

## Wild Boy

Of course, in this day and age, degradation of our native wildlands means feral child populations have been all but wiped out. A tragic case.

**"Wild Boy"** at the Dragon Theatre in Redwood City tells two stories, the first being the tale of Peter the Wild Boy. Peter, here played by Johnathan Tierney and looking like an incredibly handsome Tarzan, was a 12-year-old discovered living feral in the wilds of Germany in 1725.

England's King George I, of all people, captured him and brought him home as a combination ward and house pet. Yes, all of this really happened. John Stephen King plays George I on the Dragon stage as a bit of a rich, eccentric kook who projects his feelings of helplessness and haplessness onto the seemingly guileless and unassuming child.

The second plot is set (of course) in the modern day, when young parents Jennifer and Paul (Olivia Haas and Ryan O'Donnell) learn that their son may be autistic. Initially they deflect the diagnosis, and take it a bit personally. Soon, they vacillate between despairing over whether he or they will ever have the privilege of a normal life and defending him from persecution, real and perceived.

Paul's book in progress about the Wild Boy provides the link between the stories. Inevitably, he begins to project his anxiety and uncertainty onto the figure of Peter, who may have had a similar condition. (He was barely capable of speech and often seemed unaware of what was happening to him.)

Tierney also plays the autistic boy, slipping into overalls and a sweater during the transitions. This image is curiously disturbing the first time you see it. Most of the set by Joshua McDermott consists of an overgrown jungle gym that only he has access to, creating the impression that he's always out of the rest of the play's reach.

"Wild Boy" prods engaging questions. If someone is unable to communicate, can we ever be sure they know what's happening? If they're never aware, can we consider them entirely a part of the same world with us? Does real genius aggrandize a great mind, or burden it?

But the audience for "Wild Boy" faces the same problem as the ensemble: These characters are a mystery box. We can't really understand them; if we could, there would be no play.

Peter the Wild Boy remains an intriguing figure, but the show can't linger on him. How to tell a story where the main character (and Tierney's intriguing but difficult performance) is a million miles away from us?

So the play must be about the parents. But their dilemma resists the narrative too. An ensemble of a dozen characters pose at least a dozen different perspectives, suggestions, conclusions, and insights, but none of them stick.

O'Donnell goes for a while in one direction, then in another, then retreats back again, never sure what to do or think. That he's angry at fate and afraid to be hopeful is substantial and stirring. But the play doesn't give him enough to do besides mull the problem, and he never really establishes a relationship with the Wild Boy plot.

Haas is better. More incisive, more grounded, more sympathetic in her sense that she's thought this all through more soundly than the rest of us. But if the play were just about her character, it would be over twice as fast, so she has to be sidelined now and then.

In the midst of "Wild Boy" is a show that's very worthwhile and even noble in the way it refuses to give us pat solutions to questions that have none, and in its honesty about how difficult loving someone can be. Getting to that, though, can feel like being lost yourself.

*""Wild Boy" runs through August 21 at the Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway in Redwood City. For tickets and information, call 650-493-2006 or visit [DragonProductions.net](http://DragonProductions.net).*