

Homegrown shows to take centre stage at 30th Edinburgh International Children's Festival



A scene from 'Playful Tiger' PIC: Jassy Earl

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It was back in 1990 that Edinburgh's annual festival of children's theatre first appeared in Inverleith Park, in a series of tents and marquees that stood up bravely to some blustery spring weather; which means that when the festival opens for business on 25 May this year, with a Family Day of fun at the National Museum of Scotland, it will be celebrating its 30th edition, and the fact that many of the children it entertained in its first tentative years are now parents themselves.

Back then, the aim of its founders – including its first director, Duncan Low – was simply to show some of the riches of international children's theatre to young audiences in Scotland, and to Scottish theatre artists. All across Europe, in particular, there were countries and companies that had invested in children's theatre to an extent then rare in the UK; and audiences in Scotland saw, and marvelled, and began to raise their expectations of what theatre for children could achieve.

The result, 29 years on, is not only an event that has become one of the world's major celebrations of children's theatre, attracting artists and delegates from across the globe; but a Scottish children's theatre scene utterly transformed, so that each year now around of the third of the work shown in the festival is created by Scottish companies that have become major players in the world of international children's theatre. The festival's current director Noel Jordan was delighted to announce last week that the 2019 programme is no exception. Of the 15 shows on view this year, from eight countries – Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Scotland, England, Australia and Belgium – four will be made in Scotland, three of them commissioned or co-commissioned by the Edinburgh International Children's Festival itself.

“It's really exciting to be able to programme Scottish children's theatre that stands up alongside the best in the world,” says Jordan, who arrived in Edinburgh from Australia three years ago. “And we hope it reflects both what my predecessor Tony Reekie was able to do in his amazing 20 years with the festival, in terms of development work with Scottish-based artists, and what our overall organisation Imagineate is now able to achieve, as a year-round part of the Scottish theatre scene. One good example is this year's show *Valentina's Galaxy*, by Frozen

Charlotte, who are based in north-east Scotland. That's a show about women in space, commissioned last year by the Edinburgh International Science Festival, which we saw, and just loved the idea. So we made some money available to do further work on the show, for this year's EICF; and now we've got this lovely show, set in an early-1960s kitchen that transforms into the flight deck of a spaceship."

The Festival's 2019 programme also includes *Playful Tiger*, a new adaptation of Barrowland Ballet's *Tiger Tales*, redesigned by choreographer Natasha Gilmore for children with autism, and *Super Human Heroes*, a brand new show from Glasgow company *The Letter J* – commissioned by the children's festival with the Scottish Government's Expo Fund – about superhero culture and children's mental health, which is already on a brief preview tour around Scotland. And Scotland's women-led company *Stellar Quines* makes its children's festival debut this year with a new version of Australian playwright Finegan Kruckemeyer's acclaimed play *This Girl Laughs, This Girl Cries, This Girl Does Nothing*, a modern legend about how three very different young sisters respond when their father abandons them in a forest.

"We're thrilled to be a part of the *Imagine* Festival this year," says *Stellar Quines* artistic director Jemima Levick. "The festival is a bit of a phenomenon really – a springtime version of the August festivals, if you will; but what's different about *Imagine* is their extraordinary track record in bringing such a wide range of international delegates here, so the onward international touring opportunities for work presented in the festival are really exciting. To my mind, the Children's Festival is one of the central reasons for the children's theatre sector being so strong in Scotland. It's a brilliant model; and wonderful for *Stellar Quines* to be part of it."

All of this Scottish work, of course, is interwoven with an international programme that includes beautiful physical theatre for very young children from Denmark, Germany and France, a new version of *Emil And The Detectives* from the Australian company *Slingsby*, and a return visit from *Bronks* of Belgium with their wonderful physical theatre show *Us/Them* – inspired by the horrifying school siege in Beslan in 2004 – which won a Scotsman Fringe First award in Edinburgh in 2016. There will also be a three-week residency at a warehouse in Leith by legendary London-based site-specific company *Punch Drunk*, supported by a complex network of funding from the Scottish Government's Place programme.

"Putting the funding for this festival together is a very complicated process," says Jordan. "Every single show needs a slightly different package to work, and with shows from outside the UK, we're often very dependent on the culture ministries of those countries to support their visits here. It's tremendously exciting, though, to step back from the programme, once it takes shape, and to see these huge, vital themes emerging; this year there's so much about identity and home, ideas of place, and experiences around ageing in the family. So this can be a demanding job, yes; the travelling, the finances, the putting together of so many projects. But it's also fantastically exciting and rewarding; and we hope that our audiences feel that way too."