

## Heavy Metal

Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the pioneering engineer remembered and honoured for some of the most outstanding and innovative achievements of the 19th century, was a fanatical genius ahead of his time.

Seen through the eyes of his two children, Florence and Isambard, Tim Newton's play *Iron Dreams*, for Pop-Up charts the life and work of Brunel, as it affects their lives and dreams.

Newton makes young Isambard a romantic dreamer, while Florence shares her father's passion for engineering. The emotional conflict of Isambard who tries to become the engineer his father assumes he's destined to be and second, to tell him he never will be, is weighed against Florence's own agony of being a girl with a 'man's' talents.

The play is as much about being true to one's self as it is an historical piece on the finest engineer of the last century. Tightly written and excellently acted, it shows not just Brunel's success as an engineer but how that success made him something of a failure as a father. Terence Frisch is a convincingly bombastic but kindly Brunel whose obsession with his own vision of the future blinds him to the emotional needs of his children.

It is this sort of theatre which fires imaginations, brings history to life and makes children want to learn.

**Helen Rose**

*Above:*

The Times Educational Supplement  
(5th July 1996)

*Right:* Time Out

## Children

### Shows & Activities 'Iron Dreams'

Tim Newton's play about nineteenth-century engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel, directed by Michael Dalton, packs in masses of history, geography and technology yet does so in a manner that is emotionally and dramatically satisfying.

Against Matt Edward's appropriately innovative set, constructed in metal and lacquered wood and augmented by a couple of exquisite models which most children (and this adult), would give their eye teeth for, Brunel's life and achievements are recounted in flashback, recalled by his children for the benefit of a journalist. Jeremy Killick, as the son expected by his charismatic father (played by Terence Frisch) to become an engineer, is a cowed, dreamy boy, trapped in a leg brace designed by pa and desperately trying to tell his father that his dreams are of real horses, not iron ones. Florence (Nicola Blackwell), bright and aggressive, has inherited her father's talents but suffers the frustration of seeing his ambitions channelled into her unreceptive brother. In this short, rich play we also encounter a handful of other nineteenth-century characters – all played by the versatile Richard Oldham, notably showman and flea-circus owner Tommy Hopper, and Dr Dionysius Lardner, a contemporary of Brunel's who considered his achievements unhealthy and unnatural. In a scene reminiscent of Selwyn Gummer feeding his daughter a beefburger, Brunel, determined to silence the opponent who heckles at all his openings, sends his children into the Thames Tunnel – where seven labourers have died – to prove its safety. Pop-Up have pulled off a trick few children's theatre companies could achieve so successfully.

**Sara O'Reilly**