

We launched Peter O'Toole!

JUDITH UNWIN, a committee member of Leeds Children's Theatre and co-ordinator of its workshop team, reports on a company that specialises in productions involving adults and children working side by side – and which is now embarking on a very special one.



The group's popular Saturday workshops, held each week and attended by up to 45 children, have a waiting list of more than two years.

THE aim of Leeds Children's Theatre has always been for adults and children to work together to produce plays – not pantomime – suitable for the whole family.

After a year of trying and a great many emails, letters and phone calls within the UK and to America, we have finally been granted permission by The deFaria Company to perform that wonderful play *The Borrowers*, adapted by Charles Way from the book by Mary Norton.



The Gingerbread Man was the first production, in 2006, at The Carriageworks.

During the last year, Charles has been very supportive throughout our negotiations with the American rightsholder, even offering suggestions of other plays that he has written as a possible alternative. However we can now save those options for future dates and concentrate our efforts on staging *The Borrowers* and doing justice to Charles's wonderful script. It is an exciting project to which we are all looking forward.

We understand that this will in fact be the very first amateur production of *The Borrowers* in the UK, and tickets are already available from the Carriageworks Box Office in Leeds, on: 0113 2243801.

Leeds Children's theatre began in the late 1920's as an informal group organised by teachers to introduce drama and performance into schools. At that time these subjects were not covered by the National Curriculum. After performing in various schools the group evolved into a formal society in 1935, with its venue the YMCA Headquarters in Cookridge Street, Leeds for several years.



Judith Unwin is directing *The Borrowers*. Her husband Barry is also a very active member of Leeds Children's Theatre, designing, constructing and painting scenery and working as stage crew/flyman.

In 1947 the group staged its first one-night performance at the Albert Hall – later known as the Civic Theatre – to an audience of 700. It then performed at the Civic Theatre twice a year until 2005 when the theatre closed. Now, along with other amateur societies, it stages its productions at the Carriageworks Theatre, built in Millennium Square to replace the old theatre.

Over the years Children's Theatre has become a well established and popular group and has helped hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of young people to gain confidence and find their feet on stage – among them such well-known names such as Peter O'Toole, John Craven and Angela Griffin.

Confidence is the key word. The discipline



A reading of *Hansel and Gretel*.

involved in working in a major show is invaluable in showing children what they are capable of on their own, and perhaps, more important, what they are capable of when working with other people, young and old.

Every Saturday morning we hold a drama workshop for approximately 40 young people from all areas and all backgrounds from the age of seven. The workshops are run by volunteers who pass on their knowledge and experience. Here, for the princely sum of £1 a time, the young people learn theatre skills such as sight lines, voice projection, body language and stage presence through drama games, mime and improvisation. They also gain that all-important confidence, make new friends, learn to work as a team and, just as important, have fun. These workshops have become so

popular that we now have a long waiting list.

Apart from social evenings and Green Room Productions – occasional shows in aid of a chosen charity to give younger or inexperienced producers and directors the chance to gain some experience – we do two major plays a year, one in the spring and one in the autumn.

Anyone who does not actually get a part is encouraged to help front of house, or for the older ones, backstage or with props, or by painting scenery or helping and learning with makeup. We feel that it is important that our young members understand that a production is teamwork and not just 'I'm a star on stage.'

In 2000, the group received a small grant from the National Lottery to set up an archive to celebrate the history of the society and

record its achievements electronically. Details may be found at www.leeds-childrens-theatre.co.uk/actag.htm

A list of productions is also online, at: www.lcag.org.uk/societies/actag/productions.htm. It includes classics such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *Pinocchio* and *Peter Pan*, and plays with music such as *The Ideal Gnome Expedition*, *The Selfish Shellfish* and *Plotters of Cabbage Patch Corner*.

Having finished our production of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, we now look forward to our autumn play – which, as I have indicated, is very special. *The Borrowers* will run from 18-22 November.

One slightly unusual thing about a Children's Theatre production is that we don't use a prompt, which is something that the adults find quite scary sometimes!



Peter Pan was the group's final show at the Civic Theatre.