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## **Interview: *Tony Reekie***

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INTERVIEW:

## Tony Reekie: Children's Theatre in Scotland

BEN FLETCHER-WATSON

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*In 2015, Tony Reekie stood down as Director of Imagine, Scotland's national art-form development organisation for theatre for young audiences. Tony had programmed the annual Imagine Festival of performing arts for children and young people since 2000, bringing companies from around the world to Edinburgh each May to share their work. Prior to joining Imagine in 1996, Tony worked with a host of well-known Scottish theatre companies, including 7:84, TAG and Visible Fictions.*

*In this interview, he reflects on the changes he's observed within children's theatre over the past two decades. He discusses taboos, funding, art for babies, nationhood and theatre as a political act, presenting Scotland as a site of distinctive practices and aesthetic modalities.*

Ben Fletcher-Watson: You've talked in the past about theatre for children being the 'Cinderella sector'. Within Scotland, it's become more respected, whereas in England, perhaps the Theatre in Education movement has coloured people's perceptions of theatre for children. Do you still think of it as the Cinderella sector or are there new trends appearing?

Tony Reekie: From my point of view, children's theatre started off in Scotland around about 1990. We had TAG at

that point, companies like Comunicado occasionally making shows for children, and then we had people just making shows so they could get their Equity card.

But when Visible Fictions first came on the scene and made *Bill's New Frock* [1993], it was a change in terms of the way that people approached that kind of work, from Contemporary Arts Practice. And of course they had no relationship either with the past in Scotland or with England, because none of them had any connection with Theatre in Education at all. It was heavily influenced by the City of Culture in Glasgow, by the work of Robert Lepage, by the work of the Wooster Group—by adult work.

Everything around that time was also influenced by the first time that the International Children's Festival happened, which was 1990 again. You watched some of this adult work and you were going, 'This is astonishing,' light years away from the kind of kitchen-sink dramas that people were making and touring at that time in Scotland. And suddenly there was this event happening in Edinburgh in a field, where people were going, 'This is not dissimilar to that, in terms of approach and imagination and thought and all these other things. But it's smaller! And it's for kids, for some bloody weird reason!' [laughs]

So the movement has always in a lot of ways been about the possibilities of stretching the work—within the context of being a storytelling culture.

In a sense the new trends like theatre for very young audiences have allowed those artists to go places that probably they would have liked to have gone with slightly older audiences—they think, 'We can be much more abstract about what we want to present, or what we want to talk about, or what we want to say, or what we want to show. We

don't have to get worried about having an arc in terms of narrative storyline. It can be about an emotion. It can be about an idea. It can be about a colour.' It's much more in keeping with a European model of work, which in a sense goes across all ages.

As we get older, we still get into the mindset of thinking, 'Now we must have narrative. Now we must have story. Now we must have classical drama structure.' I think people have really been able to start playing about with that.

You've actually got artists coming to the fore in work for very young audiences who wouldn't necessarily have come to the fore in more traditional work for older children, because they're not a writer or a director. They're a musician. They're a choreographer. They're a designer, or a visual artist. So that has meant that the work is, and can be, a lot richer and broader.

BFW: Do you think children are a natural audience from birth, or is the purpose of children's theatre to show them how to be an audience?

TR: Oh God, no! Certainly, I always hope not. It's slightly trite, but it's always worth remembering: Martin Drury, who originally ran the Ark in Dublin, made a classic statement when someone talked about 'the audience of tomorrow'—he said, 'An eight-year-old is an eight-year-old. He's not a quarter of a 32-year-old. When you make a piece of work for that eight-year-old, he's as old as he's ever going to get. At some point, he will be nine, but at that moment, he's eight, with all the richness and experience of being eight, and what that is.'

There's almost a sense of saying, 'Stop. Stop thinking about

the audience in terms of age ranges. Stop thinking about them in terms of how they are going to relate to it.' You've really got to think about your art. Why do you want to make a piece of art? What's the thing that gets you up in the morning? What makes you think, 'I've got to communicate this with an audience, and this is the audience I want to communicate it with'?

But first of all, you've got to think, 'This is what I want to communicate'. *Then* find your audience. Then communicate it and see what happens. Don't get too hung up on details. Some people's whole creative process starts off thinking, 'What's the age range for this?' It's only when you start to think about it that you go, 'What a stupid fucking question that is. Why would you start off thinking that way?' When you make a piece for adults, it's the one thing you don't ever think about. But if I'm reaching 50 now, that's a very different experience from someone who's in their late 80s, and also very different from someone who's 19, but we're all adults.

I can understand things obviously becoming much more complicated when you're talking about an audience of six-months old and an audience of five-years-old—that's a very different thing, because cognitively they're very different. We understand that. But actually, it still goes back to saying, 'Concentrate on your art. If it connects with six-month-olds, that's who you've made that piece of art for. Stop getting too hung up about it.'

I'm interested in the way that the art form has developed, how that practice then feeds back into the sector, and starts to become part of work for older audiences, and how that spreads out.

**BFW:** I'm interested in how you first came across theatre for

the very young.

TR: I came across it first at what was then the Scottish International Children's Festival, and I believe it was the 1994 or 1995 festival.

A French performer, Laurent Dupont, did a piece called *Robinson Crusoe*. He also wanted to do another open-stage piece, and he said, 'I want to do this piece for 18-month-old children'. People just thought he was absolutely barking, because at that time at the Children's Festival, for the under-fives, there was basically a crèche. That was the approach then.

The Children's Festival used to be in Inverleith Park, so he did it in a space where it was basically open to the public, like an open-air space. It was almost the opposite of doing something really intimate—there must have been about 15,000 people in the park at that time. And in the corner of the park in this tent, he did this performance, where people were just walking in and walking out.

I was there. I wasn't actually part of the Festival at that point, but they made sure that the core of the audience were toddlers. In time-honoured fashion, the only thing he said at the beginning was, 'Just let the children do whatever they want. Try not to prompt them. Try not to guide them. Let them guide you. Let them do what they want to do.' And he did this piece which was as astonishing a theatrical experience as any I've ever been part of, partly because it was almost the first time for me.

It was classic—them engaging with it, not engaging with it, being part of it, being astonished by it, being slightly bored by it, moving away from it. There were four children who

basically spent most of the time actually onstage with him, wandering about the place. There was a point where he fell asleep, and they stopped. They were all in different places, not really communicating with each other. They all stopped, at roughly the same time, at the point where he fell asleep. And one by one, they moved closer to him, started to get him to wake up, some of them started to stroke him, and it was an extraordinary experience.

People were coming out afterwards saying, 'That's possibly one of the most relaxing things I've been part of in my life.' The children reacted in the way that we now know young children react to these pieces, and as soon as it was finished, they were onto the next thing, as they do. But it was astonishing, and at the same time, there was an element of 'What the hell was that?'

What happened then was that we slipped back to that way of being—crèche, don't do work for under-threes, why the hell would you bother doing work for under-fives, all that kind of stuff. It sort of got lost. We knew there was something happening out there somewhere, but it took a long time to get back to that place where we started to look at it anew. But it was a fabulous, fabulous introduction to it.

**BFW:** What was your own perception of it when you first saw it?

**TR:** In the beginning, my reaction going into it was, 'I don't understand this. I don't see what they get from this. I don't see how this is theatre. Is this art? I don't understand.' That seemed to be the prevailing mood with just about everybody. People were saying, 'Nonsense! Nonsense!'

As I watched it, because he's such a skilled performer—and

still performing—I realised that something was happening which you could quite happily take on an artistic level, but also on a performative level, and on an emotional level. One of the things that I learnt from it was: ‘This is a piece which is aimed at human beings—very, very young human beings can interact with this in a really relaxed way, but I’m not excluded from that process, not being a very, very young person. It’s something that I can be a part of as well’.

So that performance worked on a level where it was personal to each individual who was there, but also social in that way that theatre, when it works really well, can be.

It was good to get a really good experience which absolutely challenged my assumptions head-on, because I think if I’d seen pieces that were not as strong and not as realised, it might have been easier to dismiss it.

**BFW:** Moving forward to today, what’s your perception of Theatre for Early Years, now that it’s become more of an international movement?

**TR:** I suppose you can look at it in the same way as you look at any of the forms, in the sense that there are some people that I think are really good at it, and there are some people bugging about in sand. Because it’s become a movement, in a sense, people jump on the bandwagon, often for very good reasons, sometimes for reasons that it’s a place that they can work—not that that’s a bad reason!

But across a lot of the performing arts for a young audience, in a very broad sense, when it’s good, it’s as good as performing arts get, I believe; when it’s bad, there’s really nothing quite like it. Unfortunately it’s a place that people can have sometimes quite a long-standing career not really

ever having the skills or talent to make really decent work, and so they spend a lot of their career making really terrible work.

The danger all the time about work for the very young is that people can always quote it in the instrumental: 'This is doing them good. Therefore, we can put any old shit up there, because they're not going to tell us.' It's a fascinating area, because it's still going through that process of finding itself in lots and lots of ways, particularly in this country.

BFW: Do you think it's possible to talk about a Scottish way of making art for children?

TR: Yes. Somebody asked me, 'Why is Scottish children's performance so popular?' and I said, 'Because there's a glitterball in just about any performance.' Any opportunity anybody has to put a glitterball into a piece in Scotland, you'll see it.

At their heart, they're quite camp, and there is a slight whimsy about the work, which I think makes it global. It gives it a sense that actually anybody can watch this and get something from it, when it's working really well.

*White* [Catherine Wheels, 2010] has all those elements. Apart from being a really tight piece of theatre, it also has elements of whimsy. If you look at the elements which you almost should take for granted—it's really well-designed; it's really well-performed; it's really tightly directed; the music is really spot-on—all the different elements work, but that doesn't explain why people come away with a smile on their face. It's because there's a feeling of whimsy and a slight daftness. There's always that slight Scottish ability to take something seriously up to a point, and then just pull away at

that.

Now that's not the case with all Scottish work, but if you look at the work of people like Shona Reppe, there's a beautiful, meticulous quality to it, and also an endearing, Ealing Comedies quality.

BFW: People certainly use phrases like 'less serious' or 'humorous'. It doesn't take itself as seriously as Theatre in Education, for example.

TR: It doesn't, and that makes it accessible. It makes it accessible to audiences. It also makes it accessible to adults who come along sometimes, who do not go to theatre. As someone said to me after watching an Andy Cannon [of Wee Stories] piece, 'I thought that was going to be shit!' [laughs] They had thought, 'Oh Christ, have we got to go to the theatre?' And then Andy Cannon just blasts himself at you for an hour.

The people who are engaged with children's work, who like doing the work, who are in the community, they're feeding off each other. They're not all coming from the same place artistically, but there's a kind of broad approach which allows things to happen.

Look at something like *Fleeto* [Tumult in the Clouds, 2011]—you couldn't call that 'not serious', being about teen gang violence, but at the same time, there was a playfulness about its execution which stopped it being unwatchable. So whether it's lyrical, whether it's about us being poetic, whether it's about us being storytellers, there's something cultural which slightly undercuts the seriousness, or pulls away at the edges of it.

A point that's really important to make is that it's not about being Scottish. It's about being based in this community. The work of Andy Manley, for example—Andy's a citizen of this country, but he's not Scottish. Like Lu Kemp, Matt Addicott, lots and lots of people who again embrace that approach, and make it what it is.

And—this'll probably piss people off—there's a nostalgia to it. I never think that's a bad thing, because you always have to recognize that there are old people there all the time. Take great children's theatre, like *The Red Balloon*, [Visible Fictions, 1997] or *Martha* [Catherine Wheels, 2000]—you knew it was working because the children were really involved in the story and the adults were a complete mess. Something tugs at your heart at a level that's sometimes quite difficult to describe. I think it goes through a lot of our really good work, like *The Man Who Planted Trees* [Puppet State, 2006].

BFW: Do you see children's theatre as having a wider purpose beyond the aesthetic, be it educational or social or political?

TR: The performing arts always have a wider purpose. Any piece of art must always have a wider purpose. What theatre does is both personal and social. It's about the individual and the community, in a way that no other art form is, or can ever aspire to be: film doesn't do it, visual art doesn't do it.

Performance, where people gather collectively to share, is a deeply political act. It's just weird, if you think about it, why it's taken us so long to make sure that every single member of society is allowed to have that experience.

I think a lot of that has got to do with validation. As adults, we

can validate. We put on a piece of work and people respond to it—people review it, people tell us how nice we are in the bar afterwards, but with children, that validation just gets less and less and less, in the terms that we want it to be validated as adults.

Suzanne Osten from Unga Klara used to say that the really difficult thing for people working in children's theatre is that you don't get the validation of adults a lot of the time. It's not about them. The younger audience respond and relate to it in a completely different way. Once it's finished, they really don't care who you are. They don't care about letting you know what their experience of it was, unless you're prompting them a lot of the time.

But to be able to have that discourse with any human being, I think is fundamental to what we as human beings do. Therefore, why would you exclude anyone from that process?

It's difficult in terms of people's egos. You're not getting that thing that sometimes we need. I'm not a performer, and my ego could not stand the fragile nature of it. I think the best ones are the ones that learn to deal with it in different ways, and get enough out of that experience. Artists have got to be enjoying being in that moment. In the end, it can't just be about the fact that they can get a grant for doing this. I think those people, in the end, go a bit by the wayside. It's the ones that get enough from that lack of normal response, or those signifiers that are not as obvious, who are able to carry on.

BFW: How do you think children's theatre is currently perceived by other artists?

TR: I think there are some elements which just ignore it. I

think the older or higher up the scale they get, the more they ignore it.

They'll connect with something they understand. People love *White* and part of the reason is that it's a classic play structure. People were taking folk on university courses from different parts of the world to see it, because it's a classic play structure in miniature.

I think certain artists say, 'I don't want to do it.' That's entirely valid. It's like expecting some director to think, 'I'm going to do a dance piece next.' If you're not passionate about doing that, if you're not passionate about engaging with a certain audience, you don't have to do it. But at the same time, that doesn't negate other people who are doing it.

Again, if I go back to 1994, I knew it [*Robinson Crusoe*] worked. I watched it work. I was part of that audience where that worked. So as a producer and a director of a festival, it's my job then to be open enough to keep on looking and seeing and reflecting and whenever I can, presenting it.

BFW: What do you think is the political attitude to children's theatre in Scotland? For example, *Starcatchers* have chosen to connect with Holyrood via Early Years rather than Culture. Do you think that's different from how it works in England?

TR: Yes, although I'd imagine England's catching up with that. Rhona [Matheson] from *Starcatchers* was smart about the way that she connected. Whereas I'd been banging on to Creative Scotland that this stuff's important and we need more of this stuff. We do a tenth of the work that similar populations are doing for their young people. I was banging on and banging on, and you see people going, 'Just fuck off.'

You've got good shows happening. What's your problem?' The problem was that *White's* off round the world most of the time. There are no children seeing this work here.

What Rhona did, and other organisations like Licketyspit, was to go straight to the government—'We're just going to have to start to pile in with the strategies they've got, because they have got strategies for very young children. And so what we're going to feed into that and start having conversations with them.' Smart as hell! Really, really, really smart.

Their battle, of course, all the time, is saying, 'It is about the art form. You can't just make it instrumental. It's not just going to fit a social work agenda or an education agenda. It's got to always be much broader than that. It's got to be potentially a lot messier than that, which is going to make you uncomfortable.'

But that's the job of art. It's not about teaching people the times-table; it's got to be what art is about, which is about being difficult. It's about being confrontational. It's about all those bloody things which actually sometimes don't make us very comfortable. That shouldn't be any different when it's happening for young children—why should it be different? There's no reason why they can't be having a really interesting time in all different ways for them, while we can actually be confronted with something as adults. That's an interesting dynamic to have, but it's not going to make you comfortable.

Going back, though, there's just not enough of it. It's not happening across the country in the way that it should be, and because you don't have that depth and breadth, it's difficult sometimes. If there's just a pocket here and a pocket there, there's nothing really happening. It's not looking at

the needs of our community. It's not looking at the needs of children. It's not looking at anybody's needs. There are approaches, like in Bologna, where nursery staff and teachers are really empowered by the theatre experience, where the parents who are then in contact with them are empowered by that kind of experience, to have real effects which then have social, educational, health impacts, and it's all part and parcel of them. It's really important, but we're in danger all the time, at levels where bureaucracies step in, of making it tokenistic and instrumental. It's always a danger.

BFW: What is your perception of the role of parents and teachers? Apart from their obvious role of taking their children to the theatre, what else do they do?

TR: I think they're generally part of the experience. You've always got to think about that for all ages—none of these children have chosen to be there. There's not a member of our audience at the Imagine festival who has chosen to come to that performance. Which is weird, if you think about it, from a theatre point-of-view. Instead of coming to see this lovely show, if they had any choice in the matter, they would go and do something else, I promise you! The very young have no power in that sense. They are just taken to sets of experiences.

My feeling all the time as a programmer is that when I enter the environment of a production, whatever it is, I want to be part of that audience: I don't particularly care that it's for ten and up, or for five and up, or for six months and up. I'm 48 now, so in a sense, none of these pieces are really for me, but because people like me are always going to be part of that audience, I feel I *should* be part of that audience.

Great pieces of theatre work on lots of different levels. You watch Peter Pan when you're seven and it's a swashbuckling

tale. You watch it in your 20s and you go, ‘God, that’s deeply weird and troubled—her dad becomes the baddie who wants her to become his mummy. That’s really, really, really weird.’

We don’t have to have the same experience, but we should have *some* experience from it. If I’m just a vessel to bring this human being to this show, and at the end, I’m still a vessel, and that had no connection with me whatsoever, I would question how well the piece is working. We go to it as a community, and whether that community is a nursery school with teachers, or whether it’s a family with parents (in whatever way you look at a family), it has to be there for us as a community, to work fully.

We had a dance-theatre piece at the festival a long time ago, called *Romanzo d’Infanzia* [Compagnia Abbondanza / Bertoni, 2001], with two Italian performers who played a brother and sister, and a mother and father. It’s beautiful the way it starts off: the parents were not so great, they weren’t so bad, they were just parents. Eventually the boy plays about with matches, sets fire to a chair, gets beaten—always just two people onstage—gets sent away to a school, writes to his sister who then rescues him, and at the end they run away. They just run away. And they send the parents a letter, which says, ‘We were going to come back, but actually, you were kind of rubbish, so we’re not going to bother. We’ll send you a postcard. We might decide to come back one day, but just to let you know...’ And the final scene is the two parents wondering where they got it wrong, and they’re reading this letter, and they just unfold it and unfold it and unfold it, and then this tiny little black-and-white film of two children just running down a beach finishes.

The director from a theatre company in Denmark came out and said, ‘That was as astonishing a piece of theatre as I have ever seen’. The Education Officer at the Scottish Arts Council came out and said, ‘You should lose your job for that.’

That is an irresponsible piece of programming.'

At its heart, it made parents and all adults really uncomfortable, because they lost power. The parents in the show were rubbish, they made mistakes, they got things wrong, they were just parents. It was lovely. You watched this beautiful piece of theatre and it stirred you up and made you feel bad about yourself, sometimes, but the sheer wonderfulness of it carried you through.

But also, the reaction of the kids: they just loved it. And the idea that they ran away in the end—why wouldn't they run away?

BFW: There are so many books with that conceit as a main driver of the story.

TR: But put it onstage, make it real, make it up close and personal, and people get really upset about it.

The adults always should be a part of it, but that doesn't mean that they should actually enjoy being a part of it all the time, in that straightforward way. It doesn't mean that it shouldn't be quite challenging for them. Again, that should apply to any kind of theatre, no matter how young that audience is.

BFW: In terms of adult reactions, I was recently reading a Scottish Arts Council report from the 2008 festival when you programmed *Glouglou* [Théâtre de Quartier, 2004]. The reviewer said that the breastfeeding scene was 'disconcerting'—in a show aimed at two- to five-year-olds. I also remember seeing *Goodbye Mister Muffin* [Teater Refleksion and De Røde Heste, 2006] and hearing a couple of teachers saying that death wasn't a topic suitable for

young children, who were all clamouring excitedly and enjoying it. Do you think there are any taboos in work for children, and should there be any?

TR: I've always believed that if you present a situation or provide a solution in which the audience is utterly powerless, then I really question what would be the point in doing that. But breastfeeding? Get over yourself. Death happens to us all, and children have to deal with it all the time. That's nothing to do with being powerless. That's being sad. That's all right.

So it comes back to that old performance saying: 'It isn't what you do, it's the way that you do it.' It's how much you respect the people you're wanting to communicate with. If you respect them, then there's an opportunity to have a dialogue. If you want to just tell them something, as when the Theatre in Education movement got into a place where they didn't want to have a discussion, then you're just making a point, and that's when I have a problem with it.

It comes back to that thing: why do we do theatre? Why do we create these exchanges? Because as the Russian director said, if I'm not confronted by something, if I don't take something new from it, then I'm not sure it's a piece of theatre. If it just affirms everything I am, then I don't know quite what the point of it is. If it's just making us feel cosy, then what's the point?

### **About the author**

DR BEN FLETCHER-WATSON holds a PhD in drama from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and the University of St Andrews, supported by an ESRC CASE Studentship. His research interests include theatre for early years, relaxed performance and mobile / wearable technologies in theatre. He has published articles in journals including *Youth Theatre Journal* and *Research in Drama Education*. He serves on the Executive of the Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA) and is an ASSITEJ Next Generation Artist.