



**THE EXTRAORDINARY
ADVENTURES OF**
MR BENN



'Tall Stories sets the benchmark for children's theatre'
Sunday Times

'Full of magic and music'
EdinburghGuide.com

**'This lovingly staged adaptation delights a whole new generation
of youngsters'**
The Herald

**'A timely reminder that the only limit to your experiences is
your imagination'**
Edinburgh Evening News

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THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF MR BENN



Notes for teachers

Tall Stories

Tall Stories theatre company is a not-for-profit charitable organisation, which presents old, new and timeless stories in a physical, visual style, always acknowledging the presence of the audience. Our productions link original music with dynamic movement – and lots of laughs. The company was founded in 1997 by directors Olivia Jacobs and Toby Mitchell.

David McKee

David McKee is a British author and illustrator, chiefly of children's books and animations. His character led stories have enchanted children for more than three generations, and his best known figures of Mr Benn, Elmer the Elephant and King Rollo have become social and literary icons.

David McKee was born and brought up in South Devon, where he went from grammar school to Plymouth Art College. Whilst still at college he started selling one-off cartoons to newspapers and on graduation, he began to contribute to such publications as Punch, Times Education Supplement and the Reader's Digest. His first book, Two Can Toucan was published in 1964 and since then he has written and illustrated numerous children's books. As well as his own books, David has illustrated for a number of other writers including Michael Bond's Paddington Bear and the SuperGran books by Forrest Wilson.

The first Mr Benn book was published in 1967. This and subsequent stories were made in to one of the first animated programmes for television, fondly remembered by both children and adults of the time. His most famous character Elmer the patchwork Elephant is now published in over twenty countries and has recently been translated in to Japanese by David's good friend and fellow-illustrator Satoshi Kitamura.

David continues to work as a full time artist and illustrator dividing his time between London and France.

David McKee and the cast of Tall Stories' *Mr Benn*





THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF MR BENN



The Show

'We think, sometimes, there's not a dragon left.
Not one brave knight, not a single princess gliding through secret forests...
What a pleasure to be wrong.'

Richard Bach

Tall Stories had wanted to create a stage version of David McKee's fabulous *Mr Benn* for a long time. When we were children, we loved the TV series – because there were so many possibilities. Just imagine dressing up and going through a secret door to a spaceship... or a deep, dark cave... or a mediaeval castle. The whole idea of the series is so theatrical that it appeared a perfect choice for us. And as 2011 marked the 40th anniversary of the TV series, it seemed like the perfect moment to celebrate it and create the show.

It was, however, a bit daunting to be working with a cult hero. When we started thinking about the TV show there were so many decisions to make. How should we take Mr Benn and the infamous shopkeeper from the small screen to the stage? What do people remember most about the TV series? What can't we lose? What changes could we make? What adventures should we choose for Mr Benn? What makes this ordinary bowler-hatted man so extraordinary? Can any of us have Mr Benn-style adventures in real life...?

Early on we had decided that, because of the extraordinary nature of the shop and the shopkeeper, magic should be an important element of the show. We had many meetings with a magician, Lawrence Leyton, who gave us fantastic ideas for possible moments of illusion. We ended up with less than we hoped, mainly because of the busy touring nature of the show and the difficulties of setting up so many illusions in a short set up time at each venue. The show is still sprinkled with moments of magic – did you notice them all?!

In one of the periods of research and development we discussed all of the different stories that David McKee had invented for Mr Benn and voted on which ones were our personal favourites. We then decided which ones could work best theatrically and which combination of worlds and characters would be the most varied and entertaining. We ended up choosing the stories of *The Cook* and *The Diver* (but changed the diver's story a fair amount) and then for the third story (all the best things come in threes!) we had great fun putting together a montage of lots of the other adventures – and threw in a few of our own for good measure.



The Set and Costumes

One of the most enjoyable aspects of the Mr Benn stories is the importance of dressing up, so the costumes and design of the show were always going to be vital. Isla Shaw, the designer, was involved very early on, working out what the set should be (Mr Benn's house? The shop? Different worlds? How could it be all of them?!) and finally deciding on giant walls of oak panels with lots of secret doors and drawers. Four large doors on wheels ended up having major roles in the show – the co-ordination and movement of these doors was very complicated and caused more than one headache in rehearsals!

The costumes were designed at the start of the process but had to be worked on until the last minute because there are so many quick costume changes throughout the show. Isla had to see how the show worked, how the actors moved and how much time the actors had so that she could work out how the costumes could be adapted to make everything run smoothly.

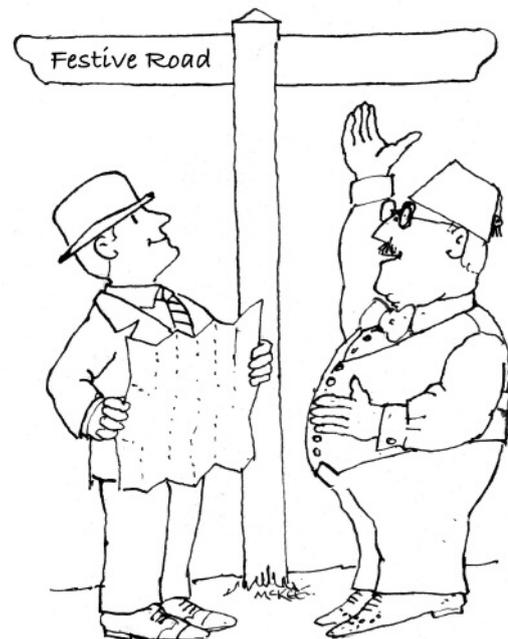
The Music

We wanted to enhance the narrative, design and the physicality of the characters in the transition from the books or the television series to the stage, and in the same way we also wanted the music to be fresh and surprising. So from the research and development for the show the composers, Jon Fiber and Andy Shaw, decided upon different styles of music for each story (some hard rock for the palace kitchen or mournful Elvis for the sea monster and so on). We did feel that we HAD to have a little nod to the instantly recognisable theme by Duncan Lamont so the composers managed to include a tiny fragment of the TV theme tune in the show's opening number!

The artwork

Excitingly, David McKee even drew some new illustrations especially for us. This picture of Mr Benn and the Shopkeeper was created for colouring-in. It points to Festive Road in one direction and the name of the theatre where the show is playing in the other direction!

A larger version of this picture is included at the end of this pack. Children can colour it in and add the name of their school, theatre or home.





THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF MR BENN



Mr Benn – did you know?

- Only 13 episodes of the TV series were ever recorded.
- *Mr Benn* was voted 6th in Channel 4's '100 Greatest Kids' TV shows'.
- Mr Benn lived at 52 Festive Road. David McKee based this on the real Festing Road in Putney where he used to live. An engraved paving slab acknowledging this fact was laid there in 2009.
- In the very first book, David McKee drew himself looking out of the window of his house at 54 Festive Road – he thought it would be quite nice to have Mr Benn living next door.
- McKee says he has always thought of Mr Benn as having the first name William.
- The actor Ray Brookes provided the voice that narrated the TV series – you can see him in programmes such as *Doctor Who*, *Cathy Come Home* and *Eastenders*.
- In the same year that Mr Benn was first published (1967) Francis Chichester succeeded in sailing around the world single-handed, Evil Knievel jumped his motorcycle over 16 cars and Dr Christiaan Barnard performed the world's first heart transplant.
- Some of the mementos taken back by Mr Benn from his adventures include a box of matches with a dragon on the front, a lump of rock that was once gold, a parrot's feather, a seashell, a wooden spoon and a jar that once held magic dust.
- The cameraman, Bert Walker, set up his own company, Zephyr Films, in a shed at the bottom of his garden in Surbiton. This is where the *Mr Benn* episodes were filmed.
- If you watch closely, at the beginning of *The Caveman* episode, we step inside Mr Benn's living room while he watches television, and there in his display cabinet are the mementoes from his six previous adventures...

Activities

This production of Mr Benn uses a variety of physical theatre techniques to create different environments and atmospheres with four actors, some music, many costumes and a little bit of magic. The following ideas aim to encourage children to think imaginatively about the story that they have seen and explore some of the ideas behind the creation of the show.



THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF MR BENN



Activities (4-6 year olds)

Fancy That

If you had the chance to dress up as anything at all in the world (or out of this world), what would it be? Draw a picture of yourself wearing this extraordinary costume. Make sure you show all the colours and textures of the outfit. Carefully cut out this picture, leaving a tail of paper at the bottom (like the stick of a lollipop). Now think, if you found yourself dressed in this special outfit and stepped through the magic door of the Shopkeeper's changing room, where do you think you would find yourself? Take a fresh sheet of paper and draw the scenery of the world where you think this costume would take you. Once you have finished this scene, choose the best place in the picture for your costumed figure to appear. Now cut a long slit in the paper so that your cut-out costumed character can appear out of nowhere and you can even move it around in the scene by holding the little tab at the bottom.

Whose Hat is That?

Start with a selection of random items of clothing – a tie, a hat, a headscarf, an apron etc. Pick one of the items of clothing – what does it feel like? What does it smell like? Try it on – how does it feel to wear it? What sort of person do you think would wear it? Once you have decided on what type of character might wear this item of clothing, have a walk around the room and see if you can change the way you move to become this new character. Do you move quickly or slowly? Head up or down? Are you very curved or very straight? Characters in shows are often developed using techniques like this to find their physicality – how a character moves is as important as what they say and how they say it!

Your Daily Routine

In the show, Mr Benn has a routine that he sticks to every day (before the invitation to the party leads him to all sorts of adventures). We see him dress for work, walk down the street, take the train, do his office work. As a group, decide what activities you all do every day. Brush your teeth? Put shoes on? Walk to school? Get a bus to school? Read a book? Eat lunch? Choose 4 or 5 of these activities and together come up with a mime or action to show each of these activities clearly. You could then get into smaller groups and piece all of these actions together to create a short movement sequence that shows your daily routine. How does it look if you perform the sequence in a tight group? Or spread around the room? Or with everyone walking slowly between each action? Or everyone running between each action?

Flicker of a Smile

The original television series of Mr Benn was a 2-D animation of David McKee's beautiful drawings. You can experiment with how animation works in its simplest form by taking a flickbook and drawing on the last page something nice and clear like the round face of a man in a bowler hat, with two dots for eyes and a line drawn mouth. On the page before, in exactly the same place, draw the face again but maybe the mouth is smiling a tiny bit more. Then on the page before that, make the smile a tiny bit bigger. See if you can draw up to TWENTY drawings, just changing a miniscule detail each time. When you flick the pages can you make him yawn? Or shout? Or stick his tongue out?! Just this little exercise shows what slow and detailed work animation is.

Kitchen Chorus

There is a scene in the show where the chefs cooking for Princess Picky sing a song about how she doesn't like any of their food. They add rhythm to the song by using all the objects they can find in their kitchen. Using just a few safe items - such as a wooden spoon, a chopping board, a tube carton of salt, a toast rack, a saucepan - experiment and find out what different sounds these objects can make. What's the most unusual sound they can make? Can you make an interesting rhythm by "playing" these sounds one after the other? Can you repeat it almost like a musical phrase? Is there a way of gently layering up the sound, from a steady bass drum beat of a saucepan, finding where the spoon running across the toast rack might fit in, and then finishing with the salt-shaker over the top? This is exactly the way that the actors worked out how to play their spoons and bowls and whisks for the song "Princess Picky"!



THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF MR BENN



Activities (7-10 year olds)

In Your Own Words

In a circle, go round and each tell a little bit about the story. Remember to describe the atmosphere and mood of each setting (Mr Benn's house, the shop, the world of the princess and the palace...) and any feelings that Mr Benn might be experiencing. Which were your favourite bits? Which were your favourite characters?

Soundscapes

Choose a scene from the play – it could be on Festive Road, or in the Palace kitchen, or underwater with the sea monster, or in the fancy dress shop itself – and use your voices, breath and anything that comes to hand (pencils, radiators, pads of paper) to gradually build up, one by one, the soundscape of that scene. Maybe you could create a few soundscapes and switch between them at the ring of a bell, as though Mr Benn were going through the shop to each different world.

Still Life

If Mr Benn were a colour, what colour would he be? If he were an item of clothing, what would he be? What vegetable would he be? Or what animal? Collect some objects and pictures and textures and colours that you think could represent the character of Mr Benn. Position them as you think would suit him and then take a picture of them, creating a still life representation of him. You can do exactly the same thing for the character of the Shopkeeper – how very different is his still life picture? This is often a way that is useful for us when creating a show to find more details for characters and make them feel more real and three dimensional.

Professional Statues

Write out on sheets of paper some of the characters or jobs that Mr Benn dressed up for – a cook, a diver, a cowboy and so on. Are there any other jobs that you can think of that weren't in the show? A pilot? A ballerina? A teacher? Write those out too and pin them all up around the room. All stand in a circle and on the count of 3 make a statue of one of the words. See if you can guess what other people's statues represent. Do this a few times in a circle and then get into groups. Decide in your group what profession you're going to show and make an interesting group statue of that job. Can the other groups guess what job you've all chosen to do?

Clothes Maketh the Man

Start with a selection of random items of clothing – a tie, a hat, a big coat, a headscarf, an apron etc. Pick just one of the items of clothing – what does it feel like? What does it smell like? Try it on – how does it feel to wear it? What sort of person do you think would wear it? Once you have decided on what type of character might wear this item of clothing, have a walk around the room and see if you can change the way you move to become this new character. Think about how your feet move. And your knees. And your arms. Work upwards and even think about how your eyes might move. Do you move around the space quickly or slowly? Do you walk in straight lines or squiggles? How easily do you make eye contact with the other characters in the room? Take it in turns to stop and have a look at some of the weird and wonderful characters that people have created – all from just one item of clothing! We often develop characters in our shows using techniques like this in order to find their physicality – how a character moves is as important as what they say and how they say it!

Character Choice

Choose ONE of the characterisations from the previous exercise and everyone else in the room try and copy precisely what that character does. The way they walk and look at things and even what expression their face is pulling. As everyone is walking round the room in, what should be, a very similar way, each choose ONE thing to push to an extreme – maybe it's the swing of the arms, or the pace of the walk, or the nod of the head. Now, as everyone is developing a more individual and extreme character, what sound do you think your particular character would make? It could be just a sound or maybe even a whole phrase. Once everyone has established their new character, what happens if they meet each other? What does your sound or phrase make other people feel? Do you get on with these other people?



THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF MR BENN



Activities (7-10 year olds, continued)

A Little Souvenir

If you had the chance to dress up as anything at all in the world (or out of this world), what would it be? Draw a picture of yourself wearing this extraordinary costume. Make sure you show all the colours and textures of the outfit. Perhaps you could use different bits of material to make a collage of this costume. Now think, if you found yourself dressed in this special outfit and stepped through the magic door of the Shopkeeper's changing room, where do you think you would find yourself? What world would you be in? Who would you want to meet? What kind of adventure would you have? In the stories, Mr Benn always comes away with a memento or a souvenir of where he's been to remind him of his adventure. What object would be perfect to remind you of your adventure? Make a model of this souvenir out of plasticene.

Claymation Fascination

Using the model of the souvenir from your adventure, can you bring it to life, or make it move across the room, or make it grow? See if you can create a short animation of your object using an animation program you can find at www.clayanimator.com.

Wish you were here

Imagine that you are Mr Benn and have been transported through the changing room door to a far-off land. What land would you most like to travel to? Pretend that you are exploring there and write a postcard to someone back home (who would Mr Benn write to? A work colleague? His postman? His mum?) describing what you are seeing and doing and feeling. Do you mention the strange way that you got there?!

And Now For Our Next Guest...

Set the room up with a few chairs in front of an audience. Someone can volunteer to be the chat show host or questions can simply come from members of the audience. Taking it in turns to be either Mr Benn or the Shopkeeper (or even Princess Picky or the Sea Monster...) imagine that you have just returned from one of your adventures and tell the audience a little bit about it. The audience (or the chat show host) can ask questions – how did you feel when that happened? Would you like to go back again? Where do you live? – any question is allowed. Whoever is being interviewed must answer immediately and without too much thought – the more detailed the answer the better – and remember, there are no wrong answers, whatever you say is the truth! This is an exercise that is called 'hotseating' and is used frequently by actors to find out more about their characters, by seeing what comes out of their mouth without thinking about it first!

When All's Said and Done

Do you think the show has a message at all? If so, what might it be?

What a Hero

Mr Benn chooses to go to the party at the end of the show as the hero SuperBenn, realising he's not just the ordinary man that he once thought. At the end of each of his adventures in the play he's also referred to by the other characters as a hero because he has helped them out in some way. Who is one of your heroes and why? Mr Benn proved that by being thoughtful and helping other people in small ways is heroic. Can you think of any ways that you have been 'heroic' recently?!



THE EXTRAORDINARY
ADVENTURES OF

MR BENN

A cartoon illustration of Mr Benn, a character from the children's television show. He is wearing a dark suit, a white shirt, a dark tie, and a black bowler hat. He is standing and waving with his right hand.

Resources

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_McKee

For more information about David McKee you could take a look at this page.

www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc/games/by/type/dressupgames

Check this page out for dressing up games and other creative games.

www.fluxtime.com

www.clayanimator.com

More information and fun with animation.

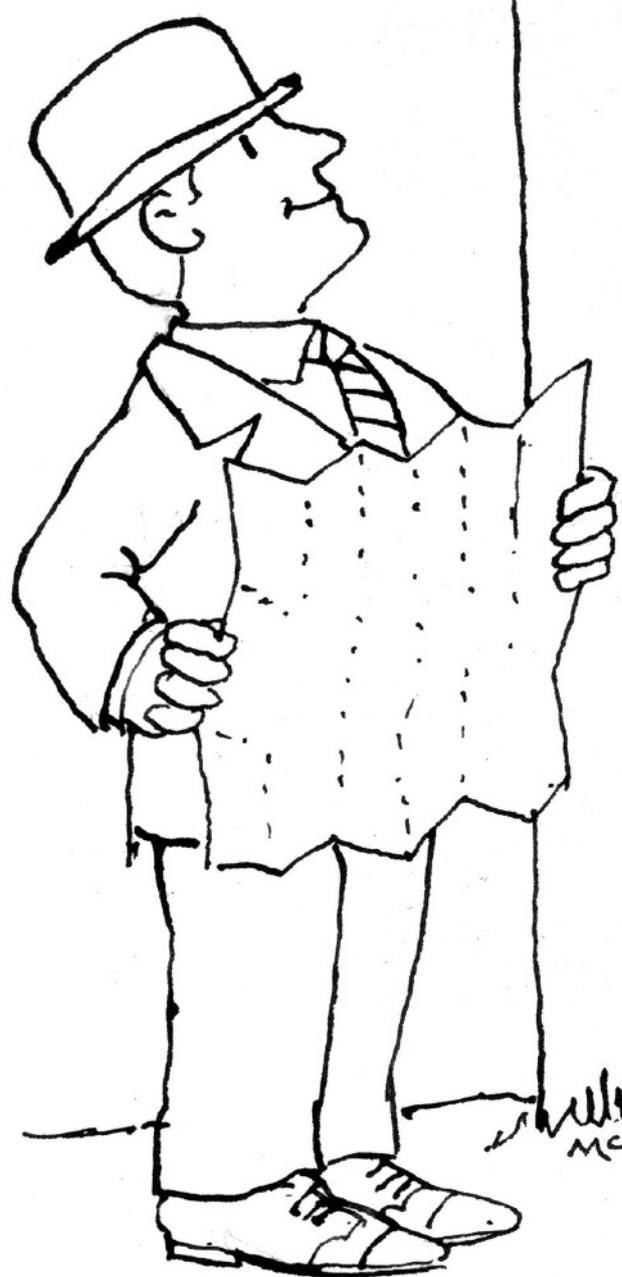
www.activityvillage.co.uk/magic_tricks.htm

To get a taste for magic!

www.tallstories.org.uk

Anything you need to know about Tall Stories and all of our past and future shows can be found here.

Festive Road



McKee