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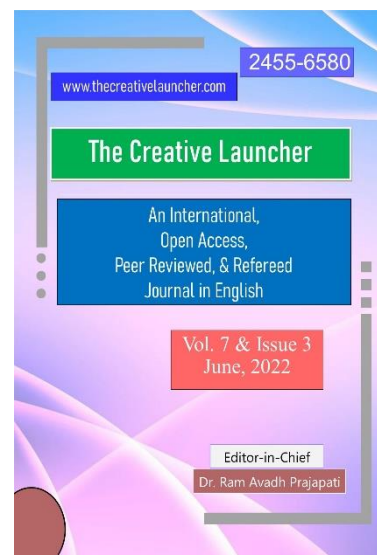
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## The Accord of Discord: Reflections on Private Lives in Peter Shaffer's *Five Finger Exercise*

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### Abstract

Peter Shaffer holds a place of pivotal importance in Modern British Drama. The variety and complexities of life that Shaffer presents through his works, give us a good idea that he is a playwright who intends to further the representative nature of theatre as an agency of influence.

The acute fidelity with which he perceives and deliberates upon life narratives remains a preserve in which the playwright influences his proficient talent to good use. He works upon aspects of human situations with a deep sense of purpose and understanding which bespeak of his merit as a playwright. *Five Finger Exercise* is a play by Peter Shaffer that stands as an important work in the formative years of his career as a playwright and contributes a notable standing to his oeuvre as a writer in the making. Paralleled in the reputation of the drama of the fifties with *Look Back in Anger* as a profound dramatic work, it is Peter Shaffer's *Five Finger Exercise* that holds its ground as a work of incredible consequence about complexities of human ordeals. The 'family' and its private frontier remains a compelling subject for drama and it also seeks our renewed enquiry, one that is exemplified in the action of the play, *Five Finger Exercise*. The paper instils a vital seeking through an academic deliberation, accentuating a vigorous argument as to why it needs to be recognised as an important work in English theatre history. It is the domain of the Harringtons' family and their trials and turmoils that puts into question a consequential deliberation on beneath the surface reality of the family/domestic space. The paper also serves to explore the psychological and emotional dimensions of human behaviour and its treatment as part of the narrative which seeks to highlight Peter Shaffer's perspicuity and his acumen as a writer.

**Keywords:** Family, Love, Domestic Space, Engagement, Discord, Belongingness, Empathy, Stage Narrative, Displacement, Territories, Communication

Embodying an influence that is often the preserve of incredible writings, it is the play *Five Finger Exercise* by Peter Shaffer that influences a profound artistic reckoning in establishing itself as an example of good theatre. The play appears to hold its place as one of the important works that Peter Shaffer wrote in the year 16th July, 1958 and was performed at The Comedy Theatre, London. It is a two-act play where the action of the events largely take place at the "Harringtons' week-end cottage in Suffolk". For the play to be chronicled in the active years of a decade sharing its coveted place with John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, it is *Five Finger Exercise* that keeps up to its archival significance as a play accrediting its own merit. As mentioned by Madeline MacMurragh-Kavanagh who puts it quite clearly, "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" (Kavanagh 7).

As a playwright Peter Shaffer explores the centrality of the domestic space and the significance of its representation through the stage space. The "family/domestic space" within the narrative acquires signification in its perceived role as a marked territory that calls forth complex connotations and its subsequent representations made available through a stylised "performance" of the personal frontier. The showcasing of individuals assigned to their ideological fixities within the "family/domestic space", are people who are to be seen withheld

within the framework of cultural, economic and social interactions, and are constantly centred and decentred in the given circumstance.

The play also reflects upon the individuals' proverbial pronouncements voiced as life edicts whereby they partake as actors in performance of a given life script and its absolutes. As Peter Roberts mentions, "a devastatingly true picture of the way human beings suffer and yet remain isolated and totally unable to understand each other" (Kavanagh 38). As Sanford Sternlicht mentions,

Shaffer's first stage success was *Five Finger Exercise* (1958), a drama of middle-class life in which Shaffer tells the story of marital strife in the Harrington family and how the rows hurt their nervous son. The Harringtons confide in Walter, a charming German tutor with a dark secret, who is brought in to teach their volatile fourteen-year-old daughter. Walter upsets the household as the family's weekend country house becomes a battleground. Like a Chekhov play, *Five Finger Exercise* ends without resolution but leaves the audience in a contemplative state. (Sternlicht 125)

The family space has always been an interesting field of enquiry in the realm of theatre and with Peter Shaffer the consequential depiction of private lives of individuals' gains attention as an engaging stage narrative. The plot progression of the play marks an unravelling of lives burdened and riddled with a great sense of overbearing antagonism towards each other. The characters' placid lives bescreen a deep sense of emotional upheaval and misplaced anger that largely remains relentless in its lashings and acerbic stings that ultimately give rise to hostilities towards each other.

The play draws forth a realistic picture of the social milieu that renders a deeper understanding of how the interpretations of the domestic space have been a part of theatrical imagination. The private space and its existing vulnerabilities embody deeper questions of identity and cohabitation. The play discourses upon credible life stories bringing into light such microcosmic territories of the family/domestic space, which layers an undercurrent of simmering dissension and individuals ultimately losing out to frigid emotions, are found devoid of their warmth and the truthfulness of the once avowed promise of love.

The opening scene in the play gives us an insight into the Harringtons' family and the invasive vigour of marked dissension and discord that leaves a palpable sign in their mutual relationships. For the idea of faith and trust that needs to be reiterated in a thousand ways, the succession of events in the play finds a severe uprooting of communication amongst the individuals. As the characters find themselves seemingly withheld in the lull of an incoherent communication, whereby any scope of fluency of meaning gets annulled by its gripping strain which stifles further articulation of emotions.

Amongst the many characters, it is Stanley Harrington who is the husband of Louise Harrington. He is described as "...a forceful man in middle age, well-built and self-possessed, though there is something deeply insecure about his assertiveness. He is wearing a brightly checked lumber jacket and is carrying a box of cartridges" (1.1.3). As a character, Stanley's life credentials are set against his wife who is certainly not his mirror image and is someone

who comes across as a person who is temperamentally different from him. Her portrayal as an aspirational individual whose upper middle-class leanings make her constantly aware of her claims to the quintessential sophistication and aspirational yearning for her desired social echelon. She is introduced as "...a smart woman in her forties, dressed stylishly, even ostentatiously for a country week-end. Her whole manner bespeaks a constant preoccupation with style, though without apparent insincerity or affection" (1.1.2).

Peter Shaffer, through this play positions his characters in the binaries of oppositions, as characters restrained in their ideological strongholds and closeted in their attitudes and apprehensions. However, the playwright's art gives equal representation to all the characters aimed to enshrine their marked character traits. It is the art of characterisation that adapts to a semblance of life whereby the characters influence the audience and also script a profound influence on each other as characters in mutual engagement and discord.

The conflict in the family is a theme that recurs as part of theatrical representations across time and space. But the play is more incisive in its presentation as it works towards showcasing conflict of ideas stemming from a character's past and her/his longings for a probable future. It appears everyone is an outsider in each other's experiential reality. Cohabiting a circumstance, it is imperative for them to make sense of who they are even in their inability to understand each other and also to articulate their honest self. The acrimonious flare of self-possessed ideas that often ride high waves of leaping emotions devours the possibility of true love and compassion and is an idea that *Five Finger Exercise* subsumes.

The rising action leads to an unease that arises from a sense of mistrust and animosity that stealthily impacts the family. As individuals in the family exercising difference, it is a realisation that stigmatises the innocence of relationships and causes a deeper conflict and leaves them with a sense of betrayal. Stanley's apprehension is clearly marked in his observations for his son where he says:

STANLEY: You don't seem to realize the world you're living in, my boy. When you finish at this university which your mother insists you're to go to, you'll have to earn your living. I won't always be here to pay for everything, you know. (1.1.6)

The acerbic exchange that takes place between the father and son leads to a constant erosion of mutual respect and camaraderie that could have existed but it further causes a split in their relationship. Clive in his sensitivity retorts but Stanley takes charge to explicate things further to him.

STANLEY: ... All this culture stuff's very fine for those who can afford it; for the nobs and snobs we're always hearing about from - (he indicates Louise) that end of the table, but it's not going to earn you the price of a sausage outside this front door. I mayn't be much in the way of education, but I know this: if you can't stand on your own two feet you don't amount to anything. And not one of that pansy set of spongers you're going round with will ever help you do that. And you know why? Because they've got no principles. No principles worth a damn. (1.1.6)

Stanley holds a strong opinion about his son, and is quite vociferous about lessons on life's practicalities. He is a man who is apparently dubbed as someone who nurtures an unadorned life catering to utilitarian ends, with virtually no desire for creative aesthetics like music and fashion.

STANLEY. I know. I've seen them. Arty-tarty boys. They think it's clever going round Chelsea and places like that giggling and drinking and talking dirty, wearing Bohemian clothes. Tight trousers. Who gave them the right to look down on other people, that's what I want to know, just because they don't know about the - (in an affected voice) operah - and ballay and the dramah. (1.1.6)

The rising hostilities between the husband and wife are truly a setback to their marital coexistence. Louise does mention "... Unfortunately, my dear, we weren't all born orphans; we didn't all go to grammar schools, or work up a furniture factory on our own by sheer will-power" (1.1.7).

The apparent use of language by characters in the play reflects upon a growing rift that is heavily charged with a sense of animosity and emotional upheaval. The acerbic nature of family conversation is spun around with hushed tones of overloaded sarcasm. As Stanley mentions later in the play,

... I'm in business to make money. I give people what they want. I mean, ordinary people. Maybe they haven't got such wonderful taste as you and your mother: perhaps they don't read such good books - (he peers at Louise's magazine) what is it - (He reads) Houses and Gardens - but they know what they want. (1.2.21)

As Madeline MacMurragh- Kavanagh opines in the chapter "Words and their Limits", "In Shaffer's plays, words and their limits become an obsession as the need for communication, and the impossibility of it in verbal terms, is placed centre stage" (Kavanagh 36). The idealisation of "family talk" as a symbolic representation of communication is charged with a deep sense of unease that expunges available opportunities of camaraderie. The feeling of unhappiness and a realisation of one's situation under duress is what makes Clive question the very idea of "family" like his very own, one that he can vouch for, not as an example of idealisation.

Walter Langer's presence in the play is of a "tutor" and who has come to teach French to Pamela Harrington, the daughter of Stanley and Louise. Walter is introduced as "... a German youth, secret, warm, precise but not priggish and happily at ease with his young student" (1.1.9). Having arrived at the household as someone who is barely aware of the state of play, it is he who comes across as an "outsider" and it is he who gets deeply engrossed in the affairs of the family. Being hopeful of warm acceptance by the Harringtons', it is he who thinks that he can have a fresh start.

WALTER. One thing I know: I will never go back. Soon I'll be a British subject.

LOUIS. You really want to stay here.

WALTER. If you had seen what I have, you would know why I call it Paradise. (1.2.30)



Enflamed in the hopeful light of having found a “home”, Walter misjudges his opinions about the Harrington’s. However, in the gradual drift of time and days, he is consumed in the deepening vortex of the family affairs, oblivious of the repercussions which would affect him and render him hapless as days pass by. For as a young man, whose travels have brought him to a different place, it is he who seeks an emotional comfort within the family environs. For him, being hopeful of receiving love and emotional solace and loving comfort with the Harringtons’ appears to be a promise that gradually fades in the moments of becoming a withering illusion, an ambition that would be far from any attainment.

As Madeline MacMurragh- Kavanagh writes:

Of course, as Shaffer is at pains to point out throughout his plays, it is not necessary to leave family and home to feel alienated from them, in which case the entire Harrington family of *Five Finger Exercise* could be added to this category. All of these characters are exiles, all floundering between concepts of self and place, all in varying stages of psychic disintegration, and all unable to locate ‘home’. (Kavanagh 58)

The imagined idea of ‘home’ is an exclusive category. In the play, those who are in it will never get to embrace its warmth and the ones outside, hopelessly look forward to be held in its embrace. Monika Fludernik in her book *Metaphors of Confinement: The Prison in Fact, Fiction, and Fantasy* cites many examples where she deduces upon the idea of the “metaphors of confinement” where “home” could be seen as one such site where the idea of conflict gets substantiated. She talks about this idea through different facets and it’s representations in literature and articulates a whole range of meaning in the understanding of the idea of home and its metaphoric interpretation as an internment. She says:

Both the PRISON AS HOME and the HOME AS **PRISON** tropes are ultimately metaphors that apply to situations of unhappiness and misery... the ‘homeliness’ of these metaphoric homes consists in their seclusion and narrow intimacy rather than in love and happiness. Inversely, homes that turn into prisons are perversions of the ideal of what homes should be like- they exhibit an atmosphere of cruelty, neglect, and a lack of affection (if not downright hatred) and stage a scenario of surveillance and persecution. (Fludernik “Chapter 4”)

In the play, Walter serves as an anti-thesis to the idea of “Home and family” and also the other characters, where the state of belongingness is a fabled attainment, an idea also voiced in the critical readings of Peter Shaffer’s works by Madeline MacMurragh- Kavanagh. Walter’s yearning for a family makes him traverse through geographical boundaries in order to find love. His intimate sharing with Clive tells us a lot about his past that coloured his imagination for a long time to come. Reminiscing his past and remembering his father, Walter shares his life story with Clive, one that comes as a surprise.

WALTER. (Looking out of the window) Oh, yes. He was a great man in the town. People were afraid of him, and so was I. When war broke out, he went off to fight and we did not see him for almost six years. When he came back, he was still a Nazi. (2.1.56)

Having remembered his past, Walter hopes for a future where he is able to find a family that can offer him love and empathy.

WALTER. (recovering) So you see, I do know what it is to have a family. And what I look for. (In a strange tone) A house where now and then good spirits can sit on the roof. (2.1.56)

Peter Shaffer gives us a deep insight into human nature and portrays a conflict that has emotional/psychological bearings in the workings of drama. The notion of displacement within the context of the home and family has deeper connotations- one that is clearly marked in the fate of the family and the extended life choices of Walter as a character. The discord, as it gets verbalised in the noisy tenor of selfish emotions leads to a serious impact on Walter, who came looking for emotional anchorage. Treading divergent pathways, the individual members have only survived on inchoate utterances of selfish prattles, and are seen sequestered in their tiny microcosmic islands.

The climax of the play leads everybody turning towards Walter for validation and appropriation, whereas he finds it hard to hold on to his ground and in a fit of anxiety collapses, asphyxiated, in a way to commit suicide but is saved towards the end. The rising tensions in the family becomes all-consuming and deeply affects the lives of the individuals. *Five Finger Exercise* remains an important work by Peter Shaffer. It exemplifies as a play which in its symbolic reference is more than an ordinary family drama. *Five Finger Exercise* exercises the desire for truth, love and empathy that is found in small measures in the given situation. Nevertheless, the unsettling nature of the conflict is a showcasing of human relationships losing out on love and compassion and therefore claim a renewed effort to foster a better understanding and a nurturing of individuals towards human values.

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