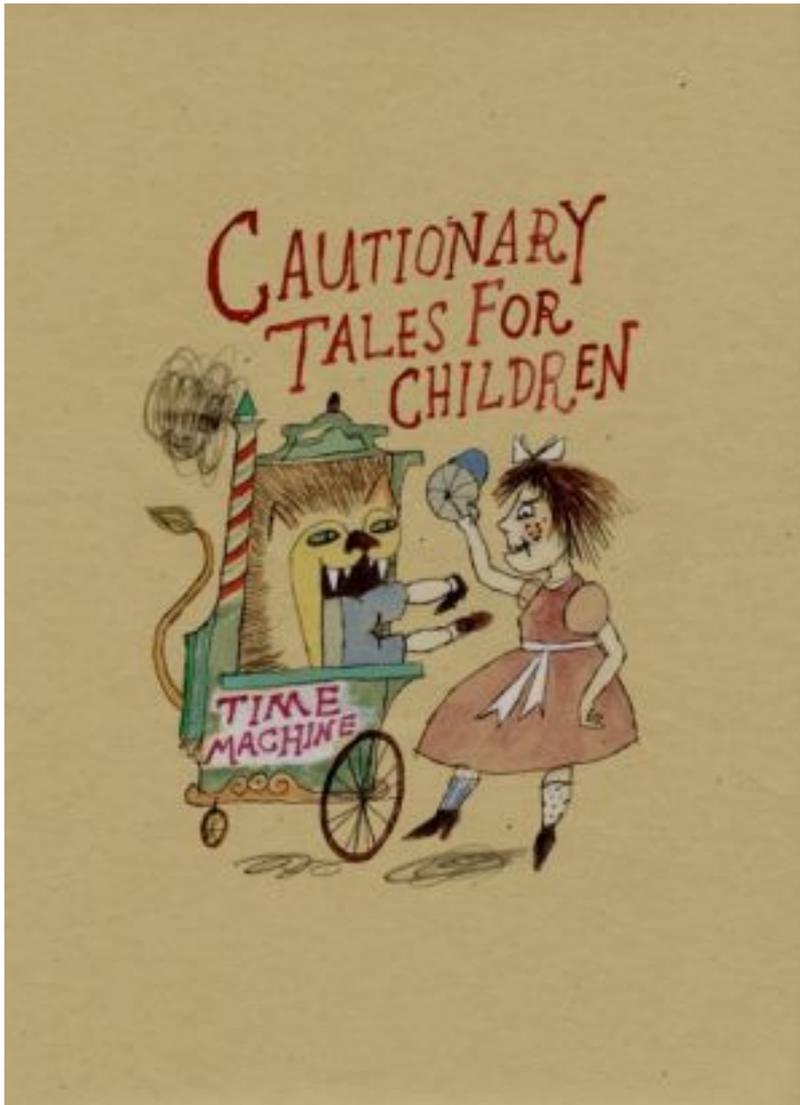


Cautionary Tales for Children

Jessica Carrascalao Heard

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Based on the verse by Hilaire Belloc. Arena Theatre Co., and Arts Centre Melbourne Carnegie 18 (VIC). Adapted by: Claudia O'Doherty. Composer: Mark Jones. Director: Chris Kohn. Designer: Jonathon Oxlade. Stage Manager: Meg Deyell. George Fairfax Studio, Victorian Arts Centre, Melbourne. 4-7 February, 2012.

Cautionary Tales for Children, the second of Arts Centre Melbourne's Carnegie 18 projects, opened last Saturday in the George Fairfax Studio at the Victorian Arts Centre.



The studio, usually sleek and ready for action, had a whimsical, homely flavour, created by the addition of mismatched retro lampshades hanging over the audience. A night of story-telling was in order.

The show was a blast of pantomimic whimsy from go to whoa. Out of a cardboard-box time machine tumbled the stiff and proper Roger (Bert Labonte), the captain of the time machine. With him was his crew, sharp-mannered Esther (Rosemarie Harris), frog-fascinated, dithering Sophie (Christen O'Leary), and the machine's mechanic Stephen (Mark Jones), who doubled as the bumbling simpleton and on-stage accompanist. Their mission was to better the manners of the children in the audience through telling stories of horrific (and humorous) consequences of bad behaviour, which they did through fine singing and plain silliness which had the audience in stitches.

Like any good pantomime, this show had many opportunities for audience participation. The audience were required to scream loudly, set up a chant declaring children are better than adults, and one adult, in order to redeem all other adults from their wickedness, was required to confess his wicked behaviour on stage, much to the delight of the children.



The songs themselves, based on the original Edwardian *Cautionary Tales for Children* by Hilaire Belloc, triumphed in bridging the gap of modern audiences and archaic language by using accessible, play-school-esque melodies which were easy to listen to and understand. A minor drawback was the Britain-central setting of some of the poems, which an Australian audience may not identify with, but this drawback was far outweighed by the absurd nature of the verses. Like all Carnegie 18 shows, this one was followed by a 10-minute Q&A session where children and adults were all able to give both practical and emotional feedback.

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