



Oily Cart has always challenged accepted definitions of theatre and audience. We create delightful, multi-sensory, highly interactive productions for very young children (aged 6 months – 6 years) and for young people with complex needs. We transform everyday environments into wonderlands which our young guests physically enter joining us in a world of the imagination.

Our original scripts draw on a vast array of theatrical styles and techniques. We've blended acrobats with automata, didgeridoos with digital images, hip hop with hydro pools, and actors with aromatherapy, to engage with audiences that other theatre just can't reach.

How did it all begin?

Oily Cart was established in 1981 by Claire de Loon, (a.k.a Amanda Webb), Max Reinhardt (a.k.a Dave Bennett) and Tim Webb, who, regrettably, does not have a stage name. Claire was Oily Cart's Head of Design until 2016; Musical Director Max and Artistic Director Tim stepped back from their roles with the company in September 2018.

The first Oily Cart productions were for children under five. Back in the 1980s under-fives were thought to be an *impossible* audience by most theatre practitioners. It was commonly assumed that such young people would not have the attention span to watch anything more challenging than the most basic clown act or puppet show. We began to evolve a form of interactive, highly visual theatre, which always involved live music, to challenge such assumptions.

In 1988 we were invited to perform one of our under-fives shows in a school for young people with severe learning disabilities. When we discovered that the young people in the school were aged from 3 to 19 years, we asked if we might research and create a piece that was age appropriate. This set us off on the quest for theatre that would truly communicate with young people with high support needs, which continues to this day. This work most frequently takes place in special schools, although we are undertaking an increasing number of performances in public venues so that we can do more to involve the families of the young people with disabilities, and to help with the integration of this community into society at large. For many years we have specialised in work for young people defined as having complex needs or on the autism spectrum. Most recently, we have begun creating theatre for children and young people who are deafblind.

For these audiences, we create productions that multi-sensory (which address the senses of touch, smell, and the kinaesthetic sense) as much as the usual theatrical stand-bys of seeing and hearing. This is theatre for young people who may not be able to either see or hear; or who may use little or no verbal language; who may not be able to understand concepts like cause and effect.

Because there is a vast ability range to be found within a group defined as having complex needs, on the autism spectrum or deafblind, we ensure that our performances are highly adaptable to the requirements of each participant. Our performers work one-to-one for extended periods, improvising as necessary. For example, they may re-introduce something that worked earlier if the current approach is not connecting.

To ensure that our theatre is relevant and age appropriate, we often integrate one or two performers with a learning disability into our casts, while our rehearsals are very much about putting ourselves in the shoes of the audience, and include several sessions in special schools.

Much of our work for these audiences has been inspired by the good practice observed in the schools we have toured to across the country. For example, we were inspired by the work we had seen in hydrotherapy pools to create our own water-based shows. We transformed the pools with underwater lighting, mists on the surface, and bubbles from below. Accompanied by live musicians, our audiences floated in boats seemingly made of bubbles.

More recently we have made extensive use of video, particularly to show the young students huge close-ups of themselves. As they see their image, we sing a song in which their own name is the only lyric. For a moment, each young person becomes the focus of everyone's attention and care.

Sometimes it is difficult to know if we have connected. But all our participants are accompanied by an adult, perhaps a teacher or a family member. Afterwards they tell us: "Did you see her turning towards you? She never does that?" "Did you see how he gave you eye contact? I've never seen that."

What is certain is that the perceptions of the adults who work with these young people can be changed radically. Sometimes they will see something we do, simple in itself, have an enormous impact, such as the effect of a sponge squeezed on the back of someone's neck, or what happens when someone is gently bounced to music on a trampoline. These moments can be recreated long after we have moved on.

Best of all is when, as a result of our work, someone categorised as having this syndrome or that disability is seen in a new light. Then attitudes change and we know that the work we have initiated will be continued.

We have one great advantage: in their everyday lives these young audiences have so many practical things that have to be done to them and for them. Then Oily Cart comes along and simply tries to connect, communicating our respect and care. The reactions can be astonishing and very moving.

Beginning with our piece JUMPIN' BEANS in 2002 we began to apply some of the principles of our work for people with complex needs to another primarily non-verbal audience: very young children, babies and toddlers from 6 months to 2 years old. Although our work for this group is quite distinct from what we would perform for an audience of young people with complex needs, our theatre for the under two's is also highly interactive, multi-sensory, and staged in one of our wonderlands, the specially-created spaces with which we transform the everyday reality of a nursery, a school hall, a theatre foyer or studio.

In 2019, Oily Cart welcomed Ellie Griffiths as Artistic Director, and Zoë Lally as the company's first ever Executive Director. Together, they will build on the legacy and ambitions of the company's founders, and continue their unrivalled commitment to research, exploration and aspirations for theatre for young people.

Where is Oily Cart based?

Oily Cart is based in Wandsworth, at Smallwood Primary School.
Our postal address is Oily Cart, Smallwood School Annexe, Smallwood School, London SW17 0TW.
Phone: 020 8672 6329
For general enquiries, email oilies@oilycart.org.uk. For any access queries or requests, please email access@oilycart.org.uk

How many people are in the team?

Who we are

Artistic Director – Ellie Griffiths
Executive Director – Zoë Lally
Touring Producer – Alison Garratt
Communications and Engagement Producer – Flossie Waite
Book-keeper – Xiaohong Zhang
Press Representative – Rachel Furst

In addition, the company employs a production team to create our sets, props, costumes and puppets, as well as performers, stage managers and musicians to tour our shows.

The Founders

Artistic Director (1981 – 2018) – Tim Webb MBE

Music Director (1981 – 2018) – Max Reinhardt

Head of Design (1981 – 2016) – Claire de Loon

All now enjoying freelance creative careers as freelancers and grandparents

Where can I find information to help me with my research?

Further information about the company can be found on our website at

www.oilycart.org.uk.

You may also wish to purchase our book, in which the founders, actors, reviewers and audience talk about our plays:

[OILY CART: ALL SORTS OF THEATRE FOR ALL SORTS OF KIDS, edited by Mark Brown, Trentham Books, ISBN 978-1-85856-510-1](#)

There are also useful articles in the following publications:

THEATRE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE, edited Stuart Bennett, Aurora Metro Press, ISBN 978-09546912-8-8 with a chapter about the Oily Cart.

Dr Susan Young of Exeter University, IT'S A BIT LIKE FLYING, in RESEARCH IN DRAMA EDUCATION, VOLUME 9, NUMBER 1, March 2004, ISSN 1356-9783 or, online, ISSN 1470-112X.

We work with independent academics to undertake analysis of feedback from parents, teachers and carers following their visit to our shows created for audiences with complex disabilities. Recent evaluations can be [viewed and downloaded here](#). This is also where you can watch interviews with teachers about a couple of recent productions.

Some recent interviews and articles with co-founder and former Artistic Director Tim Webb available online include:

<https://www.thestage.co.uk/features/interviews/2018/tim-webb-oily-cart-artistic-director-young-audiences-complex-disabilities-hidden-real-need/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/oct/14/oily-cart-theatre-company-tim-webb>

<https://www.thestage.co.uk/advice/2016/tim-webb-five-tips-for-creating-work-with-young-people-with-disabilities/>

<https://childrenstheatrereviews.com/2015/11/05/you-can-hear-their-brains-glowing-tim-webb-talks-to-us-about-oily-cart/>

<https://www.whatsonlive.co.uk/birmingham/interviews/tim-webb-interview/15270>

<http://www.mrcarlwoodward.com/interview/tim-webb-mbe/>

<https://upfrontperformancenetwork.wordpress.com/2015/09/28/upfront-and-personal-with-tim-webb/>

<http://tyatodayonline.org/2015/05/08/oily-carted-an-interview-with-tim-webb/>

What's the best way to stay up to date with the company?

We post regular updates on social media. You can follow us on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Youtube](#) and [Flickr](#).

You can also keep an eye out for news, announcements and blogs on our website: http://www.oilycart.org.uk/about_us/news/

Training

Oily Cart runs a week-long course, in collaboration with Rose Bruford College, each summer. This six-day, hands-on training programme offers participants a unique opportunity to explore Oily Cart's ground-breaking approach to theatre making for people with complex needs. To get a flavour of what to expect, you can watch a video from a previous course [here](#).

You can find out when our next course has been announced on our [News page](#), or contact us at oilies@oilycart.org.uk for further details.

Our shows

You can read about our current, future and previous shows for early years audiences here: http://www.oilycart.org.uk/early_years/

You can read about our current, future and previous shows for audiences with complex needs here: http://www.oilycart.org.uk/complex_disabilities/

The timeline of Oily Cart shows can be found here: http://www.oilycart.org.uk/about_us/timeline/