

Kids rule in cardboard jungle

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Children throw themselves energetically into the cardboard chaos of Polyglot's

We Built This City production.

Brown boxes stack up to hours of fun.

IT'S A phenomenon shared by parents all over the world - toys discarded and forgotten in favour of hours of imaginative play with the cardboard packaging.

In London this weekend, hundreds of brown boxes were strewn over a terrace alongside the River Thames and attracted a horde of yahooping kids of all nationalities and their bemused mums and dads.

For two hours, the children built towers and destroyed them, constructed tunnels to hide in and bridges to play beneath, threw boxes in the air, watched as the winds wreaked architectural havoc, and lay quiet and still to be buried under a sea of cardboard.

The show, brainchild of Australia's Polyglot Theatre, was selected as part of the London International Festival of Theatre, dominating the National Theatre's outside terraces and filling the air with cheerful Aussie accents.

The veteran children's troupe are masters of interactive play and, in a feat remarkable for its simplicity, kept children as young as three and as old as 12 amused with little more than an upbeat sound track and enthusiastic, improvised encouragement.

Armed with big rolls of masking tape, they stuck boxes together, glued arms to sides and labelled kids and their constructions with big black felt-tip pens. An "earthquake" at the end incited a mini-riot as a swarm of children were given permission to raze what they had created.

At first, it seemed too simple - perhaps even a little lazy. But the reaction of children themselves soon dispelled this too-hasty adult response: they were riveted, energetically throwing themselves into the environment and reluctant to leave when it all ended.

Allegra Wainwright, 9, a veteran of theatre productions from Shakespeare to West End musicals, said it was "the coolest thing ever. I love it!"

Ava, just six months old, cooed and watched wide-eyed for an hour in her mum's protective embrace.

Polyglot's production, *We Built This City*, has toured England, Ireland and Scotland. It is also one of its most enduring productions, touring since 2001 and with more than 30,000 children participating in venues as diverse as the Kennedy Centre in Washington and the forecourt of the Sydney Opera House.

The performers said their role - as construction workers - is merely to facilitate free play, sometimes inciting laughter and riot but always setting tasks to encourage kids to build together "in unity".

Simon Abrahams, Polyglot's executive producer, said that in many places where they have presented the show, the host city's unique aesthetic and building styles often emerge via the little participants: "It is a fascinating reflection of immediate cultural recognition: in Sydney, bridges and iconic buildings; in Singapore, skyscrapers; in Melbourne, big houses and backyards; in Washington, monuments; and so it goes on."

Perhaps the most refreshing aspect of the production - noted by Australia's deputy high commissioner, Adam McCarthy - is that it reminds us of a time, before computers and the internet, when imagination and simplicity could offer hours of fun.

"In some ways there's a lot of pressure on children these days, so this is a wonderful opportunity for them to have fun and run riot while working together to be the 'architects' of their own city," he said, just before running in the wake of his own two little builders.