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Child's play in the dream house

JO PICKUP, The West Australian
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It's not often a theatre company gets to spend a term at primary school, knee-deep in crayons, textas and the wild imaginings of the students.

For Melbourne's Arena Theatre Company, a six-month stint with a class of five-to-eight-year-olds in the outer suburbs of its home town was the key to bringing its new interactive theatre work *The House of Dreaming* to life.

The work is about a long-abandoned house which stirs to life as it daydreams and reflects on its past inhabitants and days gone by.

The House of Dreaming, whose season starts this weekend as part of the Festival, was conceived by Arena artistic director Chris Kohn who wanted to create an immersive, other-world show for youngsters.

Kohn grew up in City Beach and his love of theatre sprang from drama classes at Hollywood Senior High School. He began a degree in theatre arts at the University of WA, finished it at the University of New South Wales and studied directing at the Victorian College of the Arts.

"Arena is very interested in making work that is especially tailored to its audience, so that means designing work to ensure kids can intuitively connect with it," he says.

"Spending six months working with the students at Diggers Rest Primary School was really important for us, as we talked about dreams and imaginary worlds with the kids," he says. "And then we incorporated some of the imagery they came up with in drama exercises we did with them in the show."

The final work has materialised as a magical sensory feast within a giant three-dimensional storybook. Or perhaps it is better described as a giant 3-D Kindle-style ebook, as the entire *House of Dreaming* environment is powered by Wii remote technology.

"That's another important aspect of the work," Kohn says. "We frequently invite artists

who may not have worked with young people before to consider how their practice might be adapted for children's theatre. In this case we invited visual artist Matthew Gardiner to be involved."

Gardiner is best known for combining high-tech robotics and motion-sensitive detectors with the ancient Japanese craft of origami. He coined the term "oribotics" to describe his work and the mesmerising "oribot" sculptures he creates.

"Matthew is interested in forms from nature," Kohn says. "So for The House of Dreaming he has made these incredible flower structures which respond to the movement of people and respond to light - so they change colour and change shape as kids interact with them.

"And importantly Matthew has developed these robotics to suit the young audience."

There also are projections, other motion-sensitive objects and two performers who facilitate the visit by only three audience members at a time as they journey together through the nine interconnected rooms over the course of 30 minutes.

Kohn points out that the show is wheelchair accessible too.

Jo Pickup