The *Philippa Pearce Memorial Lecture*

celebrating excellence in writing for children

Taking Tom from Page to Stage

Not long after the play was first produced, Philippa asked me what was the most difficult thing about adapting *Tom's Midnight Garden* for the stage. I told her that it was finding logical reasons for Tom to stay in his pyjamas throughout most of the play. There are several scenes set in the 50's in daytime, when he certainly wouldn't be wearing pyjamas, but I wanted to avoid scene breaks or superfluous dialogue to cover costume changes. At one point Aunt Gwen finds him reading in his room. "Not dressed yet, Tom?" she frowns. "It's nearly lunchtime!"

I think Philippa enjoyed the fact that I had chosen an example of the nitty gritty, the craft of playwriting rather than some high-flown literary problem. A vital part of her artistry was the fact that she was a great craftswoman, affording great care to detail, choice of word or even punctuation mark.

Her practical approach made her sympathetic to the idea that children's theatre budgets might make it difficult to have a cast of more than eight, so doubling would be required. Two parts played by one actor. She could understand my pleasure in the fact that the two time zones meant that the doubling was relatively easy — Uncle Alan and Abel, Aunt Gwen and Susan, Mrs. Bartholomew and Aunt Grace — on paper it actually worked quite well, as long as time was allowed for their numerous costume changes.

Philippa enjoyed the fact that one of my first jobs was to 'find the interval'. Most theatre managers want to sell large quantities of ice cream, so insist on an interval. But, of course, the structure of a book is different from that of a play. You don't automatically find a good cliff hanging moment exactly half way through. Finding a strong end of Act One becomes essential — we want our young audience to want to come back into the auditorium for Act Two!

Philippa understood all this and was intrigued by the process of adaptation. She accepted that sometimes changes had to be made, the running order of events adjusted. She understood that the narrative voice telling the story in the book couldn't be exactly the same voice in the play. But I think she trusted me to be faithful to the story, which to me is a vital ingredient of adaptation.

And because we discussed things from day one, I like to think that she felt part of the process. There was a lovely moment when, as we watched a performance together, after one exchange of lines, she whispered to me, "Was that you or me? It was rather good! I hope it was me!"

But I'm jumping ahead. The idea — ten years ago — to adapt *Tom's Midnight Garden* didn't, I'm sorry to say, come from me. It was Tony Graham, the Artistic Director at Unicorn Theatre who suggested it. Rather arrogantly, I told him, no, I was certain it had been done already. Totally wrong. Yes, it had been done on radio, television, audio — and, we discovered, there was a film in preparation — but there had never been a stage version. From what we could find out, it seemed that previous requests to adapt the book for the stage had been refused. It made me wonder if Miss Pearce — who took on a rather stern image in my mind - simply wasn't interested in theatre.

Anyway, a meeting was arranged. I set off for Philippa's cottage in Great Shelford using a splendid hand-drawn map, plus detailed handwritten instructions. I was welcomed quite noisily by Clem, the dog, and not so noisily, by Worcester, the cat - I remember thinking this was a good omen, because Worcester was the name of my college at Oxford — and by Philippa. It turned out that 'stern' was one of the least appropriate adjectives to describe her. She cooked me a lovely lunch, ending up with cheese called 'stinky bishop' cheese. Sadly I've forgotten if she told me how it acquired this nickname — maybe Sally knows! Then we talked. And delicious talk it was.

I discovered that far from having no interest in theatre, Philippa loved it. She often travelled to London to see productions at the National or the RSC. We shared a love of the RSC's *Nicholas Nickleby*. This turned out to be rather helpful. I pinched David Edgar's use of narration by the character to whom things are happening - you may remember Roger Rees as Nicholas announcing, "And Nicholas went to London!". What's so great about this technique, particularly in children's theatre, is that it keeps the focus on the right character. Children don't have the same range of vision as adults. Their heads move as they watch the stage. So it doesn't help to have a narrator on the side of the stage telling you something when you are meant to be watching something centre stage. Human nature means that the eyes go to the moving mouth of the speaker. So, Tom became his own narrator, and Philippa approved.

I discovered that the reasons for saying 'no' to other requests to adapt the book were purely practical. Philippa found it difficult to see how it could be done satisfactorily, particularly with the two time zones, both as real and as important as one another. How would the settings be realised without cumbersome scene changes? She was also concerned about the ability of a child actor to sustain a major role not just for one performance, but for a whole season or tour. Again, she was very practical. She realised that Tom would need to be the motor running the play. His character is proactive rather than reactive. A child might be able to do it on camera, but live on stage? Little did she know then that the actor who was to create the role of Tom was well into his thirties — but totally accepted by audiences of all ages as a lonely 9 year old.

Philippa also put her finger on another possible hurdle. She said in one of the first of her many wonderful, treasured letters, '*there is always an element of dismissive snobbery about children's literature, which probably extends to children's theatre, I suspect*'. Philippa, I think, was worried that the play might not be taken seriously within the mainstream theatre industry.

But she did understand my belief that many of her ideas in the book are inherently theatrical — the voices of the

house that talk to Tom, the clock striking thirteen, the two time zones, the theme of loneliness and longing for freedom, shared by both Tom and Hatty, the twist at the end — the wonderful Mrs Bartholomew revelation. I knew these ideas would translate well to the stage, and suggested it might be possible to encourage the audience to use their imaginations by not having a naturalistic set. I thought the costumes should faithfully reflect both the 1950s and the Edwardian periods, but that the locations, including the garden, could be created simply, using light and a few specific objects such as the grandfather clock or a door frame.

I think Philippa liked the idea of simplicity of staging. It would hopefully allow the story to breathe and flow.

Then Philippa explained how personal the inspiration for the book was. How traumatic it was for her when her family left the mill, and how she began to think about time passing, yet things staying the same — for example her dining room table. She wrote about this later in a programme note:

'I was the youngest of four children. We lived in a big old house with a garden to match, with trees to climb and secret places. Long after I had left home, I remembered it all. There I had spent a happy childhood with my brothers and sister. There my father had been born, in that garden he had played with his seven siblings in the last years of Queen Victoria's reign, at the end of the 19th century.

I began to imagine two childhoods widely separated by Time, but taking place in the same garden. I imagined these childhoods superimposed upon each other, as ghostly and yet as real as two images coinciding from a wrongly working camera.

In my story a little Victorian girl would play with a boy from the 20th century. Eventually she would have to grow up, leave the garden: how would that happen?

My father told us about the Victorian garden. He also told us of the great frost of 1894-5, when he skated all the way from Cambridge [or Castleford] to Ely. Just what my story needed. Hatty would skate her way to a grown-up happy ending.'

And, of course, there we were sitting in her cottage, only yards away from the actual mill house and the real midnight garden! By the end of the meeting I understood how personal the book was. It really was Philippa's — if Sally will forgive me — other child. Quite naturally she feared that putting it on the stage could destroy something. No wonder she was reluctant to let me or anybody else get their grubby hands on it!

Philippa sensibly didn't say yes to the play straightaway. She read some of my work, and my book about children's theatre. She even came to see me perform in my magic and music show! Eventually she agreed to let me have a go and I did a synopsis. I always tend to do a very full synopsis, because with a children's play I feel the through line is very important.

From then on, Philippa was wonderfully hands-on — in a very constructive, supportive and sensitive way, reacting to the synopsis, the first draft and the second draft.

A couple of years before, I had adapted *The Sheep-Pig*, Dick King-Smith's lovely book. When I sent him the play for comment, he only had one — he complained that I had used the word rifle instead of shotgun! His lack of criticism was, I suppose, flattering, but a little unnerving. Philippa came back with pages of wonderfully detailed notes — I'll give you some examples.

I had given Uncle Alan a line in which he described Tom, confined to the flat in quarantine, as 'like a caged

tiger ...' Philippa wrote, *'this image seems wrong to me. I should have thought Tom might be restless in the daytime, but also subdued, even apathetic, longing for the night'.*

I had given Tom a torch, with which to read under the bedclothes. Wrong! The whole point is that Uncle Alan doesn't allow him to read after lights out. A torch would mean he could, and would give him a little victory over Uncle Alan, which would be wrong. Philippa wrote: *'Important that this [the torch] should be taken away for good? It shouldn't be an available alternative to moonlight later.'* She was rightly saying that if he had a torch, he would be able to see the grandfather clock, without having to open the garden door to let in the moonlight!

Still on the idea of light, Philippa wrote *'Is it going to be possible for Hatty to 'hide in the shadows of the clock' if she's carrying an oil-lamp?'.* She was so logical! I got away with this one by changing the stage direction to 'shielding the oil-lamp, she hides in the shadows of the clock'. Philippa accepted that.

Another question of logic — I had suggested that the Edwardian boys should enter with the terrier dog Pincher, on a lead. The reason for this was that I had suggested the dog might be imagined rather than real or a puppet. If it was to be imagined, I rather liked the idea of a visible stiff lead with a collar on the end, to create a kind of illusion ... Philippa wrote: *'Perhaps it doesn't matter, but one would not normally have a dog on a lead in one's own garden.'*

A bigger problem, and one we discussed a lot, was to do with language. Tom, in his role as narrator, often used some of Philippa's wonderfully descriptive phrases, particularly when seeing the garden for the first time. Philippa wrote: *'This is one example of many which raises quite a large issue. By using the wording of the original narrative in speeches [or letters] you have given these a non-realistic, literary tone [e.g. 'thick beetle-browed yew trees']. You may have calculated that at certain times this heightened speech is justified by the whole atmosphere created. Something I can't properly judge. Even so there are some things which would seem outside Tom's experience of knowledge e.g. 'a fan of peacock feathers' and 'a housemaid'.*

This was a tricky one. I argued that Tom could have two voices — a narrative voice and a voice in role — his character voice. I thought, and still do, that the narrative voice could be more literary, almost as though an older Tom is looking back at what happened. Anyway, we managed to agree, and sometimes to agree to differ, until it was possible to see whether it worked in performance.

I used the word 'scrumping', in the mouth of one of the boys going off to find apples. Philippa pointed out: *'This usually means stealing fruit from someone else's orchard or garden.'* Quite right!

I wanted Tom to help Hatty get one up on her cousins. This would, I thought, help bond Tom and Hatty. So I had him interrupt a game of pig-in-the-middle, by catching the apple the cousins were throwing over Hatty's head, teasing her. Philippa pointed out that Tom couldn't catch the apple or hold it — it was not in his time zone. Similarly Tom couldn't fire a bow and arrow, only help Hatty to do it. Eventually we came up with a better apple idea. Hatty is told she can have the apple if she can guess which of the cousins is holding it behind his back. Tom, invisible to the cousins, goes round and points the answer to Hatty. This achieves the bonding, without the apple-holding!

This also led to an idea which became an important feature of the play. After this moment of triumph for Hatty against her cousins, I had her shake hands with Tom. Wrong! They cannot touch. So, with Philippa's approval, I introduced the notion of them TRYING to shake hands, but realising that they cannot. This

becomes a gesture in which they hold up their hands, palm to palm but don't actually touch. They do it several times in the play, as a kind of greeting. It pays great dividends at the end, when Tom and Mrs Bartholomew — the grown up Hatty — do it, thus confirming to Tom that Mrs Bartholomew is actually Hatty. Then, right at the end, because they are now in the same time zone, the two palms actually do meet and touch, and fingers interlink, for the very first time. A lump in the throat moment I think Philippa enjoyed as much as I did!

You may remember that Hatty, in the book, writes a note to the fairies. I included this in the play. Philippa wrote: '*Since writing the book, I've come to feel uneasy about my invention of the King of the Fairies episode, simply because I once received an abusive letter from a group of* [*older?*] *girls playing on the double-entendre of 'fairies'. Please think about this.*

The 'Time' theory that particularly interested Philippa was in a book by J.W. Dunne called NOTHING DIES published by Faber in 1940. She kindly sent me a photocopy of a chapter and also wrote *'re. page 78, I'd like it to be clearer that the minds of Tom and his uncle work in totally different ways. Tom is seduced by his imaginings; his uncle tries to stick to pure reason.*

I think you can see how hands-on Philippa was, and always in a helpful way. She reminded me that what I had called the back door should be called the garden door. Occasionally she was, perhaps, a little pedantic. I wanted Tom and Hatty to throw goose feathers in the air — a nice theatrical effect. Philippa wrote *'I'm afraid you can't have these in the greenhouse. They belong only to the potting-shed, where Abel would pluck the goose and store the feathers in a sack for the making of pillows, feather beds etc.*' In the end I managed to persuade Philippa to let us have them in the greenhouse, and they do flutter very attractively!

What was for me reassuring was that we never disagreed on structure.

The Unicorn production went into rehearsal. A special performance was announced, to which VIPs were invited — Philippa herself, Laura Cecil, her agent, the Unicorn board etc. etc. My family came too. Before the performance the whole audience waited for what seemed an eternity in the cramped foyer. Eventually we were admitted to the auditorium and told that none of the stage lighting was working. This was incredibly frustrating, because lighting played a big part in the production, particularly when Tom finds the garden. But the brave actors had to do the show in the cold and dim working light state, plus all the house lights, which rather disturbingly stayed up throughout. Thanks to the actors, the performance went well. Philippa wrote: *'Dear David, I resolved not to write to you until I could tell you that I was seeing your* [*our?*] *TMG play again with the proper lighting. I've booked for the very last performance* [*November 4th*].

But I was amazed and delighted last Saturday even at the lighting-less production we attended. One could see how good the play was in structure and coherence and performance.'

As you can imagine, that meant an awful lot. And Philippa's generosity extended further. Right at the end of the play, when Tom returns to his mother, Aunt Gwen finds the skates — the one pair of skates that both Tom and Hatty magically and triumphantly use at one and the same time. Tom leaves them behind. I introduced the idea of 1950s Aunt Gwen looking bemused at these Edwardian skates as the final image of the play. Philippa very generously said after one performance — *'I wish I'd thought of that for the book.*'

There was also the problem of 'wow' and 'double wow'! Let me explain. The device I introduced, to help the narration, involved Tom writing letters to his brother Peter. Sometimes the voice of Tom writes them.

Sometimes the voice of Peter reads them. Quite a lot of plot is usefully conveyed in the letters, which culminate in Peter being encouraged to magically arrive — in his pyjamas — at Ely Cathedral, where he meets Tom and points out to Tom that Hatty has grown up.

In the letter to Peter in which Tom describes seeing the tree crash down one night, but then the next night finding it magically upright again, I needed Peter to express awed surprise. Tempting fate, I used the word 'wow' and then, reacting to a second surprise, 'double wow'!' Philippa wrote *'This is an anachronism for the* 1950s, *although to be appreciated by contemporary children. I leave you to decide.*' She did, but later on wrote *'Wow! double wow'!' By now you know my aversion to this. It's American, and an anachronism for the* 1950s. *Worse, it will — like all slang — become dated — with the wrong date.*

However, I could not suggest an alternative that you - and young audiences - would like. So I had to trust to your ingenuity. In the meantime, if all else fails, OK.' I am ashamed to admit it is still in the script ...

Well, over the next few years, the play managed to win two awards and go to New York in the original Unicorn production. Other productions followed, and I was delighted to accompany Philippa to some of them. We also shared the occasional joint question and answer session.

Philippa became not only a delightful correspondent, but a dear friend. We used to meet for lunch. Once Philippa took me to the Old Fire Engine House in Ely — *'the very nicest restaurant I know. Only English cooking, and second helpings offered.*'

Once, when she couldn't manage a lunch date, she said she was disappointed — *'disappointed' — she mused, 'is one ever 'appointed'? Fatuous; but I'm reminded of Geoffrey Dearmer — son of Percy, the hymnologist — who would describe himself as sometimes 'gruntled.*'

She wrote elegantly, delightfully and with great modesty. In early 2003 — *'since May last year I've been concentrating — as far as possible to the exclusion of outside attractions, however tempting — in order to work on a full length book for children. I was amazed — at my age — to find an idea gripping me — insisting on my dealing with it. I've been very slow — slower than usual, I think — but the end is in sight .... and then I shall frisk.*'

When she sent me a proof of her new book, which was called *The Little Gentleman,* I wrote back expressing my appreciation of the story.

'What a lovely letter to have from you about The Little Gentleman! [*I need something to sustain me between finishing a book and holding it in my hand as a book. All the usual Best Butter from the publisher is no good, because they have a vested interest in the project anyway.*]'

When I was asked to write a play in celebration of the Queen's 80th birthday, Philippa wrote *'It has only just dawned on me that the D.W. of the Buckingham Palace Party must be you! You'll be run off your feet and at the same time take everything in your stride. Don't let any royals try to boss you about.*'

She was right about me being run off my feet — for seven months! I wrote a diary cataloguing some of the delights and more of the horrors of the job. Philippa enjoyed the gruesome stories. She invited me to lunch. *'I do want to hear so much more of your Buckingham Palace experience. I hope the wounds won't heal too quickly.*'

Philippa's last letter to me was dated November 28th, 2006. We were trying to find a date upon which she and

Sally and Ben and I could lunch. She suggests some dates, then says, *'I am just off to Durham and Newcastle* [*Seven Stories*]. *I can't put dates to Sally and Ben until I get back. Then I'll write again.*'

Very, very sadly, she wasn't able to ...

But Philippa is still very much a part of my life, because our play lives on — last Christmas Manchester Library Theatre revived their splendid production, and the Open University have just made a programme about it. I say 'our play', because I am proud and delighted that Philippa contributed to and approved of the adaptation. She ended one of her lovely letters with the words — *'I thanked you then and thank you again now — and congratulate us both! Philippa.*

Philippa, thank *you*.

David Wood.

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