

## **THE STORY OF THE HUGH WHO?**

### **Catch the heart off guard and blow it open**

*Jenny Gunn describes the process of development, the funding and the success of a special children's opera project in a special place.*

Cromarty Arts Society was established 19 years ago to promote the arts in their widest sense to the population of Cromarty on The Black Isle in the Highlands of Scotland. Forgive me for this rather 'dry' introduction, but it is important to set the scene for a project like this. Most small communities believe themselves to be special, even unique. Cromarty really is. Geographically it is 'the toe of the sock' of the Black Isle, situated 25 miles north east of Inverness, 10 miles from the nearest town and very self-contained. We have 800 inhabitants, about the size of a medium scale secondary school, with a community spirit and dynamism that would be the envy many other small towns, and a Primary School with 100 pupils.

For some time I had harboured an ambition to commission and stage something spectacular in Cromarty, and suggested we go for a children's opera, based on the life of Hugh Miller, and performed by ALL the children. 2002 was the bicentenary of Hugh Miller, aptly described as the David Attenborough of his time. A stone mason and self taught geologist. A writer much admired by Dickens and the editor of The Witness newspaper. A group of interested organisations was brought together by the Community Council to plan the celebrations and a project officer appointed with financial assistance from the local Enterprise Company.

Over the years I have built up strong connections with artists and performers. When touring companies visit Cromarty they inevitably stay overnight and firm friendships are established over the years. One of the first professional companies to visit us 18 years ago was Scottish Opera with their wonderful touring arm *Scottish Opera Go Round* and that is how we met David Munro, Music Director, composer and music specialist who had considerable experience writing for children and staging children's musical shows. David and Julie Gilchrist had established a company, GMG Productions, which worked with many thousands of children all over the UK and Ireland, writing and staging musical theatre.

First of all we approached David who brought in lyricist Ross Stenhouse. This may seem a bit topsy turvy. We had no idea what the costs would be, but having discussed our ideas with the professionals, and explained that we wanted the very best of everything, they were able to go away to think and Julie at GMG was able to give us a budget. £20,000 seems a lot of money, especially to a small group who had never done anything like this before, but when we broke it down we realised we had a very good deal. The budget covered commissioning of music and lyrics, professional lighting, choreography, stage management, production design, laying down of music tracks, printing scripts and professionally designed and made costumes. We thought the costumes would be 'one size fits all' but in the event each child was measured and a costume made especially for them, even eye colour was noted!

The team that GMG had gathered was an exciting one. Elly Goodman is a hugely inspiring director, one of the most effective children's drama specialists in the business, Ross and David were highly experienced in their fields and the technical staff all fitted our demand for the very best of everything.

Then we began to have more ideas....There is a film and television production company based in Cromarty (yes it is a surprising place) called *Move On Up*. Wanting to bring in as many young people as possible to the Hugh Who? project we decided to organise a video workshop with them. Nine teenagers would work with professional film-makers, learn all aspects of producing and editing, and make a video of the preparation and completion of the opera. This also meant that we could have a video of the whole show added to the teenagers' work. This added a further £8500 to our budget and Hugh Who Too was born.

But wait a minute! This was becoming something very special. Why don't we try and get a TV company interested? So BBC2 Scotland made plans for an 'Artworks' programme. This meant the video course participants would be working alongside a professional camera crew and director.

All that had to be done now was to get the school on board and raise the money. The school thought it was a great idea. I think they thought it would remove some of the burden of organising 'Hugh Miller' projects within the school. Little did they, or we, know how hard they would eventually work, but all the staff were wonderful in their support and back up throughout.

How do we find the money? Ross and Cromarty Enterprise would help but had a limit of £2000. That was the easiest application, though we had to make their money apply to the video project as formal education would not qualify for their funding. The Highland Council Arts Development Officer could also help us, but again on a relatively small scale. I rang the Scottish Arts Council New Music department. I am sure that all the SAC officers are equally helpful, but we hit gold with ours. She explained that we would be better to go for National Lottery Children and Young People funding, and that this application would also cross her desk. How could she help? Could she come and discuss the application with me, or would I be down in Edinburgh to go through it with her? Yes I would and I did.

I have applied to the SAC for relatively small annual funding for the past 15 years, but never anything of this complexity or scale. It involved considerable research into the local authority Arts Strategy, organising letters of support, costing the 'in kind' work, teachers time, my time, administration costs. I should have added up the hours I spent. It seemed like hundreds! The hours of work paid off and we were granted 75% of our costs. The final small amounts were made up from the National Trust for Scotland, who run Hugh Miller's Cottage in Cromarty, and the Cromarty Common Good fund. We would also have some income from the three performances we had planned. By Christmas 2001 we were able to give the go ahead, with the show planned for early October 2002 when the actual bicentenary occurred.

How do you organise a cost-effective commission of this scale? GMG have a very good system. Once written the music is recorded on disc and the lyrics, music and script printed. This is sent to the school where the children are taught by their own teachers, including our peripatetic music teacher who visits once a week. Teachers and parents measured children for costumes and the production team visited several weeks before the event to audition for the leading roles and generally prepare the ground.

Eight weeks before the show we suddenly had to find extra funding. We had a fairly basic allowance for the production design, but now one of the team had been working with an amazing multi-media video artist. Wouldn't it be fantastic if he could design the production? We managed to raise £1500 from the Enterprise Company which freed other money for the designer. He visited Cromarty, re-created some wonderful old photographs of the town using the present, adult, population.....more people involved. The script, music and CDs arrived. Wonderful songs were soon heard being sung around the town ...OUR songs and an ever-growing 'community' excitement and anticipation began to build.

### **The real work begins**

Now we waited for the first week in October when the professionals arrived to work intensively with the children. The choreographer dropped out due to illness a week before the team were due here but an excellent replacement was quickly found. We were asking a lot from our composer and lyricist. Hugh Miller was fascinating if you were interested in geology, schisms in the Church, social history, and his life ended in suicide. David and Ross decided to concentrate on young Hugh and the vibrant and sometimes hard life in Cromarty during his childhood, touching on his romance and marriage, his huge literary success and finally his death, but in a very stylised form. Ross, a professional actor as well as a writer, would play adult Hugh and a boy from the school was chosen to play young Hugh.

Rehearsals began. Endless troupes of small children plied back and forth between school and hall, singing their hearts out as they went. The adult population slowed as they passed the hall, listening in. It was decided to begin the performance at the beautiful old East Church with Miller's memorial service, and then process behind a fiddler along Church Street, still much the same as it was in Miller's time, to the hall. More adults were brought in and bustling 18<sup>th</sup> Century street scenes were recreated as the audience passed. Wonderful back projected photographs of old and new Cromarty played on a sail shaped screen as the audience entered. The children worked with Inigo, our designer, to make videos. Primary 5,6 and 7 produced all the artwork for programmes, tickets, posters. The whole town was audibly buzzing!

### **What did Cromarty expect?**

We knew that the team would produce something very special. Mums, Dads and Grandparents were expecting a 'superior' school play. Though I was around all week, I had little feeling of how the show was coming together. What we saw and heard at our 'world premier' of Hugh Who? was simply mind blowing. The audience broke into spontaneous cheers and applause throughout the performance, even the video effects brought rounds of applause. At the end there were cheers, tears, hugs,

The Head Teacher of the local Secondary School left a message on my answerphone, "It was STUNNING, simply STUNNING". Our local Regional Councillor ran up and hugged me with tears running down his face. Those reactions really summed it up, and we had two more performances to go! Cromarty almost literally swelled with pride in the achievements of its children.

### **What made this project so successful, and what did the community get out of it?**

Bringing in professionals from outside the area means that none of the children had a history. There were no naughty or awkward children, no pre-judgement. Eyebrows had been raised when the casting of young Hugh had been announced, a troubled and troublesome child. He shone throughout rehearsals and performances. He had lost his father 18 months before. None of us knew until his mother told us and of the profound effect the project had on him. Hugh Miller lost his father when he was 5. One teacher commented that the 'invisible' children also had a chance to shine. Everyone was in the show, all shared the hard work and the glory. One small girl decided she did not like the stage, but she was costumed and did everything but walk out into the limelight.

Elly told the children on the first day of rehearsals that they would be turned into "All singing, all dancing superstars". She kept her promise. The school wanted to kidnap her and keep her here, so effective was the way she worked with children. The team had been particularly concerned about working with children as young as 4. They need not have worried. Their song called 'Chip,Chip,Chipping Away at the Rocks', about finding fossils, was one of the highlights of the show. My own 4 year old grand daughter learnt it by some system of osmosis. It had superb percussive music and simple but profound lyrics *"Each boulder's like an open book lets split it wide and take a look, perhaps we'll find some great big dinosaur bones"*.

The effect on the Cromarty has been equally profound and hopefully long lasting. This is a small community with high long term unemployment and all the transport problems associated with the Highlands. To have discovered that it can do what at times seemed like the impossible, and do it superbly, has left people saying "Why don't we do..." rather than "I don't suppose we could..." The perception of the town has changed. In the TV film the production team described how free and creative our children were, how wonderful it was that they looked after one another. People from other communities who saw the programme have picked up on this and spoken of how good it must be to live in such a place. To me it underlines my belief in the vital importance of the arts to all of us, especially the children. In a time of budgets cuts, when we are gradually losing peripatetic music, art and drama teachers we must fight very hard to keep them.

All that is left is to build on what we have begun. Sir Thomas Urquhart, translator of Rabelais, an eccentric who died in prison of a fit of laughing at the restoration of Charles II has an anniversary in 5 years time, and our adults want their turn!

### **Reactions to Hugh Who?**

*“There is great ...and then there is exceptional”* – this banner headline was on the front page of The Ross-shire Journal - followed by an appreciation by our Highland Regional Councillor, Dr.David Alston, which included the following comments:

“The poet Seamus Heaney writes of moments when the everyday and expected can instead ‘catch the heart off guard and blow it open’. The performances last Friday and Saturday by all 100 pupils in Cromarty Primary School of the newly commissioned children’s opera ‘Hugh Who?’ were among such moments. Most arrived expecting a merely competent performance – until the unexpected happened.

Some magic had been worked and every one of the children had been transformed into a performer with a confidence and assurance, which we had not seen before. They moved to a choreography that embraced all 100, collectively and as individuals; they acted with verve and panache; and they sang their hearts out. I know of many people, including myself, who had to fight back tears which sprang from an almost overwhelming pride in the children of the town.

And was it worth it? None of the children will forget it, all will have learnt from it, and, for a handful, it will change their lives by opening the way to previously unimagined possibilities. Anyone with an open heart will know that it was worth every minute of effort and every penny. Hugh Miller, whose bicentenary we are celebrating, would surely have understood. He knew the secret of good education – that, in his own words, the person ‘who keeps his eyes and his mind open will always find fitting, though, it may be, hard schoolmasters, to speed him on in his lifelong education’. With some of the same force ‘Hugh Who?’ opened eyes and minds to the potential of our children – and blew some hearts open”.

#### **And the children?**

*“ I thought last week was exhausting but exciting...While Friday got closer I got more sleepier. On Friday night I was all excited for the big night. I thought Saturday night was the best ever”.*

*“ I woke up one day, as usual, I stepped out of bed, as usual, I got dressed, as usual, I went to school, as usual, but this was no usual day. I couldn’t wait till school, not so usual. It was the first day of the Hugh Miller Opera”.*

*“First I thought its just going to be a normal play at the school. But when I went to the Victoria Hall I was amazed by the lights, cameras, screen then I truly believed that this is going to be amazing opera.....first I never wanted it to happen. At the end I didn’t want it to go”.*

*“ Last week was the best week of my childhood. We put on a show that was spectacular.....I thought it would not be a big play but it was huge..”*

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#### **Two footnotes**

1. Cromarty Primary school has just lost half of its centrally provided peripatetic music allocation, though with characteristic determination shown by this article, the community is not likely to give in easily.

2. From the 1946 and 1947 Advisory Councils on Scottish Education. Readers will be interested in the following quotation Jenny Gunn came across recently quoted in the Glasgow Herald, applying equally well to music as to theatre:

“In no single school activity are all the values of the new education so finely embodied as in the production and acting of a play. It integrates, as nothing else does, almost every department of the school: for literature, the social studies, art, music and the dance, electrical science, the

workshop and the sewing room are all alike mobilised to one end. It gives the freest scope to the most varied talents, and in its uniting of individual effort and self-expression with sustained corporate enterprise it is the microcosm of the school as a community. It draws together what educational unwisdom has too often divorced, the intellectual and the practical, the artistic and the homely. And it has its own lesson to convey; for it has brought to many a youngster the first realisation of his dependence on schoolmates whom he had lightly esteemed, and it has given to some who were but modestly endowed the joy and enhanced self-respect of discovering that they are needed and have indeed a part to play – whether it be before the footlights or behind the scenes”