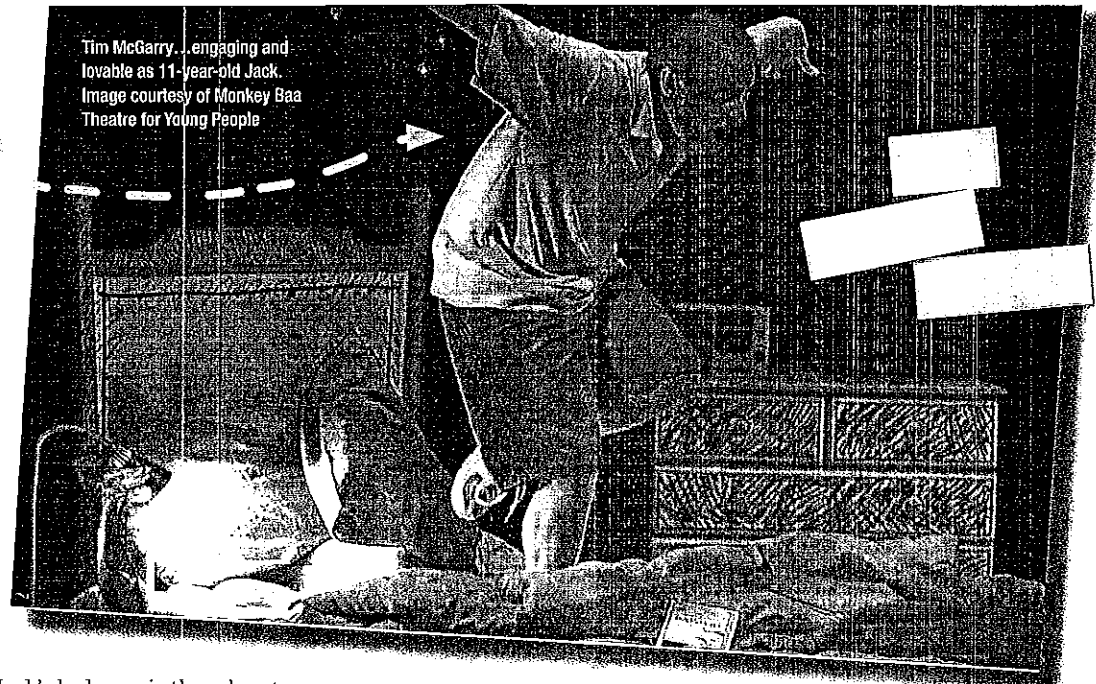


I Am Jack

Monkey Baa Theatre for Young People

Written by Susanne Gervay's
 Adapted for the stage by Eva Di Cosaro,
 Sandra Eldridge and Tim McGarry
 Director Sandra Eldridge
 Design Alice Lindstrom
 Lighting Design Luiz Sampolha
 Sound Design Jeremy Silver
 Dramaturge Caleb Lewis
 Production Manager/Stage Manager
 2008 Luke Cowling
 Assistant Stage Manager
 2008 Peta Dyce
 Stage Manager 2009 Tour Peta Dyce
 Performed by Tim McGarry



Tim McGarry, engaging and lovable as 11-year-old Jack. Image courtesy of Monkey Baa Theatre for Young People

School can be tough, and kids can be cruel. Monkey Baa tackles the subject of bullying with an adaptation of Susanne Gervay's *I Am Jack*, based on a true story. For the 95th performance of this dynamic one-hander, Year 3 and 4 school children from Greenwich Public School filled the small theatre at Sydney's Seymour Centre.

The subject of bullying is tricky: How do you give kids the tools to deal with a bully, or as in the case of Jack, a gang of them led by a potent ringleader? Seeking help is essential, but risks further isolating the victim and cementing their reputation as a 'dobber' and 'do-gooder'. When a child is cowed and scared to draw further attention to themselves, the problem can go on and on, slipping under the radar of both teachers and parents. Many adults bear the scars of seemingly innocuous schoolyard shenanigans.

Tim McGarry is engaging and lovable as 11-year-old Jack, trying to find a way to speak to his Mum about his problem, while she is preoccupied with a new boyfriend about to move in and the regular presence of Jack's grandmother. McGarry plays all roles – Jack, Nanna, Mum, the boyfriend, teachers, bullies, and the heroic 11-year-old Anna who eventually comes to his rescue. His deft timing, physicality and range of elastic, comical voices deliver a big-hearted performance that, with credit due also to the writers and director, captures the vulnerability and pathos without resorting to sentimentality.

Jack's bedroom is the sole set for all the action. It's a clever collection of typical boys' bedroom furniture, scribbled over in fat permanent marker, reminiscent of the lockers, desks, bags and books that populate the world of any school-age kid.

The bedroom is like Jack's consciousness—we are inside his mind all the time, filled as it is with books of jokes, 'scientific' vegetables involving mutant vegetables growing in jars, a promising hobby in photography and underlying anxiety, expressed by the scrawled-over furniture.

This cluttered but compact set, designed to be portable and allow the production to travel with just one actor and a technician, served the action well except when Jack projected a slideshow of his photography onto the headboard of his bed. The angle was a bit skewed and the image too small. The poetry was lost, and turned what might have been an important intimate interlude, into a flat spot that felt like marking time.

McGarry, with simple lighting and sound effects, takes us from schoolyard to classroom, soccer field to beach, without leaving Jack's bedroom. There was a magical moment when, walking along the seashore, Jack sees a giant washed-up jellyfish and stops to marvel at the gelatinous mass. Describing it as a 'ball of snot with tentacles', half the audience spontaneously rose out of their seats to better see the theatre floor.

There were plenty of laughs and McGarry knew when he had the audience eating out of the palm of his hands, milking any joke that was working. When Jack plays a game of cards with his Nan, she takes an age each time it's her turn, much to the impatience of Jack and the rolling giggles of the audience.

But then there's the seriousness of the bullying, which grows from troubling to traumatic. Jack is beaten with a cricket bat and spat on in the showers by a gang of alone—even his two best friends desert him under pressure from Hammill's growing gang. His imperious 'nearly-best friend' Anna, daughter of the local migrant fruit shop owner, can't take it anymore and tells her father everything, who in turn alerts the adults. Jack's mother visits the school and threatens to enrol Jack elsewhere. The principal is contrite and apologises to Jack for letting him down and asks him to consider returning, ensuring him: 'You won't be alone, we'll fight this together.'

The bully isn't expelled; Jack has two days off, with a list of chores from his mum that make him feel useful and, along with the lightness that comes from finally unburdening himself, boosts his confidence. He returns to school under the close watch of the principal who, when the time is right, teams him up for a project with the bully himself, George Hammill. Jack makes the discovery that George isn't too bright, maybe can't read and write so well and even finds he feels sorry for him.

If only it were this easy. In the Q&A afterwards, when the question 'Why do you think Jack was bullied?' was put to the audience, the answers came fast: 'Because he was small', 'Because he was a little bit different', 'Because he was my mummy's boy', 'Because he wasn't on the footy team...' It's a pity they seemed to miss the message that it wasn't Jack's fault; that the problem was George, the bully himself, who, if he hadn't picked on Jack, would have found another victim on which to vent his own feelings of inadequacy. ☘

Tracy Ellis is a freelance writer with an extensive background in the arts. She graduated from VCA's School of Drama but traded acting for music, playing in several bands while working at various arts organisations.

