

HUMBLE BOY

by Charlotte Jones

IES – Friday 25th May 2018

THE PLAY

Oh, I like this play! The script has been my constant companion on the bus to and from Bath, playing croquet at the Rec these past couple of lovely hot sunny days – a charming story, wittily written, cleverly structured, peopled with six really well-drawn characters, and set in a lovely garden. No wonder it so delighted the critics and won so many plaudits. The whole thing is marvellously entertaining; not so much laugh-out-loud funny, at least on the page (though I can imagine that there will be some very big laughs when seen on The Warehouse stage), but certainly very amusing, and rather tender too in its resolution - a perfect choice for an ambitious Society, nicely timed to coincide with this glorious May weather.

Just a thought about this as a middle-England version of *Hamlet*... I confess I hadn't spotted it on my first reading, and I'm not sure how relevant the allusion is, though lots of reviewers have mentioned it; not the author, however, I note. Yes, we have a Hamlet, a Gertrude and a Claudius, and we definitely have the ghost of Hamlet's father in the form of Jim, the gardener. I'm not sure that Rosie shares any of Ophelia's contradictions, and I don't see how Mercy fits in to this scheme at all. But most importantly *Humble Boy* isn't a tragedy; at its heart it is a play about a dysfunctional family and eventually its reconciliation. I think trying to draw parallels is rather a waste of time.

The script you sent me has had some lines amended – mainly those referring to Felix as being “fat”. There doesn't seem to be anything in the story which requires him to have any particular body-shape, and I wonder therefore whether the author had a particular actor in mind when she wrote it...maybe she used it to snare Simon Russell Beale for the original NT production? I know Chris Williamson has been cast, and he isn't fat at all, hence the changes of course. This all seems entirely reasonable to me and I mention it only because the new lines lack the poetic balance of the original – eg Flora: “You've grown ~~fat and~~ unkempt”. The other alterations relate to the removal of the word ‘fuck’ in its various forms – used both as a meaningless adjective and as an expletive, so widely heard nowadays as to be almost commonplace, but also as a description of casual sex, which still has some shock value I think, particularly when used by Rosie. I know Lyn was worried about Ilminster sensibilities, and I don't have any problem with this minor degree of censorship, though I think the decision is probably best left to the actor; if they feel comfortable with the lines as written and can say them naturally then I think it is appropriate to leave them be, with the usual published warning about “strong language”!

This delightful play will be in safe hands, I'm sure, and I am greatly looking forward to seeing it.

THE PRODUCTION

Presentation

What a lovely setting! The first thing we saw of course was the beehive, in its own light, on that platform on the L of the auditorium where I seem to remember there is usually a piano; a perfect spot. It looked as though it might be a real disused hive – bravo – and there were some colourful silk flowers and grasses around it and also over on the R, providing balance, although here they looked almost like a flower arrangement. We couldn't see much of the unlit garden itself while the auditorium lights were on, and I think I might have been tempted to let the audience enjoy this too before the play proper started, possibly with a very slow fade up once most of them were in their seats, because you had gone to such a lot of trouble to make it look just ‘right’.

The author suggests “perhaps just the suggestion of a house...” but you had given us a proper half-glazed door out to the terrace area, set in a modern composite stone-effect wall UL, with a black drainpipe, no less! The glass was obscured by a bee design, painted on I assumed – nicely done, and I was super-impressed by the glimpse we got of the room beyond when the door was opened, decorated and independently lit, and with a

picture on the wall. This sort of attention to detail gladdens my heart. The wings stage L were occupied by quite a realistic stone wall – with a bit of variation in the paint colour it would have looked even more convincing – and there was a nicely stained solid wooden gate DL, providing an exit round to the front of the house, we imagined. The terrace was bordered on two sides by artificial grass, which looked very effective, and over down stage R was a remarkably real-looking and nicely weathered garden shed. Upstage R was a table, laden with potting materials, in front of what looked like a screen made of willows, which was an excellent idea in that it provided a place for Rosie and Felix to watch George's antics unobserved. It also provided support, I would think, for what I assumed initially was going to be a small apple tree, though no fruit on it that I could see. I'm sure you would have liked a couple of apples, so as to be able to drop one at the end of Sc 3, for Rosie to pick up and eat! Dominant in the centre was an arch flanked by trellis and this was the only element of the set which jarred a little with me, and only because the big red silk roses were arranged so symmetrically... And behind it all was a nice tight hedge, and above it the blue-painted cyc, which – when lit – was cerulean like a perfect summer sky. Lovely.

Set dressing and props had also been chosen with great care. There was an abundance of artificial flowers everywhere, and just a few real ones as well I would think, mainly to provide greenery? You must have spent a small fortune, but I suppose the silk ones will be used over and over again; every Society will need to create a garden sooner or later. What a pity we don't have a central reserve in Somerset from which they can borrow elements. I used to dream of starting one up, to run alongside our costume business. There was also a variety of suitably aged garden tools, some used in the fight towards the end, of course, and lots of garden paraphernalia on the potting table. Lots of realistic-looking wine too – well done – and, surprisingly, real glasses I think. The one rolling around under a chair was a bit of a worry! The garden furniture was just right, and there was an appropriate-looking bench. The port box was a nice touch – excellent. The 'Etruscan' honey-pot looked very suitable though I thought the dark brown 'ashes' looked a bit too much like compost!

Lighting was really good. We needed a really lovely sunny day effect for most of Act 1 and you managed this very well, and you also gave us the slowest and most effectively timed fade (Sc 4) I think I have ever seen. By most standards it was much too dark by the end of this, but we didn't need much light for the increasing intimacy between Rosie and Felix and I thought it worked perfectly. Nice too that you brought up the fairy lights as the evening progressed, though later they were also on in the day as far as I remember, which was unusual. But you hadn't forgotten the lights in the house when George and Flora got back, and then you added the moon effect from the auditorium L for George – lovely. I think the only refinement I would have liked to have seen would have been some focal light directed through the half-glazed door panel to cast some warmth onto the terrace, once the sun was gone, but I suppose this might have been difficult to arrange without dazzling some of the audience. And then in Act 2 the painted blue cyc appeared to go grey as the light faded and I got the impression of some colour projected onto it (also onto the upper part of the house which was a bit odd), but a really good attempt to suggest a lowering sky. Well done.

Sound also was exceptionally good, I thought, because the levels were so tightly controlled – the 'spill' from the headphones in particular: beautifully done. The sound of the car off L was well indicated too. In fact the only slight criticism I had was that George's impatient hooting seemed rather too distant and not well localised. Having clearly established that the wings stage L led to the front of the house I would have expected the car horn to come from there.

Costumes were quite a feature of this production, because it seemed that everyone (except, notably, Jim of course) changed for each of their scenes – and quite rightly too, since the style of the play is theatrical realism and we are told that the action takes place over a whole summer. I thought they were very well chosen to suit each character – from Felix's inappropriate 'cricket whites', with a black tie and black shoes, to his father's ridiculously oversized suit in Act 2... (too big for Jim too, to be honest, but I suspect nobody really noticed), Mercy gamely coping with a complete absence of dress-sense as Flora so cuttingly points out, while she herself drifted about looking absolutely divine, naturally. Colourful George Pye dressed to match his temperament and Rosie wore clothes which portrayed no hint of vanity. Very good work.

Hair and make-up was pretty natural and effective. I was impressed to see that Jo had neglected her roots for some time before production week and this conveyed her self-effacing character as Mercy so well! Bravo. Also Chris's decision not to shave for a while was helpful, not only because it contributed to his 'unkempt' appearance, along with his uncombed hair, but also gave his face a blond 'fuzz' which reminded me irresistibly of a bee... This may of course have been entirely fanciful on my part, but presentation values were so high for this production that I could imagine this had occurred to the team too. What a lot of fun you had, making this special! Well done.

Direction

They do say that 90% of the work of direction is in the casting, but – as with so many aphorisms – though neat, this is obviously very far from true. Nevertheless, it does emphasise the importance of having the right people in the right roles, and picking them out at the auditions is a skill which definitely shouldn't be underrated. You appear to be blessed in Ilminster, Lyn, with access to a range of very able actors, and I reckon you had assembled something of a dream-team for this production. Mind you, dream-teams sometimes crash and burn because they aren't always well-led and often don't work together towards a common aim. I was so delighted to see that this wasn't the case here – in fact the whole production felt as though it was imbued with a great sense of teamwork and common purpose, and I really rated what you'd achieved together.

There were so many examples of good direction here, some of which may well have been instinctive, rather than deliberate, choices. The decisions you took about where to place entrances/exits, and who should use them, for instance; both the door from the house and the central rose arch were very strong entry points, and round the back of the shed and through the oak door DL were weaker, but appropriately so. Felix comes on that way for instance when he arrives home from the charity shop, and later Rosie drifts on from behind the shed munching that apple. I know you were very pleased to have been able to design the set yourself, Lyn, and I thought you did an excellent job with it. Not only did it look good, and feel right, but it was also extremely functional. Mind you, I cannot imagine *not* having designed the set, as a director. It seems to me to be an integral part of the job – like an artist choosing the size and orientation of his canvas. I hope from now on that you'll always do it!

There was also the use of sound and/or music to augment and to link the scenes, sometimes for instance using characters to hum the tune into the next, which all helped with flow. Lovely. To some extent however the snap blackouts, although very brief, and contributing punctuation marks, as it were, between the scenes, did tend to work a bit like full stops, and pulled the action up short. Since you didn't need to have crew coming on to reset things I think fading the lights down and up again might have been enough to show that time had passed, especially since you were also using music.

Just occasionally I felt that characters were a bit too ready to sit down; I remember picking you up on this once before – in *The Memory of Water*. An example was when Flora entered from the house while Felix is explaining to Mercy that he has never actually witnessed an apple falling. They don't notice her, and she is obviously listening in on their conversation, but it seemed to me odd that she would immediately sit down on the chair beside the door, rather than closing it quietly and leaning casually against it. However, Jim's coming to settle on the bench just before, while Mercy was talking about flowers and he was naming them – unseen and unheard by her – looked wonderfully natural, even though it was in fact directorially contrived so that both would be in Felix's eye-line; clever. By contrast Jim's sitting on the wooden box earlier looked odd – why would he need to sit down at this stage I wondered? It smacked of a 'director's move'!

On the other hand there were many instances where I felt that your blocking was just perfect – I'm thinking of that highly imaginative use of the empty port box which Mercy set on the grass in front of the table for Felix to perch on, briefly, at the meal. The concept was delicious and funny and the execution wonderfully practical, in that he didn't mask anyone; an inspired piece of direction! I also loved the sensitive way you directed the sex scene between Felix and Rosie – it could have seemed a little awkward, but in the fading light it worked beautifully, following which was the scene with drunken George in the moonlight, requesting Flora's "urgent lying-down assistance", and then proudly watering the lawn – just a complete delight. And to round off this paean I must just mention the glorious awkwardness of the lunch party – so well paced, and especially the agonising pauses when Rosie is trying to get Felix and George to relate on some level, the break-up between

Flora and George – both standing this time, so right, and then the hectic battle between George and Felix, with Flora keeping well out of the way and just spraying them ineffectually- fabulous.

You will have gathered that I thought you did a pretty good job – and I loved it. Congratulations!

Acting

There was what seemed to be just one dry early on in Friday's performance, in the scene between Flora and Felix and Mercy, but we heard just the slightest murmur from your prompter (Felicity Forrester, I assume) and there was only a momentary interruption of the flow. I mention it only because the whole ensemble seemed so well rehearsed and therefore it came as quite a shock. I wonder how close you are, as a Society, to abandoning the safety net of a prompter? I really would recommend it; the risk is stimulating, the associated adrenaline aids concentration, and I'm sure it enhances performances – even though it tends to give the director ulcers...

Felix Humble – Chris Williamson

I have found nothing to suggest it in the script, or any mention of it in any review that I have read, but it seemed to me, Chris, that you had chosen to play Felix as being somewhere on the autistic spectrum, and immediately his awkwardness, his lack of social skills, his difficulty with communication, his tendency to revert to talking in lengthy monologues about his specific interest... it all made perfect sense. Even the stammer, which you incorporated with marvellous consistency, and the rather charming clumsiness, all fitted together so well to produce a totally believable character; a Cambridge research fellow in theoretical physics who feels completely out of his depth when having to relate to people rather than numbers. It is interesting that Charlotte Jones chose to make him 'overweight but not unattractive' with no mention of ASD, even though it now seems obvious to me that your interpretation was right on the money. Perhaps she realised that if she used the word, her play would immediately be known as the 'one about autism' with the risk that we might miss the point that actually it was about people. Anyway, Chris, I thought this was a truly outstanding performance; you had physicalized him with great care and attention to detail and you were entirely subsumed in the character, relating with total conviction to those around you. It was a great privilege to watch such fine work on an amateur stage. Thank you.

Mercy Lott – Jo Neagle

I have seen you playing quite a number of good supporting roles at Ilminster, Jo, but with Mercy I thought you found something special. For a start I thought it very brave of you to let your roots grow out, and to dress badly – as required by the script of course. It was a lovely quick way in to tell us so much about this sad woman whose lonely life revolved completely, it seemed, around her totally unappreciative 'friend' Flora. It would have been tempting, I'm sure, to demonstrate how Mercy felt about the constant sniping and cruel put-downs, but you kept it real, and we loved it. Her almost imperceptible primping when George was around was so telling too. Of course the highlight of this lovely role is the gazpacho soup scene; in fact it is just about the only bit I remember from having watched Street's production quite a few years ago (Di Dean played her). I had only one slight misgiving because you had put the pot of salt on the table just behind the urn and I think a few people started to laugh when you hovered over this area – ideally I think the salt should have been on the stage L of the table, in full view, so that we would have seen the joke coming and could have enjoyed all that laughter of anticipation. And then we had that marvellous grace/monologue which you delivered so well, followed by the ghastly realisation about the true nature of what she had thought was pepper! Her reaction was delicious and you so richly deserved the spontaneous round of applause you got as she scuttled off with the tureen. Very good work.

Flora Humble – Val Wright

This is a wonderful role, Val, and it looked as though you were very much enjoying it. The bitchy ones are always the most fun to play, I reckon. You looked every inch the part – wonderfully tall and glamorous in those fabulous clothes (out of your own wardrobe, I should imagine?) and it was entirely credible, I thought, that Flora had once been a bunny girl. The opening scene in dark glasses was the least effective, to my mind, but it is always difficult to fully establish a character when the audience cannot see their eyes – you have to make even more effort to project your personality. I was delighted however to hear "strange and unkempt" which restored the poetry of the line – bravo! Later she came very amusingly to the fore, with very different

responses to all four of her fellow characters, and I admired the way you found considerable depth in her relationship with Felix. I'm sure I wasn't alone in giving a private cheer when she realised that life with George would never be enough, and that perhaps salvation lay in reconciling her feelings for Felix and for James too. The end was rather moving. A fine performance – well done.

Jim, the gardener – Ken Steed

A nicely understated performance I thought. You made Jim/James a thoughtful, kindly man with an obvious fondness, and sympathy, for Felix. There was no shred of subtext on view and, though it began to seem more and more obvious that only Felix engaged with him directly, I wonder when the penny dropped that he was a ghost, for those in the audience who didn't know the play, and hadn't made the Hamlet connection. I think the author cheats a bit – twice, early on, she gives Jim the words “Mrs Humble” when he is referring to his widow, with no trace of irony, rather than maybe “your mother” which would have allowed for a more open interpretation. Your stagecraft was excellent, as one might expect, and though Jim did have quite a lot of lines facing the potting table up R you managed to make them all audible by projecting clearly. You also got quite a few marigolds re-potted during this section of dialogue, which was impressive! Nice work with the Latin names too, both in the scene where he is unseen and unheard by Mercy, and later with Flora, and the scene with the flashlight was well handled. I enjoyed this performance a lot.

George Pye – John McGrouther

A peach of a role for you, John, and you embraced it with a great sense of fun. A very colourful character with a strong, forceful personality (Flora describes him as a ‘monumental man’). I thought your delivery was just slightly too quick in the early scenes, before we'd got a bit more used to this self-made man – some of your words got swallowed, I felt – and I found his little laugh at his own jokes, often a sign of insecurity, was overdone because it belied the self-confidence he was trying to exude. The drunken late-night scene was just delicious though – beautifully controlled - and the subtly portrayed inebriation in his scene with Rosie and Felix after lunch was also very good. It wasn't hard to see why Flora found him exciting and attractive as a mid-life lover, but certainly not a very suitable life-partner, as she came to realise towards the end of the play, and his disappointment at this, and the subsequent rage he expressed in his battle with Felix, was very well-conveyed. Good job.

Rosie Pye – Kayleigh Partt

Though the lives of most of the characters in this play revolved around Flora, it seemed to me that Rosie was much the stronger personality – and we were left in no doubt that Flora was aware of this, and resented it. I thought it was an excellent contained performance, Kayleigh; totally convincing as an independent young woman who is comfortable with herself and knows what she wants from life, as a very proud and loving mother, and as an understanding and loyal daughter. You didn't put a foot wrong as far as I was concerned – very nicely done.

SUMMARY

Having thoroughly enjoyed reading the script, I had high hopes for this production and I'm delighted to say that my expectations were exceeded in every respect: the set was lovingly and painstakingly created and, without exception, presentations values were high, direction was imaginative and assured, and the standard of acting was very good across the whole cast, and in one notable case outstanding, with no weak links at all.

I understand that audience numbers were low at the beginning of the run on Tuesday, but that they picked up steadily over the course of the week - for very good reason; no doubt word had gone around that this was one not to be missed! I think/hope the day must soon come that people will book tickets for a show just because they trust IES will choose good theatre, and will present it well. The auditorium appeared to be full on the final night and there was absolutely no doubt that Friday night's audience were lapping it up. Congratulations to all involved!

Thank you very much for inviting me to adjudicate. If I have failed to credit anyone for their contribution, or got any details wrong, please let me know.

Philip de Glanville
29.05.18