

# TARRAGON THEATRE

35<sup>th</sup> SEASON 2005-2006

“The real creative energy emanates from those theatres that develop their own plays. Of these, the most successful, on a popular and critical level, is Tarragon Theatre.”

*Time Magazine, 1974*

“Tarragon is a powerhouse of new Canadian writing. It is also an actors’ powerhouse.”

*The Times of London, 1986*

“What a miracle the Tarragon is, really.”

*The Globe and Mail, 2000*

## About Tarragon Theatre

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Tarragon is primarily a playwright’s theatre. Its mandate is to develop, encourage and produce new work; to attract or train new artists and technicians to interpret new work; and to inform and develop an audience for new work. The goal of the OutReach programs is to develop quality theatre education initiatives for students, educators, community members, and theatre patrons. The mandate of OutReach is “to use all its resources, programs, and facilities to promote, wherever possible, inclusion. Particularly through our OutReach initiatives we aim to support and foster relationships with community members, educators and students as together we develop the theatre practitioners and audiences of today and tomorrow”.

## Tarragon Achievements

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- Over 175 Canadian premieres by such celebrated and award-winning playwrights as David French, James Reaney, George F. Walker, Judith Thompson, John Murrell, Joan MacLeod, Maja Ardal, Morris Panych, Jason Sherman, Guillermo Verdecchia, Ann-Marie MacDonald, Daniel Brooks, Diane Flacks, Richard Greenblatt, Ted Dykstra, Ken Garnhum, Michael Healey, Morwyn Brebner, Mavis Gallant, Kristen Thomson and a host of others.
- Tarragon is the foremost producer, in English Canada, of translated plays from Québec, most notably the work of Carole Fréchette and Michel Tremblay.
- Plays developed and produced at Tarragon have, on many occasions, toured nationally and internationally; they have also been widely published, broadcast and filmed.
- Tarragon has received more than 200 Dora Award nominations, many nominations (and winners) for the Chalmers Canadian Play Award and many nominations for the Governor General’s Award for Drama (winners include John Mighton, Judith Thompson, Joan MacLeod, Guillermo Verdecchia, John Krizanc, Jason Sherman and Morris Panych, all for Tarragon plays). Tarragon has received the Lieutenant Governor’s Award 5 times in the past 7 years.

- Tarragon has 3,800 subscribers in the 2005-2006 season. Tarragon is deficit-free.
- The Urjo Kareda Playwrights Endowment Fund, named to honour Urjo's commitment to Canadian theatre, stands at just under \$1.2 million. Income from the fund is used to assist playwrights while they are writing their plays.

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### **Tarragon Programs**

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- 7 or 8 major productions in two theatres each season. In the 2004-2005 season, there were eight productions (over 300 performances).
- Playwrights Unit (since 1982). As many as 7 playwrights, with works-in-progress, work individually and collectively with the artistic director and the associate artistic director over the course of a year. These plays are given a public reading during Play Reading Week.
- 5 playwrights-in-residence.
- Tarragon Theatre/George Brown College New Play Development Project – Each year, the Tarragon works with George Brown College's Theatre Department to select an appropriate playwright to work with George Brown's second year class. The playwright's script is workshopped by the class, under the direction of Tarragon's dramaturg Andy McKim. In the students' third year, a second workshop culminates in a staged reading. George Brown Theatre School then has the option of performing the play in full production later that year.
- Spring Arts Fair (since 1985): an extraordinary free celebration of the performing arts, presented in spaces throughout the interior and exterior of Tarragon Theatre.
- OutReach programs aimed at youth including Spring Training Project, Young Playwrights Unit, Under 20 for Under 20's playwriting competition, high school and post-secondary co-op placements; OutReach programs aimed at educators including Teacher Nights.
- Apprentice programs in arts administration and stage management.

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### **Tarragon Special Services**

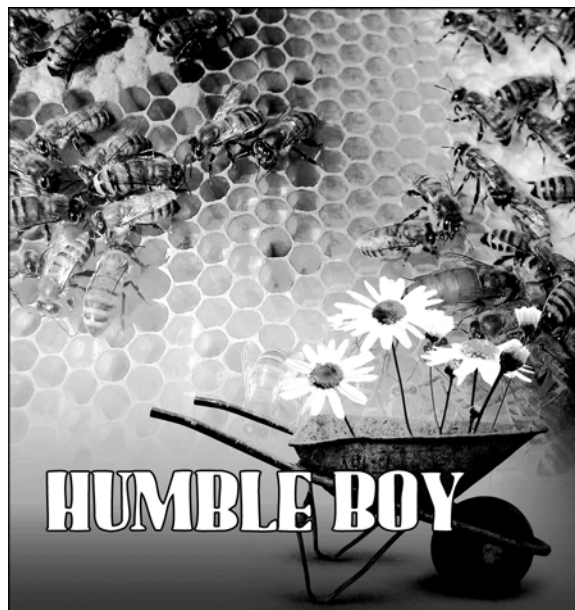
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- Over 500 scripts professionally read and assessed annually without charge.
- Student and senior matinees; wheelchair accessibility throughout the facility.
- Teachers provided with a complimentary study guide.
- Costume and prop rentals for professional and community companies.
- Pay-What-You-Can performances every Sunday afternoon.
- Tickets donated to community and social service groups for fundraising events.

**TARRAGON** THEATRE

# Study Guide

**Humble Boy**  
by Charlotte Jones



**Directed by Richard Rose**  
**Starring: Michael Ball, Ian D. Clark, Sarah Dodd,**  
**Dean Paul Gibson, Nicola Lipman, Fiona Reid**  
**Set and Costume Design by Charlotte Dean**  
**Lighting Design by Andrea Lundy**  
**Sound Design by Todd Charlton**  
**Stage Manager: Kate Macdonnell**

January 3 – February 12, 2006

About the *Humble Boy* study guide:

This study guide has been created so that your theatre experience at Tarragon is a fulfilling and engaging one. We hope that it will help create discussions, generate ideas and prompt many questions.

The *Humble Boy* study guide was coordinated and compiled by:

**Joanna Falck** Literary Manager

**Fiona Jones** Studio and OutReach Co-ordinator

**Mary B. Wood** OutReach Consultant developing lesson plans grounded in Ministry Curriculum

**Avery Swartz** Publicity and OutReach Associate

The *Humble Boy* study guide is divided into several sections.

1. **About Tarragon Theatre**
2. **About the Playwright**
3. **About the Play**
4. **Elements of the Play**
5. **Elements of Design**
6. **Additional Resources**
7. **Lesson Plans**

**Point of Interest**

We encourage you to make use of this study guide as effectively as possible and as such we want to highlight the fact that some elements of the guide are most useful prior to viewing the production and some are most useful post viewing. For example, while the structure, character breakdown and themes set up a context for viewing, the design elements are best understood after viewing. There are also lesson plans included for pre and post show activities.

**Feel free to contact us should you have any questions or comments at  
416.536.5018 x243.**

## **Humble Boy**

“Theoretical physicists don’t get out much.”

Astrophysicist Felix Humble’s father has just died, his mother wants to marry his ex-girlfriend’s father and his stutter has returned. If only he could understand the world like he understands string theory. But he can’t even decide what to do with his father’s ashes. In this *Hamlet*-esque comedy, love, death and family come together as Felix tries to uncover the theory of everything.

### **About the Playwright – Charlotte Jones**

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Charlotte Jones studied English at Balliol College, Oxford before training as an actress. She worked for six years as an actress in theatre and television before turning to writing. Her first play, *Airswimming*, was premiered at the Battersea Arts Centre, London and later broadcast on Radio 4. Her play *In Flame* was premiered in January 1999 at the Bush Theatre, London, and revived at the New Ambassadors’ London, in September 2000. *Martha, Josie and the Chinese Elvis* premiered at the Bolton Octagon in April 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. It was revived at the Watford Palace Theatre in 2000. Charlotte Jones won the Critics’ Circle Award for Most Promising Playwright in 2000 for *In Flame* and *Martha, Josie and the Chinese Elvis*. Most recent credits include *The Dark* for Donmar Warehouse, and the book for Andrew Lloyd Weber’s new musical, *The Woman in White* currently running in London and on Broadway.

*Humble Boy* was first produced by the Royal National Theatre in 2001 and toured nationally in 2003. It was then produced in the US at the Manhattan Theatre Club in 2003. In Canada, the play was first produced in Halifax and has since been produced in Vancouver, Edmonton, Winnipeg and Ottawa. Actors Fiona Reid (playing Flora Humble) and Dean Paul Gibson (playing Felix Humble) were both in the productions in Vancouver and Ottawa.

### **About Writing the Play: Charlotte Jones talks about the birth of *Humble Boy***

In an interview before the first production of *Humble Boy* at the National Theatre in London, playwright Charlotte Jones described how the play was born (from the National Theatre website: [www.nationaltheatre.org.uk](http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk)):

“My plays often begin with an image. For *In Flame* the first one was of the old woman tap dancing at the moment when she died. During the gestation period of *Humble Boy* I had this image of a man at the top of a hive, in a bee-keeping suit that looked like a space suit, about to jump, and then he dies.

I’d also been thinking about male depression, and the very high suicide rate amongst young men. A friend from Oxford, a bit of a golden boy with a top first in English, had developed schizophrenia, and had gone back to live at home and work in a charity shop. I was really haunted by his story, because he was so aware of all that he’d lost.

Then I also wanted to write a play set in an English country garden, though I'm not sure why. So I had this image of a golden boy – who became Felix Humble – stumbling about in a garden with bees in it. I'd also been interested in mother-son relationships for a long time, and the more I thought about Felix's mother, the more it suggested *Hamlet*. So all these themes and images connected in my head.

I thought, I can either ignore the *Hamlet* idea or embrace it. I chose to embrace it. And that was brilliant, borrowing a structure from Shakespeare, because suddenly all the other characters became clearer. But I didn't want the parallels to be rigid, because the connection could be quite intimidating for some people. If you get something extra from it, that's fine, but the play exists in its own right. In fact some people who read it early on didn't see the connections, and I liked that.

The choice was whether to kill Felix or not. I thought when I started to write that he would have to die, but then I just couldn't kill him. I kind of fell in love with him, but also by the time I got to that point in the play, it seemed wrong. So although the original image is still intact, it now has a slightly different emphasis.

Once I thought of Felix as a Hamlet figure, I wanted him to be a student, or perhaps a research fellow. I wondered what he could be studying at the age of thirty-five which would not make him a completely tragic figure. Then I heard a radio talk by an expert in super-string theory. What attracted me was the language he used; he was so passionate about it, and so spiritual.

So Felix became a theoretical astrophysicist. The attraction wasn't so much the science as this unified field theory, which combined the big things and the small things. I thought that was a perfect match for Felix's life, for his search for unity.

I had to do a lot of research for the science. I'd only done one term of physics at school, and I didn't even know what an atom was when I started to read around the subject. But I'm quite good at cramming information and assimilating it quickly – and then forgetting it six months later. Actually there isn't that much science in the play, it's not like Tom Stoppard or anything.”

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### About the Play

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*Humble Boy* opens as Felix Humble (played by Dean Paul Gibson) stares into an empty beehive. His father has suddenly died and Felix has returned home from his studies in theoretical astrophysics at Cambridge University in order to deliver the eulogy. But he can't quite manage it. His childhood stutter seems to have returned and the right words to describe his quiet father who loved gardening and bees, escape him. Felix's mother Flora (played by Fiona Reid), has lost all patience with her son who has grown, in her opinion, “fat and strange”. Mercy (played by Nicola Lipman), a long-time family friend, tries to console Flora about the eulogy for James Humble, delivered by an amateur entomologist:

**Mercy:** *He did very well, considering.*

**Flora:** *He did not do well, Mercy. He compared my husband's career to the life cycle of an aphid.*

**Mercy:** *I liked the bit about you spinning a web around him.*

**Flora:** *Oh yes, there was no end to his metaphorical prowess. Men who spend their waking hours studying the mating rituals of arachnids should not be allowed out.*

To his horror, Felix discovers that his mother has taken up with George Pye (played by Michael Ball), father of his ex-girlfriend Rosie (played by Sarah Dodd), and owner of a bus company with the unlikely slogan, "Travel Pye if you want to fly." Flora will not agree to marry him until he and Felix can have a civil relationship but Felix won't cooperate. When George refers to his studies in string theory as "astrology", Felix cannot contain himself:

**Felix:** *Here I was thinking that all the other sciences were woolly and descriptive, that there was something p-pure and exact and fundamental about theoretical astrophysics, that it would unveil for me the secrets of the universe but now I see I was mistaken. I should have got myself a sparkly waistcoat and a pair of coloured contact lenses and started b-banding a few predictions about. At the summer solstice, with the happy conjunction of Venus and Saturn, all Taureans born on the cusp will find themselves going out on a romantic limb.*

When Rosie, his ex-girlfriend and George's daughter turns up for a visit, in her very practical way she sums up their break up:

**Rosie:** *It's all right, Felix. I fell in love with you, you weren't as in love with me, you tried to be, you failed, you ran away because you weren't emotionally evolved enough to talk to me about it, you threw yourself into work, I didn't wash my hair for five months, blah, blah, blah, you failed to write, I got angry, I got over it. In a nutshell.*

Throughout the summer, Felix spends time in the garden, trying to understand the world around him – an equation he cannot solve. Jim the gardener (played by Ian D. Clark) tries to help Felix look at the world in a different way:

**Jim:** *Felix, you know, bumblebees shouldn't be able to fly. Aerodynamically they're too big, their wings are set up all wrong. They don't obey the laws of physics. But they fly anyway.*

## Elements of the Play

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All of the components that make up a play are called the dramaturgical elements. These include the **structure** (how the story is 'built') the **genre** (comedy or tragedy), the **dialogue** (what kind of language the characters use), the **characters** and **themes** (the larger issues the play is examining).

### Structure

The structure refers to how the playwright has arranged the events in his/her story. A story can be told in many different ways, for example the playwright can begin at the beginning of the story and move forward until the story reaches a logical ending. Or a play can begin long after the events have happened and unfold in random order, for example, in one character's memory.

In general, most plays consist of **exposition**, where the background of the story is told and the characters are introduced; the **crisis point** – the point in the story where the events around which the play will be centred begin; from here there is **rising action** which lead to the **climax** – the point at which the conflict introduced by the crisis point are resolved and the **denouement**, where the elements of the story are summarized and the play is concluded.

Examples of kinds of structures or plots:

- Shakespeare's plays always have five acts with the rising action in the first two acts, the climax in the third act and the falling action or denouement in the final two acts.
- The Well-Made Play – a term created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for plays which are characterized by the perfectly logical arrangement of its action. Suspense is a major element of these plays and each act reveals more of the plot which is then neatly resolved in the climax. Soap operas often follow this structure.
- Many modern playwrights reject logical, linear (meaning forward moving in a straight, logical line) and they arrange the events in the play in a less logical way. Memory plays, for example, don't often unfold in a chronological structure ie. Tennessee Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie*

How a playwright chooses to arrange the events in the play can tell us how he/she wants the audience to experience the story.

*Humble Boy* is in two Acts and is divided into 4 scenes in Act One and Act Two is simply one long scene with no scene divisions. Because the play is set in one place (the Humble's backyard), the locations do not change throughout the course of the play. What does change however between scenes in the first act is that time moves forward and this is reflected in the set (the moon phases and the growing rosebush). In Act Two, neither the time nor the location changes and so there are no scene breaks included in the act.

## Genre

Genre is a French word meaning type, species or class of composition, and most works of literature's genre can be divided into **tragedy** or **comedy**. Determining a play's genre helps the reader/spectator understand how to 'view' the play – what is the worldview of the playwright? How is s/he asking us to look at the world? Knowing a play's genre helps us understand better the 'rules' of the play – how the play is operating in terms of its portrayal of the world.

- **Comedy**, in general, is defined as a play written “chiefly to amuse its audience...It will normally be closer to the representation of everyday life than a tragedy and will explore common human failings rather than tragedy's disastrous crimes” (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*). Shakespearean comedies are also defined as ending in marriage. The pursuit of love is a strong element of comedy.
- **Tragedy**, in general, is defined as “a serious play representing the disastrous downfall of a central character”. The central character is led to this disaster through “an error” and “the tragic effect usually depends on our awareness of admirable qualities in the protagonist which are wasted terribly in the fated disaster” (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*).
- Modern plays are difficult to categorize because they often contain elements of both the tragic and the comic, called **tragicomedy**. As the name suggests, tragicomedies combine elements of tragedy and comedy by “either providing a happy ending to a potentially tragic story or by some more complex blending of serious and light moods...In modern dramatic criticism, the term has come to be attached to the theatre of the absurd” (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*).

The playwright, Charlotte Jones talked about how she defines the genre of *Humble Boy*, and why she's reluctant to call it a comedy:

“Although the play is a comedy, I'm rather wary of calling it that. I think sometimes comedies aren't taken as seriously as other kinds of plays, and it seems like a hostage to fortune. I suppose it's a tragicomedy if you want to attach a label. But comedy is what I write; I can't avoid making jokes...my instinct is always to find the funny side of things.”

Another element of comedy evident in *Humble Boy* is **farce** – a particular kind of theatrical comedy. Although the entire play could not be characterized as a farce, there are some farcical elements in it, particularly in Act Two.

### Farce:

- Word 'farce' comes from Old French, meaning "spicy food used to stuff meat" likely because originally, serious medieval mystery plays were intercut with short moments of comedy and laughter – adding a kind of 'spice' to the more serious meat of the play
- Usually associated with humour of a more physical type examples of farcical humour include mistaken identity, disguise, chase scenes, sexual innuendo, puns
- Most often, farce focuses on a character that is trying to hide something from the other characters and on the unforeseen chain of events that result from this.
- Farce plays date back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century (*The Second Shepherd's Play*) and include plays by Oscar Wilde (*The Importance of Being Earnest*), Noel Coward (*Hay Fever*), Michael Frayn (*Noises Off*) and films by the Marx Brothers and Monty Python

In Act Two of *Humble Boy*, the dinner scene becomes farcical as we watch Mercy unknowingly add the dead James Humble's ashes to the soup and then watch as she realizes, in horror, what she has done. She hides the fact that she has made this error from the other characters and quickly exits the stage once she has taken away the soup.

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### Dialogue

There are several unique features of the dialogue in *Humble Boy*.

- Because the play is set in England, the characters often refer to things or people and use words and phrases that may be unfamiliar to North American audiences including **Bobby Charlton** (a famous British soccer player that a rose was named after), **Biggles** (a character from a series of books about a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps), and words like **brassic** (a cockney slang word meaning 'poor'), and Felix failing his "**eleven plus**" (an exam taken by British students at the age of 11). There are also some references to cricket, a game not well known in Canada – words like **Owzat** (a player will appeal to a referee asking "Owzat", shortened from "How's that?") and "**Won the Ashes**" (referring to a long standing rivalry between British and Australian cricket teams and whoever wins the tournament has 'Won the Ashes').
- The use of words is a central theme. Throughout the play, Felix talks about wanting to find the "right words", which he feels he is unable to do. Flora, his mother, is also particular about her use of words and both play a game of using the correct collective noun to describe a group of something – a game James Humble liked to play with them. They refer in the play to an "exaltation of larks" and Felix and Mercy invent the phrase "a heavenly host of beekeepers" or an "apocalypse of beekeepers".

### **Fun with Collective Nouns**

Collective nouns can apply to a group of animals, objects or people. Here are some fun ones: (these are not made up – they are real!)

An abomination of monks

A tower of giraffes

A den of thieves

An ambush of widows

A troubling of goldfish

A charm of finches

A kaleidoscope of butterflies

A murder of crows

A clutch of eggs

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## **Characters**

### **Felix Humble**

The central character in the play. He is a 35 year old, slightly overweight research fellow at Cambridge University. The playwright describes him as “An overweight but not unattractive man” and that he “walks in a stumbling, uncertain way”. The name Felix is also Latin for ‘happy’ and his daughter by Rosie is named Felicity, which is Latin for ‘happiness’.

### **Flora Humble**

Described as “a very attractive woman in her late fifties. She looks young for her age.” The play begins after her husband’s funeral and throughout the play we find out that Flora has just had a nose job and that her looks are very important to her. Felix refers to her as a big force, a black hole that “gently warps” everything around her.

### **Mercy Lott**

Jones describes her as: “in her late fifties, a petite and timid, mousy woman...She is wearing black clothes with brown shoes.” The fact that her shoes don’t match her clothes signals the differences between she and Flora – a woman who is always impeccably dressed. Mercy is the spiritual character in the play – she speaks of her relationship with God and her work in church. The events in the play, however, shake her belief and she struggles with what she calls “bursts of unutterable sadness”. She is unmarried and without children and has adopted the Humble family as her own, but Flora seems to have little regard for her.

### **Jim, the gardener**

His presence in the play is a quiet one – he is described as “thoughtful and quiet, even absent-minded, with a gentle sense of humour”. He dispenses advice to Felix throughout the play and tells him to try and have happy thoughts.

### **George Pye**

A fan of big band music, especially Glenn Miller, George is described as a “beefy, well-built man of about sixty”. Unlike Flora, language is not George’s strong suit but his obvious passion for Flora is enough to engage her.

### **Rosie Pye**

George’s daughter and Felix’s ex-girlfriend, mother of seven-year-old Felicity. She’s a practical woman, dominated not by her head, as Felix is, but a more physical and emotional person. For example, she preferred Tae kwon doe to psychiatry to solve her problems.

## Themes

### **Humble Boy and Hamlet**

Charlotte Jones discusses the connection between *Hamlet* and *Humble Boy*:

*I'd...been interested in mother-son relationships for a long time, and the more I thought about Felix's mother, the more it suggested Hamlet...I thought, I can either ignore the Hamlet idea or embrace it. I chose to embrace it. And that was brilliant, borrowing a structure from Shakespeare, because suddenly all the other characters became clearer. But I didn't want the parallels to be rigid, because the connection could be quite intimidating for some people. If you get something extra from it, that's fine, but the play exists in its own right. In fact some people who read it early on didn't see the connections, and I liked that.*

Some parallels between the two plays:

- Both centre on a young man who has returned home after the death of his father
- The mother figure (Gertrude/Flora) in both plays has begun a seemingly inappropriate relationship with a man (Claudius/George) shortly after her husband's death
- The father in both plays returns as a ghost figure
- Felix and Hamlet both contemplate suicide
- Felix and Hamlet both plot a revenge on their mother and her boyfriend – Hamlet stages “The Mousetrap” and Felix arrives at their engagement party wearing his dead father's suit
- Rosie, the “Ophelia” character, says to Felix “What did you expect me to do after you left me? Hie myself to a nunnery?” referring to Hamlet's line to Ophelia “Get thee to a nunnery”.
- When Flora decides to tell Felix how James, his father, really died, Felix wonders if she and George were responsible for his death – like Gertrude and Claudius were responsible for Hamlet's father's death

### **Science/The Universe/String Theory**

Felix is a theoretical astrophysicist whose specialization is in the field of super string theory. While understanding string theory is not central to understanding the play, what is important to understand is how the playwright uses science as a way to talk about the world, in particular Felix's quest for unity in his world.

For Felix, **string theory** represents the theory that would bring two forces together – Albert Einstein's **theory of relativity** ( $E=MC^2$ ) which explains the larger forces in the universe including stars, galaxies and the universe as a whole; with **quantum mechanics** which explains the smallest elements of the universe including atoms, molecules and quarks. While both theories have been tested individually and each proves, with significant testing, any theories applied to them, **they do not work together**. In other words the one theory does not work with the other theory so they cannot both be right. The theory of string theory (and it is simply a theory, it has never been proven or even tested, but they are beginning to test it) would bring both of these two theories together – which is why it is also called the **Theory of Everything**.

In *Humble Boy*, string theory for Felix represents not only the theory that would explain the universe to him; he also applies it to his parents' relationship. For him, the physics of his parents' relationship, like the physics of quantum mechanics and general relativity, do not match up. He applies logic and theory to everything, even love, to try and

understand how and why relationships work. For him, his mother Flora represents the big forces of the universe (general relativity) while his father James represents the smaller forces at work (quantum mechanics).

### **Bees**

Another theme running throughout the play is bees. The set features a large beehive (also called a skep) and Felix speaks often of his father's love of bees.

In preparing for this production, the actors all watched a documentary produced by NOVA called "Tales from the Hive" which detailed the lives of bees in their hives. ([www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/bees/buzz.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/bees/buzz.html)) In beehives, the worker bees all work to serve the queen bee and in *Humble Boy*, Flora can be seen as a kind of queen bee who is served by Mercy, George and Felix. Jim also tells Felix that according to the laws of physics, bees shouldn't be able to fly, but they do. Felix represents that bumble bee (humble boy/bumble bee) who is trying to fly but can't seem to take off.

The play also has numerous references to bees and honey. For example:

- Flora says that Felix is "honey tongued"
- Felix refers to a drink as "nectar"
- Felix refers to the W.B. Yeats poem "The Lake Isle at Innisfree" which describes a "bee loud glade"
- Felix also refers to the myth of the Sun God Ra who cried bees
- George refers to Icarus and his wings of wax (beeswax)

## Elements of Design

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The following section combines general information about areas of design (including information from Tarragon production staff, design websites, and the textbook: *Theatrical Design and Production* by J. Michael Gillette) with specific examples of how design elements have been employed in the production you are attending. A brief glossary is also included to assist with technical terms used in this section of the guide.

### Design Overview

A script can be performed numerous times without ever being interpreted the same way. Although text stays the same from production to production, the way the piece is conceptualized changes.

The designers (set, costumes, lighting, sound, etc.) and director thoroughly discuss the play to ensure all parties share a similar vision of the play, and explore how this vision will be represented through design. Design elements should create an environment for the play that supports the production concept: the creative interpretation of the script.

There are some artistic and practical considerations that apply to all areas of design. These include:

- mood and spirit of the production
- historical period of the production
- season of the year and time of day for each scene
- time, labour and material budgets
- health and safety
- needs of other designers
- how do these elements affect the choices for each area of design?

***Felix:*** *With superstring theory there need to be six or seven dimensions. We can't see them but it's like a garden hose. If you stretch it out between two posts in a field and then you walk half a mile away and look back it looks like a one dimensional line. But if you look at the hose through binoculars, if you magnify it, a second dimension – one that is in the shape of a circle curled round the hose – becomes visible.*

Set in the garden of an English country house in the Cotswolds in 1997, bees and string theory are some of the elements suggested in *Humble Boy*. From that starting point the design team makes decisions about the look and sound and shape of the show. Director Richard Rose, in discussions with the designers, wanted this version of the play to stand out from other productions. As the play is set in an English country garden, previous productions have been hindered by the luxuriousness and “realness” of the garden. It takes over. To allow the play and the words to stand out, the decision to simplify the set was made. Modern art influences such as Henri Matisse and Louise Nevelson were called upon to inspire a clarified set. What is “real”, what is abstract? There are “real” elements - the rose bush, the apple that falls from the tree and the geraniums in the pots. These are things that the actors actually touch, everything else is part of the backdrop.

## Set Design

The set designer's job is to create a physical world that helps the audience understand and enjoy a play by providing a visual representation of the production concept. Before rehearsals begin, the set designer meets multiple times with the director. From these meetings design drawings and a maquette (a scale model of what will be onstage) are developed. The model and drawings are used by the actors, stage managers and production staff to better understand the design goals; to imagine and replicate the space the production will be set in; and to build and decorate the set pieces.

Specific practical elements considered by the set designer are:

- number and position of entrances and exits needed
- number and position of entrances and exits already in the space
- the seating formation of the theatre – can it be changed?
- the type of stage that comes with the theatre (i.e. proscenium, thrust, arena, catwalk etc.)
- is this a flyhouse?
- the duration of the run
- will the set tour after the first production

In addition to the scenery, the set designer is frequently responsible for designing the stage properties.

It will be interesting to take notice of the following:

- How the mood and spirit of the production is relayed through the design
- What information the set gives about the characters

As string theory is an abstract concept that poses the question “what exists at the micro-micro level?”, set designer Charlotte Dean set about to create an abstract world. Large blocks of colour (green hedge and lawn, blue upstage wall, white house and path) and the abstract apple tree are the backdrop against which we see the real characters. The abstract concept is also applied to the flowerbeds. From a distance we get a strong impression of lots of varieties of plants in this garden, but on a close inspection the reality of what these plants are actually made of can be seen. They are made of feather dusters, sponges and nylon scrubbing pads, clothes pegs on chicken wire frames, fans and loofah sponges. Realistic elements then stand out in stark contrast to this abstract stage. The rose bush, the apple that falls from the tree and the potted geraniums are real or realistic (and all red in colour!).

The beehive (or skep) was challenging to build. A requirement was that it light up from inside so it had to be translucent. It is a chicken wire frame covered in papier mâché. To form the hive, a mock-up made of heavy duty dryer-vent hose was carefully coiled together and then it was covered in thin plastic film. The chicken wire was then fastened with thicker gauge wire to the mock up and coated with papier mâché. When it dried, the top was carefully cut off and the dryer hose pulled out. It is very light but fragile. Another bee element on the set is the honeycomb pathway. The script calls for a hammock in the garden but for our production a branch bench was built to balance out the set.

## Sound Design

Sound design consists of music, effects and reinforcement (such as microphones).

The sound designer obtains a lot of information directly from the script i.e. “a phone rings”, “it begins to rain”, or “a sad song is heard through the window”. He/she must think about the transitions between scenes and what sound elements will shift the audience from the mood of one scene to the next. Sound design also extends to the elements the audience hears when they first enter the theatre, during the intermission, and even the curtain call and post-show music.

Some practical elements the sound designer considers are:

- speaker and microphone placement
- live or recorded sound, or both
- volume of each piece
- length of scene changes
- equipment available
- existing ambient noise in the theatre

As well as establishing and reinforcing mood and atmosphere, sound elements also provide information to the audience:

- When you enter a theatre take a minute to listen to the pre-show music or soundscape – does it offer any clues about the nature of the show?
- What sound cues did you hear that helped establish time and place?
- Were any special effects used? Were they useful in moving the story forward? Why or why not?

Sound designer Todd Charlton chose sounds to reinforce the idea that we are outside in a garden; the sounds of birds in the trees and cars in the driveway. We also hear voices of the mourners inside whenever the door opens in the first scene.

The high-pitched tone, which is mixed with the sound of bees buzzing, is similar to tinnitus - a disorder that causes constant ringing or buzzing in the ears. It can be made worse by stresses that cause the blood pressure to rise. It is a disorder that can be quite debilitating, as sufferers are, eventually, unable to sleep for the buzzing in their ears.

The songs of *Humble Boy* are a mix of 1940's songs indicated in the script; *In the Mood* and *Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree*, and the preshow and intros to the scenes were chosen by Mr. Charlton. To mirror the lightness of the play he chose songs that have honey in the title or in the lyrics, *A Taste of Honey*, *Honey Pie*, *Sugar Sugar*, *The Flight of the Bumble Bee*.

What songs can you think of that have “bee” or “honey” lyrics?

## Lighting Design

Effective stage lighting not only lets the spectators see the action of the play but also ties together all the visual elements of the production and helps create an appropriate mood and atmosphere to heighten the audience's understanding and enjoyment of the play.

Lighting includes the use of coloured gels to create different effects; intensity to determine how dark or bright a scene is; direction to establish the angle at which the light hits the stage; and movement to decide the duration and components of cues.

Lighting and sound often work together to create an effect (i.e. a fade to black that is timed to a piece of music).

Lighting also works closely with set pieces when 'practicals' are used. These are light sources that are manipulated by the actors (i.e. a desk lamp). In this case the set designer will determine the look of the lamp and the lighting designer will decide how it functions.

Some practical considerations for a lighting designer are:

- the number of locations in a set
- the number of lighting instruments available
- the type of performance (i.e. drama, comedy, dance, opera, etc.)

Some lighting elements to notice are:

- when and how lighting indicates a change in time or location
- lighting changing the focus from one character to another
- how lighting interacts with sound elements
- how lighting is employed to reinforce a mood
- how colour is used in the lighting instruments

Lighting designer Andrea Lundy had a particular challenge with the whiteness of the set. In order to light an actor properly, a lighting designer will light them from the left, right, and behind so they appear three-dimensional. In night scenes, the level of intensity of the light is dropped down to create a night feel. The presence of the two white walls and the white path cause the light to be reflected around and the designer has no control over this "spill" or "bounce". The light colour of the actors' costumes can also cause bounce.

The main indication of time passing in the play is the progression of the moon through its phases. This effect is created by a series of light boxes mounted on the upstage wall with MDF and canvas covers. The moon shape is cut out of the MDF and covered with canvas. The canvas is painted white and then with several light coats of solid colour (sky blue) so it is not visible when light shines on it from the front. The light behind each moon shape is turned on when we want to see that particular phase.

The stars that we see at the end of the play are a series of rice grain incandescent lights attached to each other by ultra fine copper wire, randomly hung on the upstage wall. The final image of the cosmos is a slide projected from the control booth.

## Costume Design

Costume design includes all clothing, underclothing, hairdressing, makeup, and accessories such as hats, scarves, fans, umbrellas, and jewellery, worn or carried by each character in a production. A costume design suggests specific personal information about each character.

The designer works from indications within the play's script and looks for hints into the characters' personality. They then make artistic choices for the colour of the costumes, their shape, and the fabrics to be used.

Finally, the designer works with the costume team and the actors in fittings to make certain that the costumes are comfortable and as easy as possible to manipulate.

Some practical considerations in costume design include:

- the background and personality of the characters
- the limitations created by the set or staging (i.e. a raked stage makes spiked shoes impractical)
- the actors can move about on the stage as required (i.e. run up a set of stairs or engage in stage combat)
- the costumes remain effective under stage lighting
- costumes that need to be changed quickly are built accordingly
- costumes can last for an entire run and be laundered

Charlotte Dean also designed the costumes for *Humble Boy*. The themes of garden, bees and the cosmos are all drawn upon. As the costumes are contemporary they were purchased off the rack at major department stores and Value Village!

Flora - the queen bee - has the most fashionable costumes with a floral pattern on her final dress; Rosie's pants are striped and her dress is floral; Felix has his stripy pullover and is continually wearing inappropriate clothes (cricket whites to his father's funeral, his father's suit to his mother's engagement party); George wears the typical nouveau upper middle class Englishman's summer attire - a suit jacket at all times, even with long shorts and socks. His first suit is a pale honey yellow and his second - a dark night blue. Mercy was a fun character to shop for. She has little fashion sense and a lot can be made of that. Her gingham pantsuit has rhinestone stars on it and she wears spherical jewelry that hints at planets. Her party outfit is a frumpy two-piece floral set. Jim the gardener has a quality that is out of another time (perhaps dimension?). His costume is reminiscent of the 1940s.

Shoes are always an actor's concern especially when stage fighting occurs. The wardrobe department obtained the shoes as early as possible so the actors could become comfortable with their footwear. The different textures of the stage floor - the grass and the path - create walking, dancing and fighting challenges. All the costumes must be comfortable and easy to move in order to accommodate the action.

## Additional Resources

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### Glossary of Useful Technical Terms

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| <b>Acoustics</b>   | The sound transmission characteristics of a room, space or material   |
| <b>Cue</b>         | A directive for action (i.e. a change in the lighting, sound, or an actor's entrance)   |
| <b>Cyclorama</b>   | A large piece of scenic material used to surround the stage on to which colour can be projected   |
| <b>Gel</b>         | Generic name for the film used in lighting instruments to change colour. It can also be used as a verb (i.e. to 'gel' the lights)               |
| <b>Gobo</b>        | A thin metal template inserted into a lighting instrument in order to cut a pattern into the light that is projected onstage                    |
| <b>Flyhouse</b>    | A theatre space with the ability to "fly" set pieces and/or backdrops from a fly gallery located high above the stage using ropes and cables    |
| <b>Maquette</b>    | A scale model 3-D representation of the set design  |
| <b>Plot</b>        | A scale drawing showing the placement of various elements (i.e. lighting instruments) relative to the stage configuration and theatre           |
| <b>Prompt book</b> | A copy of the script with each actor's blocking, all the technical cues, and details/lists of all technical elements involved in the production |
| <b>Raked stage</b> | A stage that is higher at the back than at the front  |
| <b>Scrim</b>       | A scenic panel made from translucent gauze-like material  |

### Stage Configurations

|                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| <b>Arena Stage</b>   | A stage configuration where the audience completely surrounds the playing space  |
| <b>Catwalk Stage</b> | A stage configuration where the audience surrounds the playing space on 2 sides – also known as an Alley stage                             |
| <b>Proscenium</b>    | A stage configuration where the audience watches the action through a rectangular opening that resembles a picture frame (proscenium arch) |
| <b>Thrust Stage</b>  | A stage configuration where the audience surrounds the playing space on 3 sides  |

## Pre Show Lesson Plan 1

### Empathy through Role Play

#### Critical Question?

How do our assigned 'roles' define our own perception of truth?

#### Expectations:

CRV.02: create and present an original or adapted dramatic work; Ontario Dramatic Arts Curriculum

CR1.03: reinterpret roles in rehearsal and performance, demonstrating insight into the characters;

CR1.02 – convey character through the effective use of voice and movement techniques;

Ontario Dramatic Arts Curriculum

#### Warm-up:

Expert Game (builds on improvisational skills)

Divide the students into pairs

- Ask the students to decide if they are “A” or “B”
- “A” speaks while “B” listens
- Ask “A”s to speak non-stop in the following role until you say stop (about 2 minutes), switch periodically with “B”s so they get to speak
  - a recently widowed woman in a happy marriage
  - a recently widowed woman in an unhappy marriage
  - a teenager who just lost the parent he felt close to
  - a teenager who just lost the parent he did not feel close to
  - someone who is romantically involved with a recent widow and is in love despite what others may think

#### Main Activity:

This activity fine tunes tableau skills and further develops characterization and empathy while working with characters in similar circumstances as those in *Humble Boy*.

#### Part A:

Divide the students into groups of 3

Divide each group into 3 roles: teenager, mother and mother's boyfriend or teenager, father and father's girlfriend

Ask them to brainstorm three scenes based on the following:

- 1) First meeting with all three characters when the teenager suspects the parent is involved with someone else
- 2) Second meeting when the teenager confronts the parent about being with someone else
- 3) Final meeting with all three characters at a dinner party

#### Part B:

Each group begins their scene with a tableau.

For each scene, each group take turns presenting their semi-improvised scene and then freezes in the final tableau.

The teacher walks up to the tableau after each scene and taps each character on the shoulder

The character comes alive and shares their perspective about the conflict (which is grounded in their role)

They talk as in the expert game for as long as the teacher requires (about 1 minute) and then return to the frozen tableau image

**Discussion Possibilities:**

What surprised you about your perspective in the conflict?

Did similar characters share similar perspectives?

Was there a running theme between the scenes.

How were characters similar or dissimilar?

Did your character feel accepted or understood (from the other actors or the audience)?

Why or why not?

## Pre Show Lesson Plan 2

### Character, Subtext and Scene Analysis

#### Critical Question?

How do we develop character through scene analysis?

#### Expectations:

CRV.02: create and present an original or adapted dramatic work; CR1.03: reinterpret roles in rehearsal and performance, demonstrating insight into the characters;  
CR1.02 – convey character through the effective use of voice and movement techniques;  
Ontario Dramatic Arts Curriculum

#### Warm-up:

Physical warm up.

#### Main Activity:

1. Put students into pairs  
Ask them to decide who is “A” and who is “B”.

Explain that this lesson is about the exploration of subtext. *Not what you say but how you say it - the world beneath the words.*

Distribute minimal scene 1 from **Humble Boy** (see next page)

Students are to think about their scenario:

*Who are these people? How old are they? How well do they know each other?  
What assumptions can we make about them?  
What happened just before they spoke?  
What might happen next? What happens in the spaces?  
What might be the scene about (theme)?  
What gestures can be added to help convey the ideas?*

Rehearse the script, and then experiment with the text.

Do it once with “A” desperate

Do it with “B” sad

Do it with both characters accepting of the circumstances.

Do it with 2 pauses in the scene - pick two places where this will happen.

After rehearsing (5-10 minutes), students present in front of each other and the audience tries to guess the situation.

Invariably, the same text will be interpreted by different performers in many ways. It will be interesting to see the differences in each performer’s “scenario” and how that idea was communicated to the audience.

#### Possible questions:

- How did the physicalization of the script help convey its meaning?
- Were there any details that we saw which conveyed a lot of meaning? (small movements, expression)

**Scene Excerpt:**

A: I can't marry you.

B: Bun- (*short for "Bunny girl"*)

A: I'm very, very sorry.

B: What are you saying?

A: It's not right.

B: Bollocks.

A: Our families hate each other.

B: Our families can go to hell.

A: And I am already married.

B: No, well, we'll live in sin.

**Pre or Post Show Lesson Plan**  
**Analysis of Pre Show Press**

**Critical Question:**

How does the press shape our understanding of theatrical process?

**Expectations:**

THV.02: demonstrate an understanding of various aspects of the elements, principles, and techniques of dramatic arts;

AN2.02 – explain how their experiences in dramatic arts have helped develop or enhance their beliefs, philosophies, or worldviews;

AN2.01 – explain how participation in the theatre fosters self-awareness and awareness of others for performers, authors, and audiences;

AN1.05 – identify universal concepts and themes from a study of theatre works, and analyze their personal, social, and cultural significance;

ANV.03 · analyze the personal, social, and cultural impact of dramatic arts;

Ontario Dramatic Arts Curriculum

**Materials:**

“About a Boy” by John Kaplan, NOW Magazine (on the next page)

**Warm-up:**

Lead the students through a physical relaxation warm up.

**Main Activity:**

Interpreting the article “About a Boy”

- Distribute a copy of “About a Boy” to each student.
- Students read the article individually and highlight points that they “connect” with.
- Place students in groups of 4.
- In groups, students try to answer the following questions and then discuss them with the class:

What conclusions does the article make about Charlotte Jones being an actor and then playwright? Please explain thoroughly.

Actress Sarah Dodd says, *“But love, like the superstring theory, can't be explained – there are no visual proofs, no equations that can quantify it.”* Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Please support your point of view with examples.

**Journal:**

1. What most surprised you from reading this article? Please explain.

**“About a Boy” HUMBLE BOY** by Charlotte Jones, directed by Richard Rose, with Michael Ball, Ian D. Clark, Sarah Dodd, Dean Paul Gibson, Nicola Lipman and Fiona Reid. Tarragon Theatre (30 Bridgman). Previews through January 8, opens January 10 and runs to February 12, Tuesday-Saturday 8 pm, matinees Saturday-Sunday (except January 7) 2:30 pm. \$28-\$34, Sunday pwyc-\$15, previews \$17, stu/srs \$18-\$28. 416-531-1827.

Sarah Dodd is really glad that Charlotte Jones, the author of *Humble Boy*, was an actor before becoming a playwright.

"Jones said she was tired of performing small, superficial parts, so she'd never write them," says Dodd, who plays Rosie, the cast-off lover of Felix, *Humble Boy's* central character. "Every one of her characters has a rich story; no one is simply a messenger."

Set in an English summertime garden, the contemporary play never lets the audience forget its environment, with characters named Rosie and Flora and the near-constant presence of bees.

But there's also a more structural set of echoes. Felix, whose father has just died, comes home to find his father's friend flirting with his not-unwilling mother, and he can't confront his own feelings about death and love. If you catch a *Hamlet*-like drift, you're right.

"I see the play as being about love in its many forms," continues Dodd, who spent six years at Stratford and impressed Toronto audiences in *A Whistle In The Dark*. "Felix is a theoretical astrophysicist working on a superstring theory that will tie together everything in the universe.

"But love, like the superstring theory, can't be explained – there are no visual proofs, no equations that can quantify it."

Dodd treats Rosie's relationship with Felix as a really good friendship that became sexual. When he left, without goodbyes or explanations, she needed time to get over her anger.

"But now, seven years later, she's come to terms with what happened. A survivor, Rosie is a down-to-earth person she's a midwife in training who's realized that when you go through something horrible and surprising, you deal with it, learn from it and become a better person.

"She wants to pass that on to Felix, since she sees him going through what she did when her own mother died years earlier."

The play has a dark, biting comedy that Dodd appreciates, just as she does Jones's ability to write about grief with humour.

Does the *Hamlet* connection influence her acting choices?

"I can see Rosie as a bit of Ophelia with some Laertes thrown in, but I don't play Ophelia. In fact, if you don't know that Jones has used Shakespeare as a model, you're not going to miss anything in this play.

"Anyway, I think of Ophelia" - here Dodds's voice goes high and innocent, sending up the ingenue stereotype - "with long, long hair, and she's all the things I'm not.

## **Jon Kaplan**

## Post Show Lesson Plan 1

### Compare and Contrast

#### Critical Question:

Are similar ideas communicated in different contexts for similar effect?

#### Expectations:

AN1.06: identify the artistic choices made by the actors, director, designer, and technicians in a dramatic production, and assess the effectiveness of these choices;

AN1.05 – identify universal concepts and themes from a study of theatre works, and analyse their personal, social, and cultural significance;

Ontario Dramatic Arts Curriculum

#### Warm up:

Physical warm up.

#### Main Activity:

Distribute a copy of *Hamlet's* Act 3 Scene 1 "To be or not to be" monologue as well as an excerpt from Act 2 of *Humble Boy* (on next page)

In groups of four, students compare Hamlet's monologue with the contemporary 'equivalent' in *Humble Boy*. Students should highlight the elements that resonate most to them and also discuss the following questions as a beginning to the comparative investigation:

How are the pieces similar? or dissimilar?

Can one connect Felix's ideas with Hamlet's?

How does having a group of people contemplating their existence on stage differ in effect - from a theatrical point of view - than a solitary actor examining the same idea (on stage)?

(Please note: sensitivity may be required. Comments relating to suicide should not be taken lightly).

## **Act Two excerpt from *Humble Boy***

George: Why don't you take a running jump? Preferably in close proximity to a cliff.

Flora: George.

Felix: Do you think that's the best way?

George: What?

Felix: No, really I'm interested. What is the best way to do yourself in, so to speak?

Flora: What about you Felix? What is your preferred method?

Felix: Well, in an ideal world, I'd like to jump through a black hole.

George: I'm sure it could be arranged.

Flora: Why, Felix?

Felix: Just a whim of mine.

Flora: Tell me why.

Felix: Well, I'd find out what it was like inside.

George: How thrilling.

Felix: It would be for a theoretical physicist.

Rosie: Who doesn't get out much.

Felix: Theoretical physicists don't get out much.

Rosie: Well, come on then, enlighten us.

Felix: You get to pass through the event horizon and down into the state of singularity. The point where all mathematical equations break down and you break up into a thousand million particles. I think that would be quite satisfying.

Rosie: Doesn't sound like much fun to me.

Felix: The beauty of it is you get to carry on. Well, maybe you do.

Rosie: But it wouldn't be you. It would be just bits of you.

Felix: It'd be the essence of me. I'd be recycled. The particles of my body would go off and form another universe. It's kind of immortality.

Rosie: If it's immortality you want, I think it's just easier to have a baby.

Flora: Is that what you want, Felix? How very mundane. If you can't make your mark while you're here, what's the point?

## Post Show Lesson Plan 2

### Play Analysis through Role Play

#### **Critical Question:**

How does role-play act as a tool for greater understanding?

#### **Expectations:**

THV.01: demonstrate an understanding of the conventions of role playing and structuring dramatic works etc.

TH1.01: demonstrate an understanding of the theory of “willing suspension of disbelief ” both as performer and as audience;

ANV.02: evaluate dramatic performances presented in the school and the community;

ANV.03: explain how dramatic arts represent, influence, and contribute to culture and society;

AN1.06: identify the artistic choices made by the actors, director, designer, and technicians in a dramatic production, and assess the effectiveness of these choices;

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#### **Warm-up:**

Review with students the important elements of creating a whole group role-play:

- a. Maintaining focus throughout the role-play.
- b. Maintaining the physicality of your character throughout the role-play.
- c. Sustaining the vocal quality of your character throughout the role-play.
- d. Ability to take on, and commit to, your characters’ attitudes and beliefs.

#### **Main Activity:**

Interpreting the play through Role Play

- Distribute two pieces of paper to each student.
- Ask students to write down two questions they have for any member of the *Humble Boy* production (writer, director, actor, designer).
- Collect the questions.
- Divide the class into two groups. Group “A” and “B”.
- Take group “A” and distribute one of the following roles on separate pieces of paper to students: actor(s), set designer, costume designer, director, lighting designer, sound designer, playwright etc.
- Ask group “A” students to discuss quietly and prepare for their role as a member of the *Humble Boy* production team in one part of the Drama room.
- Distribute the already collected questions for members of production (hence group “A”) to the Group “B” students.
- Group “B” are told that they are each a journalist at a press conference.
- The “journalists” must ask the “artists” the already written questions (*additional, spontaneous, questions are encouraged and everyone on the artist panel must answer as least one question*).
- After each question has been asked, reverse Group “A” and “B” roles and distribute remaining questions.

In this activity students develop role-playing, reflective thinking, focusing and application of knowledge skills. Students discover through their own creative work in role (layered with their experience in Drama class and viewing the production) that they may contribute their own knowledge to some of the questions about artistic choices that are asked.

#### **Journal:**

What surprised you about your character? Please give two examples. How did discussing the play in role affect your analysis of the Tarragon production? Be specific and give examples.