THE PLAY *Lifeboat* is nearly 20 years old. It was first performed as a stage play but in 2014 we created the school’s version you see today. As a director I have made many shows for young people but this one is special because it is a true story and because myself and the writer Nicola McCartney were lucky enough to meet the heroines of the story, Bess and Beth.

Creating *Lifeboat* was wonderful but also terrifying. We were responsible for bringing Bess and Beth to life on stage and doing justice to their amazing story, fortunately both woman loved the show. Since it was first performed in 2002 the show has travelled the world and over that time we have met other survivors and relatives of the children and adults who sailed on the City of Benares. Sharing this story has been a privilege and I believe Bess and Beth’s story will always be relevant.

Bess and Beth are dead now but this play is a tribute to their courage and to the courage of children everywhere who are never the ones who start wars but are often one of the biggest casualties.
Lifeboat tells the story of 2 girls; Bess Walder (15) and Beth Cummings (14) who board the evacuee ship the City of Benares in September 1940. Both girls are being sent abroad through CORB (Children’s Oversea Reception Board) and leave their home cities of London and Liverpool to escape the bombings by the Germans during the 2nd WW.

Bess and Beth are different characters. Bess is a Londoner and longs for adventure. She is excited at the prospect of travelling to Canada, with her brother Louis, and dreams of being a movie star. Beth wants to stay at home and is apprehensive and scared about leaving her mum and family.

The play begins with both girls in the water wondering what has happened. Over the course of the story (which moves back and forward in time) we learn that their evacuee ship was torpedoed and that they survived by hanging onto an upturned lifeboat in the middle of the Atlantic for over 19 hours.
STORY OUTLINE (CONT’D):

As the play develops we learn about life on board the ship, the other children and adults, and what happened to the girls the night of the attack. We learn how the girls survived, their determination to “Hang on” and the terror of that night.

The play ends returning to the girls as old ladies remembering the ship and the other evacuees; the ones that survived and the others that didn’t. The final lines help to explain their determination to live.

Beth  
We didn’t let go, why didn’t we let go?

Bess  
Well we couldn’t give up could we?

Beth  
That’s right we weren’t in the business of giving up

Both  
We hung on.
FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES:

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

In order to write this play, the director and writer met Bess Walder and talked to Beth Cummings on the phone. Catherine Wheels Theatre Company have gathered pictures and documents about the people and the event. If you would like to see them have a look at the archive material at the end of this pack.

**If** you want to do your own detective work try searching online for:
‘Bess Cummings, City of Benares’

Other links include
[Bess Cummings obituary in The Telegraph](#)
[Mersey Maritime Museum blog](#)
ACTIVITY 1:

RETELLING THE STORY

There are many ways to retell a story.

Create your own TV news report or newspaper article from the day the survivors returned to Glasgow.
THE SMALL SUITCASE

In the play Bess takes her green dressing gown as luxury item.

What do you think Beth took?
What would you take – and why?
ACTIVITY 3:

BEING A THEATRE CRITIC

Our friends at Imaginate have developed several resources to help children explore an experience of theatre. The link ‘Talking About Theatre’ guides your class through a series of exercises to think about what they have seen and records and tells us their opinions, true theatre critics!

CLICK HERE
THEATRE AS A CAREER

Some of the people involved with this production are listed below, along with their jobs. Why not ask them more about what they do? Email your questions to tiss@imaginate.org.uk:

Writer: Nicola McCartney
Director: Gill Robertson
Composer: Dave Trouton
Designer & Costume Designer: Karen Tennent
Performers: Lois Mackie and Amy MacGregor
Stage Manager: Lauren Desjardins
Tour booking and Schools Liaison: Anna Derricourt
Producer: Louise Gilmour Wills
LIFEBOAT ARCHIVE MATERIAL
LIFE IN WORLD WAR II
Underground stations were often used as air raid shelters. Why do you think this was?
Evacuee children boarding a train. How do you think they might have felt?
SOME OF THE CHARACTERS YOU MET IN THE PLAY
Bess, Louis and Beth (L-R) with their mums
Beth on board the H.M.S. Hurricane
A painting of the S.S. City of Benares leaving Bombay in 1936.
THE RESCUE
THE FIRST SURVIVORS TO BE RESCUED BY H.M.S. HURRICANE

JACK KEELEY, JOHN MCGlashAN (CITY OF BENARES ENGINEER) AND ERIC DA VIS (BBC CORRESPONDENT)

The first survivors to be rescued by H.M.S. Hurricane
Louis (middle) aboard the rescue ship, H.M.S. Hurricane. How do you think he would have felt?
NAZIS TORPEDO MERCY SHIP, KILL CHILDREN
Among Missing

SEVEN British children, landed at a West Coast port from a destroyer, will for the rest of their lives have tragic memories of the ruthless Nazi methods of sea warfare.

Eighty-three of these comrades, making the journey from the bombed areas of Britain to the safety of Canada, lost their lives when their liner was torpedoed without warning 700 miles from the coast of Ireland— in darkness and at the height of a hurricane.

Of the seventy-nine, with doctors and nurses, were taking the children to homes in the New World only two were saved. Many died during the night and the next day from shock and cold.

The ship started to sink almost immediately after the torpedo hit stern.

Children Cheer
Survivors then endured a thirty-hour nightmare in waterlogged lifeboats, clinging to life, swept by heavy seas and flooded by seas.

Among the 294 missing is Corporal J. Baldwin, Welsh, for the Welsh Division电影院. Six children, including their parents, among the dead.

The courage of the children in the face of the sea was a sight to behold. They cheered every single child to cheer on the children.

The captain, who went down Continued on Back Page.

R.A.F. Smash Invasion Barges

This picture shows some of the damage inflicted on Hitler's invasion barges concentrated at Dunkirk by the R.A.F. Dock buildings round the upper of the two decks have been completely destroyed. Unloading cranes and hulking gear are demolished. Waterways, wharves, roads and railway sidings have all received their quota of high explosives. Damaged barges near the upper dock cover those already sunk.
CHILDREN'S LINER SUNK WITHOUT WARNING IN GALE

Outrage in Atlantic

BOATS SWAMPED BY TERRIFIC SEAS 600 MILES FROM LAND

WHILE WARNING A U-BOAT FIRED A TORPEDO AT A LINER STRUGGLING THROUGH A STORM IN THE ATLANTIC LAST TUESDAY NIGHT AND KILLED EIGHTY-NINE ENGLISH CHILDREN.

Their ship sank in twenty minutes. It was 600 miles from land.

One hundred and two children were on the ship. Ninety of them travelled under the Government evacuation scheme; twelve were sent privately.

All came from bombed areas in London and bombed towns in England; all were on their way safely in Canada.

Of the total, only thirteen are alive, all of them private evacuees. They were brought back to this country by a British motor vessel which saw their waterlogged and battered lifeboats.

But 3,000 have gone away safely

It is reported that a liner was attacked last night by a German submarine off the coast of France. The attack occurred near the Scilly Isles, and the ship was carrying 2,400 passengers, including many children.

The King on radio tonight

Whole world to hear

Vichy admits trouble

Daily Express announcement of The Benares sinking
CHILDREN'S OVERSEAS RECEPTION BOARD
(Scottish Branch),
29 St. Andrew Square,
EDINBURGH, 2.
9th October, 1940.

I am desired by the Board to convey to you, and through you to the officers and men under your command, their gratitude for the care and kindness shown to the rescued escorts and children.

Yours faithfully,

Calvin

Secretary.

The Commander,
H.M.S. "Hurricane",
c/o G.P.O.,
LONDON. E.C.
Benares survivors on arrival in Glasgow
Ellerman Line’s thank you letter from the owners of the City of Benares

Glasgow, 23rd September, 1940

Lt. Commander H.C. Sima, R.N.,
H.M.S. "HURRICANE"
c/o Admiralty,
London.

Dear Sir,

On behalf of myself and my Co-Directors, I wish to express our very great appreciation of the services rendered by yourself, Officers and ship’s Company of H.M.S. "HURRICANE" on the occasion of the loss by enemy action of our steamer, "CITY OF BENERAS". Apart from the bravery and seamanship displayed in the rescue, which were in keeping with the traditions of the Royal Navy, the care and kindness extended to survivors whilst on board your vessel is beyond all praise. Will you please accept and convey to your Officers and ship's Company our very sincere thanks.

Yours faithfully,

[Signature]
DAILY EXPRESS ANNOUNCEMENT OF BENARES SINKING

Outrage in Atlantic

Benares Liner Sunk Without Warning in Gale

Boats swamped by terrific seas 600 miles from land

Without warning a U-boat fired a torpedo at a liner struggling through a storm in the Atlantic last Tuesday night—and killed eighty-nine English children. Their ship sank in twenty minutes. It was 600 miles from land.

One hundred and two children were in the ship. Ninety of them travelled under the Government evacuation scheme; twelve were sent privately. All came from bombed areas in London and bombed towns in England; all were on their way to safety in Canada.

Of the total only thirteen are alive, six of them private evacuees. They were brought back to this country by a British warship which saw their waterlogged and battered lifeboats.

But 3,000 have gone away safely

It was embattled last night. Then despite the evacuation ship disaster and the misery of the U-boat, more than a million children are being cared for overseas safely.

Japanese attack Indo-China

Japanese troops moved across the Mekong delta last night. They attacked a French blockhouse near Indo-China, India, which was partly concealed by water. One of the Frenchmen, a printer, was killed in the attack. The other three were captured.

The King on radio tonight

Whole world to hear His Majesty's address.
LIFE AFTER THE WAR
MISS MARY CORNISH

The Liner “City of Benares” was crossing the Atlantic to America with 90 little children aboard, evacuees to a land of safety. MISS MARY CORNISH was acting as one of the escort to the children. The Liner was torpedoed. MISS CORNISH took charge of six of the children in a lifeboat, and they were in that open boat for eight days before a Flying Boat sighted them 600 miles from land.—Crouched in a corner of the little boat, she told stories to the children, massaged their frozen limbs, and encouraged them to exercises to counteract the bitter cold.—For her inspiring courage, she was honoured with the Medal of the Order of the British Empire (Civil Division).
Beth and Bess, London, 1985
The original cast of *Lifeboat* with Beth, who came to see the show in 2005. What do you think her reaction would have been to seeing the play?
City of Benares children survivors’ reunion, 1988
BACK: Antony Quinton (L), John Baker, Beth Williams (Cummings), Colin Ryer-Richardson, Jack Keeley (R)
FRONT: Bess Cummings (Walder) (L), Derek Beck, Sonia Williams (Beck), Barbara Partridge (Beck) (R)