

RUNNING WILD

The Imagine Festival is celebrating 100 years since Roald Dahl first graced the world, bringing a 'little nonsense' to young minds everywhere

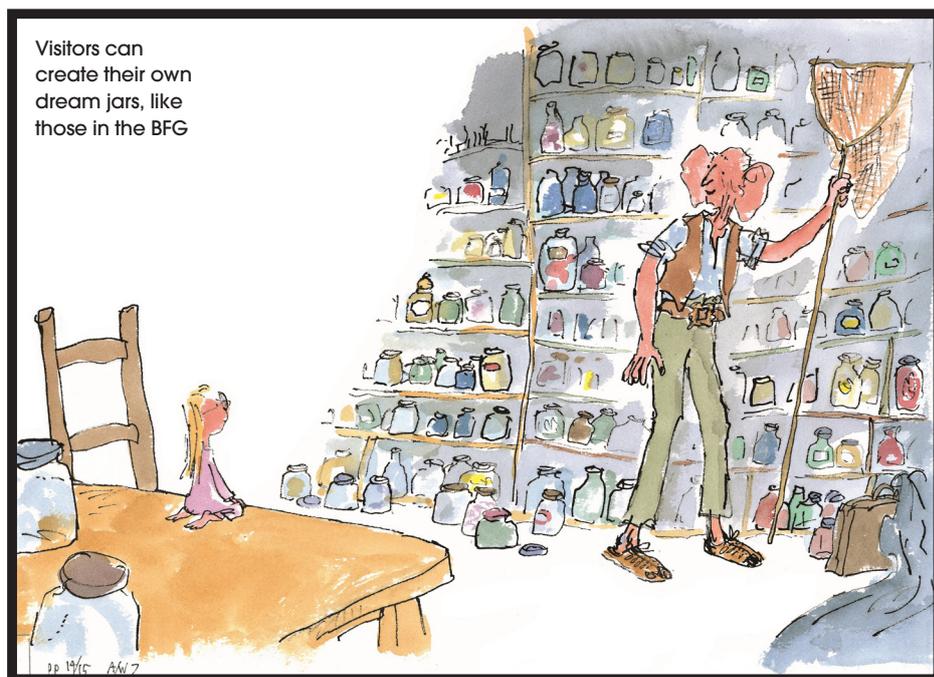
Words BETHAN ANDREWS

From 'snozzcumbers' to 'gobblefunk', when you walk into the Southbank Centre's foyer this month you would be forgiven for thinking you had stumbled into nonsense. Over the past two years, the team here have been bending their brains in order to put on a five-month spectacle delving into The Wondercrump World of Roald Dahl. My interviewees today, it seems, are taken by all things magical and are notably excited by their return to lands of giant peaches. 'He has such a huge legacy, and you can't escape the way in which his stories transcend time,' says Lead Programmer of Imagine Festival, Tamsin Ace. Paul Denton, a producer on the site design team, wholly agrees.

The event has been designed in a way that children lead the fun, something that suits Dahl's work down to a tee. 'He is universal, crosses boundaries and the dark side of his writing allows for the fact that it's OK for children to be naughty,' smiles Ace. This mischievousness and the freedom it brings create, as the two point out, the perfect environment for imagination to run wild. Dahl makes you accept the child as the hero, not against authority completely, but against the convention that adults are always right. 'The interchange that this creates is beautiful,' Denton adds.

As Denton talks me through archives embedded within forests, the immersive approach to the exhibition is resonant. It takes you through different spaces, showing Dahl's love of writing from childhood onwards. 'We have a section that is set as a school so that visitors can be transported through his education. There are some beautiful archives of letters that he wrote to his mother,' Denton says. 'He found school a horrible place, yet his letters crafted it to be wonderful. It was that spark for inspiration that led him to discover how to tell stories.'

Having worked closely with the Roald Dahl Museum of Stories, which houses

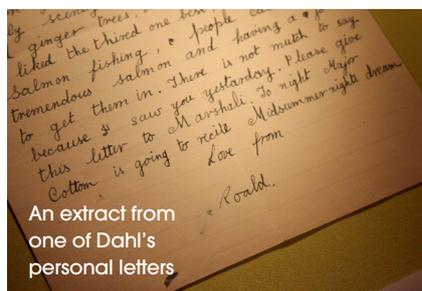


Visitors can create their own dream jars, like those in the BFG



Return to the imaginary lands of giant peaches

The Wondercrump World sows the seed and highlights that no idea is a bad idea



An extract from one of Dahl's personal letters

the archives of the author, the depth of insight into the mind of the prolific storyteller comes through. As Ace reminds me, the festival is about imagination and is crafted to inspire. The Wondercrump World 'sows the seed and highlights that no idea is a bad idea'.

We talk on about the impact of the great author on children worldwide – Dahl's stories are available in 59 languages and global sales are estimated to be over 200 million. He teaches children to read between the lines and create their own stories. 'A lot of the stories have moral messages. When he makes the characters bad he makes them very bad, when he makes them good he makes them very good,' remarks Denton. 'It's the bit between the two that helps children to navigate what's right and wrong and craft a story in between.' In a few words, children should read, play and be mischievous. After all, 'a little magic can take you a long way'.

The Imagine Children's Festival runs from 10-26 February at Southbank Centre. Find out more at southbankcentre.co.uk