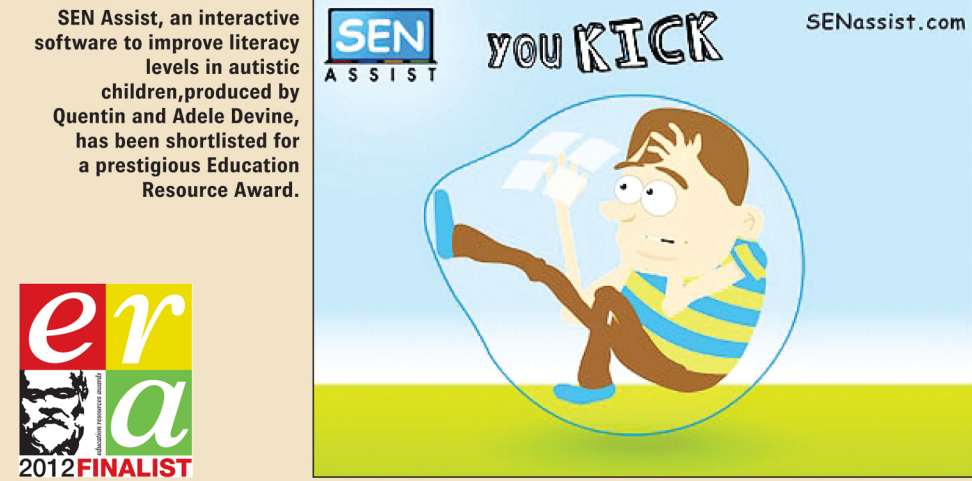


Mark McKelvey talks to the local man who is stocking the Royal Shakespeare Company's official shop...

Bringing the Bard back for the next generation



Making a difference to children's lives

BY MARK MCKELVEY

For the past two years a Tyrone couple has revolutionised how autistic children are taught, through an unique new teaching aid, one which has now been short-listed for a prestigious Education Resource Award (ERA).

Designer and animator Quentin Devine, from Plumbridge and his wife Adele, who has over ten years experience as a special needs teacher, have combined their respective skills to create interactive software that has been introduced to classrooms and homes around the world.

The duo put their heads together and produced the first range of SEN Assist CD ROMs to help improve literacy levels, and through early intervention hope to move autistic children from the care sector into employment.

SEN Assist as been such a resounding success that it has been named as a finalist in the Best Special Education Resource or Equipment - involving ICT category at the ERAs.

The awards aim to test and identify the best resources available to today's schools and classrooms. Now in their fourteenth successful year, what makes these Awards really different is that they focus on the resources, services and people that really make a practical impact on learning and the day-to-day work of the teachers in the

classroom.

Winners will be announced at the annual gala event at The Motorcycle Museum, Birmingham on Friday 16 March, the second evening of the Education Show 2012.

Quentin said he is delighted and honoured to see his product get such notable recognition.

"It has taken so much hard work to get to this stage and to even be short-listed for an award like this makes us think we are finally getting somewhere with it. There were times we thought 'what are we doing?' but this has hopefully given us the green light from the education bodies to expand further."

He believes SEN Assist not only enhances the lives of those availing of the programmes, but also has the potential to save the government millions, having worked closely throughout development with the National Autistic Society.

Quentin explained, "It is a different approach to teaching which aims to enhance inclusion so autistic children can be involved in the classroom. We have been told that £2 billion is spent each year on autism, but if this can be reduced through initiatives like ours it would really aid the economy by helping people out of the care system into work, through early intervention."

The couple met in America while working in a summer camp for mentally handicapped

adults. Quentin said, "My wife was always asking me to

come up with games for her class to use on the interactive whiteboards. When her teaching colleagues saw this they asked if I would develop similar interactive games for their classes also.

"We then attended a few NAS meetings and showed our software to a number of parents who bought copies there and then."

The programme which is up for the award 'The Fairy Tales' is related to the story of the three bears. They are also developing software with the Gingerbread Man as the central character.

Quentin added, "It's basically a story that starts with symbols and there are questions and quizzes at the end.

"I also made a poem and got my son to read it for the software, explaining what it is like to be autistic. I have received emails from kids in America thanking me for doing this for autism. It is so good to get feedback from the kids and the teachers about how it's making a difference - as far as we are aware, there is nothing else like it in the world."

For more information visit www.senassist.com



Quentin Devine creating a snow sculpture of the famous Oxford Bard.



Characters from Quentin's Early Shakespeare CD, including the bard himself and the donkey.

When Plumbridge animator and designer Quentin Devine grew up attending St Colman's High School in Strabane in the early '90s, he had a dark, dark secret. You see, Quentin was a fan of William Shakespeare.

Unbeknownst to his classmates, Quentin used to save up his pocket money and sneak in to the local book shop Paperchase on a Friday afternoon and invest 99p in a copy of Hamlet or Romeo and Juliet, as a means to better familiarise himself with the work of the famous Bard.

Quentin explained, "It was the best shop to buy from, if you didn't want your friends knowing, as Shakespeare books were found upstairs and the stationary, sweets, magazines were downstairs. So as upstairs was fairly empty on a Friday evening, I could make my purchase, put it in my schoolbag and go. After a while, I grew to understand Shakespeare's language and loved his use of words. My favourite line of Shakespeare's has always remained the same: "More than kin and less than kind" from Hamlet."

Fast forward 17 odd years and Quentin, when he's not annoying George W Bush and Fox Network*, has managed to make his mark on a global scale (again) and his curiosity and love for learning more about Shakespeare has not diminished. In fact, Quentin has dedicated the past year to developing an innovative approach to teaching Shakespeare which is more assessable and appealing to the masses.

"I remember when at school being given Macbeth and pupils basically struggled through, to understand the language of Shakespeare the best they could, not really understanding any of it and just waiting for the part they were reading out end.

"I was always interested in Shakespeare. I don't really know why, but I knew I wanted to know more. So when I met my future wife, many years later, I was overwhelmed at how she could quote pages of Shakespeare non-stop. Both of her parents were professional actors and spoon-fed her Shakespeare from birth.

"Ever since I learned to animate and develop (over 12 years ago), I've wanted to make Shakespeare easier for school children to learn. Something that a teacher could easily put on and use with the whole class and that they would actually enjoy.

"It has taken a while, picking up various skills and making other software, but Adele and I have finally made our first 'EARLY Shakespeare' CD ROM - A Midsummer Night's Dream."



Making Shakespeare easy and fun for children.

Quentin also fulfilled his life-long dream a couple of years ago by writing and producing a short animated film entitled, "The Land of Ire," (which can be viewed at www.landofire.com). Spurred on by his rural surroundings, Quentin was inspired to create this short film, constructing the animation using traditional painting skills, mixed with several computer packages and techniques including Photoshop and Flash.

He created his personal website www.q4nobody.co.uk eight years ago to share his creativity and to date has had millions of hits a year from all over the world. Make a visit yourself. You won't be disappointed.

Having only recently developed this new Shakespeare software, Quentin and Adele have received the best possible endorsement, as the Royal Shakespeare Company have already started to sell it in their official shop.

It has also received glittering reviews from educationists who praised the software for its ability to "simplify" this complex play, allowing children to watch an animated version of A Midsummer Night's Dream at one of four different levels.

Simply click 'play' and the words are spoken by real actors who have actually trod the boards themselves.

Quentin continued, "We were spurned on by the fact that this year the World Shakespeare Festival begins on April 23. Adele abridged the story and I designed and animated the characters. We believe that if children are taught the basic story and characters at an earlier age, then learning the language would become so much easier at a later stage.

"I really believe it will change the way children are taught Shakespeare. Our three year old goes around the house quoting Puck, Oberon and Bottom. And now, even the Royal Shakespeare Company has purchased their first batch of our software to be sold in their theatre shops.

"It is a great honour and we hope to soon be supplying all the schools throughout England, Ireland and beyond. So my old primary school, St Peters in Plumbridge might soon be performing their very first 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'.

For more information or even a free trial visit www.earlyshakespeare.com

