

DAVID WOOLLCOMBE'S

PEACE CHILD HISTORY



For me, the history of *Peace Child* starts in 1971, when I spotted this picture of this gorgeous young lady in the pages of a casting book at the National Film School. After some persuasion and helped by her mother, I was able to cast her in my first film, *The Dinner Party*. A cornucopia of adventures followed – involving her running in her underwear through Hertfordshire meadows, crazy sailing trips of the west coast of Scotland, restoring (- and fighting with a sitting tenant in -) a beautiful house in South Hampstead and, eventually, a New Year's Eve Wedding in 1979, two wonderful children – Alexander and Natasha and a third child – *Peace Child* – all three of which have dominated our lives and made us very, very happy, and very, very proud.

We are still married, 35 years later – and as well as immense happiness, she has given me her wisdom and common sense and shared with me the highs and lows of the Peace Child adventure + a fair amount of harassment on such topics as diet, alcohol consumption, flatulence and personal hygiene.

The actual *Peace Child* history started for me one night in March 1981 – when I answered our front door of our South Hampstead home, and found a man standing there who looked the spitting image of Cat Stevens. I was just on my way out to an ACTT Union Meeting – which I absolutely had to go to. I left him with Rosey, whom he appeared to know – and when I returned, two hours later, he was still there, drinking cups of tea and wanting to play me some music. For some reason, our stereo was bust – so we broke into my brother's flat down stairs where – by another snafu – the light bulbs had all gone. So we sat in the dark – and I heard, for the first time, the magnificent, plangent music of David Gordon.

I was moved, but I had no idea how I could help. David gave me a copy of a colourful book, *The Peace Book*, and asked me to read it. Which I did: it was a somewhat simplistic, Disney-esque story of some nameless children from unnamed countries bringing peace to the world. It had the nice trick that it was set in the future – with an old story-teller explaining how the children did it when he was young. But it was NOT the kind of story that one could imagine being combined with David's majestic music. It would be like having *The Jungle Book* set to

music by Wagner or Vaughan Williams – rather than the wonderful songs of the Sherman brothers.

So I told David – No can do! But he was very persuasive: there has to be a way, he thought. He took me out on a drive to the country – to Caversham, where we talked about his life and his commitment to promoting peace. Rosey had been in touch with him for some time – and she, and her mother, were equally persuasive. Rosey had just given birth to our first wonderful baby – and looking at him, and watching a re-run of Peter Watkins' famous *War Game* film about what happened to parts of Kent after a nuclear attack – I realised that working for Peace might make for a more meaningful life than just making commercial films.

Rosey's mother, Eirwen, had said: "This is something that might change your lives for ever...." I had no thoughts about that – at that stage. If I thought about it at all, I wrestled with: how to marry David's wonderful music to this slight and simple story. Some ideas started to formulate and one morning, in April, I got up early – and went to my study and started writing. I was supposed to go on a film recce to some factory in North London – but I was in full flow, so I told the cameraman to go with out me. By lunchtime, I had 14 pages – and I wrote at the top: PEACE CHILD. And I sent it off – by Fax – to David and Eirwen. Soon after, I got a phone call – and that evening, Rosey and I went round to Eirwen's home in Hamilton Terrace – where it was agreed that I would write and direct, Rosey would produce, Mel Bush and David would oversee – and the World Disarmament Campaign, managed by Michael and Eirwen Harbottle – would be the over-all producer. Bernard Benson, the author of the Peace Book, had secured £40,000 to underwrite the first production in the Royal Albert Hall.

So – we began.

The actual casting, rehearsal and production of the RAH production is a blur in my memory. Certain parts stick out: the arrival of Geoff Westly as an audition pianist for Esther (??) – when we found him so good, we invited him to MD the show. And he was BRILLIANT! I remember the time we took the entire cast up to an abandoned carpet warehouse at Staples Corner to rehearse the movements – it being the only place big enough to lay out the three stages we had planned for the Albert Hall.

And – of course – the story I have told many times since about driving Magnus, Dominic, Jessica and some other cast members home to Hampstead – and hearing them chatting about in the back seat about what they would actually say to a US President were they to meet with him – rather than what I had written for them to say: their ideas were significantly better than my lines – so I changed the script and gave them back some of their lines to say at the next rehearsal.

"But that's what I was saying in the back of the car?!" said Magnus.

"I know," I said, "Now you're going to say it in front of thousands of people in this play!"

"Really??"

"Yes – really."

"That's cool!"

So came about the Peace Child mission to 'empower young people' – by taking their best ideas and showcasing them for adults and their peers to see – whether in a musical play, a debate, a book, a conference – or anything!

On the night itself, several memories persist. A CND person coming up to me and being so angry about the "Keep your bombs...." line. My father bringing me a copy of the Listener, with Gerald Priestland's article in it about Don Richardson's story of the Peace Child in Papua New Guinea – providing the story that has driven Peace Child International's mission these last 35 years:

And – the mess-ups: Peter Straker careening around the underground tunnels in the Albert Hall, seeking the right entrance to come in to sing ‘Child for a Day’ – and looking so flustered, I doubted he could sing a note: and then he sang it. Like an Angel! And my whole fixation about ending the show with Fred Astaire’s scene from the end of ‘On the Beach’ – and the projector didn’t work – and it took me all of an agonised minute to understand that it absolutely didn’t matter: that the audience felt the show was complete as it was – that nobody needed any clever twists at the end to tie it up.

Some months later, I met some one who had arrived late for the show – and crept into the Upper Circle to watch it. She felt the energy as she climbed the stairs – and when she opened to door and came into the arena, she said: “It felt just like diving into a swimming pool of champagne! The whole atmosphere in the hall was fizzing...”

Also later, we heard that Nobel Peace prize winner, Sean McBride, had leant across to his fellow Nobel Peace prize winner, Philip Noel Baker, at the end of the show and said: “This needs to be seen in Washington!” “And Moscow...” said Philip – thus laying out my life’s work for the next 6 years.

But for me – that night – Peace Child was done. I had no plans to do anything further with it – and the following week, I went back to Transatlantic Films and carried on preparing my film productions. Until David Gordon again turned up and told me that I had to go to Washington. I remember Gerry Jampolsky, the author of “Love is Letting Go of Fear”, coming round to our home and offering help and contacts in Washington DC to launch Peace Child in the USA. And a couple of friends of David offered to buy me a ticket to Washington to go explore the possibilities. And so it grew, and grew – until Rosey and I realised that we had a tiger by the tail and we needed to follow where it led.

ORIGINS OF PEACE CHILD

Eirwen Harbottle

1980 was a memorable year.

We were well on the way with the UN World Disarmament Campaign. The first Special Session devoted to Disarmament (SSD1) had taken place at the UN in 1978. The second (SSD2) would follow in 1982. Meanwhile our efforts to obtain a million signatures of support from the public were being diligently promoted by a growing number of local support groups across the country. Many had begun by young mothers looking at their young children and worrying what kind of world they were going to inherit, plagued by the threat of nuclear weapons. Teachers were often reluctant to raise their heads above the parapet of government disapproval when nuclear defence policies came under scrutiny.

The fact that our WDC, although led by two distinguished peacemaking Lords – Philip Noel Baker and Fenner Brockway - was administered by a retired one-star Brigadier in the British Army was an encouragement to many people. If a high ranking soldier could have the courage to speak out in favour of disarmament, why shouldn't they? Sometimes husbands would warn their wives to steer clear of becoming associated with controversial issues such as disarmament and peace protests lest their own job security might be affected. Best leave such things alone, dear.

Abroad a new book by Bernard Benson was winning much acclaim in diplomatic circles. Written and illustrated in the form of a comic by Benson's own hand, it was a savage criticism of the political world of arms traders, nuclear weapons development and the inability of leaders to halt the world clock moving inexorably towards midnight and nuclear annihilation. Woven into this scenario was a tale of a Storyteller telling a group of young people the story of celebrating "Peace Day" and of how children helped to bring peace to the world. Starting with saving the butterflies then the whales and the tigers, they discovered that when a few people with good intentions got together IT WAS AMAZING WHAT THEY COULD DO. The story then continues about a boy meeting the President of a Big Power and the child's conversation with him - of his horror to learn about the Key of Death being carried in a big bag by a man following the President wherever he went. To a party... on a picnic... in church... in bed?

"Yes, yes, yes. Always, always."

"But that's no way to live" said the boy. "No," said the President.

1980 also marked the 40th anniversary of the destruction of Coventry Cathedral and with it a great part of the city itself in a catastrophic aerial bombardment by German planes. Across the isolation of the English Channel it matched a similar savage destruction of the city of Dresden with its beautiful historic Cathedral and the huge numbers of civilian casualties. Here seemed a partnership in tragedy and a decision was taken to create a Centre of Reconciliation in Coventry Cathedral. It was led by Canon Kenyon Wright with the immediate task of calling together representatives of many peacemaking organisations to share information over a long weekend on what kind of progress was being made on issues of peace and reconciliation. Michael was invited to represent our World Disarmament Campaign so we were both present there. On the Sunday we were bidden to attend the debut in the Cathedral of ALPHA-OMEGA - a new oratorio by a young man named David Gordon.

The ambience of the newly restored Cathedral, risen phoenix like from the ashes of war, was potent. We waited in a strange expectation of what was to come. And what came was soul shattering to me: magnificent, overwhelming, like some stupendous storm of sound enfolding readings from different holy scriptures, telling of the rise and fall of humanity. Years later I can still recall its effect on me.

We drove back to London in a kind of silent daze to resume our work from the tiny WDC office in Little Russell Street. Reporting to Philip and Fenner the following day, we were informed that SSD2 was now gaining increasing interest and CND would be holding a vast march to Hyde Park where well known speakers would be holding forth. What innovative suggestion could we come up with for our WDC? We were told to think this over and return soon with an idea.

Michael was as ever a one for new ideas. Clearly nobody would want another march or a demonstration in the Same week, in the same city, on the same subject. What would really be different? Suddenly his new idea came.

“You know that story in the Peace Book of how children brought peace to the world?”

“Yes...?”

“Well that would make a marvellous musical for young people!”

“Gosh, YES! But we should somehow marry that story to ALPHA-OMEGA. They belong together!”

And that was how Peace Child began.

Things then moved swiftly Rosey called me to say that David Gordon had been wanting to offer ALPHA-OMEGA to CND in the hope they could somehow make use of it. But Rosey had replied:

“Why not call my Mum who works for the World Disarmament Campaign?”

This clearly seemed more promising to Gordon. It was a WORLD campaign after all! OK. Let him try Rosey’s Mum...

The rest is a bit of a chronological blur. A little group was formed of Michael and me, David Woollcombe and Rosey and David Gordon, Michael and I held a supper party at Hamilton Terrace when Benson and Gordon met and agreed to blend their two successes - storyline and music - into a youth musical. Rosey was delegated to find the appropriate young actors and singers, using her experience of Theatre in Education in London schools. David W (DW), although winning career success and awards in film making, had always been interested in innovative educational projects and saw the potential of THE PEACE BOOK story in such a light.

So the ‘new idea’ seemed ready for presentation to Noel Baker and Brockway. Michael and I duly arranged to tell them about it. Their reaction was underwhelming.

“A children’s musical about disarmament? What do children know about that?”

I looked strait-faced at him.

“You know, Fenner, they know far more than we think.”

“Well, where’s the money coming from?”

They had a valid point there. Like all peace groups, WDC was strapped for cash. We had to agree we needed to think again. Back to our core group we had to confess total failure with our noble Lords. And where could we obtain the funding for such a show? This was where the subsequent series of miracles began to occur. Benson’s son approached a Buddhist institution and won a grant from them that would finance such a proposition. Back we went to our two Lords:

“We have the money. Will you give your blessing to this project. Please...?”

There being no financial commitment by WDC, their agreement was given although clearly they thought we were pretty crazy.

Miracle No 2 was that at the last possible moment, a cancellation on the last night of UN Disarmament Week meant that the R. Albert Hall was ours. 3,000 people attended and the celebrated Irish Nobel and Lenin Peace Prize Winner, Sean McBride, who was sitting next to Michael, confided amid the applause:

“You can’t leave this show here. You have to take it to the UN!”

“My God, you don’t know what it has been like to get this far...!”

But over to the two Davids, W and G...

