

Curtain call

Rhiane Kirkby AND HER TODDLER EXPLORE AN IMAGINARY WORLD IN THEATRICAL CLASSES, SURE TO BE HARBOURING HOLLYWOOD'S NEXT SUPERSTARS

There's music, singing, rhythm and rhymes, but this is no ordinary music class. Hartbeeps is, in fact, the complete antithesis of the sit-in-a-circle-and-clap-your-hands-to-the-beat type of baby class. "It's a mini production, a magical and memorable theatrical experience where children and their parents are encouraged to play," explains founder Sarah Godwin. "Ordinary spaces are transformed into tactile wonderlands with clever use of lighting, props, puppets and sound effects." But for Sarah that is where the connection with the theatre ends. "This isn't a performance and there aren't any show tunes, it's a creative and inspiring interactive experience."

Adults are invited to leave the 'real world' at the door and enter into the theme of the day by playing alongside their little ones. From teddy bears' picnics to treks through the jungle and trips into space, there's a whole host of new adventures to be had, each one set to a musical soundtrack. The words 'adult participation' may have some parents running for the door, but even the most reluctant join in. Many admit they never would have imagined themselves waddling round a room with a bright yellow shower cap on their head



Kimmy Newell is one of the most popular session leaders with mums and babies

and washing-up gloves on their feet, singing *Five Little Ducks*, but say they find it easy to immerse themselves into what's going on. "Such a break from the norm – the highlight of my week," comments one mum, while another admits, "I could almost turn up in my pyjamas, I feel so relaxed!"

Adults may have a part to play but there's no mistaking the fact that the children are, in Sarah's eyes, "the beating heart of Hartbeeps." Years of scientific study have gone into each class to ensure there's a developmental purpose, from bonding and nurturing to socialising and interacting, and for Sarah it's crucial children are given the freedom to express themselves and explore and play

in their own way. A musician by trade, she came up with the idea for Hartbeeps during a music session for adults with learning disabilities. She noticed the difference adding props and multisensory objects made and thought it would translate well into a class for babies and toddlers. And translate well it did – from humble beginnings in a youth club in Watford, Hartbeeps has grown into a multi-national operation which is still expanding.

The session leaders, or 'imaginators' as Sarah prefers them to be known, have a big part to play and it's fair to say that Kimberley Newell is one of West London's most popular. "The energy and fun Kimmy brings to Hartbeeps is unlike any other class we do, I can't recommend it highly enough," says one mum.

For Kimmy, who has been leading sessions for five years and has recently been nominated for a national award, the feeling is mutual. "It's pure, pure joy. I feel very honoured to be part of a special time in people's lives." With a degree in Performing Arts, she feels music and drama are key to early stage development, enabling children to experience things they may otherwise miss out on. She talks of children who've never been near animals falling in love with her cat puppets,



Hartbeeps transforms ordinary spaces into a tactile wonderland for curious babies



Props and multisensory objects add to the joyful experience



Hartbeeps believes in giving children the freedom to explore and play in their own way



and of a little boy who was so taken with the doll he was looking after at the toy 'hospital', his grandma vowed to buy him one on the way home. "Children get so much out of the Hartbeeps experience," says Kimmy. "It's really wonderful to see the shyest come out of their shells, and the more boisterous learn how to interact and play."

If, however, glitz, glamour and razzle dazzle are more your thing than look no further than Baby Broadway – a new addition to London's baby class market. Here you can sit with your little one and immerse yourself in the sounds of the musicals, and while audience participation is encouraged, it's by no means a necessity. Top West End performers are on hand to deliver an uplifting programme of show tunes carefully put together by Anna Unwin, Baby Broadway's creator. Anna came up with the idea while on maternity leave after realising that "no one was doing musicals." Having worked in the West End for more

CHILDREN OFTEN LEARN HOW TO SING WORDS BEFORE THEY CAN SAY THEM

than six years, she knew she'd be appealing to mothers, with two thirds of visitors to London's shows being women, most aged between 25 and 34.

Anna's background in music also taught her that as well as attracting tired parents looking for a little escapism, her concerts would be hugely beneficial to babies and toddlers. "It's scientifically proven that the first three years of life change the formation of the brain", she explains. "Clapping and tapping both develop fine motor skills and the expression in music helps develop emotional intelligence." Music also helps language development,

as children often learn how to sing words before they can say them. Anna's key aim, however, is enjoyment. She wants to create an atmosphere that "excites and delights both parent and child" and it seems on that note she's already succeeding, with regular standing ovations from audiences: "Went home on a total endorphin-high"; "Literally had the best time"; "Really put a spring in my step."

With critical acclaim like this, expect Baby Broadway to be treading the boards for quite some time yet. **B**

hartbeeps.com, babybroadway.co.uk