

PETER SHAFFER'S QUEST FOR FAITH

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Peter Shaffer seems to have gone out of his way to escape being labeled. Each of his plays has worked out its themes within a completely different genre from the preceding one; his works include a well-made play (Five Finger Exercise), a pair of light comedies (The Private Ear, The Public Eye), an epic (The Royal Hunt of the Sun), a farce (Black Comedy), what may be loosely described as a psycho-drama (Equus), and a Shavian style drama of ideas (Shrivings). At no point in his career have critics been able to place him within the general trend of modern British drama, and consequently they have largely ignored his work. In slighting Shaffer's plays, however, critics are also ignoring an issue which is central to the dilemma of twentieth century civilization: how can we spiritually compensate for the God which we have destroyed?

Shaffer refuses to conform to the tradition of anti-tradition, that revolt against theatrical convention which was heralded by John Osborne's Look Back in Anger in 1956. The playwrights associated with this revolution--Wesker, Arden, Pinter, the writers involved with Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop--have abandoned conventional forms in an attempt to bring a new vitality to the theatre. In expressing himself via traditional dramatic forms, Shaffer has exposed himself to the charge of being a throwback to the tame pre-war drama of Coward and Rattigan.¹

Beneath these accusations lies an implicit assumption that if one is to be original, he must completely abandon traditional forms of expression. However, the most skillful writers of the past--

Shakespear, Milton, Pope, Dryden--have illustrated that rather than stifling the creative impulse, the adherence to conventional form can channel one's energies into a forceful expression of the sublime. Like these masters, Shaffer is a very deliberate craftsman who uses all of the conventions associated with a certain genre to produce a work which is both unique and powerful. In an interview following the opening of Five Finger Exercise, he stated, "...as the man said there are many tunes yet to be written in C major. And there are many plays yet to be written in a living room...."² Through these "living room" plays, Shaffer has explored crucial issues which the "bed room" playwrights have left untouched.

Shaffer's devotion to the craft of playwrighting has exposed him to yet another objection to his style. John Russell Taylor, who has taken the most critical interest in Shaffer to date, has commented on the impersonal tone of his plays. While Taylor does not actually reprimand him for this, he clearly considers it an eccentricity which tends to weaken the impact of his plays: "Five Finger Exercise is immensely clever, extremely well written, and completely theartical in the best possible sense of the term. It is also quite impersonal, almost as though the author has felt it his duty to keep himself entirely out of the picture. This is not necessarily a bad thing--most authors err in the other direction--but it is disconcerting."³

Those objections to Shaffer's art as conventional and impersonal were both countered nearly forty years before they had been formulated by a man totally immersed in the literature and art of western civilization. T.S. Eliot, in "Tradition and the Individual

Talent," observed that we "insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors . . . Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously . . ."4 Eliot goes on to define the task of the artist as the refinement of that which has gone before him; he cannot simply ignore the generations of artists which have preceded him, for ". . . no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists" (p. 15). The artist's mind is compared to a catalyst, which remains unchanged, though its presence causes a significant change in the composition of the matter to which it is exposed. Thus ". . . the poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality" (pp. 19-20).

It seems reasonable to suppose, therefore, that if Shaffer has not been directly influenced by Eliot's views, he at least concurs with them. If so, he must take Eliot, one of the most prominent of the "dead poets," into account. The poet had articulated