

## **Interviews on the making of “A Child’s Christmas in Wales”**

*A Child’s Christmas in Wales* is a unique collaboration between the Lantern Theater Company and interdisciplinary performance-maker Sebastienne Mundheim's White Box Theatre. KC MacMillan, the Lantern Theater Company’s Associate Artistic Director, sat down with Sebastienne to talk about the experience.

### **KC: How did this collaboration evolve?**

**SM:** This project began in 2008 when Charles saw *Sea of Birds*, a performance/installation work I made for Live Arts. *Sea of Birds* told the story about my mother and her family fleeing Latvia during the Second World War. It was lyrical, immersive and about remembering a break from an idyllic childhood. It was also performance about the pleasure of storytelling and the way that storytelling makes memory. Charles asked if I would be interested in adapting Dylan Thomas’s “A Child’s Christmas in Wales,” a poem about childhood and remembering. Charles felt that my aesthetic and sensibility fit well with the poet and images. We had conversations about musical structure, visual imagery, the way memory and imagination work. Charles then developed the resources to produce this show. I am grateful.

### **KC: You call yourself an interdisciplinary performance-maker. What does this mean?**

**SM:** I didn't study theatre or performance. I came to perform because I like working with people and animating worlds. In college I studied Painting and English, but I didn't want to art alone in a studio. I started to work with community groups and kids, making installations; eventually I wanted the piece of the installations to move. In 1994 I started to do some museum education. I wrote stories to help children learn more about artists, poets, collection/exhibition content. I started to illustrate these stories with props, musicians, dancers, actors. I came to performance from both of those trajectories - wanting to be a good communicator, liking to make things and be around people. In fact for me the making PROCESS is as important as the product. I like to work with artists, non-artists, adults and children. I like to use non-toxic materials, encourage discussion, revelation, the pleasure of craft along the way. We have dinner discussion groups; we spend a lot of time stitching and machiering. I always have interns and volunteers, both because I need them to get it all done, and because I like having all kinds of participants. It’s about what we can DO, not what we can buy. We use ordinary, non-toxic materials.

**KC: What is the process of creating and rehearsing a piece like Child's Christmas?**

**SM:** We read, re-read, discuss image and metaphor. Then I work with a group of fabricators and start to create the objects I am most interested in making (either because they have visceral appeal, or they are metaphorically important -- usually both!) Once we have created the physical world, we invite the performers in to discover what is there ... the world is fragile and has limitation and invitation -- the performers respond to that and invent movement. I then start to shape the movement ... we layer the rhythm of the language in last ... I always write and perform the narrative in my work. This is the first time I have worked with an actor's voice (Genevieve). So that's exciting. The narrator storyteller has to know the rhythm and choreography, have a sensitivity to what she conjures and how she experiences what is happening around her -- how that impacts her language and nuance of interpretation.

I love Thomas's language. I didn't want to obscure it or slow it down. I wanted to punctuate it, revel in it, and allow us to remember moments. I also wanted the pleasure of responding to memorable moments and making things that are fun to make. Like Thomas, when I immerse in making cat, fire truck, little town, big moon, the dark side of melancholy goes away. I decided to work in tandem with Thomas, pulling out specific concrete images around which story and fluid description wrap themselves. We read, we thought, we built a physical world, we invited the performers to invent and play inside of that world.

**KC: How is it different from theater making? Did these differences create challenges or happy surprises for you?**

**SM:** It's been great to have the production support from the theater, really great! The time line for making this was really short for me. That was challenging.

**KC: Anything else?**

**SM:** I really thank Charles McMahan and the Lantern for inviting me to do this project. It has been an enjoyable, well-supported process. Alongside me, visual artists Anna DeCaria, Watsuki Harrington, and Dot Vile have spent many hours making wonderful things with their hands. Care, craftsmanship, and delight in creating both environment and individual moment are essential to this work.  
Lance

[Kniskern, the Lantern's technical director] made everything run smoothly. This cast, formed through invitations from Charles McMahan and me, has been an open-minded, positive, inventive, smart and skilled group that moved quickly

into a fluid ensemble-mentality. Rob [Kaplowitz, the show's sound designer] is great thinker and maker. I couldn't be luckier.

**What are your hopes for the future of this work and your collaborative relationship?**

This is the first iteration of this work. We made in less than four months -- exciting to get something up so quickly. I would like to develop this further and hope that we can run it continuously. I love doing the interviews with people about their holidays and incorporating those. I also love creating workshops -- maybe we could incorporate some children's projects into the parade of images. I really appreciate the support and insight from the Lantern ... we are talking about what's next!