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Friday Jan 19

'Humble Boy' a grand success

By John Angell Grant / Theater Reviewer

There's a terrific, not-to-be-missed play running in downtown Palo Alto right now. That would be the odd, magical "Humble Boy," by English playwright Charlotte Jones.

"Humble Boy" was Jones's surprise hit at London's National Theater in 2001. Because of this show, Jones landed the job with Andrew Lloyd Webber to adapt his controversial Wilkie Collins musical "Woman in White."

"Humble Boy" is an intelligent, mysterious and unusual present-day backyard English garden play about families, sex and relationships. It's a real treat to have a quality small theater production of a recent London hit running at Dragon Theatre, at the corner of Alma Street and Hamilton Avenue.

In "Humble Boy," a fragmented middle-class English family struggles to sort out relationships in the wake of their ridiculed and undervalued patriarch's sudden death. They hash it all out in the back garden of the family's suburban home over the course of a summer, in the precarious shadow of a romantic triangle and other loaded conflicts.

Director Nichole Y. Hamilton has staged the show very well. Overall her cast does an impressive job with the English accents, which are often the bane of small American productions of British plays.

John Aney portrays the mourning and confused 35-year-old son Felix, a Cambridge theoretical physicist dressed inappropriately in cricket whites, who stutters under stress. Felix says he's trying to unify string theory, but maybe he's just on meds, or maybe he's just a momma's boy.

Maggie Grant is his unsettlingly toxic mother. Unsettling because although she's officious, she's a sympathetic character, in her desperately tight, short skirts, and flirting with a friend after the death of her husband.

Mother was upstairs lying in bed, for example, recovering from a nose job with her face bandaged when her husband keeled over in the garden from an apparent heart attack. "Humble Boy" turns out to be a story in which people learn something about themselves, some of them actually grow, and she's one of them.

Maddy Fluhr entertains as a hyperactive, ectomorphic, flighty spinster neighbor, who is effective in her amusingly eccentric birdlike performance. Dan Roach plays the drunken, fun-loving self-made small businessman with designs on marrying the widow while her husband's corpse is still warm.

Katie Anderson gives the best performance of the evening as a rejected girlfriend of the son, returning years later to the scene of her old relationship, armed with wisdom, humor, experience and wit. She has worked through her pain and is refreshingly upfront and un-hung up about sex and her past.

Underlying these encounters is the memory of the recently dead father, who taught high-school biology and kept bees.

All these fragmented people are looking for meaning in their injured families and relationships. "Humble Boy" proves to be a story about parenting, childhood and conjugal life, as well as growing beyond the restraints of neurotic and unhealthy family dynamics.

It's a talky, thoughtful British play with a dense subtext. There is a lot going on underneath the surface, which keeps things interesting. It's also a play about a backyard garden, which is a special place for the English.

Although "Humble Boy" starts as a black comedy about mourning, it ends bigger than that. If you're a fan of new, literate British theater, or would like to be, don't miss this play.

Rating: Four stars

E-mail John Angell Grant at jagplays@dailynewsgroup.com.

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Shannon Stowe / Dragon Productions

John T. Aney and Maggie Grant star in Dragon Productions' "Humble Boy."

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