

# Doing it for the kids

Master of children's theatre, David Wood OBE, talks to Tracy Gorman about 50 years in the entertainment industry and his Surrey upbringing

David Wood is one of those extraordinary individuals who is blessed with a multitude of talents. Throughout his career, he has occupied such roles as playwright, actor, author, director, composer and magician. Though he has always considered himself first and foremost a 'children's entertainer'.

Recently celebrating 50 years in entertainment, David has adapted approximately 75 plays, including such favourites as *The Gingerbread Man*, *The BFG*, *Fantastic Mr Fox* and *Goodnight Mr Tom*. His adaptation of Judith Kerr's book, the Olivier Award nominated musical *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* is currently on its 10th anniversary tour and stops in Guildford this month (June). Indeed, the secret behind the success of this incredible icon may well lie in the Surrey roots that produced such a unique and inspirational individual.

David was born in Sutton on February 21, 1944 and attended a local prep school until the age of 11, where his favourite subject was English, closely followed by Latin. As a young boy, he recalls having enjoyed reading. In nursery, he was often selected to read last so that his rendition would continue until the bell went – he was destined for a career in entertainment.

"From a very young age I knew that I wanted to be in theatre or in some form of entertainment and that never changed," he says. "It was as though a course had been mapped out for me, though I never realised it at the time."

This sense of destiny was heightened by a visit to the local memorial hall at the age of 10, to see an adaptation of *Cinderella*: an event that lingers fondly in his memory. "I was so enamoured with it, I insisted that I go and see it again in the evening," he



Photo: Jill Fumanovsky Archive

David Wood OBE has adapted approximately 75 plays

remembers. “It was sold out, but they very kindly allowed us to stand at the back. The things that intrigued me were the outsized props and an electric guitar, which, in those days, was quite unusual. Not long after that, I did my first ever performance in a play at the same memorial hall and I remember feeling very at home on stage.”

David was encouraged but not pressured by his family, whom he describes as “not stage parents”, and enjoyed singing songs with his father, who played the piano and told amateur jokes. “I used to stand looking over his shoulder and sing pop songs of the day,” he recalls. David’s father also dabbled in entertainment during the war and his creative abilities no doubt had an influence on his young and impressionable son.

David also became hooked on a programme called *Whirligig*, the title of which would later inspire the title of his own theatre company. *Whirligig* featured a musical section and a slot entitled ‘Box of Tricks’ which coincided with David’s aunt buying him a magic book.

The programme also featured a puppet show and a ventriloquist and David recalls how every aspect of the show impacted on the things he would later partake in. “Whirligig had an effect on everything that I did later on; the magic, the music, the puppet shows,” he says. “It’s those things that I think of when I consider my time in Surrey.”

## THAT’S ENTERTAINMENT

In the early days, David attained a prominent acting career. He appeared in both regional and West End shows, in addition to starring on TV and in film. His television appearances included roles in *Dixon of Dock green*, *Aces High* and *The Vamp*, alongside Shelley Winters. His most prominent role was playing Johnny in the 1968 film, *If*.

As if that wasn’t enough, David dabbled in screenwriting for a time, collaborating on such series as *Playaway* and *Emu’s Christmas Adventure*. He authored the screenplay *Swallows and Amazons* (1974) and *Tide Race* (1990).

However, it was playwrighting for children that had really captured his heart. In 1979, David and John Gould founded the Whirligig Theatre Company. This was a travelling children’s theatre company that, for the first time, brought children’s entertainment to mainstream theatres. It was a pioneering concept and gave a lot of children, who may otherwise never have seen the inside of a theatre, the chance to experience the true magic of a theatre production.

“I was never someone to whom children gravitated,” he explains. “But if you put me on a stage in front of 500 children, I kind of know what I’m doing. I can’t explain why that is, but I think it was the experience of just doing it that got me used to it and made me able to enjoy it. I think there has to be an element of respect.

That is, not to patronise, demean them or make them look silly. I’d rather make myself look silly and empower the child. A lot of my plays empower children by inviting them to make decisions.”

In recognition of his services to literature and drama, David was awarded an OBE in 2004. Although a huge achievement, David’s only regret was that it made no mention of the vocation he loved most; children’s entertainment.

## COMING HOME

David returns to Surrey frequently, most recently to partake in ‘speech day’ at Homefield School in Surrey – quite coincidentally and unbeknown to the staff, it was the school he attended as a child. “I got a phone call from someone representing the school and she asked if I’d be available to do the speech on speech day. She hadn’t realised I was a former pupil,” he explained. “I was asked to do speech day again last year and I did something which I think was unusual, in adding a bit of magic and making the children laugh.”

David’s plays are now produced all over the world and appreciated by millions of children internationally. He recently returned from China, where they were opening a play he wrote 30 years ago called *The Seesaw Tree*. As part of the play, the children had to vote on whether or not to save a protected tree. It’s a production that has run many times in other countries, very successfully, and it proved just as popular there.

So what does David consider to be his greatest accomplishment? “When I first started writing, it was unusual for plays to be written specifically for children,” he tells me. “Children’s plays weren’t a part of mainstream theatre and there were probably no children’s theatres at all. So I guess I feel a limited sense of success, particularly with Whirligig, in that we managed to open up mainstream theatres to receiving plays for children. Now there are many more people progressing this. Children’s theatre is no longer a rarity and that is a great achievement. If I manage to spend a lifetime entertaining children, I’ll be a happy man.” ♦ ***The Tiger Who Came to Tea* will be captivating audiences at G Live on June 18 and 19. For tickets visit [glive.co.uk](http://glive.co.uk).**

**BELOW:**  
The Tiger that Came to Tea will visit G Live this month



Photo: Robert Day