



Season for Young People

Jim Morrow, Managing Artistic Director of Mermaid Theatre of Nova Scotia shared his thoughts with TPAC Teaching Artist, Beth Anne Musiker, on the upcoming performance of *It's Okay to Be Different – Stories by Todd Parr*, for which he serves as both Director and Production Designer.

The conversation took place just a few days prior to the first rehearsal and after more than a year of preparation for the production. Mr. Morrow has assembled a diverse team of talented artists, created the puppets and so much more. We hope the following excerpts of their conversation provide insight and inspiration as you prepare to attend *It's Okay to Be Different – Stories by Todd Parr*.

What inspired you to take on Todd Parr's stories for this Mermaid Theatre production?

Morrow

We base all our plays on the written work of respected authors. Part of our mission is to promote literature and engage young children in the process of owning, borrowing, renting, or finding books and reading them. We are celebrating our 50th year, so we've been creating this work for young children for a long time.

Todd Parr's books are interesting because they share messages which are more overt than many stories we've chosen in the past, and yet, are explained with a gentleness and humor to which we were attracted.

I aim to create plays in which children can participate, so the experience becomes much more than sitting and listening. There's an engagement that happens between the child and the action on stage that opens an opportunity for the child to become enveloped in the work.

Why did you choose these Todd Parr stories?

Morrow

Todd's work is very playful. He's very prolific and has written many books.

We were attracted to the brightness of Todd's imagery, and the simplicity of his characters in *It's Okay to Be Different*. He's not trying to overwhelm you with detail; he leaves a lot to the imagination. We are attracted to his bold use of color and the idea that, currently, many of us are struggling with what it means to be different.

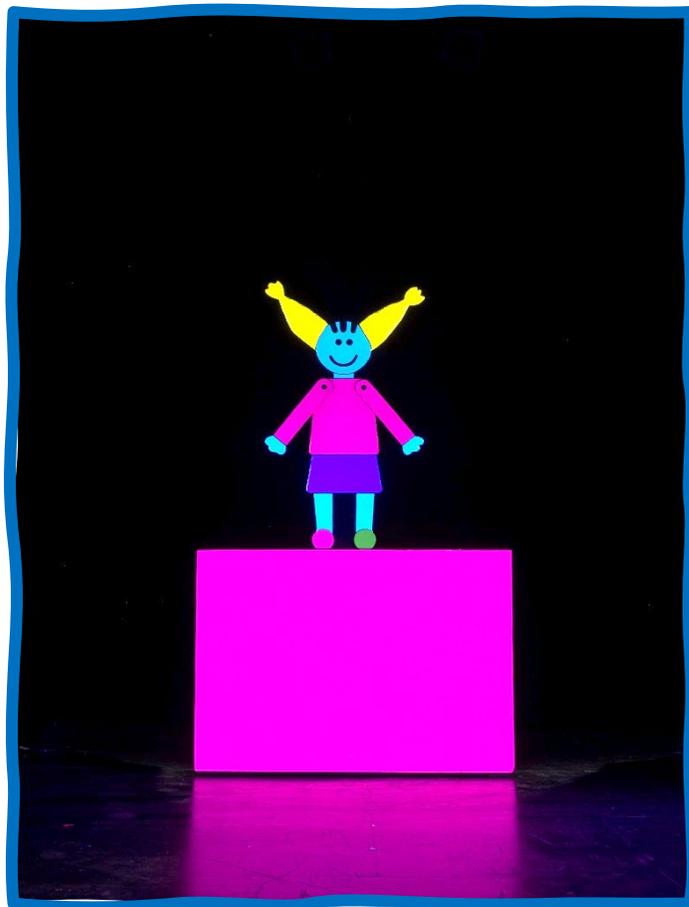
I think it's important to introduce children to the notion that if you're sitting in the audience, and you feel somehow different from the people around you, that's okay. Not only that, but let's celebrate our diversity because that helps us grow and learn.

The story is about learning to appreciate how we are different from one another and how much we are all the same in many respects. I love the fact that Todd shares these ideas in a playful way. He creates interesting characters and fun little situations that we can bring to life. It's an important message that young children should be hearing, and it's a perspective that we at Mermaid share and want to promote.

The Earth Book is a good complement to *It's Okay to Be Different*, because it's promoting good stewardship of the earth and our own place in that collective responsibility. Certainly, it's very topical, asking what we can do as individuals to help Mother Earth become healthy. And I think this is also an important message for very young children to hear.

I felt we needed a third story to complete the show, and I found *This is My Hair* intriguing because it's about being happy with who you are. It's about having confidence in who you are and expressing yourself in a way that makes you feel comfortable. All those ideas are wrapped in a simple, silly story about different hair. While *It's Okay to Be Different* is general, *This is My Hair* is more specifically about body image.

Our show is a "jumping off" place to start a conversation with children about these topics. Teachers can continue to explore these ideas in the classroom and reinforce them through dialogue with their students.



What is the order of the stories in the show?

Morrow

We open with *This is My Hair* and transition into *The Earth Book* and then we'll finish with *It's Okay to Be Different*. We've designed a sensory friendly production and we're honoring that approach by gently introducing sound and gently introducing darkness.

To open the show, the two performers will come out on stage and introduce themselves. The audience will see the performers, who will talk about themselves and share what the experience of the show will be like. They'll talk about the color and the lights. For the first book, *This is My Hair*, the lights will be dimmed in a way that allows the performers to remain visible while moving the objects as they tell the story. Then, by degrees, we will ease the children into the darkness, so they won't even realize it's happening.

Next, we'll move to *The Earth Book*, which is performed on play boxes. Then the final story, *It's Okay to Be Different* will take over the whole stage. So, we start small, and build slightly bigger and then we end with a full production of large movement. We find that works quite well. We aim to change things up physically, emotionally, and sonically for each story to keep the audience engaged throughout the experience.

Will the performers be narrating the book as it was written?

Morrow

Nothing has been altered in terms of the wording. The children will hear narration using language that comes directly from the book. *This is My Hair* will be narrated using the recorded voices of the two performers. First the audience will hear the performers speak live, and then they'll hear their recorded voices as they animate the objects and move around the stage.

For *The Earth Book*, we're very excited to partner with highly respected Mi'kmaw, spoken word artist, Rebecca Thomas, as narrator. The Mi'kmaw are the indigenous people of Atlantic Canada, and we think it's perfectly fitting to have a Mi'kmaw spokesperson for good stewardship of the earth.

For *It's Okay to Be Different*, we have six children in grades three and four from different cultures who narrate the story. We had a lot of fun working with and recording these six young children from Armbrae Academy in Halifax. They were incredible and brought a lightness of touch, a beauty and warmth to the piece that an adult couldn't bring.

Are you able to tell us about the music in the show?

Morrow

The music is an important element of the production. We have extraordinary Nova Scotian composers, originally from Sri Lanka, working with us. They're going to bring a world music flair to the show which is quite exciting for us. For *The Earth Book* they are pulling sounds from the Amazon that are evocative of the rainforests. The instrumentation will be exotic and fun.

Music for me, provides the emotion for the piece; it lets the audience know how to feel at any given moment. Once we've determined exactly what is needed musically the composers create the score. Once it's created, there will be more rehearsal time to work the beats into the choreography.

We're also creating the production using predominantly recycled or recyclable materials. We are committed to lowering our impact on the environment as much as possible.

How did the challenges of touring impact your production choices; from the size of the company to design elements and the puppets themselves?

Morrow

I'm both the designer and director of the show. I started carving the puppets during the COVID shut down. There are hundreds of characters, so it was a lot of work. Each puppet, while designed to be very flat, has multiple layers; they're really quite exquisite.

I've been creating plays for 40 odd years. At this point, I kind of know what we need to do. Mermaid is different than a lot of companies, because all of our puppets, props and scenery have to come apart and fit into the back of a vehicle and then travel down the road and be set up in an hour and struck in an hour.

In addition, we perform in many different types of venues with audiences of 300 or 3000. We have to take into consideration how the same show unfolds across these different venues, which, naturally, impacts our decisions regarding color, size, and animation. There will be intimate puppet animation as well as big sweeping moves.

So those are huge constraints on the work that we do.



Did I see that you are using glow paint for a portion of the show?

Morrow

Yes – for the whole thing! This will be an entirely “black lit” show that allows performers to be both seen and unseen! Using fluorescent paint and ultraviolet lighting means the performers can be hidden until the light hits the objects which creates interesting, magical moments that provide some mystery for audiences.

Are you able to share more about how the paint and lighting work together?

Morrow

The lighting is ultraviolet, and the paint is fluorescent. This is typically called ‘black-light theatre’. When the ultraviolet light hits the fluorescent paint, it glows. What's interesting is that the ultraviolet light is actually blue light even though they call it black light. So, if you project UV light on white, it will show up light blue, and that's a consideration for our painter when she's trying to arrive at the various colors. She must always factor in the blue spectrum.

It's hard to ignore Todd Parr's use of black line in his illustrations. How did you choose to handle that?

Morrow

This is where things become complicated. Anything that is black disappears against the black background. As a result, we couldn't outline the objects, but we do have significant black lines within the shapes, so black lines separate the skirt from the blouse, or the legs from the pant or the shoes, for example. Anytime there's black hair like in *This is My Hair*, we have taken light gray paint and outlined the shape. So, you will be able to see the black in between the gray lines.

I'm curious about the scenic design for *The Earth Book* because there are so many smaller objects in those pages of the book – vegetables and fruit being grown or garbage on the street, etc. What did you do about these smaller objects?

Morrow

I have chosen what I consider to be the most important objects. For example, with all the little garden plants, I've chosen three heads of lettuce and four strawberries, to create a sense of place. At some point when there are so many items you have to make a decision about what to include, or we would need a transport truck to carry it all and more people to handle it, as well. We've chosen as much as I think is necessary to explain the moment and honor the story.

To what degree will the imagery be faithful to the story, or how much will you be opening it up?

Morrow

The production is 100% faithful to the story and the images. Audiences will see the characters from the books on stage. They are going to be identical in color and shape. I have made editing decisions with some of the ancillary details that do not affect a particular moment on stage. We must place the characters in Todd Parr's world, but we can choose how much of the scene in the book we really need to set the context.

Have there been some innovations in your puppetry as you prepare this piece?

Morrow

We never know exactly how each creation of a new play is going to advance our knowledge of what we do. At some point, there's new information that's going to stay with the company because we're investing in both the creation of work and our own professional development.

The only reason I'm able to produce the work we're doing right now is because of all the work that came before. I have learned to work with the constraints – because the reality is only three people will be on stage telling the story in each show that we produce.

It takes a huge amount of time for us to work out the choreography in a way that keeps the action moving and allows the performers to be in the right place at the right time to handle the objects in time to the music. Figuring out this portion of each show is always a huge challenge, and we

discover how it's going to work as we do it. Manipulating these flat objects that have limited movement themselves is something new for us, so the challenge is learning how best to handle them and keep it entertaining.

It's really fun that people are interested in questions about the details of creating the show, and there's no end to the detail, no end to the decisions that have to be made each day. During the four weeks of rehearsal, there'll be a whole new set of decisions; some will be significant! For example, how will we introduce the young performers? What is a certain moment about and how can we best explain it? There are so many questions that will need answers during the rehearsal process.

For me, the most important thing is the audience. I direct and create thinking about how the audience will want to feel. It's about creating a positive experience for children.

We have the confidence going into rehearsals that it's going to be entertaining and quite special. It's going to be unlike anything they've ever seen before, and that is kind of neat.

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Morrow

Yes! While I act like the quarterback of a football team, there's an entire team of dedicated and creative people working on this play, and they have been working on it for a while now. They pour heart and soul into it. I think if the show is successful, it is because they believed in it as well. We have an extraordinary team of people here at Mermaid who will make this possible.

