

## ON THE EDGE

Early in July I was in Birmingham for the long-awaited World Festival of Theatre for Young Audiences. Practitioners from all over the world came to see performances by international companies, to exchange ideas and to celebrate a theatre sector that is still often underrated and undervalued. The ASSITEJ Artistic Gathering takes place each year in a different world city. It seemed somewhat ironic, as Steve Ball, the Associate Director of Birmingham Rep, said in his welcome speech, that this inclusive event was taking place only days after the UK had voted to leave the EU. The Festival title – ON THE EDGE – could now be misinterpreted as meaning that the UK was wanting to isolate itself from Europe and the rest of the world. This, of course, for theatre folk, is just not true. We are proud to be part of an international family, for whom freedom of movement between countries is healthy, desirable and, to an extent, necessary. Touring abroad is an important part of our work, as is welcoming artistes from overseas. Ballet, music and circus in the UK would suffer hugely if talented foreigners were denied the chance to work here. And many UK actors, performers and creatives such as directors and designers currently travel worldwide to ply their trade on stage, on film or at sea. However Brexit eventually develops, I'm sure most of us hope that freedom of movement in our industry will continue, indeed expand. In Birmingham, the international productions for young people we saw were innovative, skilful and thought-provoking.

In Birmingham I met up with Peter Glanville, the Artistic Director of Polka Theatre in Wimbledon, one of the very few theatres in the UK dedicated to work for children. They have recently revived their delightful production of my adaptation of Roald Dahl's JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH. Peter tells me exciting developments are planned for Polka, to be announced in the near future. Meanwhile they are planning to stage my adaptation of Dick King-Smith's book, BABE, THE SHEEP-PIG for Christmas, featuring puppets and actors and music in what sounds like an inventive and joyful production.

A party to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Olivier Awards took place at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Jacqui, my wife, and I were very happy to attend, particularly because guests were allowed to look round the new CURTAIN UP exhibition, featuring items from the V & A Theatre collection, including the Theatre Museum collection. It's a splendid celebration of theatre past and present, costumes, props, designs, personalities and history. We bumped into the wonderful Roy Hudd, and Debbie, his wife, and enthused with them about the scale and variety of the exhibits, ranging from Ellen Terry memorabilia to panto posters. Our favourite item was a star trap, taken, I think, from Drury Lane. Fascinating to see it up close – it didn't look too foolproof, to be honest..... Very pleased to hear from Roy that he will be back at Wilton's Music Hall for Christmas, this time giving his MOTHER GOOSE. Don't miss this!! He first crack at Dame last Christmas proved to be a masterclass in panto performance.

For me, this year has unusually not been dominated by my children's theatre work. My first grown-up show for thirty five years or more has found its way to the West End. It is THE GO-BETWEEN, based on the novel by L P Hartley. Composer Richard Taylor and I have been working on it for some time, along with director Roger Haines. West End producers Joseph Smith, Becky Barber and Bill Kenwright showed interest in the first production, five years ago, at West Yorkshire Playhouse. And now the musical is playing at the Apollo Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, starring the legendary Michael Crawford. We were thrilled that Michael agreed to come on board. Watching him in rehearsal was a privilege. His commitment and concentration was inspiring to everyone, cast, creatives and crew alike, and his generosity and humour lit up the room. At the end of the first preview, as Michael took his curtain call, it was as though the entire audience had received an electric shock through their seats! They rose as one to salute this great performer. The whole cast are outstanding, and I feel very fortunate to be part of the team. It's been an exciting few months, and I shall be sorry when the limited season finishes on October 15th.

Now I'm back in my comfort zone, directing for the umpteenth time my adaptation of Judith Kerr's classic picture book, THE TIGER WHO CAME TO TEA. We play a summer season at Cadogan Hall, off Sloane Square. Little did I think, when we first put on the show eight years ago, that it would just keep going! The company have just returned from a tour of the United Arab Emirates and China. And the indefatigable Judith Kerr just keeps going too! Still writing and illustrating at the age of ninety three, she recently received the Book Trust Lifetime Achievement Award. Richly deserved. This lady is an example to us all. She came to the UK as a refugee from Hitler's Germany in 1932. Her father was a distinguished theatre critic, who criticized the Nazis and was high on their wanted list. The family escaped and were eventually embraced by the UK. A twentieth century example of foreigners allowed to move to another country, to which they made a major contribution. Judith's brother became our first foreign-born High Court Judge and Judith became one of our best-loved children's writer/illustrators. May Brexit not prevent similar movement of talent in the future.....

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