

adventures in wonder

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Performer Stephen Noonan takes working with children a step further than most – with theatre for babies. Behind the puppets, dance and stilts is a man passionate about stories, childhood and creativity.

You're a physical theatre performer with a focus on theatre for children. How did you get onto that career path? Before I was an artist, I was an industrial plant and machinery valuer and my girlfriend at the time was in the arts; that opened up my world and I realised it was what I wanted to do. So I went to study a BA in educational theatre at Adelaide University. I would have been about 23. It was a broad course and we learnt a bit about everything. In the last semester of my degree, I did an exchange at the University of California in Santa Barbara. I did some performing work over there, then came back to work in Adelaide in various theatre companies. Then I got a Dame Ruby Litchfield scholarship to do a year-long course at Dell' Arte School of Physical Theatre. I stayed overseas for another year and toured shows around America, Canada and Denmark. I've been in Adelaide and a bit in Melbourne ever since. I've toured work overseas but haven't lived there again.

When you were studying, was there a moment that made you go 'this is for me' or did you maintain your broad focus? It was accumulative. Every week it got better, more

exciting, more interesting. By the end of the course, I was hungry for more. In America I started to specialise more in physical theatre, which is a cross between theatre and dance. I lived in California for two years and I started to hone my interests in the body as a vehicle for telling stories and expressing ideas.

Did it naturally lean towards working with children or did that come later? It came later. Being exposed to Sally Chance [director of Stephen's Come Out show, *Nursery*], that set me on course for interesting work in schools, making work specifically for children and then for babies, and I've taken that into my own practice, sometimes with Sally, sometimes not.

When did you two start working together? It would have been in 1992. She was the director of Restless Dance Theatre and fresh from England and had a lot of ideas around disability dance. I was interested in that, so our working relationship began as part of me performing with Restless and grew to teaching for their outreach projects. Years later we are making dance work for babies together.

I'm fascinated by the idea of theatre for babies, the whole idea of creating something for a

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WATCH STEPHEN IN ACTION
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very young audience. Everyone questions it but those who come to it have an 'aha' moment. Babies are experts at seeking out relationships; it validates them, it emotionally validates you as the parent, and in the performance, that's an important factor. The other performer, Heather Frahn, has an amazing voice and she begins the show with a call out and all of a sudden, you see the babies' spines sort of tingle up. **So how do you get into the headspace for creating a show like this?** With a lot of research and development. The first baby show we made was *This Baby Life* and we spent a lot of hours in childcare centres, just observing, playing and following the babies' lead. *Nursery* is structured for three quarters of it and a quarter of it has parameters but how we move in and out of that changes and that's where the show really happens. The piece really works when the babies come in and start to interact, play and seek out relationships. A show like that comes together by observing, playing, making material, trying it out, and going "This bit works, this bit doesn't, why doesn't it?" Ideas come from all sorts of places. For *Nursery*, somebody found a clip of a woman washing a baby and it had beautiful music and was a sort of dance, and we were really struck by the beauty of that. Within *Nursery* there is this baptism welcoming the babies to the performance, and to create that we looked at that clip, dissected it and found some movements from that. Also, each week we had a trial of the show – after four days of making material, we'd bring in an audience to help us find what was going to work.

What do you love about working with children? The sense of play and acceptance for what you can bring to them. If it's done skilfully and with real consideration, you can really do anything, in as creative ways as you can. I enjoy that sort of acceptance of the theatrical agreement. And I love the immediacy, there's no way you can look above their heads and repeat yourself.

When you're working with Sally, what sort of roles do you take in that process? She's the director and conceives it, so essentially they're her projects. There's usually two performers/dancers and then a live musician, and she'll

come in with her ideas and set tasks for us to build on it. For example, for *Nursery*, she asked us to pick up on the notion of baptism and welcoming to find three gestures from that video clip and then we started to make a sequence and layer it. She has an idea and we collaboratively put it together.

Is that how you like to work best? Definitely, and if I'm leading a project, I'll generally do the same. Years ago, the director or choreographer would come in with the full thing in their head and all they had to do was teach it to you, but these days it tends to be much more collaborative. With the last puppetry show I did, *Paul and Pinto*, the designers had infinitely better ideas not just about the design but about the storytelling, too.

How did you get into puppetry? I started working with a company in Melbourne called Men of Steel on their self-titled show about these cookie cutters that come to life. The technique is in finding an object that's not really a puppet and bringing it to life, and I really became interested in that. It's something kids understand so well – to invest in an object and give it life, character and an emotional quality. *Paul and Pinto* came about as I was doing artist in schools residencies with workshops in shadow puppetry and the schools wanted a show to go with it. It's essentially about a man's memories at the end of his life. I wanted to make something non-verbal and image-based. For a lot of children, the first loss they experience is the family pet or a grandparent, and this story is about the loss of his dog and he's an old man, so it was a good match of those characters.

Have you had a moment where you felt that you'd finally made it? Probably with the first baby show. When you get good feedback, with people coming up to you after the show and asking questions, you realise people are really interested, so there's a sense of pride. That show went on to a festival in Edinburgh, then New York and around Australia, so I was delighted to be able to share it and also just to have a life with a show. So many shows only get the shortest of life in Australia. In America and Europe there's a touring circuit where a show can live on a lot longer.

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Is there a perception that creativity is a talent you either have or don't? Yes, teachers often tell me they're not creative. To me, creativity is a muscle that has to be exercised. The whole idea that I woke up and was suddenly a good artist... that doesn't exist. And it didn't exist for that songwriter or that painter, they had to think about it, had to practice, had to have a mentor and go to a school. I try to instil in the kids that to be creative or an artist or whatever, it's something you have to work towards.

Are children more open to that or do they get caught up in the idea that they're not creative?

More and more, there's that thing of wanting to get it right. You ask for a volunteer to get on stage and increasingly they don't want to unless they know they will get it right. But it's not about right or wrong, it's about seeing what works, and if it does work, talking about what works, and if it doesn't work, talking about what doesn't and doing it again to see if we can get better at it. There's a real need to embrace being wrong. Mistakes can often bring something better to it, so it's something to embrace rather than be cautious about. I think art in schools is really good for that, they see at first there isn't a correct way to do things.

Is that one of the benefits of having arts in

junior primary [laughs]. There's a grade two class looking at fractions and decimal points, so we gave everyone a sticker with a value – 1, .5, 100%, -2 – and asked them to line up accordingly without speaking. If they can do the maths on a worksheet and then get up and understand it physically by placing their bodies in it, it becomes a full experience.

Speaking of creativity, how do you deal with creative block? The first thing is, I know it's going to pass. So I try to work through it or take myself into a place where I can literally meditate on it... not think about it, but through swimming, yoga or meditation, just breathe and let thoughts come in. With other artists, if it's not working, there's always something else you can work on. Though sometimes, not all ideas are worthy, so don't drag yourself and others through it. You don't have to hold onto it.

Do you have the usual artists self doubt to deal with or does it buffer you by working with others? I wouldn't use the term self doubt but it's a healthy questioning, asking if I'm just naval gazing or if there is some expression that is worthy and is going to connect with people. Hopefully I've developed a good sense of that. I seek out honest feedback from people who I know will give that. I'm more interested in

you've built up some strong working relationships, you've become more resilient and disciplined. That self doubt can kick in when you're not yet able to sustain yourself in your practice.

When you look back, is there anything that stands out as a highlight? I'm proudest of the two baby works I've made with Sally, because they parallel with my own life. The first one, my son Archie was a newborn so I was going to childcare centres for work and coming back home and trialling stuff on him. It was really exciting finding my personal and professional life marrying. Then we had Luca while making *Nursery* and that again was two worlds entwined, so I was most excited by them because of that.

What do you want people to walk away with from your shows? I think it's about what it means to be human, whether you are six months old or 60 years. As people, we are all seeking to understand the world, feel something and belong somewhere. And from my experience, art opens a door to our emotions, where you can laugh and cry and ultimately feel something. With *Nursery*, it's about the parents delighting in their babies and it's about us letting the babies know how important it is that they are here, in the world. I do like the theatrical side of the work and by

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schools? It's not just about learning to act or draw or whatever. The arts push boundaries and question things, which is all the more reason why we need the arts and creative, new approaches in schools. I'm working with West Lakes Shores Primary School at the moment to see if we can bring an arts pedagogy to maths to help improve numeracy. I'm one of four artists going into different schools. Drama and dance use games that teach a lot about problem solving, critical thinking and emotional empathy. You've got to get your head around the maths but luckily I'm doing

where they vague out or lose track of the show, as ultimately that's going to be more helpful. **What would you say to yourself at graduation?** You will get through this, you are going to enjoy it and hold onto those working relationships that you really trust and value. And don't get caught up in this individual solo practice experience you're in, you're part of a community. Make sure you know that you're part of an ecosystem and feed it and it will feed you, whether it's attending conferences or going to workshops or just talking to other people about what you're doing. If you can get through that first 10 years,

that I mean it is a hyper-real presentation that we're making. I like shows that acknowledge that we are in a theatrical place and some magic is going to happen. We can see you, we're going to play with you, so play with us and embrace that theatrical agreement. I like to have that always present in the work because ultimately, that's the work I love to see. ♦

See Stephen in Nursery by Sally Chance Dance, Come Out Children's Festival, 25-29 May, \$20/adult and child, State Library of SA. adelaidefestivalcentre.com.au



Archie and Luca's baby nametags



Passports



Hot water

There's a Pablo Picasso quote that goes every child is born an artist, the challenge is to keep them one. These represent my children but also symbolise the beauty of childhood and how every child is an artist. They serve as an inspiration and what I love about the world of children, that they have those artistic curiosities and viewpoints.

From an early age, I was fortunate to travel. The first time I went overseas was a high school exchange to America, in year 11. I love gaining an appreciation of other cultures and other ways of looking at things, and you get to see artists, museums and galleries that open you up to new ideas.

My wife Belinda pointed out that I always drink hot water. I picked it up from my parents. Whenever I start work, I have hot water and it's just a habit. It's good for you and the heat somehow keeps everything ticking along. The cup is Belinda's, she loves tea so she has lots of beautiful cups.



Podcasts



Goggles

I'm a big fan of podcasts, mainly ones about ideas. My favourite is *This American Life* as it's long-form radio documentary about people, relationships and the unexpected and they do it in such a poetic way. Others are Ted Talks, Radio National and anything relating to what I'm working on.

Lap swimming is a place I can take myself and think through a creative problem, calm my thoughts and go internally. I use it to deal with a creative block or just to quieten down a bit so that you're more available for ideas and thoughts.



Shed

If I've got an idea for a show, I'll spend a lot of time in the shed trying it out before I bring others in. When I was making *Paul and Pinto*, I'd put Archie to bed and then go to the shed and make the work out there, and I'd have designers coming over at night to work with me.