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David Wood OBE: The Man Who Made Children's Theatre Matter

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When David Wood began writing plays for children in 1967, theatre for young audiences was often dismissed as second-rate entertainment—relegated, as he would later say, to "the third division" of theatrical production. Nearly six decades later, Wood stands as a towering figure in British theatre, having transformed children's drama into a respected and professionally rigorous art form. The Times dubbed him "the National Children's Dramatist," a title that barely captures the scope of his influence on generations of young theatregoers and theatre-makers alike.

Early Life and Career Beginnings

Born on February 21, 1944, in Sutton, Surrey, David Wood's journey to becoming the preeminent voice in children's theatre began at Oxford University in the mid-1960s. While studying English, he wrote for and appeared in the satirical revue *Hang Down Your Head and Die*, demonstrating early promise in both writing and performance. His theatrical versatility would become a hallmark of his career—he would go on to work as an actor, author, composer, director, and even magician, later becoming a member of the prestigious Magic Circle. Wood's film career included a memorable role as Johnny in Lindsay Anderson's acclaimed 1968 film *if....*, and he earned a Best New Actor nomination in 1970 for his performance in *A Voyage Round My Father* at Greenwich Theatre. Despite these successes in mainstream theatre and film, it was a commission in 1967 at the Swan Theatre in Worcester that would change the trajectory of his career forever.

The Birth of a Mission

While working at the Swan Theatre, Wood wrote his first children's adaptation, *The Tinder Box*. This experience ignited what he would later describe as a "crusade" to elevate children's theatre from its status as thin pantomime variety acts to cohesive, professionally produced plays worthy of serious artistic consideration. In 1968, he wrote *The Owl and the Pussycat Went to See...*, which became a long-running success and established his reputation in the field. Wood's philosophy was radical for its time: treat young audiences with the same integrity and respect as adults, but without patronizing them. "The volatility, the honesty and the sheer electricity created by an audience of children makes, for me, writing, directing and acting, a new adventure," he explained. He believed that children deserved "proper" plays with engaging narratives, emotional depth, and what he called "magical theatricality"—a technique drawing on his background in magic to trigger children's imaginations.

Whirligig Theatre and National Impact

In 1978, Wood co-founded Whirligig Theatre with John Gould and Robert Scott, a non-profit public service touring company dedicated to bringing high-quality theatre to children across the nation. This venture was crucial in professionalizing the field, establishing production standards, and making theatre accessible to schools through affordable ticket prices. Whirligig pioneered national touring at a time when most children's theatre remained localized, ensuring that young audiences beyond London's West End could experience world-class productions. The company navigated significant challenges, including the Education Reform Act of 1989, which threatened school theatre visits. Wood's leadership and advocacy helped the industry survive this crisis, cementing his role not just as a creator but as a champion for the entire sector.

A Prolific Catalogue of Works

David Wood's output is staggering: over 70 plays spanning original works and adaptations, all published by Samuel French Ltd. His 1976 play *The Gingerbread Man* became his most popular work, performed globally for decades and later adapted into a book and an animated television series that aired on ITV in 1992. The play ran at the prestigious Old Vic in 1977, demonstrating that children's theatre could command major venues. Wood's adaptations brought beloved children's literature to life on stage. He became the go-to adapter for Roald Dahl's works, creating stage versions of eight Dahl novels including *The BFG* (1991), *The Witches* (1992), *Fantastic Mr Fox* (2001), *James and the Giant Peach* (2001), *The Twits* (1999), *Danny The Champion Of The World* (2004), *George's Marvellous Medicine* (2009), and *The Magic Finger* (2013). His ability to capture Dahl's darkly comic sensibility while maintaining theatrical magic made these adaptations particularly successful. Beyond Dahl, Wood adapted works by authors ranging from Judith Kerr (*The Tiger Who Came To Tea*, 2008) to Philippa Pearce (*Tom's Midnight Garden*, 2000), from Enid Blyton's *Noddy* to L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* (2011), which opened in the West End in 2016 as a musical co-created with Richard Taylor. He also penned numerous original plays including *The Plotters Of Cabbage Patch Corner* (1970), *Hijack Over Hygenia* (1973), *The Ideal Gnome Expedition* (1980), and *The Selfish Shellfish* (1983).

Writing the Textbook—Literally

In 1997, Wood published *Theatre for Children: A Guide to Writing, Adapting, Directing, and Acting*, which became the definitive professional guide to the craft. The book codified Wood's dramatic theory: focus on action and emotional involvement, use audience participation judiciously, and always view the story from the child's perspective rather than pandering to accompanying adults. Co-author Janet Grant praised how his

work fits together "like an enchanted piece of Swiss clockwork," and this meticulous craftsmanship is evident in both his plays and his theoretical writing. Wood's approach emphasizes education through entertainment. "Any play for children should educate and expand the knowledge and experience of the audience, encouraging empathy and tolerance," he stated. His environmental plays like *The See-Saw Tree* (1986) and *Save the Human* tackled important themes without being didactic, while his participatory plays like *Boadicea* engaged young audiences directly in the storytelling.

Recognition and Legacy

David Wood's contributions were formally recognized when he was appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in the 2004 Queen's Birthday Honours List for services to literature and drama. The following year, he received an honorary MA from the University of Chichester. But Wood's true legacy extends far beyond awards. He transformed children's theatre from an overlooked corner of the performing arts into a vibrant, respected field. His work proved that theatre for young people could be both commercially successful and artistically rigorous. He demonstrated that children deserved the same production values, talented performers, and thoughtful writing as adult audiences. Wood's influence reaches across generations. His plays continue to be performed worldwide, introducing new audiences to the magic of live theatre. His textbook remains essential reading for aspiring children's playwrights and directors. And his philosophy—that young audiences deserve integrity, respect, and theatrical excellence—has become the standard by which children's theatre is judged.

Conclusion

David Wood didn't just write plays for children—he changed how we think about theatre for young audiences. Through his prolific writing, his touring company, his advocacy, and his mentorship of new generations of theatre-makers, he elevated an entire art form. His declaration that "for too long children's theatre was relegated to the third division" wasn't just a complaint; it was a call to action that he spent over five decades answering. Today, when a child experiences the thrill of live theatre—the magic, the laughter, the emotional connection—they are benefiting from David Wood's life's work. He made children's theatre matter, and in doing so, he mattered to countless children and the adults they would become. That is the measure of an artist whose impact extends far beyond the stage.