

Uploaded: Wed, Aug 3, 2016, 10:00 am

'Wild' child

Dragon Theatre explores autism on personal and historical levels

by Karla Kane / Palo Alto Weekly

I have a particular affinity for stories that flip back and forth through time, skipping between eras and drawing parallels between them, the past informing the present and the present shining light on the past. It's an affinity that Dragon Theatre shares, exemplified by its current production, "Wild Boy."

The play shifts between modern day, where Portland, Oregon, couple Paul and Jennifer are reeling after their toddler son is diagnosed with autism, and 18th-century Europe, where King George I of England has brought a seemingly feral, mute boy found in the woods to court as a pet project.

"Wild Boy," by Oliver Goldstick, was adapted from writer/historian Paul Collins' book "Not Even Wrong: A Father's Journey into Autism." Collins is also the lead character, and it's through his voice that the audience witnesses both his own family life and the story of "Peter the wild boy," whom Collins is researching for a book. As Collins grapples with his son Morgan's (Jonathan Tierney) diagnosis and ponders Peter's fairly tragic life, he makes connections between the two and begins to explore ideas of what it means to be "normal," or even human, as well as how to balance helping Morgan thrive in a world designed for the neurotypical with encouraging him to be himself.

Morgan, his parents proudly boast, learned the alphabet as a baby and can put together a complex puzzle in record time. He could, they venture, be a genius. Ah, but their early-interventionist clinician replies, he prefers to do the puzzle backward, not interested in making a picture. He refuses eye contact and rarely speaks, other than in fragments of song lyrics. He's someone with significant issues, the doctors say, for whom difficult things come easily and easy things with difficulty.

Paul and Jennifer are first in denial, then vacillate between anger, fear and acceptance. Morgan's quirks, which they once celebrated as adorable and charming, must now be scrutinized as possible autism signs. They're overwhelmed by the hours of behavioral therapy recommended and worried about stamping out what's special about Morgan in favor of trying to make him conform to societal norms.

Paul (played with wonderful warmth and naturalism by Ryan O'Donnell) also comes to recognize in himself and his relatives some neurodiverse characteristics -- as a child his senses were overloaded by school, and he was placed in special ed. He loses himself in his research topics obsessively, becoming deaf to the world. His father, uncles and in-laws, he recalls, were introverted, socially awkward engineers, mathematicians and musicians. Have he and Jennifer (Olivia Haas) burdened their son with what he refers



Johnathan Tierney plays Peter, the titular "Wild Boy" from the 18th century. Photo by Kimberly Wadycki.



AW

The AW Team

Full-Service Luxury
Real Estate Advisors

TOP BLOGS

Vegan, gluten-free French fries coming to Stanford Shopping Center

By Elena Kadvary | 5 comments | 3,409 views

Corporate Wellness and Couples

By Chandrama Anderson | 0 comments | 2,529 views

Replacing the Marshmallow in S'mores

By Laura Stec | 11 comments | 1,292 views

Community, Extended-stay Hotel or ...? Part 1

By Douglas Moran | 17 comments | 1,050 views

Radio Show, Katz's Corner, Focused on Men's Health Particularly Prostate Health

By Max Greenberg | 0 comments | 174 views

[View all local blogs](#)

Palo Alto's Streets Now Score **82!**

We continue to improve our road conditions and are now the best in the county!

CITY OF PALO ALTO

[CLICK TO FIND OUT MORE!](#)

Dana van Hulsen

ALAIN PINEL
COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE

to as a "genetic kick-me sign?" Are the family's artistic and cerebral gifts a blessing, a curse or both? And while Jennifer is keen to have a second child, Paul worries about saddling a younger sibling with a possibly highly disabled older brother for life, as well as the family having enough resources to give their children the opportunities and energy they deserve.

Meanwhile, back in the 1700s, King George I (John Stephen King, yep, King plays a king) is a monarch unhappily dragged out of his beloved Bavaria to rule in misery over damp, foreign Britain. When he finds "wild boy" Peter (Tierney, again) living alone in the woods, he senses a kinship between himself, an outsider in his begrudgingly adopted country and culture, and this boy, doomed to forever be outside society due to his inability to assimilate into civilization. Kindhearted Princess of Wales Caroline (Isabel Siragusa) takes pity on Peter and shows him tenderness but with little avail. Though he becomes a celebrity of sorts, even turning up in a Kensington Palace portrait, he's at best treated as a circus freak and at worst a despised, savage beast. Peter, it seems, was abandoned by his parents when they couldn't cope with his lack of language skills and "wild" behavior. We'll likely never know his true origins, nor the cause of his disabilities, but his story does prove an intriguing and heartbreaking case study.

Sensitively and skillfully directed by Ken Sonkin, Dragon's production is sweet and funny in addition to thought-provoking. Sonkin also deserves credits for the production's nicely executed sound design, which allows styles of piano music to distinguish switches in timelines and, in one transition, the rain of Portland to meld into the downpour of England. The set, by Joshua McDermott, is the most elaborate I've seen yet at the Dragon, with clever jungle-gym features such as swings and bars. Tables and stools shaped like jigsaw-puzzle pieces are a nod to the puzzle-piece symbol used by autism-awareness organizations. In addition to the good chemistry between O'Donnell and the understated, deadpan Haas, Tierney does well with his challenging, largely nonspeaking roles, and the supporting cast plays such a large number of different parts that I was shocked at curtain call to realize how few actors are actually involved (with King especially good at switching between blustery monarch and laid-back Portland dude).

"Wild Boy" is recommended for anyone who's a parent, interested in history, concerned with what it means to be human or has ever felt like an outsider -- and that's pretty much all of us.

What: "Wild Boy"

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

When: Through Aug. 21, Thursday-Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m.

Cost: \$25-\$30

Info: Go to [Dragon Theatre](#).

Comments

There are no comments yet. Please share yours below.

Post a comment

Posting an item on Town Square is simple and requires no registration. Just complete this form and hit "submit" and your topic will appear online. Please be respectful and truthful in your postings so Town Square will continue to be a thoughtful gathering place for sharing community information and opinion. All postings are subject to our [TERMS OF USE](#), and may be deleted if deemed inappropriate by our staff.

We prefer that you use your real name, but you may use any "member" name you wish.

Name: *

Select your neighborhood or school community: * Not sure?

Choose a category: *

Since this is the first comment on this story a new topic will also be started in Town Square! Please choose a category that best describes this story.

Comment: *

SUPPORT LOCAL JOURNALISM

Help support local news coverage of our community.

BECOME A MEMBER

[LEARN HOW](#)

express

Get top local news daily

[SIGN UP](#)

FACEBOOK FARMERS MARKET
at 1 Hacker Way
Menlo Park

This Saturday Features:

"BACK TO SCHOOL"

LIVE MUSIC
FROM
MELTED STATE & DOGCATCHER
AND
MARINE SCIENCE INSTITUTE
SCHOOL OF ROCK & BACK TO SCHOOL COOKING DEMOS



Students are Thriving in One-to-One Classrooms

fusion
Fusion Academy



Thank You Palo Alto for Your Support in Voting Us Best Eyewear!

LUX
OPTICAL

PALO ALTO WEEKLY BEST OF 2016