

## An essay from The Archive Team at Falmouth University reflecting on Kneehigh's glorious 40 years

Kneehigh Theatre was founded by teacher Mike Shepherd (b1953) in Cornwall in 1980. The first phase of Kneehigh's development commenced with theatre workshops run in Shepherd's spare time. These workshops were a collaboration with an eclectic group of individuals – including students, a farmer, a sign writer, a thrash guitarist and an electrician – with a mandate to create work for children and their families. This company of players would become Kneehigh Theatre – with its own distinct manifesto and ethos for creating vibrant, energetic, accessible, touring productions for a wide audience.

From the beginning Kneehigh approached theatre by organically developing ensemble pieces of a highly physical and spectacular nature, to be performed in local environments. This ethos is reflected in much of their early work in pieces such as **Awful Knawful** (1980) based loosely on the stunt motorcyclist Evel Knievel, **The Mystery Machine** (1981) based on the Children's book *The Phantom Tollbooth* by Norton Juster, **Mrs Corbetts Ghost** (1981) based on the novel of Leon Garfield and **Around the World in Eighty Days (Minutes)** (1982) adapted from the Jules Verne classic. These productions were performed for families in both conventional locations such as community centres and alongside those of an increasingly unorthodox nature such as cliff tops, up trees and on abandoned industrial sites.

*“An over-heightened sensitivity, coupled with innate naughtiness, led me to start Kneehigh”* Mike Shepherd, 2008

After establishing a reputation for this early work it would be their 1985 production of the Cornish tale **Tregeagle** which would lead the Company in a new direction. A piece originally conceived by Shepherd as a production for schools earlier in the 1980s, *Tregeagle's* second incarnation – with the influence of director Jon Oram – became an innovative, high-energy creation. The production was significant in terms of the use of music and song as part of the narrative, as well as incorporating masks and energetic 'theatre sports', the latter credited to Oram as a lasting contribution to the Kneehigh aesthetic. Importantly, *Tregeagle* was also their first production to tour outside of Cornwall and – thanks to Oram – to receive grant funding. This production would come to define Kneehigh's second phase, embodying the philosophy that 'grass-roots theatre' could build audiences – as established by Footsbarn in the 1970s. Shepherd sites Footsbarn and

their decision to leave Cornwall in 1984 as an important factor in Kneehigh's early development. Kneehigh's work shared a similar aesthetic, attracting the local Fooksbarn audience, and Shepherd acknowledges that that pressure of expectation in the vacuum left by the more established company forced Kneehigh to improve.

The latter half of the 1980s saw Kneehigh touring regularly outside of Cornwall including several visits to Edinburgh Festival with productions such as **Cyborg: A Folktale of the Future** (1987), **Stig** (1988) a reworking of Clive King's Stig of the Dump, and **Sun and Shadow (An Electric Adventure Story)** (1988) which toured both in schools and a 300 seater big top tent. During this time the Company also maintained their Theatre in Education programme with **Footprints I and II** (1986-87) taking children on a hunt for a magical beast, **The Thinking Kit** (1990) encouraging children to develop imaginative lateral thinking, and **The Story Box** (1989-90) a magical adventure introducing infants to using costumes and music.

In 1989, Kneehigh celebrated the official opening of their rehearsal barns at Lamledra, Gorran Haven. This was the first time the Company had a permanent base to work on Research & Development and rehearsals, and remains their creative base to date. Shepherd describes the barns in Cornwall as a place where things can get done, "[a secret, special place where we can seed ideas](#)". Almost all Kneehigh productions after 1990 started life there, with the cast and creative team assembling for an intense fortnight of collaborative devising.



*The Kneehigh Barns, Gorran Haven, 1990. By Steve Tanner*

One central theme of Kneehigh's work is the Company's commitment to the use of fairy tales, myths and legends which during the late 1980s & 1990s would come to embrace both those of a Cornish and European tradition. Another incarnation of **Tregeagle** in 1989 would prove important for the Company as it was the first production built for touring outdoors, and the first with Bill Mitchell as designer. Mitchell would become a significant force in the design and directorial vision of not only Kneehigh but in the wider theatre world, focussing increasingly on creating large-scale pieces of walking theatre that used landscape not just as a backdrop but as an integral part of the storytelling. He had previously worked with Welfare State International who created large scale outdoor spectacles, and contributed that passion and experience of site-specific work to Kneehigh's increasing vocabulary. Mitchell went on to form his own company Wildworks with his partner Sue Hill. The first Wildworks production was a co-production with Kneehigh – **A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings** (2004).

In addition to the outdoor, high design work of Mitchell, Shepherd characterises Kneehigh's 1990s through the collaboration with playwright Nick Darke. Amongst others, Darke wrote **Ting Tang Mine** (1990), **The King of Prussia** (1997), and **The Riot** (1999) all three telling politicized stories of

Cornwall through a lens of Kneehigh's irreverent energetic performances. In these plays Darke's voice shines through: "playful and political, fantastical and yet grounded, profoundly Cornish (wherever the play might be set), fierce, angry, stubborn, warm, exotically foreign, and always, like the author, terribly funny" ([read the full article](#)). **The King of Prussia** was a breakthrough for Kneehigh; the first time they had performed in London – and to nearly universal positive reviews – gaining them and Darke high profile interest from The National Theatre.