

# Wholesome family fun full of crushed skulls and immolation

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January 30, 2012

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Actors ham it up in rehearsal for *Cautionary Tales for Children*. Photo: Rodger Cummins

THE title of Claudia O'Doherty's last show may have sent shivers through most youngsters (or anyone with memories of high school geography), but *What is Soil Erosion?* managed to milk laughs from the driest of subjects. It was enough to recommend her to Arena Theatre's Chris Kohn as the ideal writer for a work of children's music theatre that draws wicked glee from a book of moral fables more than a century on the shelf.

*Cautionary Tales for Children* was writer Hilaire Belloc's 1907 collection



of poems pitched at pre-teens but it's no Dora the Explorer - here kids stepping out of line are eaten by lions, have skulls crushed by marble busts or suffer a slow death after ingesting too much string. What larks.

Now Kohn is directing an up-to-the-minute adaptation in which time-travelling musicians attempt to use Belloc's words to keep today's kids on the straight and narrow. The piece is one of the three works in progress receiving showings at this year's Carnegie 18 New Music Theatre Series at Arts Centre Melbourne.



Arena Theatre's Chris Kohn. *Photo: Marco Del Grande*

Belloc was a stout Catholic, an ex-military man and a much-feared orator - even as a child he was known as "Old Thunder". You might expect his *Cautionary Tales* to represent some kind of stern corrective to wayward youth, but even a cursory examination suggests the perverse moral universe they inhabit.

"What's really fun is how everything is given the same weight," says Kohn. "It's completely arbitrary what the outcome might be. You might just step away from your nurse and get eaten by a lion, but you try to shoot your sister and you only get a slight reprimand. It just points to how arbitrary justice really is."

In Belloc's poems, a boy "good as gold" is rewarded with a large balloon; through no fault of his own the gift brings about the death of his

entire family. Young Matilda tells lies and is burnt to a cinder. "Being burnt to death is way out of proportion. But adults do tend to present things to kids that way" says Kohn.

It's all rather grim, but Kohn has been careful to keep things in good faith: "They're very dark, but they're so funny. We don't want it to be a mean show. Most of the time it's the adults who are the butt of the joke. So, we want to make sure that it's not this nasty show about kids who have terrible things happen to them."

At the same time, there's a special place in most children's hearts for the gross, the rude, the indecent. "I think it's because for the first few years of your life all you're given is the nice stories," says O'Doherty. "So, as soon as you're given something darker it's a lot of fun."

Belloc's poems are in the same tradition as Roald Dahl and Andy Griffiths' stories, in which the strictures of adults are prised apart to hint at the hypocrisy beneath. It's why their tales always have the sense of an in-joke, and children pass them around like contraband.

Kohn has a three-year-old of his own and has already noticed the secret knowledges that kids share among themselves. "There's all of this networking that goes on away from adults. As soon as you put a bit of gore in there, the one kid who knows about that stuff will spread it like a virus. Because it's naughty. This show's a pretty naughty show in a way. We want kids to feel like they're being shown stuff that's not quite right."

Kohn and O'Doherty are aware of the difficulties in getting new Australian musicals off the ground. The Carnegie 18 series is Arts Centre Melbourne's initiative to help encourage the form, but it's still no guarantee of success. Luckily the support of Arena Theatre means that *Cautionary Tales* will continue to develop over the next year (it's already heading to Washington as part of the Kennedy Centre's New Visions/New Voices series).

The other entries in this year's Carnegie 18 are *The New Black*, a story of indigenous identity in the caustic world of a corporate law firm, and



*Dreamsong*, a satire of evangelical mega-churches directed by playwriting legend Michael Gurr.