

win  
one-night Kirra  
Kite Festival  
package

LIFE'S WORK  
Richard Flanagan's  
epic new novel



## Fabulous four

Small stars set to shine

## Meet the pint-sized talents selected to star in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

Jane Scott reports

In a mirror-lined rehearsal room deep in the backstage maze of the Queensland Performing Arts Centre, four small children are buzzing with excitement. Skipping, pirouetting, and dropping to the floor in the splits at random moments, they have never met before but they all have something in common – a very big secret that they can't reveal to even their closest friends, until it is announced exclusively in this week's *Brisbane News*.

Meet Emma Cobb, Jayden McGinlay, Campbell MacCorquodale and Sophie Moman. Bright-eyed and bursting with enthusiasm, these pint-sized talents are the Queensland kids who will share the lead roles of Jemima and Jeremy in the blockbuster family musical *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

*Chitty*, as everyone involved calls it, opens in November, and for the duration of the month-long Brisbane season, Emma, Sophie, Jayden and Campbell will sing and dance their hearts out through numbers such as *Truly Scrumptious*, *Toots Sweets* and the title song, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

The producers, Australia's TML Enterprises, will be hoping for sell-out crowds and it's likely that Queensland's legion of famously supportive musical theatre fans will oblige.

The day of the *Brisbane News* photo shoot was the first time the children had met since receiving word of their casting, but within minutes the four of them were chatting and joking like lifelong friends.

"It's such a relief to be with people we can talk about it with!" said one of the mums.

Gold Coast resident Jayden, 8, Daisy Hill's Sophie, 9, Kenmore Hills' Campbell, 10, and Emma, 9, all the way from Mackay, were selected, along with 28 others who constitute the unfortunately tagged "sewer children" ensemble, during a three-day audition process in September.

On the first day, 300 hopefuls strutted their stuff for director Roger Hodgman, casting director Damien Chambers, choreographer

Dana Jolly and musical director Peter Casey, who flew in from Perth where the show is in its fourth Australian season.

"The first day is pretty brutal," Roger says. "We bring them in, in groups of 15 or so, and they all sing very quickly. At that point, a lot drop out because they're not good enough singers. Some are just too tall to be believable as children and sometimes you can detect a kid with an attitude, but very rarely."

A dance session follows and at that point any child showing Jeremy or Jemima potential is weeded out and invited to return the next day.

"It's a harsh process, compared with what adult actors get," Damien says. "They tend to get a bit more time."

While there's room for all shapes and sizes in the ensemble, specific qualities are required for the lead roles.

"They've got to be very good actors and very good singers and we want kids who are natural, not little eisteddfod performers," Roger says. "You get some kids who are very talented, but so rehearsed you're not sure how they'll actually go – that's what the callbacks are about, to see how open and flexible they are."

If you've been to *Mary Poppins, Annie*, or any of the other blockbuster musicals that have rolled through town these past couple of years, you will most likely have been astonished at the child performers' capacity to shine alongside their fellow cast members – older, far more experienced performers who include some of the biggest names in Australian showbusiness.

Audience members do not pay up to \$130 a ticket to watch children who are there only to make up the numbers. The bar is high for everyone on stage, including adults, children and dogs (there are eight canines in *Chitty*).

This production stars David Hobson (Caractacus Potts), Rachael Beck (Truly Scrumptious) and Shane Bourne (Baron Bomburst), with Tyler Coppin as the dreaded Child Catcher. While the adult cast has bonded over the Australian run, the director's great challenge in each city has been to find the child performers so crucial to the mix.

"Wherever we've been, there's been a lot of talent," Roger says. "The ensemble, you could cast twice over, but for Jeremy and Jemima, there are only a few kids in each state who are right for that."

He has worked with many children, for both stage and television, and he says they bring a



What children lack in experience, they very often have in natural ability. Sometimes it's astonishing how good they are

**ROLE CALL** ... Emma Cobb, Jayden McGinlay, Campbell MacCorquodale and Sophie Moman (opposite) will take centre stage in *Chitty*.

wonderful vibe to a production, their excitement infecting the rest of the cast.

"Kids don't know as much, so you have to explain things a bit more, but they're natural actors, they're storytellers. What children lack in experience, they very often have in natural ability. Sometimes it's astonishing how good they are."

Of course, casting children for the stage means dealing with the dreaded stage mother (or father).

"It was in Sydney and Melbourne that we occasionally had parents who got angry – we don't get that so much in Brisbane," Roger says. "Why didn't you choose my child?", they say. 'My child's so talented.' That might be true, but we don't think they're right for this show."

Based on the much-loved 1968 film starring Dick Van Dyke and Sally Ann Howes (itself inspired by a story written by Ian Fleming of *James Bond* fame), the musical debuted on the London stage in 2002.

It features all the original songs, plus new numbers by the Sherman brothers (who also wrote the music for *Mary Poppins*), and tells the tale of the magical flying car, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, eccentric inventor Caractacus Potts and his two children, Jeremy and Jemima. Truly Scrumptious and Grandpa Potts make up the crew trying to outwit the dastardly Baron Bomburst and the evil Child Catcher.

Central to the spectacle is British musical theatre history's most expensive prop – the \$1.3 million car.

"It's one thing to see a car fly in a film, but when you actually see it fly a few feet away from you in a theatre, it's breathtaking," Roger says.

"I still get goosebumps when I see it and I've seen it hundreds of times. It is impossible to see how it's done."

For our child stars, it's almost too thrilling to contemplate. Emma, and her mother Sarah, from Mackay, will stay with family friends in Brisbane.

Emma's already in love with her character. "I love how Jemima is always excited about everything," she says. "She's always able to find a bright side to every dark problem."

Gold Coast Jayden is home-schooled, which makes life easier when it comes to managing the rehearsal and performance commitments. His mother Jackie will bring Jayden's younger brother to South Bank when required. "He can do his work under a tree," she says.

Sophie is the only one of the children to have featured in a professional show before (as an orphan in *Annie*).

She is delighted to be stepping up to a lead role and attended the shoot with her mother Wendy.

Campbell comes from a family of boys more familiar with sporting representative trials than showbiz auditions. His mother Nicole is slightly stunned by this exciting turn of events.

"Something happens to him when he walks out on stage," she says. "I help him get ready and he's the little 10-year-old boy I know. Then I watch the show and I think, 'Is that my Campbell?' He becomes a different child."

For the bubbly Chapel Hill State School student, it's all pretty simple.

"I'm looking forward to two things," he says. "The flying car and getting captured by the Child Catcher. I have never been in a cage."

**CHITTY CHITTY BANG BANG**, Nov 19-Dec 15, from \$65, Lyric Theatre, QPAC, South Bank, ph: 136 246. qpac.com.au

