

Humble Boy

by Charlotte Jones
a Vancouver Playhouse Theatre Company /
National Arts Centre coproduction

Study Guide

**THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE ENGLISH THEATRE
PROGRAMMES FOR STUDENT AUDIENCES
2004-2005 SEASON**

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Artistic Director, English Theatre**



**NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE
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About This Guide

Portions of this study guide are formatted in easy-to-copy single pages. They may be used separately or in any combination that works for your classes. Here is an outline of the contents of each page with suggestions as to its use.

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A Note from Director Glynis Leyshon

“Charlotte Jones has written a play that positively buzzes with ideas – mothers and sons, superstring theory, beekeeping, astronauts and Cotswold gardens. It made me laugh out loud when I first read it, and it took my breath away at the bravery of its fearless heart. It was a play that I immediately wanted to share with our audience, and now I am delighted to be presenting it both here at the Playhouse and at Canada’s National Arts Centre.

“Felix Humble, the boy-man of the title, is a gifted physicist who is trying to come to terms with the death of his father. His beloved science now provides him with more questions than answers, and his personal relations are hopelessly dissonant. Most critically, he struggles to overcome his grief while orbiting in the gravitational sphere of his alarmingly powerful mother, Flora. Felix goes through a whole summer of intense, heartbreaking, and often very amusing exploration...endlessly searching for that elusive M-theory, the mother of all theories, the Unifying Theory that will answer all the questions of his universe.

“This wonderfully literate play invites us to fly into a not so elegant universe of tangled emotions and painful truths. We rocket from fragile tenderness to passionate animosity in the blink of an eye – for in this garden the apple has already dropped, and knowledge has its own very special rewards.

“It has truly been a privilege working on this lovely play with such a gifted company of actors – enjoy!”

Plot Synopsis

It is early summer as 30-something Felix Humble, timid, bumbling and unworldly research fellow in theoretical astrophysics at Cambridge, returns to the family home in the English countryside after the sudden death of his father, James. He is in a bad way--distraught over his recent loss and obsessed with finding his own personal Eureka* moment in his struggle to resolve the conflicts between quantum mechanics and Newtonian physics.

To make matters worse his attractive, vain and domineering mother Flora has hastily removed all traces of his father's existence from the home, including his beloved bees. Felix soon makes the dreadful discovery that Flora is on the brink of marrying a man as unlike his father as possible. James Humble had been an unassuming biology teacher with a passion for the quiet pastimes of gardening and beekeeping; boyfriend George Pye is a brash and randy entrepreneur, a crass materialist with a taste for big band music. George and Felix have another reason to be enemies: George's daughter Rosie and now stepson-to-be Felix had a love affair seven years earlier. Rosie's heart was broken when Felix abandoned her to pursue his studies without even saying goodbye.

As the emotional distance between mother and son widens, Felix's mood grows ever darker, even suicidal. Flora sends her self-effacing friend Mercy to probe into her son's state of mind, but Felix quickly sees through this strategy. Jim the gardener is his only source of wise counsel until ex-girlfriend Rosie, now a nurse and single-mother, re-appears in his life and reveals that Flora and George had been having an affair for years before his father died. She also lets him in on the fact that he is the father of her daughter Felicity, something his mother had conveniently neglected to mention to him when the child was born.

Confrontation looms on several fronts as Mercy readies things for the garden party at which Flora plans to officially announce her impending wedding to George. After several near misses, the veneer of civility Flora has struggled to impose on the occasion is finally shattered as each character, even poor repressed Mercy, heatedly offers up some unvarnished emotional truths. A final revelation from Felix involving posthumous recognition of his father's scientific skill and the depth of his devotion to his unfaithful wife culminates in a magical Eureka moment of healing, self-acceptance and forgiveness for the entire Humble clan.

***Eureka:** Greek for "I have found it!" The exclamation is associated with a great scientific discovery. Legend has it that Archimedes, the greatest mathematician and scientist in ancient Greece, called out "Eureka! Eureka!" when the water he displaced by stepping into his bath led to his discovery of a scientific method by which to assess the purity of the gold in the king's crown.

Characters

Felix Humble...“walks in a stumbling, uncertain way into the garden.”

Felix is our Hamlet for the 21st century plagued not by madness but by nerves. He's a man-child in his mid-30s with a stutter and shockingly inappropriate taste in clothes. As a theoretical astrophysicist, Felix looks for answers in the stars but discovers that the secrets of the human heart are just as compelling and difficult to fathom.

Flora Humble...“looks young for her age.”

Felix's newly-widowed mother Flora is a former Playboy bunny who is accustomed to being the centre of attention. In her early 50s, she has no plans to let the aging process undermine the absolute power she has exercised over others as a result of her uncommon beauty. Flora's self-centeredness has led to problems both in her marriage to James and in her troubled relationship with her son. She feels trapped by the humdrum life of a village matron she has led in the tiny village of Cotswold, and takes her bitterness and frustration out on others through her razor-sharp wit.

Mercy Lott...“wears black clothes with brown shoes.”

Mercy is a kind-hearted but somewhat ineffectual woman in her 50s who circles in orbit around Flora while harbouring a secret crush on Flora's lover George Pye. A stereotypical English spinster, Mercy has dedicated herself to worthy causes and church work and relies on herbal remedies to help her cope with the ultimate disappointment of her life.

Jim...“is thoughtful and quiet, even absent-minded, with a gentle sense of humour.”

Jim, the gardener, is a thin, small man in his 60s. He remains on the periphery of the action, tending the garden and occasionally dispensing down-to-earth advice to Felix, until the final scenes of the play.

George Pye...“is a beefy, well-built man of about sixty.”

George is a self-made man who likes listening to big band music, owning all the latest gadgets, and winning the affections of a classy and attractive woman like Flora. George holds a grudge against Felix for breaking his daughter's heart. What George lacks in subtlety, he more than makes up for in presence, which both attracts and repels Flora.

Rosie Pye...“does not pay much attention to her appearance.”

Rosie is in her early 30s. She is rather plain but radiates an aura of good health and emotional maturity. The daughter of George and former lover of Felix, she has a seven-year-old daughter, Felicity, whose paternity is in question--at least by some. As blunt and plain-spoken as her father, Rosie tempers her straight-talk with an earthy wisdom and compassion.

Theme

Humility versus Pride

The centuries-old debate between the classical and the Christian view of humility is a central theme in *Humble Boy*. In the classical view expressed by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, the man of “great soul” is the model for the noblest type of life a person can live. Such a person truly knows himself; he knows how to make the best of his strengths and overcome his weaknesses through self-discipline. The pride he takes in his accomplishments, and the honour he receives for them, is a natural extension of the virtuousness of his life.

For Aristotle, both vanity and humility were two extremes ends of the same type of distortion in thinking. While the vain man seeks more honour than he deserves, the humble man does not value himself highly enough and seeks less than he deserves. The humble man’s lack of appropriate self-respect makes him just as foolish and ignoble a figure as the vain man in the classical view.

In sharp contrast, humility and self-sacrifice are the primary virtues in the Christian view of a life well lived. In this view, all goodness on earth flows from God and should always be reflected back to Him. Just as Jesus surrendered his life in the service of mankind, a Christian seeks to serve God and others with no thought for personal honour or reward.

Taking pride in one’s own abilities and accomplishments is foolish and morally dangerous in this view because it presumes for the self a kind of power that belongs to God alone. No real distinction exists here between pride and vanity. The Medieval Catholic scholar Thomas Aquinas defined pride as excessive love of the self and called it “the mother of all sins”.

The names playwright Charlotte Jones gives to her characters in *Humble Boy* clearly signal her intention to provoke a re-engagement with this debate about the value of humility. In addition to the main characters’ surname--“Humble”--we have:-

Felix--the Latin word meaning happy and the first word in the phrase “felix culpa” (happy fault) that relates to Adam and Eve’s fall into sinfulness in the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden

Flora--the name of the pagan goddess of flowers, youth, and spring in ancient Rome

Mercy--one of the four cardinal virtues in the Christian tradition

Felicity--from the Latin word “felicitas” (happiness), a minor Roman goddess of success, contentment, and joy

George’s toast to the Humble-Pyes recalls the expression “to eat humble pie”, i.e., to come down from a position you have assumed and be obliged to defer to others; to submit to humiliation.

About Playwright Charlotte Jones and *Humble Boy*

Charlotte Jones burst onto the international theatre scene with her fourth play *Humble Boy*, which debuted in 2001 at the Royal National Theatre, London. After a long run at the Royal National and Gielgud Theatres, it toured Britain in 2003. It received the Smith Blackburn Award, 2001, as well as the Critics' Circle Award for Best New Play and the People's Choice New Play Award in 2002.

Humble Boy made its North American premiere in 2003 at New York's Manhattan Theatre Club, where it earned a Drama Desk nomination for Best New Play 2003-2004. There have been numerous productions of the play around the U.S., and in Australia, New Zealand, Germany, Greece, Spain and Italy. *Humble Boy* made its Canadian debut at the Antigonish Festival in Nova Scotia in 2003 and has since played at the Manitoba Theatre Centre.

Jones wrote *Humble Boy* with British actor Simon Russell Beale in mind. She had never met Russell Beale, but her husband, Paul Bazely, was co-starring with him at the National Theatre, and he showed his colleague the script; Russell Beale signed on for the world premiere (which also starred Dame Diana Rigg).

Charlotte Jones studied English at Balliol College, Oxford University, before training to become an actress. She worked for six years in theatre and television (supporting herself as a waitress) before turning to writing as a means of creating her own roles. Her first play, *Airswimming*, debuted at the Battersea Arts Centre in 1998 and was subsequently broadcast on BBC Radio 4. *In Flame* was premiered in January 1999 at the Bush Theatre, London, and revived at the New Ambassadors, London, in September 2000. She followed that up with *Martha, Josie and the Chinese Elvis*, which premiered at the Bolton Octagon in 1999 and transferred to the Liverpool Everyman in May of that year. It won the Manchester Evening News Best Play Award and the Pearson Television Best Play Award of 1999. Her body of work, specifically *In Flame* and *Martha, Josie and the Chinese Elvis* also earned Jones the Critics' Circle Award for Most Promising Playwright in 2000. Her follow-up to the extraordinarily successful *Humble Boy* was *The Dark*, which premiered at the Donmar Warehouse in 2003.

In addition to her work for the stage, Jones has written several radio plays for BBC Radio 4 including *The Sound of Solitary Waves*, *Maggie Tales*, *Ruby on a Tuesday*, *Blue Air Love and Flowers*, *Sea Symphony for Piano and Child*, *A Seer of Sorts Future Perfect* and *Mary Something Takes the Veil*. Her onscreen credits include the screenplays for the films *Dogstar* and *Ruby on a Tuesday* and the teleplays *Mother's Run* and *Bessie and the Bell*, which won the Gold Award at the New York Film & TV Festival, the Platinum Award at Worldfest Houston and a Bronze at the Columbus International Film and Video Festival.

Most recently Jones took on the daunting challenge of adapting Wilkie Collins' 1860 novel *The Woman in White* for Andrew Lloyd Webber, which is the season's hot ticket in London's West End.

Allusions--The Many Layers of Meaning in *Humble Boy*

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Sunday Times reviewer John Peter described *Humble Boy* as “a poem about people, bees and the galaxy”, and even without meter or rhyme Charlotte Jones’ play is very poetic in several ways. Like a poem, the play frequently draws attention to words themselves: the ‘m’s and ‘b’s in the two-word title buzz like bees; Felix struggles to find the precise words to capture his visions; his stutter underscores the physicality of language every time he stumbles on the letters ‘b’ and ‘p’; and the polysyllabic Latin names for flowers and bees take on an exotic magic of their own. The play even ends with a pun: “*Let be(e)*”.

Like a poem, *Humble Boy* is full of strong images created onstage and/or in the imaginations of playgoers through vivid descriptive language, such as Felix’s description of the beekeepers removing the bees from the hive; the English country garden created onstage; Felix in a too-small suit sitting on a too-low stool; the skulls over the faces of those who are about to die in George’s story about his father; and the love-at-first-sight meeting between the young James and Flora.

But perhaps *Humble Boy* most strongly resembles poetry in the richness of its literary and cultural allusions. Jones’ play is a kind of literary ‘theory of everything’ that intertwines images and ideas from bees and beekeeping, the pastoral genre, astrophysics, mythology, *Hamlet*, the Bible and more into the kind of “perfect, elegant super-symmetry” Felix Humble has devoted his life to discovering. Here’s a closer look at how this works:

Allusions to the Social Organization of Bees--Jones suggests parallels between the life of honeybees in a hive and the gender-based balance of power in the Humble family. The queen bee (Flora) has all the power. Female worker bees (Mercy) serve her. Male bees, the drones, (James and ultimately George) are beings of a lesser order, of interest to her only in so far as they are necessary for sexual reproduction.

Allusions to the Pastoral Genre--A literary work portraying a stylized, idealized form of country life is said to be in the pastoral genre. Such works often evoke an image of Eden and Paradise, with nature, man, and animals living harmoniously together. Jones sets *Humble Boy* in a country garden that tellingly contains an apple tree. Other pastoral allusions include Felix’s reference to the “bee-loud glade”, which is drawn from William Butler Yeats’ poem “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” (*I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree, / And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made; / Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honey bee, / And live alone in the bee-loud glade.*); and Flora’s sarcastic description of her life in rural England as an ‘idyll’, a type of pastoral poem on the beauty and peacefulness of country life.

Allusions--The Many Layers of Meaning in *Humble Boy*

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Hamlet Allusions--Both *Hamlet* and *Humble Boy* feature:-

* a son with a brilliant but troubled mind coming home after his father's sudden death, who slips deeper into depression and possible madness and has great difficulty performing the task he has been given to do by a parent.

(Hamlet/Felix)

* a powerful mother adulterously involved with a man of a much coarser nature than her husband's (Gertrude/Flora and Claudius/George)

* a friend or friends sent to spy on the hero (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern/Mercy)

* a young woman in love who is rejected by the hero (Ophelia/Rosie)
Jones makes the borrowing from *Hamlet* explicit by having the character Rosie paraphrase the famous "get thee to a nunnery" line from the play. Another line in the play--"*Exit, pursued by a bee*"--is an allusion to one of the most famous stage directions in theatre history: "*Exit, pursued by a bear*" from Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. Neither the bear nor its prey were seen again.

Allusions to Theoretical Astrophysics--The mental concepts Felix has made the focus of his life's work are brilliantly paired with the feeling and relationship issues he so badly needs to resolve before he can let go of his overwhelming grief and anger. Jones has Felix compare Flora's capacity for total emotional tyranny over her son to the gravitational attraction of a black hole, pulling in and wrapping everyone who gets too close. Felix's struggle to unite the opposing fields of quantum mechanics and Newtonian physics runs parallel to his inability to comprehend the union of opposites that was his parents' marriage.

Allusions to Falling and Being Fallen--The Newtonian physics underlying an apple falling on the head of a scientific genius is linked with the Christian metaphysics of the famous apple and the famous fall in the Garden of Eden. Bees, thought to simply drop out of the sky when their allotted number of wing beats are used up, are connected to Greek mythology in the story of Icarus' fatal fall from the sky when his wax wings melted; both image strands add to the significance of James' question to Flora--"*Did you drop from the sky?*"

Suggested Activities to Introduce *Humble Boy*

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1. Swarms and Queen Bees.

The social organization of bees is a recurring metaphor in *Humble Boy*. This movement activity will help your students explore this idea. You will need a fairly large open area for this activity. Background music, possibly Rimski-Korsakov's *The Flight of the Bumblebee*, is an asset for this activity but not essential.

Divide your class into groups of five to ten members. Have the members in each group number off to determine person number one, two, three, and so on. Instruct the members in each group to stand as closely together as possible without necessarily touching each other.

Next, explain that each group is going to have the chance to explore what it feels like to move around the space in swarm formation, i.e., moving together as a tightly knit colony of bees. Bee number one in each group, the Queen Bee, is the only group member who initiates movement, but can do so as many times as “she” wants.

Whenever the Queen Bee breaks away from the group and takes up a position in a different part of the room, the group members become very agitated and follow after her in rapid succession, with person two moving first, person three a split second after, person four a split second after that and so on. All group members strive to protect and stay connected to their beloved Queen by gathering as closely as possible around “her”.

At any time the Queen Bee can decide to “sting” anyone else by touching the tip of her/his pointer finger to the forehead of the victim, who will immediately fall down dead at the feet of the Queen. Queen Bees are immune to the stings of other Queens. Dead bees remain on the floor until all the Queen Bees have settled on new locations for their colonies and call out “*Home*”.

In a follow-up discussion, ask students to comment on how they felt about being in their roles as either anonymous and expendable worker bees or all-powerful Queens. Which role best suits their own personality?

Suggested Activities to Introduce *Humble Boy*

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2. Collective Nouns.

A collective noun is a noun that denotes a collection of persons or things regarded as a unit, such as a **flock** of sheep, a **crew** of sailors, or a **stand** of trees. In the opening scene of *Humble Boy*, Felix Humble struggles to find the right collective noun for a group of beekeepers and settles on “an apocalypse”. Flora Humble coins her own unflattering collective nouns to describe the men who were her late husband’s friends, describing them as “a boredom of entomologists” and “a woeful irritation of insect men”.

Have your students work in pairs to invent some collective nouns of their own for each of the following groups: skateboarders; wrestlers; clowns; toddlers; teachers; plumbers; hunters; ballerinas; rappers; hockey players; opera singers; sky divers; jockeys; plastic surgeons; game show hosts; orthodontists; pet groomers; undertakers; forensic pathologists; shoe makers; pharmacists; cartoonists; supermodels; vandals; waiters; taxi drivers; acrobats; hippies; whalers; forest rangers; dragon slayers; geishas.

Record the most inventive and ingenious suggestions on the board. Do any of the collective nouns created in class reflect the essential characteristic of the group they define? Do any tell us more about the creator’s attitude toward the particular group than they do about the group itself?

To extend this language activity into drama let students in small groups explore how their collective noun groups would move, i.e., if a group member coined the collective noun “a skulk of stalkers,” the group would need to work out how such a skulk would move. Have each group perform a few of their best collective noun movements for the class.

Suggested Activities to Introduce *Humble Boy*

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3. Dysfunctional Families.

The troubled relationships in the Humble family are a major focus of *Humble Boy*. Try the following drama activities with your students to help them tune into the play's dysfunctional family dynamics.

a) In small groups, plan a scene in which a young adult has done something to disappoint and humiliate one of his parents during a very important public event (wedding, graduation, funeral, retirement banquet, awards dinner, etc.). Be as clear and specific as you can be about the details of the event, and especially about what motivated the young adult to behave in a way that others would see as irresponsible. Improvise the scene that occurs between the parent and the son or daughter the first time they are alone together after the event.

b) Ask each group whether it chose to end the improvised scene with reconciliation between parent and child or an escalation of the negative thoughts and feelings they have about each other. Whichever ending they chose originally, have the group go back and play out the scene again with the opposite outcome. What needed to happen inside the characters to make reconciliation and forgiveness possible? What happened that made it impossible for them to “forgive and forget”?

c) With your group, improvise a routine domestic scene from the life of the dysfunctional family you have created, e.g., breakfast around the kitchen table. Make the scene as non-dramatic and true-to-life as possible. Decide on a secret that one of the characters is keeping from someone else at the table. Play the scene through again with everyone doing exactly what they did before as the character with the secret speaks it out loud to the audience without any acknowledgement whatsoever from the other characters.

Suggested Activities to Introduce *Humble Boy*

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4. Open Up the Allusions.

An allusion is a literary term to describe an indirect reference to an event, person, thing, place, or quality that may serve, by suggestion, to extend the significance of a poetic image or prose passage. *Humble Boy* is densely packed with allusions (see pages 6-7, “**Allusions--The Many Layers of Meaning in *Humble Boy***”). As a fun introduction to the many indirect references in the play, divide your class into six groups and give each one of the topics below. Have each group create a tableau to match their topic. When all the groups are ready, share these with the class and let folks guess the topic each represents:

- revolt in the beehive
- Adam and Eve chat with a snake about an apple
- “*to be, or not to be*”
- Stop and smell the roses
- Icarus flies too close to the sun
- The black hole pulls in all objects in its path

What To Watch For— Activities for Students Before Viewing the Play

Assign small groups of students one of the topics below as a special area to focus on as they watch *Humble Boy*. After the show have each group report their findings about the topic back to the class.

1. Music and Sound.

A trio of musicians on saxophone, piano, and cello produced live music and sound effects for the premiere production of *Humble Boy*. Composer Noah Drew is responsible for the sound design in this production. Use the questions provided on **Activity Sheet 1: Sound Design Checklist** (page 25) to guide your response as you watch and listen for how different types of music and sounds are used in different ways in this production. Share your findings with the class. Which aspects of the sound design were the most effective at establishing mood? Which elements were the most memorable and why?

2. Props.

A prop can suggest something about the personality of the character who wears or uses it. Props can also be used to represent concepts that connect symbolically to the larger themes of a play. *Humble Boy* offers examples of both. As you view the production keep an eye out for each of the following:

- the beehive
- Flora's oversized sunglasses
- George's mini-disc player and headphones
- the antique honey pot and its contents
- the garden hose
- the apple
- the too-small suit

How does each of these items add to our understanding of the characters and/or themes in *Humble Boy*?

3. Status. An audience gets information about the status of a character onstage in a variety of ways. As each new character appears in *Humble Boy*, note how their relative level of status is suggested by their:

- a)** clothing and accessories--fit, colour, stylishness, appropriateness
- b)** movements and gestures--speed, gracefulness, energy, effectiveness
- c)** willingness to make direct eye contact with others (assertive vs. shy)

Suggested Follow-Up Activities

Discussion Questions

1. According to the Canadian Oxford Dictionary, “humble” describes a person who is “*not proud; one who has a low or modest estimate of his or her own importance*”. Which characters in the play would you describe as truly humble? Which characters are the most proud? How does a sense of self-importance, or the lack of it, contribute to each characters’ ability to create and sustain intimate relationships in *Humble Boy*?
2. James Humble chooses to immortalize his wife by naming a new species of bumblebee after her. The play also makes passing reference to honouring people by naming flowers and stars after them. Describe the kind of discovery you would want to have associated with your name and why you would choose it over something else.
3. What did you make of Felix’s visions? Did the play’s ending change your opinion of him? Why would the playwright want to save such an important revelation about his character until the end?
4. There are two family groups in *Humble Boy*--the Humbles and the Pyes. In what ways are the personalities of the children like and/or unlike those of the parents?

A Production Who's Who

Humble Boy is an NAC English Theatre /
Vancouver Playhouse Theatre Company
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CREATIVE TEAM

| | |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| Director | Glynis LEYSHON |
| Set & Costume Designer | Pam JOHNSON |
| Lighting Designer | Gerald KING |
| Sound Designer | Noah DREW |

CAST

Fiona REID (Flora Humble)
Dean Paul GIBSON (Felix Humble)
and
Megan LEITCH (Rosie Pye)
Peter MILLARD (Jim)
Bridget O'SULLIVAN (Mercy Lott)
with
Norman BROWNING (George Pye)

STAGE MANAGEMENT TEAM

| | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Stage Manager | Jessica CHAMBERS |
| Assistant Stage Manager | Matthew BYRNE |

An Interview with Set and Costume Designer Pam Johnson

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Humble Boy is the 36th show designer Pam Johnson has worked on in her 17 seasons with the Vancouver Playhouse Theatre Company. Some of her favourite designs from past years include *Equus*, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *Oleanna*, and three separate productions of *Macbeth*.

Pam was first infected with the theatre bug by a teacher at Brocklehurst Elementary in Kamloops. She later trained as an actor at Studio 58. Her career has seen her under the footlights as an actor and calling the shots as a director, but it is as a designer that she has made her indelible mark on Canada's theatre scene. She has continued to dedicate her time and talent to the stage because of the people, the creativity, the unpredictability, the stories, and the passion. One of the things she enjoys most is the ability to work with so many different people – experiencing how their minds work and the different ways in which they approach a script. *“Designing is a team effort,”* Pam explains. *“You start with reading the play and working from what the playwright is saying or what you interpret that a playwright's saying. Then you meet with the director and the support team to flesh out ideas. Sometimes inspiration can come from an image, something seen in a magazine, or sometimes it's just a line in the play.”*

She has worked with *Humble Boy* director Glynis Leyshon on many productions. The two have developed a kind of shorthand method of communication over the years, a rapid-fire sharing of ideas that feed the overall vision of the production. Leyshon comments that from their very first production together she's had a rare and special relationship with Johnson. *“She can stimulate, provoke, and challenge me,”* says Leyshon, *“and yet in a profound way she can understand what I want to do with a piece. Pam is able to distill an essence and understanding of life and design that extends beyond the immediate physical reality, connecting with audiences on a higher level. She invites us into a world that isn't naturalistic but imagistic and provides the stimuli for that imaginative experience.”*

What excited you the most about working as a designer on *Humble Boy*?

“I was thrilled to be designing an English country garden. The script doesn't dictate what kind of garden it is so our garden is overgrown and a little bit wild, filled with tall grasses and meadow flowers--garden that any humble bee would be happy in. Through the magic of theatre we bring the outdoors in”.

An Interview with Set and Costume Designer Pam Johnson

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What colours will predominate in your design and how were they chosen?

“The entire set is a fairly neutral pallet of sage green. Director Glynis Leyshon and I decided we didn’t want a ‘traditional’ garden with everything green and colourful but more of a ‘mystical’ garden. The mother, Flora, can’t smell the flowers and Dad has died so we thought the garden should reflect something of the upheaval in the family.”

Humble Boy weaves together references from a wildly diverse number of areas--from bees and bee-keeping to Hamlet to unified field theory to the garden of Eden. What challenges does such a complex text present to the designer?

“I think the playwright has done a brilliant job of weaving the references together--Hamlet, unified field theory, and Biblical--by setting the play in a garden. In a garden, science and magic happen every day--plants grow or die, a flower feeds an insect that pollinates another plant that feeds a bird who drops a seed to start a new plant to grow. It is all connected, much like the string theory.”

Do your designs for Humble Boy reflect a particular style or movement in the theatre?

“My design reflects more of a particular gardening style. I looked at a lot of gardening books for influence. The one book that inspired me the most is called Designing with Plants by Piet Oudolf with Noel Kingsbury. It has beautiful images and non-traditional gardens.”

The Vancouver Playhouse Theatre Company recently renewed its mandate to focus on producing contemporary plays. Will the new focus have an impact on your approach as a designer there?

“I don’t think the mandate of a company should have any influence over you as a designer. As I see it the designer’s function is to support the play first, the director second, the actors third and finally herself (or himself) as an artist. The play has been chosen by the Artistic Director with the company’s mandate in mind. The Playhouse has always done contemporary plays within our season.”

An Interview with Sound Designer Noah Drew

(page 1 of 2)

What is the most interesting aspect of this project for you as the sound designer? What aspect is the most challenging?

“The key question for me was, ‘how much should we experience the inside of Felix’s head in this production?’ I think we’ve settled on a design concept in which we sit outside the characters in a very naturalistic way for most of the action, but occasionally, when the tension inside Felix becomes too much, it’s like the inside of him spills out, and we (the audience) find ourselves immersed in the humming, buzzing, singing, desperate world of his inner life. So, many of the scenes are supported with very subtle, naturalistic sounds of the birds and bugs of the garden, but occasionally, a vast, often-dissonant humming music whirls through the theatre.”

How will your work complement the choices made by the director and set/costume designer?

“Actually, the design element sound is most closely tied to is lights, because the two elements work in close tandem to realize the rhythmic and ‘mood’ aspects of the director’s vision.”

In the premiere production, the music and sound was created live by a trio of musicians. How will it be handled in *Humble Boy*?

“The sound in Humble Boy is played back through computer, using a program called SFX which allows sound cues to be automated in much the same way as lighting cues are. I’ve built a fairly three-dimensional design which uses eight distinct channels (stereo is two-channel) for a fairly ‘surround sound’ experience.”

How will you create the hum (what instrument, etc.)?

“It’s created partly through recordings of me using a violin bow and/or a single bowhair to sympathetically vibrate a string on my acoustic guitar. Also some vocalizations. What gives the hums their character though is a sound manipulation tool called granular processing, wherein a digital sound is stretched in time by breaking it into tiny bits, called grains (each one less than a millisecond) and playing each of those bits over and over in a kind of frenetic, semi-random order, which creates a very lively, vibratory kind of drone sound. It’s sort of like turning each original recording into a kind of swarm version of itself, which I thought would be right for this show for obvious reasons.”

An Interview with Sound Designer Noah Drew

(page 2 of 2)

What kind of training and life experiences resulted in your becoming a composer/sound designer?

“I was heading towards the end of a Theatre degree at Simon Fraser University in the mid-90s, when I started taking some music composition courses. I liked them a lot and decided to do a second degree in Music, with a focus on electroacoustic composition. Meanwhile, I spent a term as co-artistic director of SFU’s student-run theatre company, which produces collage-style shows of shorts -- a new one every two weeks. Students were auditioning pieces for these shows that included some very technically shoddy recordings of voice-overs and music. Because I had access to some recording studios through my music courses, I began doing some sound work to improve the quality of those shows. One thing led to another. I began experimenting with more interesting and more centrally integrated uses of sound in a theatrical context. Over the next couple of years, I created several sound designs for student and faculty-directed productions at the university. Some professionals from the Vancouver community -- Norman Armour of Rumble Productions and Andreas Kahre -- came in to direct and design a production of Jason Sherman’s Three In the Back, Two In the Head. I did the sound design for that show, and they were impressed enough with my work and my collaborative style that they started referring me for professional work. Before I knew it, I was working non-stop as a sound designer, so much so that, after three years of wall-to-wall designing, I had to deliberately start being much more choosy about which shows I took on as a designer in order to leave time in my calendar for acting and directing work -- elements of my career that are very important to me. And, about 40 sound designs later, here we are.”

Glossary of Terms I: Astrophysics and Outer Space

(page 1 of 2)

Theoretical astrophysics: Astrophysics is the branch of astronomy concerned with the physical and chemical properties of celestial bodies. Theoretical physics encompasses two of the greatest scientific achievements of the 20th century: relativity and quantum mechanics. A theoretical astrophysicist like Felix would be working on reconciling the principles of general relativity (which applies to large objects) and quantum mechanics (which deals with microscopic objects), which contradict each other.

Astronaut/cosmonaut: The American (astronaut) and Russian (cosmonaut) words for space explorers. Robert Lepage contends in his play *far side of the moon* that these two names reflect a fundamental difference in the philosophies of the two space programs: a cosmonaut seeks to explore the mysteries of the universe (cosmos), while an astronaut attempts to confirm what he already knows in the stars (astro).

Black holes: A region of space-time from which nothing can escape, even light. When a large star has burned all its fuel, it explodes into a supernova. The resulting mass collapses into an extremely dense object called a neutron star. If the neutron star is too large, gravitational forces cause the collapse to continue until the star shrinks to the point where the velocity required to escape its gravitational pull exceeds the speed of light.

Cassiopeia, Andromeda, Pegasus, Ursa Major, Ursa Minor: Constellations, or formations of stars in the night sky.

Chaos theory: The study of unpredictable and complex dynamic systems that nonetheless have an underlying order and are highly sensitive to small changes in external conditions, ie: a very small action can result in extreme behaviours or events. This sensitivity is often referred to as the butterfly effect, from the facile explanation that the flicker of a butterfly's wings in Brazil might cause a tornado in Texas months later. The name may have come from a Ray Bradbury short story, "A Sound of Thunder", in which a time traveller accidentally kills a butterfly in the distant past, causing his present to be altered radically. Systems governed by chaos theory include the atmosphere, the solar system, plate tectonics, economies, and population growth.

Event horizon: The boundary of a black hole. Once something passes through the event horizon, it will be sucked inexorably towards the centre of the black hole (the point of singularity) by the extreme gravitational pull. A person falling through the event horizon would experience tidal forces to a greater degree on the feet than on the head, causing spaghettification, (the extreme stretching of objects into thin shapes). As an object approaches the point of singularity, these forces become so strong that they can tear atoms apart.

Glossary of Terms I: Astrophysics and Outer Space

(page 2 of 2)

M-theory: An offshoot of string theory, it's the yet-unknown solution proposed for the "theory of everything". It would combine all five superstring theories and 11-dimensional supergravity into one theory, thus finally reconciling quantum mechanics and relativity.

Quantum mechanics: The study of forces governing the behaviour of subatomic particles. By the beginning of the 20th century certain experiments were producing results that couldn't be explained by classical (Newtonian) physics. The old way of looking at the fundamental forces of nature simply didn't apply on a subatomic level. Quantum mechanics explains such concepts as the Uncertainty Principle, particle spin, the wave-particle duality of light and matter.

Quantum theory of gravity: Also known as the theory of everything, it would explain the behaviour of everything in the universe, from the smallest particle to entire galaxies.

Singularity: In astrophysical terms, a gravitational singularity occurs at a point of infinite curvature in the space-time continuum. In a black hole, a singularity exists at the centre of the event horizon.

Stephen Hawking: British theoretical physicist and mathematician whose main field of research has been the nature of space and time. Perhaps best known for his book *A Brief History of Time* as well as his long survival with ALS.

Superstring theory: A field of study designed to reconcile the mathematical incompatibility of quantum mechanics and relativity. It attempts to explain all of the particles and fundamental forces of nature. Three of the fundamental forces (strong nuclear, electromagnetic and weak nuclear) are explained by quantum mechanics, while general relativity explains the fourth, gravity. To do this, superstring theory proposes 10 or more dimensions.

Uncertainty principle: A principle devised by German physicist Werner Heisenberg that states that you cannot simultaneously establish the velocity and position of a subatomic particle. This is because in order to determine a particle's position and/or velocity, you have to shine light upon it, which is made up of photons that collide with the particle, thus altering its course. Therefore, the very act of observing the particle changes it, making its prior state unknowable.

Glossary of Terms 2: Gardening and Insects

Aphid: Any of various small, soft-bodied insects of the family *Aphididae* that have mouthparts specially adapted for piercing and feed by sucking sap from plants. Also called plant louse.

Arachnid: Any of various arthropods of the class *Arachnida*, such as spiders, scorpions, mites, and ticks, characterized by four pairs of segmented legs and a body that is divided into two regions, the cephalothorax and the abdomen. Also called arachnoid.

Bombus hortorum: A garden variety of bumblebees. They live in a nest, not the hive, so they escaped Flora's bee apocalypse.

Entomologist: Someone who specializes in the study of insects.

Floribunda: A hybrid rose bearing numerous single or double flowers that rebloom throughout the season. They were first developed by Danish hybridizer D.T. Poulson in 1912.

Hybrid: The offspring of two animals or plants of different races, breeds, varieties, species or genera. The floribunda is the hybrid of polyanthas and hybrid tea roses.

Josephine Bruce: a hybrid tea rose, described by the Country Garden Plant Centre as follows: *“Lovely dark red blooms which repeat well right through the season. It has a very strong fragrance which is possibly the reason for so many requests. Highly recommended but does need loving care and attention.”* Jim calls it positively rampant and suggests that perhaps Josephine Bruce was “a bit of a goer” (ie someone sexually enthusiastic).

Royal Entomological Society: Founded in 1833, its purpose is to disseminate information about insects and improve communication between entomologists. It is situated in South Kensington, London, not far from the Victoria and Albert, Science and Natural History Museums.

Royal jelly: A secretion from worker bees that aids in the development of young bees, who feed on it during the larval stage until they reach the desired rank. Queen bees receive much more royal jelly in their formative stage in order to fully develop their ovaries.

Smoker: A tool used by beekeepers to pacify bees within a hive. Keeping the smoker lit ensures that the bees will stay controlled, allowing access to the hive without danger.

Thorax: The middle region of the body of an arthropod, between the head and the abdomen, in insects bearing true legs and wings. In humans, it is the area of the body between the neck and diaphragm, including the heart and lungs. A thoracic surgeon specializes in diseases of the chest.

Glossary of Terms 3: Health and Medicine

Anaemic: Anaemia is a condition resulting from a lack of red blood cells or haemoglobin, which results in a reduced ability of blood to transfer oxygen to body tissues. It causes fatigue in mild cases and shortness of breath, palpitations, sweatiness and heart failure in extreme cases.

Anaphylactic shock: An extreme allergic reaction characterized by respiratory distress, fainting, itching, swelling of the throat and a sudden decline in blood pressure, which can lead to death. As Rosie explains, the severity of an allergic reaction can develop over time as a person becomes sensitized to the antigen, the substance that causes the allergic reaction. Thus somebody who has received repeated bee stings is more likely to suffer anaphylaxis on subsequent exposures. James should have been carrying an epi-pen so that he could have injected himself with epinephrine (adrenaline) immediately after being stung.

Anorexic: Anorexia is the medical term for loss of appetite. Anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder characterized by voluntary starvation and exercise stress.

Anosmic: Anosmia is a condition causing the loss of ability to smell. It can be related to one specific scent, or universal. It can be temporarily caused by a congested nose, or permanently as a result of brain injury or the death of olfactory receptor neurons in the nose. It is often an early sign of Parkinson's disease and Alzheimer's, or the result of using zinc-based nasal sprays.

DNA: Deoxyribonucleic acid. It carries the genetic instructions for the biological development of all forms of life. During reproduction it is replicated and transmitted to offspring, so a DNA test would determine Felicity's paternity.

Myxomatosis: A viral disease that afflicts only rabbits. It was first observed in Uruguay at the turn of the 20th century and was deliberately introduced into Australia to control the rabbit population. It can cause death in infected animals in as little as four days.

Paracetamol: More commonly known as acetaminophen in North America, it is a popular drug used for the relief of fever, headaches and minor aches and pains. Unlike aspirin and ibuprofen, it is not an anti-inflammatory and does not potentially damage the stomach lining. As Rosie points out, however, an overdose does indeed do funny things to the liver, causing hepatotoxicity, liver failure and death. The most widespread name brands are Tylenol, Anacin and Datril in North America, and Panadol in Europe, Asia and Australasia.

Glossary of Terms 4: British Terms

(page 1 of 2)

Aga: A stored-heat cooker invented in 1922 by the Nobel-Prize winning physicist Dr. Gustav Dalen. It was introduced to Britain in 1929 and became extremely popular with owners of country homes. A central burner heats cast-iron ovens and cook tops, generating multiple cooking zones, and cooking food with gentle radiant heat. The ovens and cook tops absorb heat and slowly release it back to the food.

Biggles: The title character in a series of 96 books written by Captain WE Johns. The stories tell the adventures of James Bigglesworth, a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps.

Bobby Charlton: One of the greatest English footballers ever to play “the beautiful game.” He played his entire career for Manchester United, but overcame that handicap with a heroic performance at the 1966 World Cup, leading England to its only championship.

Brassic: A Cockney rhyming slang term for lacking in funds. Rhyming slang works by replacing the word that is being obscured – “skint (penniless)” – with the first word of a phrase that rhymes with it, “boracic lint”. In this case, “boracic” is contracted even further.

Bunny girl: A waitress or hostess in a nightclub who wears a scanty, provocative costume that includes rabbit ears and tail. The term was coined in the 1960s.

Capsule wardrobe: A fashion concept invented by Susie Faux in the 1970s. A capsule wardrobe consists of the bare necessities, key items that go with everything: for women, she suggested two pairs of pants, a dress or skirt, a casual knitted jacket, two pairs of shoes (one flat, one with heels), and two bags.

Don: A head, tutor, or fellow at a college of Oxford or Cambridge. The title is generally reserved for teachers and professors, so as a research fellow, Felix would not be called that.

Eleven-plus: An examination given to students at age 11 in some parts of the United Kingdom, testing the ability to solve problems through verbal and non-verbal reasoning. It determines whether or not they will attend a grammar school (schools designed for children intending to pursue a university education) or a secondary modern (designated for children going into the trades). This two-tiered system of education fell out of favour in the 1960s, as secondary moderns tended to be poorly funded in school district budgets. The comprehensive school system was supposed to take over, but many parts of Britain have still not made the switch.

Glossary of Terms 4: British Terms

(page 2 of 2)

Horlicks: A malted milk hot drink invented by William Horlicks that is supposed to promote sleep. It was a popular provision on North and South Pole expeditions and is linked to the successful treatment of gastric ulcers and some forms of diabetes. It was also marketed in tablet form.

Jean Muir: A British designer known as the world's greatest dressmaker. She was also known as the champion of the "little black dress", which is somewhat ironic, considering that Flora is not wearing black at her husband's funeral.

Lancasters, Halifaxes, Stirlings: British bomber planes used in World War II capable of reaching well into Germany. The Lancaster was a four-engine bomber that entered operational service in 1942. The Stirling was the first operational four-engine heavy bomber, but didn't have the range or reach the altitude of the Lancaster. The Halifax was a front-line bomber, but lacked the performance of the Lancaster.

Moreton-in-the-Mud: The unflattering nickname for Moreton-in-Marsh, a market town in the heart of the Cotswolds, and the setting of *Humble Boy*. It earned the nickname Moreton-in-the-Mud during World War II when an RAF training station was set up in the region. Bad weather during building caused the station to be surrounded by mud.

Pimms: A gin-based drink containing quinine and a secret mixture of herbs. It was taken as a digestive tonic in the 19th century, but is now a popular cocktail – its low alcohol content means that it can be enjoyed throughout a summer afternoon.

Won the ashes: In 1882 Australia defeated England in a cricket test match, the first time England had ever been defeated on home soil. In reaction, the *Sporting Times* ran a mock obituary: "*In Affectionate Remembrance of English Cricket which died at the Oval on 29th August 1882, deeply lamented by a large circle of sorrowing friends and acquaintances. RIP. NB: the body will be cremated and the ashes taken to Australia.*" When the English team travelled to Australia for the next test series, they were said to be on a pilgrimage to "recover the ashes". After Australia's defeat, several Melbourne women burned part of the wicket and presented the ashes to the English captain, Ivo Bligh (Bligh later married one of the women). The ashes reside at Lord's Cricket Ground in London, and to this day, England and Australia play for the Ashes in their bi-annual test series.

Activity Sheet: Sound Design Checklist

(see page 12, Activity 1)

1. Pay close attention to the sound design in this production and identify:

a) Two specific moments when music is played

1. _____

2. _____

b) Two specific moments when sound effects are used

1. _____

2. _____

Why did these moments stand out for you? In what specific way did they contribute to the production overall?

B. Sound and music in the theatre can be used in many different ways. Think about the sound design in this production. Can you list specific examples of sound and/or music used to:

- make a character onstage perform an action
- give us information about an event taking place offstage
- set the time of day/season/weather/location
- create mood and changes in mood
- lead the audience to expect something specific to happen
- tell us something about the personalities of the characters
- suggest the passage of time or recall past events in the story

Resources

Detailed reviews of previous productions of *Humble Boy* may be viewed at <http://www.curtainup.com/humbleboy.html> and <http://www.mailtribune.com/archive/2004/0711/life/stories/02life.htm>

Programming

The NAC offers several programs of interest to teachers and students:

The Skills Shop — puts theatre professionals and students together for hands-on, in-school, group workshops.

Workshops Plus! — offers pre-student matinée workshops that allow for a full-day visit to the NAC.

Teachers Play! — offers one- and two-day workshops for teachers in areas such as: Lighting, Voice, Movement, Acting Technique, and Design. See the *ArtsAlive* publication, available through the NAC, for more information, or contact NAC Outreach Coordinator Janet Irwin at (613) 236-2502 or jirwin2502@rogers.com.

The Playwrights in Schools program offered by the Playwrights Guild of Canada (<http://www.playwrightsguild.ca>) makes it possible, for a nominal fee, for playwrights to visit your class to do a reading, a workshop, or a chat about their background. A brochure on the program is available from PGC, 2nd floor - 54 Wolseley Street, Toronto ON, M5A 1A5 (416) 703-0201.



Photo 1: Hive from Pam Johnson's set design for *Humble Boy* under construction.
L-R: Colin Campbell, Production Manager; Justus Hayes, Head Scenic Painter
Photographer: Jessica Chambers



Photo 2: Model of the set for *Humble Boy* designed by Pam Johnson



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