

## OnStage: Their plots engage tots

By [Rohan Preston](#), Star Tribune

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Photo by Joel Koyama

Swedish designer Ing-Mari Tir'en (left) and Christer Dahl (right) co-founded Dockteatern Tittut-Puppet Theatre Peek-a-Boo in 1977. They are in town to perform "A Special Trade" at the Children's Theatre Company.

Talk about specializing: Swedish theater company Docteatern Tittut has been designing and creating shows for 2- to 5-year-olds for more than 30 years. This season they've brought "A Special Trade" to the Children's Theatre.

"They have a great capacity to imagine and to change -- greater than anybody else." "They have the most creative minds on the planet."

It sounds like words that you would apply to composers, abstract artists, quantum physicists or poets. And such terms probably have been used to describe savants and geniuses of one kind or another.

But when Swedish theater-makers Christer Dahl and Ing-Mari Tirén spoke in a stream of rapturous superlatives last week, they weren't even talking about grownups.

The pair, in town for the premiere of their stage adaptation of "A Special Trade," were explaining why it is they love to create work for toddlers.

Tirén and Dahl should know; they have been making theater for 2- to 5-year-olds for more than 30 years. Leaders of Docteatern Tittut, the Swedish company Tirén co-founded in 1977, Dahl and Tirén came to Minneapolis to build "Trade," now at the Children's Theatre.

"People say that they should come up to our level, but it is us who needs to get up to their level of imagination," Tirén said.

### **Continent hoppers**

For Dahl, a master puppet maker and writer, and Tirén, theater is not a career, it is also their family business. Dahl is married to one of Tirén's daughters, who works for the company. (Another Tirén daughter, who works at the company, is wed to Italian shadow puppeteer Fabrizio Montecchi.)

Docteatern has traveled to every inhabited continent, performing for children all over the globe. Childhood may be construed differently around the world, being a distinct period of one's life in the developed world, for example, while it may be considered a little version of adulthood in developing countries where children are often put to work.

But it is easy for the shows to translate across languages and cultures, explained Dahl.

"The beauty of performing for this age is that we get them before they have been imprinted" with cultural blinders, he said. "At that age, a child in Zimbabwe has the same responses as a child in Colombia or in Indonesia. They are open and they go with you."

There are rules to staging plays for youngsters, Tirén and Dahl explained.

"You have to make sure that you do things in order" -- that a work breathes, she said.

"They [children] are processing everything they see and they need the space, and the time to sort it all out," he said. "So, when we do a show, it has to have clean lines. It's like a triangle. You have the actors, the props and the audience. There's no fourth wall separating us."

### **Working in Minneapolis**

Tirén, Dahl and Peter Brosius, head of the Children's Theatre, first met 20 years ago when Brosius was head of a children's company in Hawaii. Brosius invited them to bring their inventiveness to America.

And the links have been continual since, with the company performing "The Cat's Journey" for the Children's Theatre two years ago.

In creating the 45-minute "A Special Trade," the biggest challenge was not with wrangling an unpredictable audience.

"They are only restless if you've not captured their imagination," Dahl said.

Instead, it was "in training actors to become one with puppets," Dahl said. "Kids know when you are faking it. You have to be there fully for your puppet. It has to be an extension of you. We don't hide actors behind puppets. There's a reveal there. But if you're successful, they do not see you, just the characters."

He told a story about doing a show in Sweden, "Little Tiger, Little Bear." "It's simple -- me and two hand puppets," he said. "After I had finished it at this school, I was packing up the props when some boys were passing by. One of them stopped and said, 'You, you came with little tiger, little bear, no?' I said yes. For him, I had disappeared. That's your dream."

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### **A SPECIAL TRADE**

**What:** A co-production of Children's Theatre Company and Docteatern Tittut of Sweden. Directed by Christer Dahl.

**When:** Noon, 2 & 4 p.m. today, 10:30 a.m. & 4 p.m. Thu., 10:30 a.m. & 7 p.m. Fri., 10 a.m., noon, 2 & 4 p.m. Sat. Ends Jan. 6.

**Where:** Children's Theatre, 2400 3rd Av. S., Mpls.

**Tickets:** \$17.50. 612-874-0400. [www.childrenstheatre.org](http://www.childrenstheatre.org).