Introduction

Equus by Peter Shaffer is one of the six set texts for the new Edexcel A level syllabus; the set texts form the basis of the 'Page to Stage' element of the exam. The exam requires students to explore how they would realise key extracts from the play. The best way for students to understand how they would play the characters in their chosen set text is to have explored them practically in depth. This scheme of work offers a range of different ideas for closely exploring the text to enable students to write in the specific, drama focused way that is required.

Structure

This scheme of work is based around different scenes from the text. Each section looks closely at different scenes and how students can explore the scene through character work, improvisation, devising or practitioner work. This allows students to examine a range of scenes from a practical perspective, which will be invaluable for exam writing. This scheme is written with the assumption that students have read the text and undertaken some research into its social, historical and political context.

The AS exam

The Edexcel/Pearson AS exam is divided into two components. Component 1: Exploration and Performance is worth 60 per cent; Component 2: Theatre Makers in Practice is worth 40 per cent and is in the form of a one and a half hour written exam.

The exam is in two parts:

- Section A: Live Theatre Evaluation, worth 16 marks
- Section B: Page to Stage. Two essay questions based on a set text examining how you would realise an extract from the text in performance. One question is based on performance and one is based on design skills. These questions are worth 16 marks each.

Act 1, scene 9: Performance

**The question:** As a performer, discuss how you might interpret and portray one of the key roles in the extract. You should use examples from the extract to support your ideas and your answer should make reference to the performance text as a whole.

**Learning objectives**

- To explore Act 1, scene 9 from a performance perspective
- To use devised work, improvisation and practitioner knowledge to explore the text
- To use the exam question to inform your notes on your exploration.

**Discussion:** What sorts of things happen in your dreams that make them so different from real life?

**Warm-up: Weird dreams**

In groups of five ask students to improvise the following naturalistic scene:

- The protagonist walks into a restaurant, is greeted and asks *for a table for one*. They are shown to a table and given a menu. They are asked *for their order* which is brought to them. They eat and discover something to complain about. Their complaint is dealt with. They leave.

Next, ask students to create the scene again but, where an asterisk has been
inserted (see extract below), to add an abstract element to the scene; e.g. the chairs are made of jelly; the person who greets them is talking backwards; the menu is made of cheese; the spaghetti that they order is served in a bucket with a spade; the spaghetti, on closer inspection, contains an eyeball; the manager is their mum; they try to leave only to find the ground is made of custard.

The protagonist walks into a restaurant *, is greeted* and asks for a table for one. They are shown to a table and given a menu*. They are asked for their order which is brought to them*. They eat and discover something to complain about*. Their complaint is dealt with*. They leave*.

Perform.

**Main activity 1: Scene 9, part 1**

The extract: In this scene Dysart has very little patience with Alan; they exchange a quick-fire set of questions which does not explicitly reveal a great deal of detail, but certainly implies a lot about both of them. We know that Alan has been very interested in horses from an early age and that Dysart’s casual reference to his ‘carving up children’ dream is in reality much more disturbing. When Alan reverts to singing an advert jingle, Dysart dismisses him, much to Alan’s vexation.

From the beginning of the scene up to p. 37: ‘Dysart: It’s my turn.’

The stichomythic exchange here between Dysart and Alan is fast-paced and tense; Alan is playing a game and Dysart has no patience for it.

Ask students to rehearse the scene in pairs with an emphasis on the fast pace of the exchange. Students should also consider the pitch, tone, volume, use of emphasis and the proxemics of the characters.

Perform: Ask pairs to position themselves around the room and allocate a short section of the scene to each pair. Ask students to perform one pair after another, without pause, to show the whole exchange with each pair’s interpretation.

Discuss: What choices made by performers were effective and why?

**Links to the rest of the play:**

- What does Alan’s behaviour in this context tell us about him?
- How in control do you feel Dysart is?

**Practitioner exploration and subtext**

Subtext: Discuss Dysart’s dream and Alan’s interest in horses; both are important to the subtext of the scene. Why are they both so deliberately dismissive of these things? What would happen if either of them revealed these things in great detail to the other?

**Main activity 2: Scene 9 – internal monologue**

Artaudian perspective: Artaud was captivated by the concept of ‘the double’ and this can be explored through vocalising a character’s internal monologue. Ask pairs to join into groups of four and replay the scene adding Alan and Dysart’s internal monologue to the text. An example might be:

Dysart: Do you dream often?

Alan internal: What’s it got to bloody do with you?

Alan: Do you?

Dysart internal: Oh for goodness sake! It’s going to be one of those sessions is it?

Dysart: It’s my job to ask the questions. Yours to answer them.

Alan internal: Oh you think so? We’ll see about that.

Alan: Says who?

Dysart internal: Just answer the question!

Dysart: Says me. Do you dream often?

Alan: Do you?

Dysart internal: You are really starting to get on my nerves with this ridiculous behaviour.

Dysart: Look – Alan.

Alan: I’ll answer if you answer. In turns.

(Pause)

Dysart: Very well. Only we have to speak the truth.

Alan: (Mocking) Very well.

Rehearse and perform.

Discuss: What different sides of the characters were revealed through internal monologue that we do not see externally?

**Main activity 3: Scene 9 – Greek theatre flashback to Dysart’s dream**

Discuss: What do students know about the conventions of Greek theatre? Read Dysart’s dream on pp. 24 and 25. Dysart’s monologue is quite graphic and
as it's very Greek in its content lends itself to exploring aspects of Greek theatre for performance, as does the ensemble nature of the play itself.

Depending on the size of your class you could ask them to work in small groups or as a whole class to fit in with the idea of the traditional Greek chorus.

Ask students to pick five or six images from the dream that they feel are most effective. Either using tableaux or live action, ask students to recreate these images using some or all of the members of the group. For each image, students should use the text to add narration. Within this they should consider the use of choral voice including unison, canon, separating male and female voices, etc.

**Rehearse and perform.**

**Feedback:** What imagery was effective and why? How did performers use their voices effectively? If students perform as a whole group, filming their performance and watching it back can be a useful way to explore what was effective and what could be changed.

**Links to the rest of the play:**
Alan is both reluctant and willing – at the end of the scene Alan sullenly reveals that his first experience of a horse was on the beach. What does Alan’s revelation suggest about his feelings towards Dysart?

**Act 1, scene 10: Performance**

**The question:** As a performer, discuss how you might interpret and portray one of the key roles in the extract. You should use examples from the extract to support your ideas and your answer should make reference to the performance text as a whole.

**Learning objectives**

- To explore Act 1, scene 10 from a performance perspective
- To use devised work, improvisation and practitioner knowledge to explore the text
- To use the exam question to inform your notes on your exploration.

**Warm-up: 1, 2, 3**

Ask the group to get into pairs. The first person says 'One', the second 'Two', the first 'Three', the second 'One', and so on. The idea is to keep this going without making a mistake. Once they have accomplished this you can gradually introduce each of the following ideas:

- Clap on one
- Stamp your foot on two
- Snort like a horse on three
- Don’t say ‘One’ just clap
- Don’t say ‘Two’ just stamp
- Don’t say ‘Three’ just snort.

**The extract**

Pp. 38 to 43. In this scene Alan recounts the story of the horseman on the beach. Alan is building a sandcastle when the horse and rider gallop down the beach. The rider asks if Alan wants a ride and he helps him up onto the horse, they ride and as Alan enjoys the experience Frank and Dora stand up, alarmed at what is happening. Frank demands to know what the rider thinks he is doing and pulls Alan from the horse. After an altercation the horseman rides off leaving Frank annoyed. Alan reveals that he never rode on a horse again after that but does not say why. Dysart tells Alan that some of his patients record thoughts that they can’t say face to face on a tape recorder. Alan takes the machine.

**Main activity 1: Equine shape sculpting**

Read p. 15 where the horses are described in some detail. It is made explicit here that despite the actors’ horse masks their heads should be visible and that there should be no attempt made to conceal them. Shaffer is quite clear that literalism should be avoided and that the actors should never crouch on all fours and should stand upright as the body of the horse extends behind them.

**Discuss:** What links can be made between Shaffer’s precise instructions and Brecht’s ideas and techniques?

In pairs, ask students to label themselves A and B. A should begin by being the sculptor and B the clay. Give the As a short time to ‘sculpt’ the Bs into a position
that they think defines an equine stance. They should pay close attention to posture – how they hold their arms and hands; the position of their legs; how they use their backs; facial expression – eyebrows, eyes, mouth, tongue; how they hold their head. Bs should not resist their moulding and should co-operate with their partner. For more difficult movements or facial expressions the sculptor should demonstrate what they want their partner to do. Then swap so that Bs now sculpt As.

Ask students to stand in a large circle so that they can all see each other and to freeze in their sculpted position. While they are frozen, they should consider how their horse will move physically and how they will use their vocal skills (non-verbal, breathing, snorting) to express their character. Count down and ask students to begin moving around the space. You might use calls such as ‘walk’, ‘trot’, ‘canter’ and ‘gallop’ to speed up or slow down the movement.

Main activity 2: Act 1, scene 10 – Sandcastles
In this section Alan is telling Dysart about his experience with the horse, Trojan, on the beach. Alan is playing in the sand, building a sandcastle, when the rider and horse gallop down the beach and stop just in time. The rider speaks to Alan and says he can stroke the horse. Alan is excited and happily accepts the rider’s offer for him to join him on Trojan.

Discuss: What are the differences between you now and you at the age of six?

Ask students to walk around the space in a neutral stance. As they walk ask them to take themselves younger, considering the changes in how they walk, their posture, their limbs, their facial expressions. Give them different ages from their current age down to the age of six. Ask them to stand in a space as their six year old. They are on the beach and they are going to build a sandcastle. Ask each student in turn to describe what their castle will be like in the role of their six year old. They should carefully consider how they will use movement, gesture, posture, facial expressions and vocal range to portray a child of this age.

With you in role as Dysart, replay the scene from the beginning up to ‘Alan: and they swerved just in time!’ All students should read Alan’s lines at the same time in response to your reading of Dysart's lines but they do not need to be in time with each other, they should be playing the scene as if it is only them and you. In this scene they should pay careful attention to what they are doing on the sand and to their mime skills.

After a couple of runs through the section, ask one half of the group to watch the others and vice versa.

Discuss: What choices in performance were effective and why?

Main activity 3: Act 1, scene 10 – Riding Trojan
From p. 39 ‘Alan sets his foot on the horseman’s thigh, and is lifted by him up on to his shoulders’ to p. 40 ‘Dora: Alan!’

Alan is pulled up onto the horse, he holds onto his mane and they ride away, slowly at first and then faster. The stage directions state that Alan is pulled up onto the actor playing the horseman’s shoulders.

In groups of four ask students to explore this section of the scene. Where possible they should try to follow the stage directions and have Alan climb onto the horseman’s shoulders using the other two people for support and stability. The two students supporting the horseman and Alan should take on the lines of the horseman allowing the student playing the horse to concentrate on the physicality of this. The use of choral voice in this exchange could be very effective. If it is not possible to use each other’s shoulders, then students could explore alternative ways to create the impression of Alan riding the horse; however, it is important to remind them of Shaffer’s directions that the chorus playing the horses should always stand upright and not crouch or bend forwards at any time. In addition, it is essential that students carefully consider Alan’s feelings of excitement, contentment and happiness when he is riding Trojan and how they show this physically, facially and vocally.

Perform: Ask students to perform this work and discuss how effective is their portrayal of both Alan, the horse and the horseman.

Practitioner exploration: This exploration is already Brechtian in many ways. Ask students to explore the use of the stage directions, perhaps using placards or reading them aloud.

Main activity 4: Act 1, scene 10 – Dismounting
From p. 40 ‘Dora: Alan!’ to p. 42 ‘Frank: That’s what they want – trample on ordinary people!’ In this section of text Frank pulls Alan down from Trojan and an argument with the horseman ensues.
In the same groups of four ask students to explore this section of text. The two students playing the role of the horseman should multi-role and take on the parts of Frank and Dora.

**Things to consider:**

- Do Frank and Dora feel the same about Alan riding the horse?
- How does the horseman change from the riding section to the argument? Do the audience view him in the same way that Frank does?
- How does Alan change between the sections of the scene from playing in the sand to riding Trojan to being pulled down from the horse? How can this be shown physically, facially and through vocal skills?

**Perform and discuss:** Ask students to show their interpretations of this part of the text and discuss the progress of Alan’s emotions through the scene.

**Links to the rest of the play:**

What do Frank and Dora’s reactions tell us about their relationship with Alan and each other?

What does Alan’s behaviour in this context tell us about him?

**Main activity 5: Act 1, scene 10 – Alan’s tape recorder choral voice**

At the end of the scene Alan takes the tape recorder that Dysart offers him despite the fact that he calls it ‘stupid’.

On three separate slips of paper, ask each student to write down three sentences that Alan might record. Next ask students to fold up each sentence and place them in a box. Mix up the pieces of paper and ask each student to take three pieces out. They should check them as they go to ensure that they are not taking their own.

In groups of six, ask students to use the sentences to create a choral voice interpretation of Alan’s recording.

**Practitioner exploration**

**Artaudian perspective:** Artaud’s theatre of cruelty suggested that an audience should be made to feel uncomfortable in order to be totally immersed in their theatre experience. Asks students to consider this concept when creating this work.

**Design skills**

**Learning objectives**

- To explore extracts from a design perspective.

The second question in the exam is a design question:

**The question:** As a designer, outline how you would use theatrical elements to create mood and atmosphere in the extract.

You should use examples from the extract to support your ideas and your answer should make reference to the performance text as a whole.

Although *Equus* takes place in many different locations the basic stage is the same and a non-naturalistic approach is taken to the play.

**Things to consider:**

**Set:** The main action of the play is set in Rokesby Psychiatric Hospital in the south of England. P 13 of the text gives very precise details of the set design of *Equus* and this can offer a solid starting point to explore your own ideas. Although Shaffer was very clear about how he wanted *Equus* to be designed, you can of course, offer your own varied interpretation of his ideas.

**Costume:** The play was first presented in 1973, but the text states it is set in the present time. Although there are some things that set the play in the 1970s – e.g. the advert jingles that Alan sings – there is little else to make it specifically 1970s, therefore students have scope to design costumes as they wish.

- **Alan:** Does Alan’s costume set him apart from other boys his own age? Or does it suggest he is just the same, making his horrific act harder to comprehend?
- **Dysart:** What will Dysart’s costume communicate to the audience? Do we see him as professional or slipping into something else? How might your choices show this?
- **Horses:** Shaffer is again very specific on p. 15 about the horses’ costumes and masks. Will you keep to his ideas or do you have your own ideas for costume and masks for the horses?

**Sound:** There are a range of sounds used in the play. Will you use recorded sound or live music? How will you use the sounds of the horses to the best effect?
Lighting: There are many places for lighting to be used to great effect. Consider how you might use lighting in the following areas:

- Dysart’s dream, Act 1, scene 5: How would you choose to use lighting in Dysart’s dream to show it is a dream and to explore the horror within it?
- Act 1, scene 9: How will you use lighting in Dysart’s office?
- Act 1, scene 10: How will the lighting change in the scene on the beach? Will it remain the same throughout the scene or will you use different lighting when Alan is riding Trojan and different again when he has to get down?

Use of space including staging, levels, entrances, exits and proxemics: What type of staging would you use and why? Will you use the staging as it is suggested in the text? Will you use a thrust stage, end on, or set the play in the round? Why?

Actor/audience relationship: How do you want the audience to engage with your interpretation? Do you want the audience to learn something? What message do you want them to leave with?

Practitioner ideas: The play itself is non-naturalistic, but are there elements where you would want to present a Stanislavskian interpretation or will you always break the fourth wall in a more Brechtian approach? How might you use the ideas of Artaud in your work?
Martin Dysart is a psychiatrist working at a hospital when Alan Strang arrives for treatment after viciously blinding six horses. The play opens with Dysart explaining his feelings of dissatisfaction with his job and how these feelings reflect his thoughts on his empty private life. Dysart initially has great difficulty with Alan who responds to his questions by singing the jingles to television adverts.

Dysart meets with Alan’s parents, Dora and Frank. Frank is a committed atheist while Dora is a devout Christian who, to Frank’s great disapproval, has read to Alan daily from the Bible. Frank shows concern that Alan took too much interest in the darker aspects of the Bible and tells Dysart about a horrific picture of the crucifixion that Alan put in his bedroom and Frank later destroyed. Alan replaced the image with one of a large horse.

Eventually, Dysart begins to make progress with Alan and he starts to open up. Alan tells Dysart about his first encounter with a horse when he was a child. A young man on a horse invited him to ride with him. He describes his excitement as they rode along the beach and his disappointment when his parents saw them and his father pulled him down from the horse.

Dysart meets again with Frank who reveals that he secretly watched Alan chanting and performing an almost religious ritual in his room in front of the horse picture.

Alan meets Jill Mason at the electrical goods shop where he is working. Jill recognises Alan and he is eager at the suggestion that there might be a job at the stables where she is employed. Alan is enthusiastic and soon masters his jobs at the stables. Dysart meets with Harry Dalton, the stable owner, who tells him that at first Alan seemed to be an excellent, conscientious worker.

Dysart hypnotises Alan and learns that Alan is obsessed with a particular horse, Nugget, and has secretly been taking him for rides at night, bareback and naked. Alan visualises himself as a king, riding ‘Equus’ and destroying their enemies.

Dysart gives Alan a ‘truth pill’ and Alan reveals his relationship with Jill and their date to see a pornographic film. Alan offers to walk Jill home and they go to the stables. They kiss and undress but Alan is unable to perform. Jill tries to reassure him, but he shouts at her to leave. Alan, distressed and still naked, begs the horses to forgive him. He stabs the horses’ eyes with a hoof pick.

The play ends with a monologue from Dysart in which he questions the basics of his profession and whether his intervention will help Alan. By removing his requirement to worship the horses he will remove his essence and so remove his spirit and who he really is.