

# Bright Torches

Given the opportunity to sit in on a performance of *Midas*, Susan Elkin learns to shake her ears!

At the end of last term I had the pleasure of visiting Charles Dickens Primary School in Southwark to see a performance of *King Midas* – a fascinating project facilitated by Bright Torches Theatre Company who worked with children and staff to produce a show of extraordinary quality. I saw it as an afternoon event alongside a group of parents. There was to be a second, early evening, performance later that day. The pride in the children’s achievements from parents, teachers and the professionals they’d worked with was palpable.

“I founded Bright Torches in 2021”, Tom Davey tells me over a sandwich before the show. “We are a group of ‘theatre people’ – actors, directors, writers and education practitioners who all share a passion for stories and education”. Tom himself trained at RADA and is a former RSC actor.

The Epic Stages project, just part of the Bright Torches remit, offers year six pupils an opportunity to explore Greek myths and develop their creative skills, through a series of workshops and in a performance of a brand-new adaptation of a myth at their school containing original songs, Shakespeare and other poetry. “Crucially, the process also allows for the children’s thoughts to be included in the final script, which brings these ancient stories right up to date” says Tom.

Last year the project launched as a pilot at Charles Dickens Primary School with a fresh take on Pandora’s Box. “We did *Midas* this year because, of course, it’s about a king whose touch turned everything to gold. We all became much more aware of touching, and its possible dangers, during the pandemic so it feels topical.”

Tom and his colleagues are delighted that the Pandora’s Box script together with the company’s original musical score and backing tracks are now being used in a number of schools in the UK and Paris.

Then – partly because we’re eating our sandwiches in his impressively equipped music room – I’m introduced to Tama Nathan, composer of the *King Midas* music and head of music at Charles Dickens Primary School. He has violins and guitars hanging up and tells me that every child in the school gets the chance to learn an instrument. He directs the music in the production and it’s a joy to watch him moving amongst his young players, inspiring confidence and coaxing a high level of performance from guitarists, percussionists, keyboard players and a rather talented cellist.

And so to the school hall, where levels of excitement are

rising but the control, discipline and good humour are exemplary. No child has a huge role – they emerge from the ensemble and share parts in Fiona Drummond’s imaginatively written play. We are led to question the real value of wealth (in a school with high numbers of children who qualify for free school meals) and to think about “otherness”. Each of us is unique too and the children here make us think about being different from each other and to accept it proudly. The singing is a credit to Tama. The diction and projection (we’re in the round and that’s not easy) is good and, most important of all everyone is enjoying themselves. Nicola Jacobs, the assistant

headteacher who directed this show has done a magnificent job.

“Bright Torches aims to provide a fun, confidence-boosting experience for year six pupils and a magical, joyful climax to their time at primary school for parents, carers and the whole school community to enjoy. The project is designed to boost participation and engagement of all learners” says Tom, who has a large young family of his own. “All our work builds talk in the classroom and pushes young people to think critically and share their ideas with others. These stories are powerful and it’s thrilling to be unleashing that power in the classrooms, to explore timeless themes afresh and to hear the feelings and thoughts of young people. Through all of our work we hope to support teachers in providing a learning environment that has creativity and spontaneity at its heart.”

As well as Epic Stages, Bright Torches works internationally with 3–18-year-olds, running workshops and delivering teacher-training events that introduce active, drama-based activities designed to encourage young people to “burn bright”. And the emphasis, as with Epic Stages, is always on the process rather than the outcome. “Yes, we have a

package to sell to schools wanting to stage one of our shows, but it’s the learning which leads up to that which really matters” says Tom.

After I’ve joined in an end-of-show singalong of “Shake Your Ears” because like *Midas* with his ass’s ears, I am myself and proud of it, I’m introduced to Headteacher, Michael Eggleton. He has just admitted to the whole of his year six that their show moved him to tears and is clearly totally committed to the arts as essential nurture for his charges. He tells Tom, in my presence, that he now regards the Epic Stages project as an ongoing annual event and that he should consider himself hired indefinitely.

Bright Torches Theatre Company

[www.brighttorches.com](http://www.brighttorches.com)

[tom@brighttorches.com](mailto:tom@brighttorches.com) IP

