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Wild Boy

Dragon Productions Theatre Company

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Two stories — two continents and three hundred years apart — intertwine around the lives of two boys — each who puzzles, fascinates, frustrates, and sometimes scares the people of his life. Each boy alternates between a peaceful docility of blank stares into some unknown horizon and sudden manic attacks of panicked screams, flapping hands, or aggressive bites, scratches, or hits. One, named Peter, is called "savage" by some and "a beam of innocence" by the eighteenth-century King who protects him. The other, Morgan, is a modern little boy diagnosed with autism, whose parents labor to traverse their own difficult journeys of denial, anger, depression, and finally acceptance of their son's condition.

Oliver Goldstick has taken a father's memoir (Not Even Wrong: A Father's Journey Into the Lost World of Autism by Paul Collins) and crafted an exceptionally captivating, educating, and moving play. *Wild Boy* focuses on that author's research about England's Kings George I & II and a found, feral boy named Peter as well as on Mr. Collins' and his wife's parallel discoveries about their little wild boy' and themselves. With astute direction, intriguing theatrics, imaginative sets, and a solid cast, Dragon Productions Theatre Company mounts a *Wild Boy* that deserves to be seen by a full house each night of its current run.



Johnathan Tierney

Photo by Dragon Productions Theater Company

Paul Collins has become fixated on a story how a boy running about on all four limbs like a wild animal in the woods came to the attention and eventual adoration of King George I, so much so that this boy only known as Peter becomes for some time an honored fixture at the king's court. While researching this story for an upcoming book, he and his wife, Jennifer, get the news from a pediatrician that own their young son, Morgan, still in a stroller, may have developmental issues something they are both quick to deny at first. The deeper Paul gets into the story of Peter, played out in alternative scenes before us as audience, the more he and Jennifer both come to see, but not totally yet understand or accept, that their own son is likely autistic.

Like Joshua McDermott's beautiful, movable set pieces shaped like interlocking puzzles (a puzzle piece being the symbol of autism), the two stories mix and match as they weave together surprisingly similar reactions, revulsions, doubts, and fears of two very different worlds toward two little boys who often seem not at all aware of all the attention being paid to them. The final picture emerging for both time-warped puzzles is one where, after many struggles and side trips, accepting resolution comes through unconditional acceptance toward the boys from a farmer in eighteenth-century England and from suburban parents in twenty-first-century America.

From the moment he frenziedly scurries on all fours in the opening shadows among the startled, first-row audience, Johnathan Tierney excels in every imaginable dimension in his duo role as Peter and Morgan. Oft unclothed (save a loose loin cloth), Peter is aptly described with a "shock of untamed hair" and "an indifference to the world around him" — descriptions that equally apply to Morgan as he sits swinging his legs staring intently but peacefully into space. Quick changes of clothes and centuries that occur in the dimmed lights of set changes are performed deftly. With the interlocking stories, sometimes a seen Peter is mirroring what an unseen Morgan is supposedly doing in the presence of his parents. Johnathan Tierney brings to both boys a sense of being in a world apart from those around them where moments of intersection with the real worlds' of those other can be sweet, calm, and mutually loving as well as startling, scary, and combative.

As Morgan's parents, Olivia Haas and Ryan O'Donnell each portray their sometimes similar but often very different journeys that Jennifer and Ryan traverse as they each come to terms of their son's possible diagnosis of autism. Like any two people facing news that suddenly changes the future they were once sure was theirs, they move toward eventual acceptance at different speeds and through different routes, meaning their own marital relationship in turn moves out of synch and in jeopardy. Both actors bring reactions and emotions highly authentic, plausible, and visceral; and each touches chords of empathy and sympathy from an audience often glued in attentive witness to both their individual and joint odysseys.

The remaining four actors of this talented cast each play multiple parts in each of the two centuries and stories. John Stephen King is in fact a king, George I, with long blonde curls and massive build inside his royal robes. The loving kindness he shows in a soul-revealing, one-sided conversation with Peter when the King comes in disguise to see his once-court-companion in his new farmland home is akin to the accepting, non-judgmental personality the same actor brings to his modern-age Marc, uncle and caretaker of Morgan. As Dr. Arbuthnot in George II's court, the actor again is someone who sees beyond the muteness and erratic behavior of Peter and rejects the widely-held position of the times that "language is what makes us human and fear of God gives us a soul," instead to declare with visible awe, "Peter is nature-inspired ... a glimpse into our earlier selves." To these and other characters, Mr. King shows a common thread of heart and an ability to bring healing both to the two boys and to those in personal struggle of how to handle the boys.

Bryan Moriarty plays no less than seven varied persona, the highlight being his snobby, snooty King George II who brings no love whatsoever for the demon boy his father, whom he detests even after his death, found in the woods. When he speaks of either, his George II snarls with brewing rage in a voice

that spits through thin, tightly pursed lips. As eighteenth century Fenn, he brings much of the same scowl and scorn when he complains of Peter, "He eats better than my cow."

Among her half-dozen roles, Isabel Siragusa particularly shines as Caroline, wife of George II. Against the wishes of her lord and husband, she insures Peter is protected for life, bringing a fiery willingness and daring that permeates her countenance and voice as she stands up to the King. In contrast is Ms. Siragusa's soft, heart-felt demeanor and generosity of spirit when around Peter himself.

Rounding out the cast is Mary Lou Torre who swings from the highly professional Dr. Rapp who must coax the Collins into hearing the news about their son's diagnosis to Alice Titchbourne, a peasant whose glowering eyes and facially pinched lines of meanness toward Peter are only exceeded by her spitting with resentment into his mush. But Ms. Torre's most intriguing role is as Paul Collin's deceased mother who returns a number of times in his mind's eye in headscarf and checked woolen coat. With the nods of a mother and the patience to listen, she gives him an avenue to synthesize and understand the data he is gathering and the hypotheses he is forming both about Peter, the "savage in the green velvet suit" and about his own son, Morgan.

Ken Sonkin masterfully directs this cast through its many scenes and time/location changes with a sense of warmth, humor, heart, and seriousness all mixed and combined in just the right ways. He also has designed a sound background that reminds us of George I's love of Handel as well as brings the appropriate sounds of woods and cities alike to help set the scenes. The puzzle-shaped properties mentioned earlier are only part of the effective set design of Joshua McDermott (aided by Properties Designer Emily James and artisan Liz Coy). Multi-level ledges, ladders, metal staircase, and playground jungle gym are some of the means Peter, Morgan, and other cast have at their disposal to bring their characters to full life. Time periods, class differences, and differing personalities are all aided in their definition by outstanding costume designs of Brooke Jennings.

In his oft-breaking of the fourth wall, Paul Collins talks to the audience, both relating what he is learning about his research of Peter and his inner search how to reconcile his own role within his family. He also does a lot of teaching about autism with present and historical views and facts. There are times in Oliver Goldstick's script that Paul's musings almost become mini-lectures and pedantic. But each time, the script and Paul pull back just in time before the flow of the two, interlocking plots is affected.

Bottom line, Dragon Productions Theatre Company continues its seventeenth season with a production Oliver Goldstick's *Wild Boy* that is worthy of high note in many dimensions and begs to be seen, enjoyed, and discussed.

Wild Boy continues through August 21 at Dragon Productions Theatre, 2120 Broadway Street, Redwood City, CA. Tickets are available online at dragonproductions.net or by calling 650-493-2006.

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