



Life is complicated. Encouraging people to reflect on its toughest questions needs to be rooted in the belief that you can't tell people what to think, and, on the whole, nor should you try...

Dr Sophie Petit-Zeman

Left: *Every Breath*, 2006 © Robert Workman
 Below: *Nobody Lives Forever*, 2008 © Robert Workman



Y Touring: a dramatic antidote to apathy

By Dr Sophie Petit-Zeman

The debate about using animals in medical research will doubtless rage until we recreate the human body on a computer and the last mouse has died for man. And it's easy to see why the topic raises such strong feelings.

I could almost imagine fighting as hard for animals never to be harmed as for researchers to be able to use them in our name. But I know too many people who've benefitted from medical interventions that I can't see could have been developed in any other way to sit on that side of the fence.

And when I waver, I recall an interchange with a departmental head at a large anti-vivisection organisation who promised to get back to me once he had an answer to my "very interesting" (his words) question about how he would develop heart transplants or anti-cancer drugs without using animals.

It was as if he'd never thought that this, or an equivalent, was the question. And it's the lack of an answer that makes his line of work feel like emotional indulgence based on

understandable empathy for sweet furry things and probably a real desire to avoid harming living creatures. He's remained silent, presumably because there is as yet, sadly, no answer. And I'm afraid his stance also feels hypocritical: how many deny themselves or loved ones the benefits of research that has and still does use animals?

That's not to say the research community shouldn't try to find alternatives, or that anti-vivisection campaigners haven't at times helped raise standards by revealing poor practice or, very occasionally, much worse. But I believe medicine progresses in part because of animal research. Time and again opinion polls by MORI and others tell us we are pretty united in accepting it and vets stress that without it they would have little in their armouries for sick animals.

Shortly after becoming Director of Public Dialogue (more below) at the Association of Medical Research Charities (AMRC), and finding that my job was to involve a lot of work on this debate, I wrote an article for the Guardian entitled "Confessions of a Vegetarian Vivisector."

I had used animals in research, and given up eating them as a result, but the subtitle was inaccurate: “I won’t eat animals, but I’ll happily slice them up in the name of medical science.” A more assiduous subeditor might have avoided the word “happily” as what I wrote was “I disliked using animals in research but dislike far more the thought of anyone I love suffering because we didn’t allow the sacrifice of a relatively tiny number of animals.”

Seven paragraphs into this article, what’s it got to do with Y Touring? The answer is simple, and one that’s proved true on several occasions in surprising ways: when I haven’t a clue what to do, or am certain something may be impossible, it’s always worth a chat with Nigel Townsend.

Y Touring’s founding director, it would be easy to put Nigel in the creative genius box and leave him there with his boundless energy to pull together exceptional theatre from tough topics. But Nigel’s skills, and those of the company he’s gathered around him over the 15 years since we met, extend far beyond this.

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I first discovered his ability to pick through complex challenges in the mid 1990s when working at the Mental Health Foundation - a world much like that of animal research in one key respect – it was riven with debate. Debate about medical versus social models of disease, about what to do about any of it – from the right sort of research to treatment – and how to ease the stigma that so often piles on the distress.

So, when asked to sit on the advisory group for a Wellcome Trust-funded schools play being put together by Y Touring to help teenagers understand the issues, I was certain it would fail. But, as has happened again since, Y Touring proved me wrong.

Nicola Baldwin’s *Cracked* was a brilliant, moving play that engaged young audiences and enabled some who had never felt able to be open about their experiences of mental illness (sometimes painfully witnessed in parents or siblings) to talk about their feelings, alongside a sensitive package of support and educational resources for

teachers, meticulously put together for all their plays.

As far as we know (and we worried), no-one fell through the net of feeling worse as a result of seeing *Cracked*. I suspect for many, young and old (I saw it in several schools and was the “guest expert” at a series of public performances at the Mermaid Theatre) it was a step on the road towards seeking help for their own distress, or, more simply, realising they weren’t alone with experiences that daily challenged them.

Fast forward to 2004. I was new in post at AMRC, frustrated at the research community’s stance that “we know animal research is right, end of story” and struck by a growing sense that a more nuanced message would resonate better with our member charities, the public who support them, and be a lot more honest. Coupled with a realisation that we couldn’t play on the whole canvas of public understanding of science (my curious job title had to go), I went to see Nigel to ask if they could help: could Y Touring give us and our members an avenue to invest scarce resources in something focused, high quality and of known impact?

For an organisation with no agenda on animal research but a commitment to good educational drama, there was an obvious problem. They wouldn’t do this project as some sort of “propaganda piece” – putting the case for animal research that, when push comes to shove, we support - but only as a thought-provoking drama, setting out the arguments and drawing no conclusions, alongside a post-show debate and accompanied by the usual suite of educational materials.

Nigel said they’d do it, but only by assembling an advisory board of people from all sides of the debate who would have to agree at every step that the product was balanced. No chance, I thought, would we unite anti-vivisectionists with research scientists, medical charities and ethicists, and reach unanimous agreement that the chosen script would set out the debate and leave audiences to make up their own minds.

No chance, I thought, until I read *Every Breath*. The play, by former Grange Hill screenwriter Judith Johnson, enthralled schools’ audiences for two years, was made into a podcast funded by the Wellcome Trust, a DVD by the Department for Children, Schools and Families, won an Edinburgh Festival Fringe Award and was selected for publication by Oberon Books for which I had the pleasure of writing the foreword.

Originally I was asked just to jot down some thoughts for Dame Joan Bakewell, a patron of Y

Touring, and hence had the surreal task of trying to see a play for people 25 years my junior about one of the 21st century's most impassioned scientific debates through the eyes of a woman who, almost half a century earlier, Frank Muir had dubbed the thinking man's crumpet. In the end, thankfully, the foreword was mine to write, and as I said there: "Life is complicated. Encouraging people to reflect on its toughest questions needs to be rooted in the belief that you can't tell people what to think, and, on the whole, nor should you try..."

Looking back, *Every Breath* marked a sea change in the way parts of the sector handled the issue. It felt almost as if individuals and organisations heaved a collective sigh of relief at the possibility of stepping away from being hard-line, and liked the idea of getting their message across in a way that felt more in tune with public opinion.

The Guardian's James Randerson came to see the play in a school, and wrote a lovely review (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2006/mar/14/schools.uk1>), in which he recounts his conversation with Nigel about whether it was "difficult to make the play both an engaging story and a source of information?"

"Yes...I think the problem when we started was that we had too much information. The scientists we were working with felt that, if only we got all this information out, people would agree with them. Which is rubbish." The article continued: "The company's aim, he says, is to present the shades of grey in the argument and leave the students wanting to find out more.'It gently stimulates the discussion, rather than layering it all on,' says the company manager, Thom Hammond, who led the debate after the play.

"The students responded with howls of laughter and shrieks of delight and the discussion at the end was full of passion and intelligence. Waverley's catchment covers some of the poorest London neighbourhoods. The play made sense to them."

And it clearly made sense to AMRC members, who were enthusiastic about tackling other big issues in this way. Our partnership with Y Touring progressed to a trilogy – *Nobody Lives Forever*, which focused on stem cell and embryo research and *Starfish*, a deeply moving play explaining clinical trials through the true story of a man who died from vCJD, human mad cow disease.

As Peter Hollins, Chief Executive of the British Heart Foundation, which was represented on the *Every Breath* advisory group says "Scientists frequently make the assumption that if they only lay out facts logically, the conclusions are obvious. It doesn't work with adults and certainly doesn't work with youngsters. The great thing about the partnership between AMRC and Y Touring is that it engages young people in debate about serious issues in a way which really means something to them. I love Y Touring's work as does my wife who has a lifetime's experience of getting the best out of older kids at a key stage in their lives."

Peter's view of Y Touring is shared by many AMRC members, including Simon Moore, until recently Chief Executive of Action Medical Research. His charity contributed funding to *Nobody Lives Forever* at a time when the embryo research debate was raging around the topic of "animal human hybrids" and the media was frenzied with Frankenbunnies.

From Left to Right:

Cracked, 1996
© Robert Workman

Starfish, 2010
© Sheila Burnett



Echoing in part my experience, Simon says “Despite having been initially sceptical about the worth of Y Touring, I became a total convert to using theatre to put across ethical questions to young audiences. Y Touring presents complex issues in a straightforward and even-handed manner that doesn’t shy away from emotion but still manages to be objective and authoritative. Action Medical Research was therefore delighted to support this important contribution to the wider education of young people and the understanding of medical research ethics.”

Keen for Y Touring to do more work in mental health, he adds “The company not only informs but is a major force in combatting misunderstanding and apathy.” Fifteen years after first working with them, and a more concentrated five years and three new plays later, apathy is not a word I would ever associate with Y Touring’s approach or the response of their audiences.

Indeed, as students who saw *Starfish* wrote in reviews for a competition which I had the pleasure of judging, alongside Ian Shuttleworth, the *Financial Times* theatre critic and Central YMCA’s CEO, Rosi Prescott, “I wish we had more things like that because I learned way more from that than I would have done in any science lesson” and “you made learning fun and I’d recommend - *Starfish* to all students who are willing to learn something new and have an open mind towards the suggestions of others within moral debate. The performance was moving and informative, through-provoking and entertaining. I was enthralled. It certainly beats a physics lesson.”

I could say more about Y Touring, about the value to AMRC, our members and their supporters of the partnership, not to mention the chance it has given me to do unusual and exciting things.

Like several members of the trilogy’s advisory groups (which I nominally chair, although members take little corralling), I’ve spent time with actors whose dedication to getting to grips with difficult subject matter so they can do justice to “in role” debates is amazing. Over countless cups of coffee in Y Touring’s Cromer Street headquarters they ask intriguing questions until they feel comfortable to respond on stage to the audience as if they were a researcher, medic, antivivisectionist, art student with social phobia or bereaved parent – just some of the gamut of characters in these plays.

Through the partnership, I’ve trodden the boards of the Royal Albert Hall – in 2009 in the main theatre (strolling out there carries a certain thrill) as part of a day organised by their Learning and Participation Department around *Nobody Lives Forever*. This brought together schoolchildren

who had made short films in response to seeing the play to debate its themes with scientists, ethicists and religious leaders. This year, during National Science and Engineering Week, their new Elgar Room was used for performances of *Starfish*, with advisory board members joining the onstage debate.

As well as making links of this sort – getting into the Albert Hall’s orbit has to be a good thing - Nigel and his small inventive team have made other innovations during this trilogy. For example, they now use “QWIZDOM” electronic voting in post-show debates. As well as being fun, and our fear that the handsets might be stolen because they look like mobile phones is as yet unrealised, this gives young people who may be reluctant to put their hands up publicly the chance to express their views through a confidential vote.

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I can see QWIZDOM coming into its own after plays on more personally sensitive topics, and again the company was right to fight to introduce a new technology despite my Luddite scepticism. Similarly, the “virtual world” accompanying *Starfish* – *Steamfish* – is beautiful and informative. Currently offered to students who see the play, there are plans to roll it out more widely.

It would be untrue to say that working with Y Touring is always a bed of roses – and money – lack of it – is a regular hurdle. While Central YMCA provides some core funding, the company has to bring in its own money to run projects like our partnership. The ongoing enthusiasm at the Wellcome Trust (one of our member charities) for the company’s work is a mainstay, and we have been pleased to draw in significant support from other AMRC partners including the Medical Research Council and National Institute for Health Research (NIHR).

But there is no denying the ongoing stress, and a certain sinking feeling each time we hit the buffers - plays to be done and no money to do them. Somehow though, something crops up and they’re off and running again, a new avenue of support found or an old one revived.

Recently, the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry invited Y Touring to

perform excerpts from *Starfish* at a parliamentary reception which may lead to new funding sources; the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills seems keen to revive *Every Breath* in some form, and NIHR to follow with *Starfish* what DCSF did for *Every Breath* - a DVD for schools - perhaps accompanied by a “live” facilitator to run the debate, thus keeping an all-important interactive component.

This is one of the “victim of success” problems that Y Touring faces: their work is so good everyone wants it (schools tours, offered free, could sell out many times over), but it’s relatively expensive to keep actors on the road for 8 weeks if you could just produce a DVD. I suspect there’s a middle ground, and conversations with Nigel where he uses words like “streaming” that I only half understand may yet save the day, striking a balance between the thrill of live and a medium with broader reach.

I hope this article gives a flavour of Y Touring over the last 5 of its 21 years, and a hint at what it was up to back in the mid 1990s. But it really is only a flavour - where we get involved in their biomedical science work, they are tackling lots else, from binge-drinking to climate change, street dancing to homophobia in football. I won’t pretend there isn’t the occasional sigh of relief when Nigel gets bound up in one of these other themes and I go back to the day job free of a steady stream of artistic and creative queries. But I’m always glad when it’s our turn again, back at Cromer Street cradling a coffee mug and meeting Judith to discuss a script, or the next intake of actors.

I have two sadnesses about working with Y Touring. Ben Musgrave’s brilliant *Breathing Country* – about the use of electronic patient records in research – is the one that got away. Somehow (it pains me to admit) they have done this perfectly without us. I wish we’d been among

the very strong partners, and hope we may yet join them. And the other regret is that we haven’t as yet been able to do an exciting evaluation of *Starfish*.

While “evaluation” and “exciting” don’t obviously belong in the same sentence, when it was suggested that we work with education experts at the University of York to do a randomised controlled trial (RCT) of a play about randomised controlled trials, it did appeal.

I’ve never seen a Y Touring play without pleasure and interest, but as educational “tools,” it’s important to know whether they “work.” Giving kids a chance to do something other than a physics lesson or teachers a couple of hours rest is fine, but what about sustained increases in knowledge?

Y Touring do extensive evaluations, but this RCT of an RCT would be fabulous. Thanks to Professor Max Parmar, who’s on the *Starfish* advisory group, the Medical Research Council Clinical Trials Unit has done a small scale one, but the large one has not gone ahead due to lack of the right funding at the right time.

It may yet happen – the one certainty with Y Touring is never knowing what’s next. Indeed, long after *Cracked* stopped touring, it was invited to the World Festival of Madness and Arts in Toronto. Madness and Arts. Brilliance and Science. Y Touring melds this and more. Describing their work, the biologist Professor Lewis Wolpert wrote in *The Independent*, “Theatre of Science at its best.” It’s unscientific to admit, but, RCT or no RCT, I think he’s right.

From left to right:

Nobody Lives Forever,
2009
© Sheila Burnett

Starfish, 2009
© Robert Workman

