



**Seeing and Unseeing in a Gaze Relentless:
A Critical Reading of *The Public Eye* by Peter Shaffer**

Dr. Vineet Maxwell David*
ORCID 0000-0002-6043-2628

***Corresponding Author:** Dr. Vineet Maxwell David,
vineet.maxwelldavid@gmail.com, Assistant Professor, Department of
English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow
Lucknow—226007

Abstract

Aim: *The aim of the paper is to bring to light the quintessence of Peter Shaffer's dramatic art that delves into a deeper engagement with life and one that ponders over the immediacy of an undying need to revisit the body of work that Peter Shaffer is endowed with.*

Methodology and Approach: *The paper in its attempt tries to retrieve the quintessence of the modern English play and positions its primacy in the contemporary questions of intellectual enquiry. The paper is exploratory and it's based on fresh interpretation of the play. Peter Shaffer's *The Public Eye* is a play that brings to light a writer's talent exuded in the art of performance as its vital exemplar.*

Outcome: *The paper in its desired outcome is also an attempt to look into the fine theatrical skills of the playwright advancing a showcasing of novel ideas as a*

significant merit of Shaffer's oeuvre. As a play, The Public Eye is enshrined in the uniqueness of its title where the domain of the plot interestingly draws forth complexities of a private space brought to light in the conflict of spousal discord and its subsequent tensions arising out of misjudged apprehensions that seek a "public eye" for an immediate remedy.

Conclusion and Suggestions: *The dysfunctional conjugal relationship of Charles Sidley and Belinda marks the ideal dramatic question for Peter Shaffer and is also one of the prominent thematic aspects that the play and subsequently the paper intends to take into account. A sense of wonderment that the stage provides in its effort to reflect upon the varied facets of human existence is a key touchstone of the stage space.*

Keywords: Communication, Strictures, Knowing, Espying, Relationship, Complexity, Private Space, Life

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The Public Eye came into existence along with *The Private Ear* by H.M. Tennent Ltd. and was performed at the Globe Theatre, London on 10th May, 1962. The play in its referential setting places the initial action taking place "in Charles Sidley's offices in Bloomsbury" and Charles Sidley is a character who is portrayed as a chartered accountant by profession. What appears to be a customary tale of a married couple, in fact throws light upon the life of Charles Sidley and his wife Belinda Sidley and the rift that would come to light between them in a succession of events in the narrative. The play in its limited plot frame

of being a one-act play induces a riveting story of individuals whose unmet emotional desires lead to Charles' mistrust for his wife. However, one also finds that he is also too diffident in acknowledging the truth of being a man who would not forsake his preconceived notions about masculinity and adherence to a rigid life narrative - his life being consciously guided in the narrowness of attitudinal proscriptions and strictures, claiming a further expunging of love that should have reigned supreme otherwise. "Charles. The moral, of course, is that men of forty shouldn't marry girls of eighteen. It should be a law of the Church, like consanguinity: only marry in your generation. And yet it began so well." (15)

A closer look into the plays' narrative is a way to expose not only what makes Belinda as a representative figure of a wife, who is subjugated to the stony etchings of her husband's rules but the allusion is also towards Charles' myopic edicts that control his life. The play also showcases the use of theatre to constantly trounce upon the idea of fixities of life and its perennial assumptions that one normally associates with. The inability to transact emotionally at an individual level is a thing that often takes a bashing, especially in a situation where faith and love diminishes with every passing moment. The reason why the disruption of communication between two individuals occurs, who on the contrary need an introspective reflection is what the play gives as an understated promotion. To place a human story all within the purview of its fallacies and misjudged apprehensions is also a way to teach and broaden a perspective towards life. It teaches the idea of possibilities available to human agency and a promise to visualize change could be considered as one of the prominent themes that make the play interesting.

Peter Shaffer in his constant engagements portrays the family domain and its conspicuousness. His ability to bring within the fold of artistic enquiry, a domain which essentially allows the representation of lives' subtleties that mark

the uniqueness of human behavior, is where Peter Shaffer excels as a writer. As Sanford Sternlicht mentions:

Peter Shaffer has several valuable theatrical skills. He is a master of the well-made play, psychological drama, the epic, and stunning stage spectacle accompanied by music. His popular success has caused envy among other playwrights of his generation. But Shaffer's audiences generally have loved his work for their spectacle, melodramatic action, high rhetoric, and the wash of sound. They are never in doubt as to whether they are being entertained. (Sternlicht 125)

The Public Eye and its dramatic action engage with an insight into a couple's life but with a twist, where the husband's suspicion towards his wife leads him to avail of the services of a private detective to know his wife's whereabouts, but this act of detective "knowing" is an act of conscious/subconscious self-revelation of all the characters that plays out well in the narrative. The play promotes a sense of thrill and suspense intertwined in the action of the detective genre. As Madeline MacMurragh Kavanagh mentions in her book *Peter Shaffer: Theatre and Drama*, that the writer's formative years went into writing "detective novels" where novels such as *The Woman in the Wardrobe* and *How Doth My Little Crocodile?* were his notable works. This could be an impression that Shaffer carried on as a writer when he uses the genre of the detective play stemming from his previous works.

However, the use of the "detective mode" is towards the unravelling of the comic strain that the play espouses and not as a regular "murder mystery". The detective slant is to expose the eccentricities of human behaviour from close quarters which makes the play interesting. Unlike the notable figure of Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes*, and many characters who were presented in the mould of a detective later on. In the play Julian Christoforous' talents are

explored in the light of his character's portrayal as a man who is affixed to his vocation. As a detective he is overwhelmed in his many arrivals, as he deduces character traits of his "subjects" and brings to bear his professional talent to underscore their life patterns holistically. A mention could also be made about the reference to Richard Lehan, who in his book *The City in Literature* talks about the significance of the character of Sherlock Holmes as one of the most famous detectives in fiction and who is a character that has been liked by many and remains etched in the literary significance of storytelling. He mentions, "Arthur Conan Doyle created the very epitome of the rational detective in Sherlock Holmes, and Holmes uses that rationality to help safeguard another Enlightenment legacy: the imperial city." (Lehan 84)

The action of the play begins with the introduction of Julian Christoforou who is described, "as a man in his middle thirties; his whole air breathes a gentle eccentricity, a nervousness combined with an air of almost meek self-disapprobation and a certain bright detachment" (2) and later he talks about himself as, "At the risk of sounding forward, I am a superb detective. It's one of the few jobs where being nondescript is an advantage" (8). It is interesting to note that Julian too has had to forsake job opportunities before he came into making of himself as a detective. The initial action of the play begins on a casual, rather awkward exchange of pleasantries with Charles Sidley in his office, both arriving at their intent and sharing their reason for the meet. However, it is Julian who cautions Charles Sidley as he is about to undertake his assignment of spying his wife. He says, "I sometimes succeed in being humorous, Mr. Sidley, but I never try. Suspicion is a highly subjective word. It refers with exactitude only to the man who entertains it." (9) Julian's character is one peculiar archetype, a detective who is an individual- one who is supposed to bring out the truth of the "unfaithful" wife who has probably wandered off to an emotional landscape of her liking.

The slow desiccation of that special emotion, love, is perhaps a reason and a reason enough for Charles and Belinda choosing their respective life scripts but also falling prey to an overpowering sense of suspicion and doubt that hangs loose on the mind of Charles Sidley. Shaffer projects that the lurking human inadequacies and suspicion is one of those. The husband-wife conflict is not an ordinary rift but is a difference that slowly broadens over a period of time and appears irreparable. However, the text implies that there is more than just a one-sided notion of why the woman needs to be at the receiving end of man's judgmental scrutiny. Charles' accusative remarks are a showcasing of the impetuous bitter malaise that he shares for his wife and now seeks answers through a mysterious undercover to make "public" his private space:

Charles. You mean nothing concrete. No letters written in a hot impetuous hand. No guilty smiles or blushes. My dear man, we live in the twentieth century, which blushes for nothing. The blush has gone out, like the ball-card and the billet-doux (He moves behind the desk). Betrayal has become a word with rather quaint connotations. (13)

In the showcasing of the characters of Charles and Belinda, they are seen as two individuals who are polar opposites or at least their inclinations seem to suggest the mutual paradox they share. In the play, Belinda is seen as a "free spirit"- untamed in her vigor for life. She admonishes the idea of restraint and patriarchal limitations. Her yearning for life's fulfilment gives her enough gumption for a liberated world view. However, the ideological contradictions are proving to be otherwise. Her unrestrained mannerisms are not a moral upholding in her husband's views as he cascades into an unrestrained vortex of suspicion and jealousy. Nonetheless the play also empowers the affirmative identity of the 'wife' who challenges the defined status quo. As Madeline MacMurragh Kavanagh puts it, "Belinda's questioning of the definition of 'wife' and of the

arbitrary and thus illogical limits this place upon her as a human being and as a woman, seems to suggest that Shaffer's desire to articulate the female experience within patriarchy finds its first extended expression here." (Kavanagh 129)

Another important reflection could be made of Hélène Cixous where Simon Malpas talks about her essay "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays" as he ponders over what she says. He posits, "Cixous argues that the opposition between man and woman has accrued a whole range of cultural significations that generates a field of power relations that dispossess women of their voices, identities and the capacity to act." (Malpas 71) The above realisation has strong overtones in the expectation that Charles has of Belinda's conduct in the relationship.

The introduction to Belinda's character is a narrative that is bespoken by Julian, the detective who in his categorical remarks reports the succession of events. Belinda as a character comes alive in the speech by Julian, as he reports to Charles the details of her daily routine. What apparently appears is that she, in her longing for an escape from the dull prosaic rigmarole of her married life, finds herself indulging in life's more subtle and joyous occasions of visiting a "hatshop", eating "a confection of peppermint ice-cream", visiting "Kensington Gardens" and as Julian puts it, "On the contrary, she wandered about quite aimlessly". (11-12) Belinda's portrayal as a more affirmative individual is what makes her a loveable character as she challenges the masculine/patriarchal credo and explores the possibilities of finding life's renewal in what appears as the already familiar/unfamiliar territories of the city. The city, in its entire stirring demeanour beckons for an elopement with oneself as its long winding stretches engulf the imagination of Belinda and make her, her own. As Madeline MacMurragh Kavanagh puts it as an apt realization as to how Shaffer portrays his women characters. She says that if Belinda is considered as a "free spirit" then her nature is counterbalanced by an affirmative use of "rationality" "administered at

male hands” (Kavanagh 130). The critic mentions in her views, where she says, “Belinda is, in fact, paedocratized (made child-like) in this transaction since her knowledge and induction into the world of “grown-ups” (culture, art, life itself) is at the hands of men.” (Kavanagh 130)

Charles... Belinda is the wife of a professional man in a highly organised city in the twentieth century. That is her place. It dictates that she must live by a certain code. As I have often explained to her, this would undoubtedly be different if she were wedded to a jazz trumpeter in New Orleans, which she seems to think she is, but there still would be a code. (He moves down RC) There is no such thing as a perfectly independent person. (16)

The play constantly brings out the element of conflict arising out of coercion and retaliation betwixt the husband and wife and it has its presence throughout the narrative, but it also showcases the singularity of characters which is demonstrative in their unique eccentricities. While the husband-wife tussle goes on, it is the voice of the detective that reverberate an intrinsic voice of self-reflection in the play for Charles and Belinda as well as for the audience. In his comic gestures and awkward quips and sallies, Julian Christoforou draws our attention to not only observe the emotional hiatus that exists between Charles and Belinda but also gives an opportunity to look into what it means when love and trust becomes a rare commodity in any relationship. For Julian, who is an outsider, he is the one who becomes inextricably involved in the emanating issue that affects the couple. The fact that he is a detective, he in his professional pursuit follows Belinda while she revels in thinking that there is a secret admirer who has come to occupy her life. The double bind of being looked at is an innocent realization that she is being admired from afar but the “looking” is also an investigative gaze that she fails to identify. In fact, the lives of all these three individuals get inextricably linked and intertwined in the process. The play also

gives them an opportunity to take stock of their situation and place their “bare facts” as a point of revelation. Julian who in his professional extrapolation gives a long discourse on what it meant being “Alone” as he ponders over his own “private life” and found that he too suffered an emotional crisis says, “Julian. Alone, I didn’t exist; I came alive only against a background of other people’s affairs.” (35)

In fact, all the three characters seem to be in the “detective” mode, trying to assess their situation and grappling with the desire for approbation, misjudging its lack and its fullness. The play also tries to communicate a human desire to be embraced in the warmth of an emotion and the lack of which could be quite debilitating. Towards the end, the detective gives his pronouncement, that spying people’s lives envisions him with the fulfilling idea to embrace life in all its fullness. Julian acknowledges Belinda’s occupation with herself for “three weeks” that gave him an insight as he notices the fervency that Belinda possesses and how it supersedes the prosaic, predetermined world of her husband:

Julian. Yes, Belinda. I’ve spent three years helping to break up people’s marriages. Don’t you think it might recompense them a little, if I helped to preserve yours? Let me be honest with you: I’d like to be the first detective to cement a marriage. (38)

The play foreshadows the idea of how altered individuals become, as they undergo experiential change. The act of “knowing” human behavior makes them aware of their inadequacies and their immutable beliefs about themselves. Towards the end, it is Julian who brings Charles and Belinda back together, adding to their realization where Belinda is coaxed by him to take the initiative, “You led me out of those burrows, Belinda. Now, lead him the same way. Eurydice leading Orpheus for a change.” (42)

Thus, the play serves to placate mutual differences and acrimony that guided the lives of these individuals, only to be corrected in their approach for an

enlargement of the heart and mind. Shaffer establishes a unique dialogue aimed towards human enquiry and makes way for a reasoned change in attitudes. In the play, the playwright looks into theatre archetypes formalized and not fossilized as character subjects who in their conducts and misdemeanors are ultimately brought back to a wiser understanding. As a play, *The Public Eye* repositions and counterbalances its notion of its invasive as well as intuitive gaze as a trope for correction, dramatized in the action of the spectacle.

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Dr. Vineet Maxwell David

Vineet Maxwell David is Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow, Lucknow. His area of study includes Theatre Studies with special reference to contemporary theatre and its representations of gender and identity questions. His interest in creative writing also inspires him to write poetry. He was also a participant at the Mellon School of Performance Research, Harvard University.