

Humble Boy by Charlotte Jones
11-14 June 2008

Network Theatre, Waterloo, London, SE1 8SJ
www.networktheatre.org

Review by Kirsty Eyre

Sunhats off to the cast and crew of Humble Boy, who brought to life Charlotte Jones's exceptionally brilliant play - now here's a script to aspire to! For this blend of cleverly crafted dynamic dialogue, twists and turns and bitter-sweet comic precision ticks every box. No wonder it won a hat trick of awards (Susan Smith Blackburn Award 2001, the Critics' Circle Best New Play Award 2002, and the People's Choice Best New Play Award 2002) and no wonder Jennie Rich chose to direct this at Network. Top choice!

Let me set the scene... something that Helen Mason and Alan Scott (Set Design) did a jaw-droppingly outstanding job of. Their kaleidoscope of floral colours surrounding the on-stage lawn brought to life the Humble's garden, in which the entire show plays out. Instead of making a beeline for the bar, the audience could be found hovering in a swarm in the auditorium, admiring the thoughtful (from hosepipe to honeycomb) eye-catching set. Gary Cross's beehive and Alan's decking patio were the icing on the cake. The set really was an art in itself.

And then the show began... Stumbling, stuttering Felix Humble (Andy Barrett), the aspiring astro-physicist, returns home for his father's funeral. His self-obsessed and overpowering Mother, Flora (Helen Mason) doesn't give him or his theories the time of day. In her words, she has been "doubly unlucky in life. To marry a biologist and give birth to a physicist". Whilst Felix struggles to come to terms with bereavement, Flora has already removed all traces of his father's existence from their home, including his beloved bees and has a 'new' man in her life - George Pye (Kevin Heady). George happens to be the father of Rosie (Alison Rycroft), who was heartlessly jilted by Felix six years ago. Desperately dowdy Mercy (Samantha Bullock) does her best to stick up for Felix but bows under the forcefulness of Flora. It is only James (Paul D'Orley), a ghostly gardener, who truly understands. James is the only one with all the time in the world for Felix and his physics and is only too happy to sit and listen. A dinner party unravels a series of secrets. Felix has to get his head around a whole host of extracurricular discoveries: George Pye has in fact been his Mother's lover for years before his father's death. Not only that but it is revealed that Felix is the father of Rosie's child... something which, with the imminent marriage of George and Flora, contorts and distorts the family tree on both sides. The final twist being that the apparition of James is actually Felix seeing his late father- something that Flora can only see once she is presented with the ultimate symbol of devotion from her late husband- a new species of bee named after her.

Hamletesque? Definitely, but more. My whistle-stop synopsis doesn't do justice to the sub-plots, humour and depth of characters. One noticeable trait of Humble Boy and its performance on the Network stage is that each character gets their moment of glory. A perfect example is that of Mercy. Samantha Bullock's portrayal of Mercy as the

mild mannered do-gooder was a pleasure to watch as she rose to Flora's bait and under the guise of grace finally gave a piece of her mind. Layer upon layer of pent up frustration started to trickle, flow and finally gush out as an unexpected torrent of emotion. By the time for Amen, this wallflower was in full bloom amongst the most deserved audience applause.

Andy Barrett, in my humble opinion, delivered a b,b,b, brilliant performance of Felix. Dressed in his cricketing whites, he was the perfect bumbling humble boy and looked suitably petrified by the two domineering women in his life - his Mother and her verbal onslaught and Rosie with her sexual one! Andy succeeded in capturing the inhibited son, regressing in the presence of his overbearing Mother and the passionate physicist spurred on by scientific revelations.

Helen Mason meanwhile had the enviable role of Flora, the super bitch with a new outfit for every mood swing. This botanical beauty is Venus Flytrap on Red Bull with a put down for every pick up. After all, *the last word is her prerogative*. Helen's Flora made Hyacinth Bouquet look like a shrinking violet. She and her Pimms looked perfectly at home on the sun-lounger as she taunted all the others in one way or another. I kept expecting her to appear with a bee-hive hair do as she buzzed between her victims. And whilst Flora preened, James pruned. Paul D'Orley, his wellies and poised secateurs were perfectly cast as James, who displayed just the right demeanour to weed the Eureka moment out of Felix with his gentle probing, sympathetic smile and generous ears- although maybe a little too softly spoken at times as I struggled to hear in parts. And whilst James pushed up daisies, his 'in yer face' antagonist, George, completed the love triangle. Kevin Heady's performance as George didn't half make me chuckle. He delivered his 'buggers' and 'bloodies' with gusto! This, combined with the lunacy of his drunk dancing lifted the comedy element - this was crass class.

The hidden gem amongst the Humbles though, has to be Rosie Pye AKA Alison Rycroft. For Rosie says it like it is and we love her for it. And Alison? Well, she *was* Rosie. Here is an actress with a natural gift, making every line of Rosie's real, a delight to watch. Alison for me was man of the match. Hopefully we will see her in more Network productions to come.

This was a great show, which wholeheartedly deserved sell-out audiences. Both cast and crew should be proud. My only criticism was in the blocking of characters on set, who at times appeared like 'pretty maids all in a row' when that isn't how a garden grows. The three characters looked unnaturally staged as they spoke across each other in a line and there were a couple of performances which were a little unnaturally out to the audience. Nitpicking over!

Congratulations to the highly successful and focussed Jennie Rich, Director, and Hannah Few, devoted Assistant Director for pulling off this masterpiece with the help of the stalwart crew comprising the bubbly Imelda Maguire, Stage Manager, the ever faithful Eshani Weeresinghe, Assistant Stage Manager, the illuminating David Murray, Lighting Designer/Operator and the tuneful Nigel Oatway, Sound Operator. A massive round of applause.