

**SMALL  
IS BIG**

■ **REFLECTIONS ON**  
■ **HANDSPAN THEATRE**

**GEOFFREY MILNE, CONTEMPORARY THEATRE HISTORIAN,  
REFLECTS ON FIFTEEN YEARS OF HANDSPAN THEATRE'S WORK.**

"Although I have been an avid theatre-goer in this city for many years, I was out of Melbourne for a variety of work-related reasons in 1977, 1979, 1982 and 1983. While some might argue that not much happened in Melbourne theatre during much of that time, apart from the death of the APG at the Pram Factory, it is nevertheless true that one of the outstanding events of those years was with the birth and early childhood of Handspan Theatre Company. To my eternal shame, I missed it! I am probably the only living person who never saw SECRETS in 1983!

"It was while I was working in Adelaide with Magpie Theatre that I first became seriously aware of Handspan's work. The occasion was a kind of ad hoc mini-festival and conference tacked onto the bi-ennial Come Out Festival and, true to its already established form of participating in Festivals all over Australia, and indeed the world, Handspan was there with a show that fascinated me. STREETWISE. This was an extraordinarily successful piece of theatre about young children and for young children; it was based, I thought, on a great deal of knowledge about the streets and it exploited a highly sophisticated range of theatrical devices in order to promote its message about safety in the city. When I stayed around to witness the bump-out of the intriguingly complex but brilliantly simple revolving set, I began to realise something else about Handspan's work: that is, the whole notion of scale.

Handspan clearly established themselves in my mind at that moment as a brilliant exponent of theatre for young people. When A CHANGE OF FACE (an innovative exploration of the trend towards multiculturalism in Australia's schools and communities) and WE REPEAT OURSELVES (a very stylish and almost astonishingly entertaining piece of 'sex education') went around secondary schools in 1986 and 1989 respectively, and when I saw the primary show OUT FOR A DUCK in 1987, I was convinced that Handspan was just about the TIE expert in Melbourne. Later plays like THE READING BOY and LUNATIC SOUP reinforced that impression.

However, Handspan has never been solely a young people's theatre company, as the many adults who have seen such diverse productions as WAVES OF CHANGE (in the Castlemaine Swimming Pool in 1988), BANQUET and the WOMEN ALONE project of 1989, or even the remarkable FOUR LITTLE GIRLS of 1988 and THE WOODEN CHILD of 1990 will testify.

Probably my fondest memories of Handspan still comes from the various versions of the project that came to be known as SMALLS. I first saw bits of this in 1986 at La Mama, in whose small space the deceptiveness of scale became even more acute than usual; the old woman sitting by her letterbox was "lifesized" I swear. But it was the full season in the Athenaeum 2 later the same year that lingers most in the mind as one of the finest pieces of manipulation I have ever seen.

The world of Handspan's creations might be small, but the imagination and inspiration are very, very big!

