

# Fairground Fun

Back in 2006, when Chris Kohn was Artistic Associate at Arena Theatre Company, a DVD landed on his desk. Unknown to him then, this was the start of a new theatrical collaboration involving object “auditions”, a bunch of puppeteers and Scoopy, an ice-cream scoop allergic to the cold. From Melbourne, Chris Kohn, now Artistic Director of Arena, writes about making *Mr Freezy*.

The DVD that hit my desk that day was a show called *Men of Steel*, by a company of the same name. I had heard a bit about it, as it had won some awards at the Melbourne Comedy Festival and was created by some recent graduates of the VCA Puppetry School who sounded very interesting.

We make about one or two new shows each year at Arena, so there isn't a lot of room for picking up on unsolicited approaches from companies, writers or directors. But on this occasion, we made an exception. We had a ball making *Mr Freezy*. One of the most fun things about making object theatre is the shopping. We went to countless kitchen supply stores, greengrocers, supermarkets and op shops around Melbourne, “auditioning” appliances, utensils and food. The only way to do this is by staging little object theatre scenes in the aisles - “Try before you buy.” It made for some odd encounters.

It was very early in the process that we decided we would set the show in an ice-cream shop, and that a scoop would be the main character. Scoopy effectively cast himself, as he was such a great character from the minute he was first animated. His permanently open mouth and made him seem like a fish out of water, in a constant state of bewilderment, at odds with the world. Dramatic action does not exist without conflict, so we introduced the idea that he was bad at his job, allergic to the cold and therefore in search of his true self. We then realised he needed a purpose to go out into the world and prove himself - a hero's journey - so we had his mother kidnapped by the malevolent force of the hot dog machine, and

the story grew from there. The other characters all emerged organically, through weeks of open-ended play with all the food and implements we had gathered. It was important to us that the characters made sense in terms of their actual function, so a more old-fashioned, tarnished scoop became Scoopy's mother, the evil nemesis was a large, electric hot dog maker, and other worlds Scoopy journeyed through were different parts of the shop - the sink, the milkshake-making area and the hot food section, for example.

It is a high energy show which was an absolute joy to make and an even greater pleasure to present to young audiences. I love watching as the audience enters at the start of each show, with ice-cream



themed music pumping. We try to make it clear that this is a space in which they are allowed to be involved, interactive and irreverent. It is a thrill to see them enthralled by the anarchic silliness and be drawn in by the loveable and surprisingly complex characters. The most rewarding moment for me is to be standing in the foyer when the audiences emerge, energised, laughing and talking in animated tones about their favourite bits and re-enacting them for each other. They'll never look at an ice cream scoop the same way again.

CHRIS KOHN

STC ED PRESENTS ARENA THEATRE COMPANY'S  
MR FREEZY PLAYING FROM 24 JUNE IN WHARF 2.  
SUITABLE FOR AGES 5 AND UP. TICKETS FROM \$15