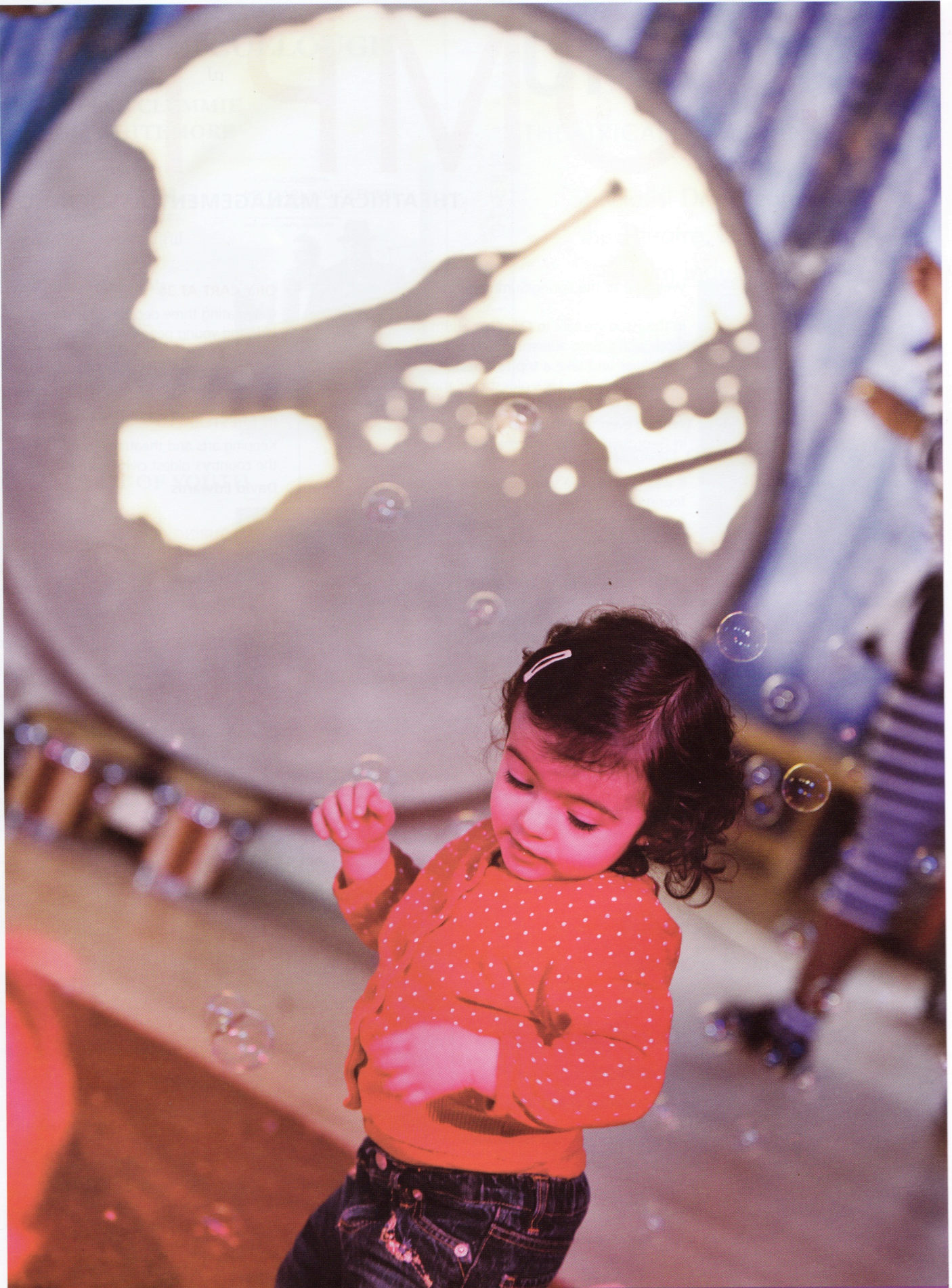


P R O M P T



PATRICK BALDWIN



DRUM

OILY CART AT 30

Celebrating three decades of inspiring kids and young people with disabilities

Jo Caird

"Theatre is about two groups of people in a space ... it's something that happens. It's about the people at one end of the room engaging with the people at the other end of the room."

All theatre directors are passionate about communicating with their audiences, but very few will have as deep a practical understanding and awareness of this aspect of performance as Oily Cart artistic director, Tim Webb. Because the "people at the other end of the room" at Oily Cart shows are not your standard theatregoers: for three decades now, Webb, along with designer Claire de Loon and composer Max Reinhardt, has been creating innovative theatre for under-sixes, under-twos and young people with learning disabilities. For Oily Cart audiences, many of whom are living with disabilities so severe that they are almost entirely closed off from the outside world, communication is not just a means to an end, it's the Holy Grail.

This year the groundbreaking company is marking its 30th anniversary, and there's plenty to celebrate: 66 original productions; numerous collaborations with respected companies and theatres in the UK and abroad; consistently strong reviews for Oily Cart's public performances; and, perhaps most importantly of all, thousands of children and young people and their carers given a new way of seeing the world through theatre.

It all began in 1981 when Oily Cart started making theatre for children as a way of earning a living while Webb and Reinhardt waited to hit the big time as a musical theatre-writing duo. Their first production was well received and it wasn't long before the fledgling company had "two shows in the van", one for



DUNCAN ELLIOT

SOMETHING IN THE AIR, OILY CART AND OCKHAM'S RAZOR

under-fives and one for five-plus, which they toured to playgroups, nurseries and school halls.

The music theatre writing left to fall by the wayside, productions with such classic titles as *Rainbow Robbers*, *Tibet or Not Tibet* and *Parrots of Penzance* followed over the next few years, each show designed specifically for children within a particular age range.

"We enjoyed it very much," says Webb, sat in the café of the Unicorn Theatre in London, where *Mole in the Hole*, the company's

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DRUM

latest show for under-sixes, was completing a three-week run before taking off on a short UK tour. That early work, he remembers fondly, "was very visual, it was live music, it was very interactive with the audience. You could kind of see the skeleton of an Oily Cart style in there."

But it wasn't until 1988 that the company made its first foray into the type of work for which it is now so respected, when the head teacher of a West London special school asked them to perform one of their under-fives shows for his students. Uncomfortable with the idea of simply adapting one of their existing productions, Webb and Co. set out to create a brand new piece of work that would respond to the particular needs of this unique audience.

Webb had had some experience working in special schools during his time at the Glasgow Citizens Theatre in the 1970s but a large part of Oily Cart's development in this direction was a matter of trial and error, learning by doing, as the show, *Box of Socks*, was researched and work-shopped with the students and teachers at the school.

"The teachers said to us," Webb recalls, "'it's no use you coming in here and doing one of these shows that lasts 45 minutes, because our guys take longer to get used to new faces and new situations and new ideas. If you give them a chance to absorb something, they'll get a lot more out of it. If you just rush it past them, they won't take it in'."

By taking place over the course of an entire day in and around the school and its environs – "challenging notions of theatrical duration

PATRICK BALDWIN



MOLE IN THE HOLE

... and theatrical location" – that first piece opened up a way of working that the company has been honing ever since. Oily Cart's productions for under-twos and under-sixes are not all that different in format to the rest of the children's theatre landscape in the UK, but it is now a recognisable feature of the company's work for young people with learning disabilities that shows will last a day or more and be performed in more than one space. In addition, Oily Cart produces supplementary resources designed to help prepare young people with autistic spectrum disorders for the new experiences that a show will entail.

While creating *Box of Socks*, the company encountered another challenge: the wide range of ability within learning difficulty schools. "On the one hand," Webb explains, "you're going to have people who walk and they talk and they're going to leave school and they're going to hold down some job and be in sheltered accommodation. And then on the other hand, you've got people in the same school who can't walk and can't talk and need care with everything all the time and will continue in that way for the rest of their lives."

Oily Cart solved this unique challenge by creating highly sensory "menu-based" shows with constituent parts designed to cater to different ability groups within the school. "We were generating a succession of experiences to engage or challenge or delight them. And we were very interested in that because that was actually very liberating in terms of our approach to theatre. How do you create a form of theatre for someone who can't see it or for someone who can't hear it or for someone who can't remember after half

"By trial and error, by thinking about it, by trying things out, we've devised a form of theatre that communicates with people for whom the conventional access channels are blocked in one way or another"

an hour what happened at the beginning or who doesn't understand cause and effect?"

To illustrate his point, Webb recalls *Knock! Knock! Who's There?*, an under-sixes show from 2000, where one of the actors was constantly surrounded by children captivated by the softness of her costume. "That's great," he says. "Why not? Often in theatre, there's a hierarchy of things you're meant to be interested in: noble thoughts, impassioned language. But what's wrong with a beautiful skirt? Why is that at number 72 and not at number four or something? So I think we want to challenge these idle notions."

Design is, therefore, an essential element in Oily Cart's work, a priority when it comes to putting together a new show. The company is not just "pronouncedly interested and driven by design", but willing to spend money to achieve its ambitions in this respect, something that Webb feels sets it apart from other companies doing similar work: "the devil is in the detail."

Music is also fundamental. Every Oily Cart show involves live music performed by musicians and actor/musicians within the playing space. They interact with the audience and engage them directly in the music, singing the young people's names to them, inviting them to bang drums, clap their hands and dance. Hearing live music is "an important kind of experience" for Oily Cart's audiences, Webb explains, because most of them hear so little of it in everyday life.

Quietly spoken, but generous in his conversation and quick to laugh, the director is utterly unassuming. He is, however, clearly very passionate about Oily Cart's creative and social mission, and immensely proud of the work the company does. This year's learning disabilities school production, *Gorgeous*, will follow Oily Cart's winning formula, but with an innovative twist, and Webb's excitement about the project is palpable. "It'll be very theatrical, all-singing and all-dancing, but we're going to be doing activities that are based upon the multi-sensory potential of working with perfumes and the like."

The company is collaborating with "the noses" at international soap giant, CZ Cussons on scents for the new show, following up an initial experiment that produced an exclusive smell for *Mole in the Hole*, which was used to perfume the air during the performance. The show's flyers were also steeped in the stuff, Webb explains, wafting a pile of them gently back and forth under my nose.

Gorgeous will be Oily Cart's first foray into this particular area of sensory theatre, but it's by no means the first time that Webb and the team have broken new theatrical ground in their attempts to

"unlock the doors" that stand between their young audience members and the world around them. Past Oily Cart shows for young people with complex needs have featured hydrotherapy pools, trampolines and most recently, for *Something in the Air*, specially designed swinging 'nest' chairs hoisted two metres into the air.

The director explains that "by trial and error, by thinking about it, by trying things out, we've devised a form of theatre that communicates with people for whom the conventional access channels are blocked in one way or another."

Many of the young people the company works with, says Webb, "have got impairments such that it's difficult for them to connect with the outside world, so they become inward-looking. So the challenge is really to say, 'look, it's very interesting out here, other people are fascinating, no?'"

So it is this, the act of communication, which lies at the heart of Oily Cart's work. The best moments, says Webb, are "when someone will react to what you're doing in a way that is totally unexpected to the people who really know these kids on a day-to-day basis. And you kind of think, 'well, that's wonderful', because what that young person who has reacted in that way is showing is that they are far more complicated and layered than even their parents know them to be. They are much more than the labels that are put on them and, God knows, they've got enough labels."

Theatre makers, politicians, funding bodies and educators can argue about the social and moral impact of theatre until their last breaths, but watching Oily Cart's young audiences respond to the company's work, one is left in no doubt as to the life-changing potential of the art form. It's been three decades since Webb, de Loon and Reinhardt began pushing the boundaries of work for children and young people with learning disabilities and they are still pushing them now. Happy birthday Oily Cart. Here's to another 30 years.

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For more info: www.oilycart.org.uk