as a dramatist was the idea he had absorbed from his father that 'work' involved a serious profession while 'writing' constituted something of a hobby. In one interview, he notes that 'my father regarded writing as a leisure activity, not central to life and not a profession':<sup>17</sup> as a result, as he told Brian Connell, 'I denied myself the pleasure of writing plays for a very long time'.<sup>18</sup> Though nowhere in any interview does Shaffer express resentment about his father's attitude, the regular appearance in his plays of domineering fathers who attempt to impose their own visions on sensitive, easily-bullied sons (in

characters including Stanley Harrington, Frank Strang and Leopold Mozart) perhaps has its genesis here.

Returning to London in 1954, Shaffer began work at the music publishers, Boosey and Hawkes. By now, however, he had realized that if he failed to commit himself immediately to a writing career, he would never do so; he resigned his job and decided to 'live now on my literary wits'.<sup>19</sup> Existing on a small allowance from his father, and earning extra money by working as a literary critic for a weekly review, *Truth*, he began writing in earnest and was rewarded for his efforts in 1955 by the sale of a television play *The Salt Land* to ITV. In the same year, his final detective novel, *Withered Murder*, was also published. Two years later, Shaffer sold *Balance of Terror* to BBC Television and another play, *The Prodigal Father*, to BBC Radio. Peter Shaffer's writing career was, a little belatedly, well and truly underway.

Of these early pieces, little is worth discussing here in any great detail. The novels were light-hearted romps involving one of two detective characters (Mr Verity and Mr Fathom) and, as is always the case in this genre, the interest was less focused on 'whodunnit' than on *why* 'it' was done. This preoccupation, of course, later emerges as central to dramas such as *Equus* and *Amadeus*. The early plays, meanwhile, were well-written exercises in social realism though, in *Balance of Terror*, a tale of cold war espionage, Shaffer also demonstrated an early ability to weave a gripping yarn. *The Salt Land* is also interesting for its attempt to construct a Classical tragedy from events taking place in modern Israel.

What is really important about this work, however, is that Shaffer had placed himself in a position where he could launch himself into the theatrical arena which he always regarded as his true home. Martin Esslin explains that the media boom of the late 1950s not only encouraged an expansion in dramatic writing, but also provided a training ground where young writers could 'first acquire professional experience in radio, and advance from there to television', finally using these platforms as 'a spring-board to theatre and cinema'.<sup>20</sup> Esslin here describes exactly the path that Peter Shaffer's writing career was to take.

His first major theatrical success came in 1958 when *Five Finger Exercise* was staged at the Comedy in the West End; the play ran for 610 performances which, as Oleg Kerensky notes, constitutes an extremely long run for a 'serious drama'.<sup>21</sup> A 'semi-autobiographical play', in Shaffer's words, *Five Finger Exercise*

seemed to militate against the dramatic trend which had been set by John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* two years earlier (whether the two plays are, in fact, as dissimilar as they seem is a question addressed in Chapter 3).<sup>22</sup> Shaffer's focus was on a bourgeois country house where a battle raged between middle-class members of a privileged family; it was 'well-made' in terms of structure and dialogue, naturalistic in form, and apparently traditional in all its aspects. The critics warmly approved but at the same time labelled Shaffer a 'Tory Playwright, an Establishment Dramatist, a Normal Worker': these were labels that Shaffer objected to and has since found difficult to shake off.<sup>23</sup> *Five Finger Exercise*, however, established Shaffer's name in the commercial sector and simultaneously established him as a writer of well-structured, crafted dramas.

Between 1961 and 1962, Shaffer indulged his second passion, music, becoming music critic for *Time and Tide*.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, he was writing the first of his double-bills, *The Private Ear* and *The Public Eye*, which appeared on stage in 1962. The first of these dramas was hardly alien to what audiences may have expected from the author of *Five Finger Exercise*, but the second of the plays risked disorientating the public with a part-farce, part-whimsy, part-realist, part-existential drama. The reaction to the play was, as a result, uncertain. However, Maggie Smith and Kenneth Williams triumphed in the leading roles and audiences seem to have approved of the dramas more warmly than did the critical establishment.

In the following year, Shaffer co-wrote the film script of *The Lord of the Flies* with Peter Brook, and contributed two sketches to BBC's satirical show, *That Was The Week That Was*: 'But My Dear' and 'The President of France' revealed the playwright's ability to write in the form of satirical farce, an early demonstration of his generic flexibility. That his dazzling epic, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, should be the next work to appear in 1964 demonstrated his range even more spectacularly. No audience member who had witnessed any of Shaffer's earlier dramatic offerings could have been expecting this 'intellectual spectacular' which, in Alan Brien's words, could be described as 'a de Mille epic for educated audiences, an eye-dazzling, ear-buzzing, button-holing blend of *Ben Hur*, *The King and I*, and *The Devils*'.<sup>25</sup> Rejecting traditional naturalism, Shaffer had embraced the theories of Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud (see Chapter 2) to produce what one critic decided was the 'great[est] play [...] written and produced in our language in my lifetime'.<sup>26</sup> *The Royal*

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