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Arts & Entertainment - Friday, January 19, 2007

## More than a humble effort

*Dragon Productions' 'Humble Pie' is engaging, thought-provoking*

by Kevin Kirby

It's summer in the English countryside, and Felix Humble has come home from university to deliver his father's eulogy. But Felix can't let go.

He is livid to discover, on the morning of the funeral, that his mother has summoned "an apocalypse of beekeepers" to take away his father's beloved honeybees, and, with his childhood stutter reasserting itself, he runs out on the eulogy. Weeks later, he still cannot part with his father's ashes (which his mother, with characteristic poor judgment, has presented to him in an ancient Etruscan honey pot), and he appears at a dinner party in an ill-fitting suit of his father's that he rescued from a thrift shop.

His overweening grief is only part of the story, though. Felix is facing a crisis of confidence. A 35-year-old research fellow in theoretical astrophysics, he worries that he may never make his mark. He is taking psychiatric meds, frittering away the summer, contemplating suicide.

Matters only get worse when he learns that his mother plans to marry the amiably gutter-mouthed drunkard George Pye. George is a successful businessman and is genuinely interested in Flora Humble's happiness, but he is earth-bound, a clod.

These are the central tensions in Charlotte Jones' award-winning comedy "Humble Boy," which marks the opening of Dragon Productions' second season in its cozy downtown venue. To bring the play to life, Artistic Director Meredith Hagedorn has tapped the talents of a number of past Dragon collaborators, while bringing in a handful of talented newcomers to round out the production. The result is an engaging, thought-provoking piece that sets an ambitious standard for the year to come.

In the title role, John Aney (one of the principals in last season's "Caucasian Chalk Circle" and director of "Brilliant Traces") carries the weight of the story comfortably, Maggie Grant, though a bit young as Aney's mother, creates a character whose frailties are infuriatingly evident. Dan Roach throws himself into George's drunken pontification with the same abandon as his amorous dance breaks.

All three fill out the general outlines of their characters readily enough; they find the primary colors that tell us who these people are. But perhaps director Nichole Hamilton — who has done an otherwise splendid job with this piece — has not done quite enough to help her principals find the subtler shades, the unexpected nuances, the transitional moments.

In the actors' defense, Jones' script is rife with abrupt tonal shifts. The play mixes weighty scientific and philosophical issues with broad physical comedy — wait till you see what happens to dad's ashes — and gentle human observation.

The performer who handles this challenge most ably is Katie Anderson. Anderson plays Rosie Pye, George's daughter and Felix's ex-girlfriend. She brings to Rosie a delightful sense of irony; it allows her to navigate these shifts with a sardonic smile or a gesture of her eyebrows, and it makes Rosie the play's wisest character by far.

The cast is rounded out by Maddy Fluhr — reliably funny as a perpetually nervous family friend — and Richard Newton. Newton, who adds texture to the piece in a small character role, also served as dialect coach for the production and deserves praise for the cast's consistently believable English accents.

Also praiseworthy is Ron Gasparinetti's scenic design. The action takes place in the Humble family garden, a small plot of grass bounded by an apple tree, the deserted beehive, the rear entrance to the house, and a beautifully rendered potting shed. The shed is a slightly dilapidated structure from which a nostalgic yellow light pours through dozens of grimy panes of glass. Sound and light designer Cy Eaton (new to Dragon) deserves kudos for this lighting effect, and also for the eerie, multi-timbral humming noise that haunts Felix in moments of solitude.

Hagedorn has enlisted Dragon on-stage alumnae Mary Lou Torre and Heidi Kobara to handle props and costumes, respectively. Both women have done fine work, though Felix's brand-name American running shoes seem out of place with his first costume. Hagedorn's "Brilliant Traces" co-star, Tom Gough, serves as fight choreographer. Gough's garden-implement fencing routine is somewhat tame but amusing.

In its course, the play provides numerous revelations for Felix and the audience alike. And for audience members who know their Shakespeare, there is an added bonus, for "Humble Boy" is, on top of everything else, a contemporary variation on the themes and characters of "Hamlet."

Knowledge of "Hamlet" is in no way necessary to appreciate the play, and Jones never lets the literary parallels steer the story she has set out to tell, but "Hamlet" aficionados will find themselves chuckling on a sort of theatrical Easter egg hunt. For instance, Felix's stutter is worst when he encounters the word "bee" (as in "...or not to be"), Rosie gives passing mention to joining a nunnery, the aforementioned fencing sequence is an echo of "Hamlet," Act V, etc.

The bottom line: "Humble Boy" is one of the most polished works that Dragon has produced to date. An engaging evening of theater, it is well worth the ticket price.

**What: "Humble Boy," a play presented by Dragon Productions**

**Where: Dragon Theatre, 539 Alma St., Palo Alto**

**When: Thursday, Friday, and Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m., through Feb. 3**

**Cost: Tickets are \$18 on Thursday and Sunday, \$20 on Friday and Saturday (\$5 less for students and seniors).**

**Info: Call 650-493-2006 or go to [www.dragonproductions.net](http://www.dragonproductions.net).**



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