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The Ceilidh Tree

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THE CEILIDH TREE (North Edinburgh Arts Centre, 1 December 2008, and touring)

TEACHERS! SHOW some sensitivity. If you take your class of P1s to a show with a strong element of interactivity, the least you can do is expect them to interact.

And when the children are clearly engaged by the performance – and they certainly are by this delightful piece of storytelling by Giant Productions – it is as unnecessary as it is disruptive to spend the whole time shushing them to be quiet. Leave the strong-arm tactics in the classroom and show a little trust.

It isn't only that Vivienne Graham is an actor thoroughly in control of her material and easily capable of keeping an audience on side. It's also that *The Ceilidh Tree* is, from the start, a participatory experience. You can't wrap the audience in blankets and ask them what they imagine will take place around the bare winter tree without expecting them to give you some answers – and to continue to do so all through the show.

And so they do, which is exactly what makes director Katrina Caldwell's production such an easy-going treat. The children understand that. It's the three teachers who repeatedly break the spell.

Graham, however, is unfazed and delivers a spirited and focused performance that is never less than captivating. Her story, which she devised with Caldwell and David Topliff, is simple and unpretentious, with no laboured moral or educative purpose, but

perfectly pitched at its 3–5-year-old market.

Sitting down beside us, Graham introduces us to her forest and a pretty tree she's never seen before. It's the longest night of the year and all kinds of winter creatures are at large. There's the robin who hops from head to head across the audience; the badger who gets stuck up the tree in a fruitless search for a better view; and the beautiful snowy owl with a penchant for telling tall tales.

Things are never as scary as the owl makes out, but they get hairy for a hedgehog caught in a plastic bag and swept up by the wind, for the children when they get to look after a silvery chain of slugs and for Graham when she gets on the wrong end of the earth from a rabbit's hole.

Topliff's music and songs enhance the air of gentle exploration and Graham rounds off the 40-minute show in appropriately interactive style by giving the audience a chance to try out the puppets for themselves. The children are enraptured, as anyone can see. Back of the class for the teachers. Full marks to Giant.