



Tim Bray with the two key cast members in his new production.

KEN DOWNE

+FOUR corners

EDITED BY JOANNA WANE

BrayTown

The Mary Poppins of children's theatre.

It's a loss of innocence all children have to face. But Tim Bray took it harder than most. "I remember when I was a kid realising Santa wasn't real. It was awful," he says, his animated face collapsing into the memory of that childhood betrayal.

"I thought, 'There's no magic in the world.' So that's what I try to do: bring a little magic back into the world."

Bray has been doing just that for the past 20 years, from his early days with Mary Amoores at Auckland Youth Theatre to the formation of his own company, Tim Bray Productions. He might not fly in by umbrella, but his adaptations of children's classics have become a school-holiday fixture at The PumpHouse on Auckland's North Shore (where *The Wind in the Willows* was performed outdoors, with Otter emerging from Lake Pupuke in a full-body wetsuit).

And if you think kids need computer-generated wizardry and sophisticated special effects to keep them entertained these days, think again. *The Santa Claus Show*, a simple tale written by Bray about the true meaning of Christmas, has been a popular annual tradition since the early nineties and draws the same audience back year after year.

"Children still have wonderful imaginations and an amazing sense of play," says Bray. "They're learning about the world, so in some ways the characters in the stories are part of that process – whether it's imagining what it's like to be a foolish emperor [*The Emperor's New Clothes*], the nonsense in *The Owl and the Pussycat*, or a girl who lives by herself and is strong and independent like Pippi Longstocking."

The dynamics of friendship form the underlying theme of his next production, *Snake and Lizard*, based on Joy Cowley's

book – illustrated by Gavin Bishop and named NZ Post Book of the Year in 2008.

Aimed at children aged four to 10, the show will be accompanied by live music with a western "desert-style" sound. Both Cowley and Bishop have been invited as special guests to the gala opening on September 26, but Bray's more likely to be lurking in the shadows than sitting up front with the VIPs. "Sometimes I'll stand at the side of the theatre and just watch the kids' faces," he says.

Bray left university with a science degree but ended up directing and teaching drama at Auckland Youth Theatre. Later he ran Central Theatre from the inner-city venue that's now home to The Basement. (*The Nice Show*, an adult cabaret starring Kevin Smith and Lisa Chappell, became a cult hit, with Bray playing the "nice MC".)

In 2004, he began what's been a hugely successful partnership with The PumpHouse, producing half a dozen children's shows each year. (In between seasons, he tours schools as a "theatre in education" performer for the national road-safety campaign.) As part of his mission to bring magic to the masses, Bray has funding to give free performances to students from low-decile South Auckland schools. For some, it's the first time they've ever been over the harbour bridge.

Despite the tangible excitement in the theatre when the lights go down, Bray says children are a tough audience to win over. "As adults we'll sit through entertainment that's not really very good, clap at the end of it and bitch about it afterwards. Kids let you know straight away."

Snake and Lizard runs from September 26-October 10 at The PumpHouse in Takapuna (for more details, visit www.timbrayproductions.co.nz). JOANNA WANE