



The Theatre of Theatre

Curated by Emily Collins

(Museum Consultant, WCHN History & Heritage Collection)

The Theatre of Theatre is a lighthearted play on the serious theatre of surgery. Featuring a colourful (and black-and-white) cast of Hospital staff, child play-actors and eccentric surgical tools, the exhibition dramatises the conduct and culture of medical operations.

The operating theatre has a genuine theatrical background. Historically, surgical procedures were staged in tiered theatres, spectated in the round by medical students and the inquisitive public.

Like dramatic theatre, the theatre of surgery is ritualistic and performative. But while the rituals associated with the theatre of performing arts are primarily creative choices, conventions and superstitions, certain rituals of the operating theatre are essential. The safety and success of the surgical act are critically dependent on patient fasting and sedation, and the pre-operative scrub. The modern operating theatre is a closed, sterile space. Patient comfort and privacy are paramount.

The 21st-century operating theatre is not barren of performing arts. It is common practice, worldwide, to conduct surgery to an accompaniment of recorded music. Many surgeons feel this enhances their performance, increasing concentration and reducing stress¹. The lead surgeon usually gets to pick the showtunes!

The Theatre of Theatre exhibition introduces the lead surgeons, and other characters, before launching into a play in three acts. Being silent and still, the play takes the form of a storyboard.

In a nod to English theatre director Peter Brook, Act I begins with *The Empty Space*. The house audience (of nurses) is expectant; the mood is electric. Then a man walks on stage to deliver the opening monologue. More theatrical tropes ensue. The Act closes with a lyrical, interpretive dance enacted by a quintet of steel surgical instruments.

Act II presents a mere surgical thread of a plot. A clown is sent in (for surgery). The tension builds, culminating in a choreographed 'sword fight'. In the final Act, the surgeons triumph. The patient is directed off stage to the recovery room. The (hospital) curtain falls...



Image: Dr Brian Fotheringham in an ACH pantomime, 1984



Image: Scene from the 1985 film *Special People* shot at the ACH

Curated using visual material found in the WCHN History and Heritage Collection, *The Theatre of Theatre* stands as an endearing ovation in honour of our surgeons, past and present, and a memento to this institution's contemporary history.

The wooden stage of Act I endures, in situ, in one of the Hospital's basements. As versatile as Meryl Streep, this stage once starred in Hospital balls, orations and nurse graduations. The man behind the monologue is Brian Fotheringham, former Medical Superintendent of the Adelaide Children's Hospital (ACH)². A doctor in the real world, here he (re-en)acts the part of stage surgeon; a role he first played in a 1984 staff pantomime of *Puss in Boots*.



Image: ACH patients engaged in play therapy, c1980s

The main surgical sequence in this exhibition is a cheeky composite of photographs from unrelated operations, some captured at Open House sessions in the ACH operating theatres in 1985. These were a far cry from the public spectacles of surgery staged in 17th century amphitheatres. In 2020, the curious among us would get a better view, with expert commentary, watching TV reruns of *RPA*³.

The children dressed in theatre gowns are acting out the rituals of surgery. They are participants in a Children's Hospital program designed to lessen their fears about having an operation. Similar programs are run by Play Therapists to prepare children for surgery at the Hospital today, funded by the WCH Foundation through their Arts in Health Program.

Some day, one of these child graduates of surgical make-believe could go on to become one of our leading surgeons. And get to dictate what songs are played in the operating theatre. This year marks the tenth anniversary of the Foundation's Arts in Health Program. May we applaud the powerful role the performing arts – indeed all the arts – play in this Hospital.

Emily Collins

1. Moris D, Linos D (2013). Music meets surgery: two sides to the art of "healing". *Surgical Endoscopy* 27: 719–23.
2. Dr Fotheringham was also a significant advocate for the WCHN History and Heritage Collection and authored *A Continuing History of the Adelaide Children's Hospital (1976–1989)*.
3. *RPA* was a documentary TV series filmed at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney.

This exhibition was planned and exhibited on the lands of the Kurna People. We pay our respects to the Kurna Elders past and present, and to the Elders of the lands this brochure reaches.

The Curator wishes to thank: Jill Newman and Lauren Simeoni from the WCH Foundation; the WCHN History and Heritage Group: Alex Del Gaudio and Marg Lea; Tim Boord from Corporate Communications; and the WCH Foundation Gallery Management Committee. This exhibition is dedicated to a young man who became a brilliant, compassionate surgeon – may he still find time to play.

History and Heritage Collection

The Women's and Children's Health Network has a collection of historical artefacts which is managed by the WCHN History and Heritage Group. This was originally formed as the ICONS Group in 1995 by retired Adelaide Children's Hospital Staff. The Group aims to preserve, collect, collate, catalogue, store, display and interpret items of historical significance to the Women's and Children's Hospital and its predecessors the Adelaide Children's Hospital, the Queen Victoria Hospital and associated institutions.

Women's & Children's Hospital Foundation Arts in Health program

The WCH Foundation Arts in Health program coordinates five galleries in the Hospital, providing a space away from the stresses of treatment to distract, entertain and inspire, improving the visual environment. The Arts in Health programs integrate art into the life of the Hospital to improve people's health and wellbeing. We try to make the environment more 'child-friendly', making it look better and helping to make the time spent in hospital 'feel better'. The Yellow Heart Gallery provides a platform to share the WCHN History and Heritage Collection with the Hospital community and explore the significant people and events that shaped the Hospital today.

The Theatre of Theatre is on display in the Yellow Heart Gallery (Level 1, Zone F) at the Women's and Children's Hospital. The exhibition will be in play until mid-February 2021.

Cover Image: detail of ACH Surgical instruments, 1986



For more information contact:

Jill Newman, Manager Arts in Health
jill.newman@wchfoundation.org.au
T 08 8464 7900 | M 0408215372
artsinhealth@wchfoundation.org.au
55 King William Road | North Adelaide | SA 5006
www.wchfoundation.org.au



facebook.com/wchfoundation



instagram.com/wchfoundation



twitter.com/wchfoundation