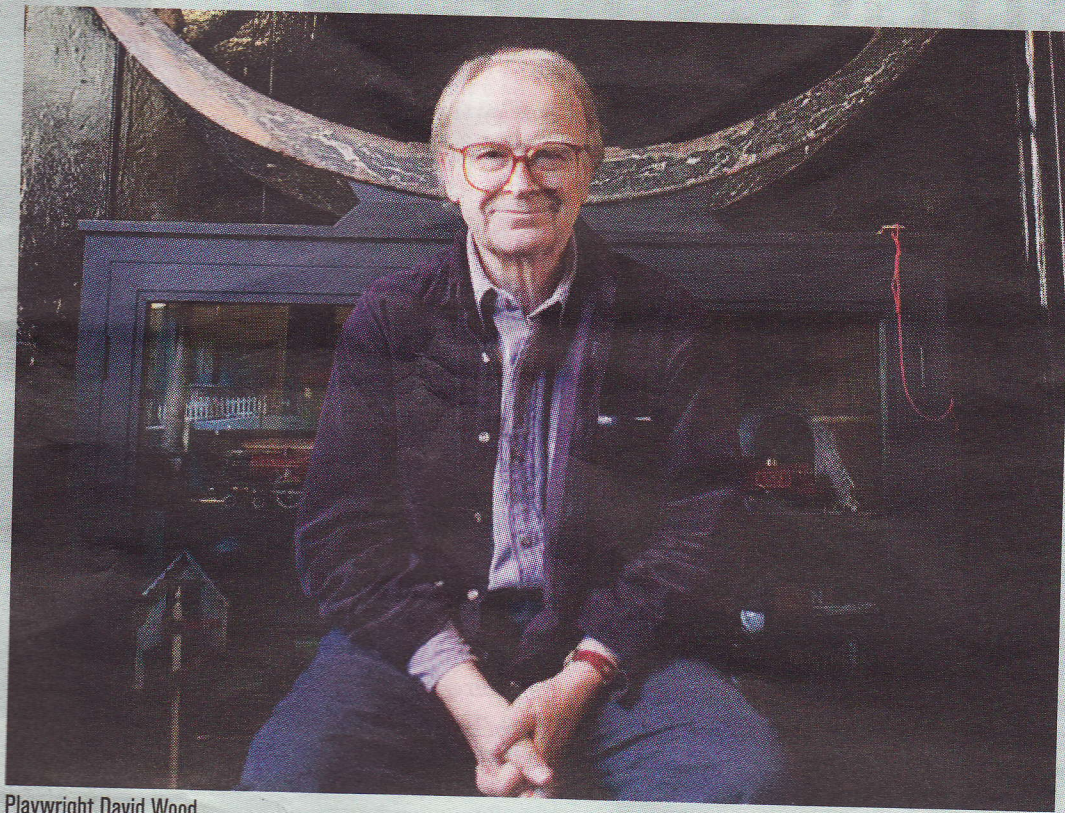


# Tots are a tough theatre audience to impress...



JILL FORMANDOWSKY

Playwright David Wood

by Jo Caird

When David Wood heard that somebody was interested in adapting Judith Kerr's 1958 story *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*, he immediately volunteered for the job. Having read the book to his now grown-up daughters when they were children, he had no difficulty imagining it on the stage.

"The thing that's interesting to me is why I never thought of it before," he says. "It was certainly a book that had meant an awful lot in our lives."

*The Tiger Who Came to Tea* celebrated its 40th anniversary last November. It has sold more than four million copies, been translated into 20 different languages and recently completed a successful tour. The story is a simple one – one evening at teatime, little Sophie and her mother are interrupted by the arrival of a tiger, who proceeds to eat and drink everything in the house. The book takes less than five minutes to read aloud. But Wood finds it "extraordinary".

"What makes it stand out is the surreal element – everybody takes it quite calmly," he says. Wood has written and adapted more than 60 plays for children, among them *The Gingerbread Man* and *Babe – The Sheep-Pig*, and is widely acknowledged as the UK's preeminent children's dramatist. Entertaining an audience of three, four and

five-year-olds is a more challenging task than many in the adult theatre industry would like to admit.

Wood expanded the book into a 55-minute play with songs, all of which are his own original compositions. Music, he says, is integral to the action: "By the end of the song, you're a little bit further in the story than you were when you began. And that for me is a very important part of storytelling, because children need stories to be clear and fairly straightforward."

Wood holds no truck with attempting to entertain the adults in the audience, but noticed a gratifying response from the adult audiences of *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*. "A lot of the parents remember it with nostalgia and pleasure, and know it too because they have been reading it to their children."

He is a firm believer in audience participation for very young children and has included songs and dances that actively involve them in the show.

"You have to break down the fourth wall, so that they're not just watching something on a screen, they're actually taking part in it," he says. "But it is not just during the songs that children and their parents join in with the actors in *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*", because Wood has used text 'straight off the page', there are many points that the audience join in with the story-

telling itself. For Wood, this is lovely.

"It just shows how the story is really and how it's become part of the consciousness of the nation," he adds.

As well as writing the script and composing the original songs, Wood directed the show and worked with an illusionist to get around the difficulty of having a person in a tiger costume consume the entire contents of a family's kitchen.

"It combines everything that I'm about – it's all in the one show. After 40 years of doing this, it's quite strange because I've enjoyed writing songs, I've always enjoyed doing magic, I've always enjoyed certain things and this show has successfully combined all those elements – which is rather nice."

That is not to say, however, that Wood considers his work done. He feels very strongly that children's theatre doesn't get the professional attention, media focus or financial support that it deserves.

"What I've always tried to do is make people feel that it really is not only extremely important, but it's also the most rewarding form of theatre – because children will enter wholeheartedly into the spirit of the performance."

To appreciate the truth of his words, it is enough to witness the collective gasp of a group of three-year-olds as they watch a tiger eat an entire plate of sandwiches in one go.