

The Bees' Needs

In Dragon's 'Humble Boy,' a family tries to fight through grief

By Marianne Messina

HAVING JUST READ about another mysterious die-out of bees back East, not to mention worrying for my own bees freezing their butts off this winter, I found Charlotte Jones' use of absent bees as metaphor in the play *Humble Boy*, a Dragon Productions presentation, a little too remote. Give me bees and make these people deal with them already! But I guess that's the point: people removed from the immediacy of life by things like expectation and busy-bee language.

Opening after Jim Humble's death as the remainder of his bees are carted off, the play takes place in the caesura of grieving and moves Jim's family—his son, Felix Humble (John T. Aney) and wife, Flora (Maggie Grant)—to wake up and smell the roses. To concretize the cliché, the restless Mrs. Flora Humble has gone anosmic (literally can't smell the roses in the garden) since her husband's death. And if you think "humble boy" sounds a lot like "bumble bee," add it to the idea of a bee man married to his Flora and multiply that over two hours and 25 minutes to find out how exhaustive is the wordplay in this script.

Like the play itself, the language can be both beautiful and comical. "The day he died," Felix says of his father, "the sun cried bees" (a reference to bees swarming). There are puns on names—Felix addresses his mother and her lover, George Pye (Dan Roach), as "The Humble-Pyes"—plus more pedestrian puns like "buzz off." And there's macabre, humorous shtick: yes, a traveling urn full of ashes.

Maggie Grant is brimming with ruthlessness as Flora, dismissing her late husband as she fends off Felix's Hamlet-style taunts about her flirtation with George Pye so soon after Humble's death. Grant and Aney take a while fleshing out and settling into the mother-son relationship, partly because Jones, like some of her characters, wants to say it all. The story includes a host of entanglements. George's daughter, Rosie (fantastically played by Katie Anderson), and Felix attempt a reunion seven years after their sad breakup. Maddy Fluhr makes a quite lovable Mercy, Flora's well-meaning, hanger-on friend. Starting out as a throwaway comedic character, Fluhr takes Mercy to a character of sympathy and power.

Fortunately, everyone has more depth than it first appears. And by the second act, as they sit among the vine-filled trellises of set designer Ron Gasparinetti's "country garden," they're discussing mortality. With the beehive looking on, prominent but empty, from a manicured lawn, the characters can't resist comparing human life to that of bees: "Their wings have a finite number of beats and they just fall from the sky." Balefully fatalistic, but pretty.

The Dragon production does a good job projecting Jones' existential clash. Felix, in a midcareer meltdown, finds his psyche a battleground between Flora's striving and yearning and his father's focused contentment. And Aney's lazy, floppy, languoring Felix contrasts nicely with Flora in her impeccable power suits. Flora speaks of Jim (Richard Newton) as an insignificant person. Felix remarks that his mother has "burned more brightly" than his father. "I only know the right names for my little world," Jim himself says, meekly.

And yet the play wants to reveal something about Jim's ability to establish deeper relationships and embrace the simple things. It falls entirely on the stage time of Newton (a beekeeper in real life, rah, rah) as a sort of ghost of Jim, to convert the Humbles' loquacious combat zone into a different kind of space. And Newton pulls it off. Puttering in the yard in his white beekeeping coveralls, talking softly in his melodious lilt, he creates a softness into which other characters can release tension. This helps smooth us into the play's 11th-hour recognition that a humble man can have a huge impact on the world around him