

Small Feet Go Far

By Tony Graham, Artistic Director, Unicorn Theatre

We are living through a time in which children are the source for some of our most prevalent fears and worries. Our children appear to be more remote and at risk than at any time before. We might be said to be living in an era of child-panic. Meanwhile, there has grown up what Libby Brooks, author of a new book on contemporary childhood in the UK, has brilliantly described as an “invidious culture of comparison”. On the one hand, schools league tables, SATs, and a national curriculum centered on functional literacy and numeracy, while on the other, celebrity culture, image consciousness and the reality game show have presented our children with a bizarre beauty contest in which there are no real winners.

It's into this context that Small Feet Go Far should be seen as more than just another arts event. On the face of it, the Unicorn Theatre is hosting an exciting three week season of theatre, literature and conversation focusing on Swedish culture for children. But the aim is much bigger than that. Swedish theatre usually summons up images of Strindberg plus Ingmar Bergman. Far less is understood of the rich post-war development of children's culture, in which theatre and children's development (education and welfare) together made great strides forward. What has underpinned this remarkable achievement is an enquiry into the meaning of creativity, culture and children's resilience.

More...

From her base in Stockholm, the work of Suzanne Osten and her company Unga Klara (Young Klara), has transformed the Swedish cultural landscape for over thirty years. Her work has been influential at home and abroad and has set the template for those questions that dominate contemporary children's theatre: how far can we go? what is the border between children's and adult theatre? is a child's "truth" different from an adult's "truth"? Her influential *The Girl, The Mother and The Rubbish* heralds this three week season. Suzanne will talk to Jacqueline Rose about her ideas, as well as being on a remarkable panel on *Taboos in Children's Theatre* featuring Philip Pullman and the popular crime writer Henning Mankell, who is less well-known over here as a children's playwright and director.

There are maybe as many Swedish voices and theatrical approaches as there are lakes and trees. In a country which encourages its companies to tour the rural areas, Unga Riks, the national touring theatre for children, is the best known representative for new writing and exploring new theatre forms. Snopp and Snippa is only one example of a stream of work that pours out of this exuberant, questioning company. *Small Feet* also features contemporary dance and theatre for younger children and an imagistic, physical approach to the Greek myth *Perseus* for older children.

For those who are new to Swedish theatre, *Small Feet* is a unique introduction. Playreadings of Swedish plays for children and young people feature directors and actors from the National Theatre, Hampstead, Polka, Company of Angels and RADA. The National Film Theatre is screening some Swedish films for children. A literary festival will introduce us to a surprising range of children's literature. Like the best festivals, this is many wrapped into one.

More...

But underneath it all, it's meant to be more than a tourist view of another culture. The aim behind Small Feet is to give us the opportunity to compare our approach, our provision and our thinking about culture for children. With this in mind, there will be a major dialogue at the highest level between the Swedish and the British Culture Ministries and their representatives from our respective arts councils and advisers. While theatre and culture can hardly be a panacea for all of our current phobias about children, Small Feet promises to be an effective antidote. And while it might enlighten and get us thinking, it will above all be hugely entertaining and rich in inspiration and hope.

END