

A common language; Terry Grimley lifts the lid on Looking for Yoghurt, which opens at the Rep on Friday.

Byline: Terry Grimley

The technique of developing plays through workshops is well established in British theatre, though you might think workshoping a play simultaneously in three languages could be a bit too much like hard work.

But that's what's happened with Looking for Yoghurt, a play for children which opens at Birmingham Rep's studio, The Door. on Friday.

It's the latest project from Peter Wynne-Willson, former artistic director of Big Brum Theatre-in-Education company and now a freelance writer and director, and his decade-long teaching association with National University of the Arts in Seoul, South Korea.

It follows on from The Bridge, a play set during the Korean War about an encounter between local children and British servicemen which combined British and Korean actors. First staged in 2005, it was revived last year for the world congress of children's theatre in Adelaide.

Looking for Yoghurt extends the international collaboration with a trio of Anglo-Korean-Japanese writers and a cast to match, with Wynne-Willson doubling as both writer and director.

"It's now ten years since I first worked with the university," he explains. "After The Bridge, I sat down with Prof Choi, the professor of young people's theatre there, and we talked about what we wanted to do next.

"We decided we wanted to do a play that was simpler. The Bridge was a very nice project, but complicated to tour. We also wanted to do something for younger children and something that involved Japan as well.

"It was difficult to re-do The Bridge because it was a collaboration with a university. This time we decided we should have a co-production with a theatre company, so this is a three-way coproduction between the Rep, Joyful Theatre from Korea and Kijimuna Festa, a big festival of children's theatre in Okinawa." Following Prof Choi's connections led to Japanese writer and director Toyoko

Nishida and her Korean counterpart Mi Jeong Kim.

Their play is based on the simple premise that a girl in an unspecified big city follows her lost kitten into a construction site and finds two other children there. The trio, played by Korean, Japanese and British actors, have no common language but nevertheless befriend each other and enjoy a series of adventures.

"It started with *The Bridge* in that while I was doing it, and having to have everything translated in the rehearsal room, my children were in Korea and they were having no problem at all playing with children in the street," says Peter. "So when we started, the theme was the wisdom of children. We began by having workshops with children, and also all three of us are parents. I have two boys, Toyoko and Mi Jeong have a girl each. That was a massive amount we had in common.

"We are concerned about children in the modern world and our first conversations, at *Tous Les Jours*, a patisserie in Seoul, were about familiar worries about over-protection, children not having anywhere to play and negative images of young people in the media." Mi Jeong Kim says working with people from a different cultural background has been a special experience.

"We can say the script has been written by the physical work and labour of the actors, rather than having a completed script at the beginning. Through the imagination of the actors, we wanted to devise the process of how characters from different cultures could become friends." Peter adds they have ended up with a play with very few words in it.

"Very little of it has been people sitting at word-processors. There's been less of what people would think of as writing, but our job has gone on for longer than you would expect it to.

"It's been very close to writing and directing.

For *The Bridge* we had two directors, one British and one Korean. Three directors would have been a bit much, but you need three people to keep track of what was being explained in which language, what story the audience was getting." Toyoko Nishida, who says she has had some experience of devising plays but has little opportunity for it in Japan, says: "For me it's been a great experience because usually when I write and direct I have a lot of different people in my head.

But this time I have had Peter who represents a male viewpoint and Mi Jeong who represents a younger viewpoint, so I didn't need to imagine all these people in my

head. Also I had a lot of imagination from the actors, so it's been lovely to have these different points of view and not have to conjure them up." After its run at the Rep Looking for Yoghurt goes to The Spark Children's Festival in Leicester and then plays for three weeks in Korea, a week in Tokyo and a week in Okinawa.

"The Japanese producer says it's going to be in 80 countries," says Peter. "It's a serious aspiration to take it further, because there's no reason why not. We've tried to get something quite small and technically simple so we can perform it anywhere." The show has already had a preview performance in Korea and Mi Jeong with very positive feedback.

"The reason the response was so positive is in Korean children's theatre there are some very nice shows, but they tend to give an educational message. This show, rather than giving a certain message, is showing what children dream in terms of their play and what their life is about, and children could easily identify with what the play is about in their own lives." Toyoko takes a similar view: "The situation in Japan is kind of the same as in Korea. For example, the character the Japanese actor is playing would be seen as a really bad child in Japan, but the energy of that child is really important." Peter Wynne Willson sums it up as "the fundamental story about the importance of children's play and a plea for space for play.

" We have thought a lot about talking to parents through this play. I'm sure kids will enjoy it but we're trying to talk to a wider audience." * Looking for Yoghurt is at The Door, Birmingham Repertory Theatre, from Friday until May 30 (Box office: 0121 236 4455) and at the Peepul Centre, Leicester, June 2-4 (Box office: 0845 310 3344)..This show is showing what children dream and what their life is about

CAPTION(S):

Opposite: Mi Jeong Kim, Toyoko Nishida and Peter Wynne-Willson