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'Wild Boy' explores challenges of autism

August 05, 2016, 05:00 AM By [Judy Richter](#) Daily Journal

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Autism is a difficult diagnosis for parents to accept.

That's true of the parents in Oliver Goldstick's "Wild Boy," presented by Dragon Theatre and based on "Not Even Wrong: Adventures in Autism," a book by Paul Collins.

Since three of the main characters are named after Collins, his wife Jennifer and their son Morgan, one assumes the play is based on their real-life experiences.

When their pediatrician suggests testing that leads to a diagnosis of autism for their toddler son, Paul (Ryan O'Donnell) and Jennifer (Olivia Haas) are in denial.

Over time, however, they come to realize that Morgan (Johnathan Tierney) is different and that they have to do whatever they can to help him.

In the meantime, Paul, a writer, is working on a book about Peter, the Wild Boy (Tierney again), an apparently 12-year-old feral boy who actually was found naked and mute in 1725 in a German forest by the man who became England's King George I (John Stephen King).

When he went to England to assume the throne, George brought Peter along and turned him into a pet of sorts even though the boy hated wearing clothes and would rather sleep on the floor than in a bed.

Eventually he was sent to live with a farmer and others who looked after Peter until his death in 1785, when he was probably in his 70s.

The play smoothly switches between 18th century and present. The present is more interesting because it's more relevant to what many parents are experiencing as they cope with their child's autism.

Paul and Jennifer never know what to expect from Morgan, especially since he lacks social skills and doesn't speak. The stress strains their marriage.

One of the few people who seems to relate to Morgan on some level is a family friend, Marc (King again), who takes him on outings to give the parents a break.

Directed by Ken Sonkin, the play calls for only seven actors, but all except O'Donnell as Paul and Haas as Jennifer play multiple roles.

The athletic Tierney as Morgan and Peter doesn't speak but mostly scrambles about the stage as Peter and remains absorbed in his own world as Morgan.

King plays several other roles besides George I and Marc. Also playing multiple roles are Mary Lou Torre, Isabel Siragusa and Bryan Moriarty. All of them manage to create separate personae for each of their characters.

Running about two hours with one intermission, the play has an unsettled ending, but it does help one to understand what it means to be different and what it takes to cope with differences.

"The Wild Boy" will continue through Aug. 21 at Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway, Redwood City. For tickets and information call (650) 493-2006 or visit [dragonproductions.net](#).



Kimberly Wadycki
 Johnathan Tierney as Peter, the Wild Boy, in the court of England's King George I.



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