

## Complicated production takes on autism

Right off the bat, many things happen -- in two vastly different time frames -- in the intense drama "Wild Boy," that opened July 29 at The Dragon Theatre in downtown Redwood City.

So it's little wonder that the audience members gives each other some "huh?" glances until the strange, and strangely connected, storylines begin to coalesce.

"Wild Boy" is a deeply personal story, because playwright Oliver Goldstick based it on Paul Collins' book about his own young son, Morgan, who is autistic. What Goldstick, a television writer and producer, did was meld Morgan's story into historical research about the famed 18th century boy, Peter the "wild boy," who was found mute and feral in the woods by none other than King George I of England.

At first it's difficult to understand, as the play bounces back and forth between eras, but not for lack of effort by a sterling cast, a quickly transformed set and some even faster costume changes, thanks to resourceful costumers and two backstage dressers. For the actors, it can't be easy to switch from an 18th century person complete with powdery wig to an ordinary man or woman in today's society. But it happens -- many times -- in this production.

As Paul Collins, the father of young Morgan, Ryan O'Donnell serves also as the narrator, frequently talking directly to the audience about the difficulties of being Morgan's dad and his inability to accept that his son has developmental delays or a "cognitive disability," as the first doctor they take him to labels it.

O'Donnell is earnest and pragmatic, perhaps a bit too much so, because he shows very little emotion until late in the play when, at long last, he brings himself to say the words he couldn't say for many years: "He has autism." That's his acknowledgement that he has finally accepted Morgan for who he is.

As Paul's wife, Jennifer, Olivia Haas is astoundingly real. Conflicting emotions flit across her face in a few seconds, and she becomes the grounding force of the family who determines that her son, no matter how difficult, will continue to live with them rather than in some kind of institutionalized care. Haas stands out in a cast of outstanding actors, which is saying something.

Only these two actors perform one part each, while Johnathan Tierney adeptly plays both their son Morgan and the mute boy Peter. The remainder of the cast -- Isabel Siragusa,

John Stephen King, Mary Lou Torre and Bryan Moriarty -- play up to seven roles each, and the surprising fact is that they are nearly all spot-on. Siragusa, in particular, seems able to switch effortlessly from caring social worker to England's Princess Caroline without smearing her mascara.

And while director/sound designer Ken Sonkin moves his cast around with alacrity and purpose, it's really to the credit of set designer Joshua McDermott that they are able to do so. This is one of the most versatile sets ever built, with actors and stage crew moving set pieces from present day to 18th century England and back within seconds.

The set's most versatile objects actually look like blown-up children's puzzle pieces. At times they are chairs, combined they are a table and, upside down, they become the entryway to a bus. Sonkin points out in his program notes that "the universal symbol of autism is a jigsaw puzzle piece," so it's ingenious to incorporate that symbol into the set design.

Then there's Brooke Jennings' inventive costumes: One of the actors confided after the play that he mostly wears several costumes at once so that he can exit the stage, strip off one and be ready for a new scene in seconds. Not an easy feat when one is playing King George I and, moments later, a medical doctor in the present day. (And that's why dressers Daniela Talavera Rangel and Brandon Ah Tye deserve a special shout-out.)

Dialect coach Kimberly Mohne Hill also warrants credit for making the British accents spoken by, among others, Torre and Moriarty, sound authentic. The musical interludes, especially the chamber music, work well here.

Finally, Tierney displays an amazing athleticism as the wild boy, climbing on, over and around the rope bridge high up on a platform, hanging upside down and frequently lurching around on all fours to hide from others.

Just as this was not an easy play to produce, it's also not always easy to watch. Yet the



Dragon Productions Johnathan Tierney in the title role of "Wild Boy," which runs through Aug. 21, 2016, at Dragon Theatre in Redwood City. ( KimberleeWittlieb )

end result is well worth the effort, because autism is a topic that few people ever think about, let alone discuss.

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Theater

What: "Wild Boy"

Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway St., Redwood City

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays

Through: Aug. 21

Tickets: \$25-30; 650-493-2006 or [www.dragonproductions.net](http://www.dragonproductions.net)