



Had I seen *Starfish* before my father's illness I think I would have thought his predicament through in a different way. Perhaps he would have done too.

Susan Elkin

Left: *Starfish*, 2010 © Sheila Burnett  
Below: *Memory Box*, 1994 © Y Touring



## Bridging Gaps

By Susan Elkin

In the late nineteen eighties my father, Ken Hillyer, aged 66 and indefatigably fit suddenly succumbed to a hideous paralysing neurological condition. It was Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS) and he spent months in high dependency units in three different hospitals, heavily sedated and hooked up to a battery of life support machines. The condition receded almost as quickly as it had begun - as most of his doctors had said that it probably would - and, almost miraculously it seemed to us, a few months later he was driving round the Dordogne towing his caravan.

All was well for a year or two. Then GBS symptoms began to recur. Now this is a condition which you are not - really not - supposed to get twice and the medics were surprised. It wasn't quite so severe the second time and Ken remained able to think, talk and make his own decisions throughout. Reckoning he had absolutely nothing to lose - and desperate to get back to playing his fiddle for folk dances, part-time antiques trading and of course, the beloved car and caravan

- he readily agreed to anything the doctors asked him to do for research purposes - including taking massive doses of steroids.

He recovered from the GBS again but the aggressive treatment had taken its toll and he was soon on dialysis for the renal failure which finally killed him. Should he have simply allowed the GBS to recede naturally and hoped for another almost full recovery? Had he done so would he have had many more years of active life without the misery of steadily deteriorating health and having to dialyse five times a day? Of course we shall never know.

So why do I tell this very personal story in connection with Y Touring? Well, it all came flooding (literally) back to me when I sat in a school hall at Lady Margaret School at Parsons Green in Hammersmith earlier this year watching Judith Johnson's *Starfish* with Year 10.

The play is set in a small Northern town. Saira, a young

doctor (Hanna Kass – very good) comes back to practise in her father's old surgery following his death. At the centre of the story is bright, kind, 20-something Michael (Max Saunders Singer) a young teacher who develops variant CJD. The play charts the diagnosis, the disease, and the heartbreak that follows for those around him. Saira, deeply attached to Michael, is nevertheless a constant advocate for the need for fair clinical trials, the danger of untried treatments and the requirement of individuals to play their part in the process. But Michael's dad, Adrian (Andrew Hobday) wants to prolong his son's life at any cost.

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Golly, how closely I empathised with the dilemma at the heart of this gripping play. This was my father's situation exactly. For him there was no reason not to try anything and everything. And yet, of course, clinical trials have a vital place and rational, scientific people like the fictional Saira who believe in their efficacy above all else make perfect sense. So what is the answer – if there is one?

The Lady Margaret girls are led through a brief introductory session and there's a well managed discussion at the end during which everyone votes on ethical questions using individual hand held devices. The results are displayed instantly on a screen at the end of the room. 'A bit like *Who*

*wants to be a millionaire?*' Steve Byrne, the facilitator, jokes to lighten the atmosphere, well aware that several girls are in tears at the end of the play and one has left the room followed by a friend to comfort her. I don't have to do that, but it's touch and go.

So, as far as I was concerned, Y Touring, the first company to work in the arena of health, sex education and science ethics, had hit the spot yet again as this company, which I have been following for most of its 21 years, usually does.

Take *Memory Box*, the first Y Touring play I saw. I was asked to go by the play's commissioned writer, Pete Johnson with whom I'd had other dealings. I caught up with it one afternoon in 1995 at a girls' school in Camden and wrote an article about it for the *Daily Mail*.

I arrived there expecting a low key piece – just a second rate vehicle for pedaling a few personal, social and health education issues linked with a bit of science, I thought.

I couldn't have been more wrong. What I saw was a sparkling piece of theatre performed by talented, highly professional actors which left everyone who saw it thinking about death, bereavement and memory in a new way.

Then there was Nicola Baldwin's *The Gift* which explores some of the social, moral, scientific and political questions raised by genetic selection. I saw it in a 'challenging' school in King's Cross. I caught up with the same playwright's *Cracked* (about mental health) one evening at a performance for guests and press at the off-Tottenham Court Road headquarters of YMCA – the organisation which owns Y Touring.

From Left to Right:

*Cracked*, 1996  
© Robert Workman

*Starfish*, 2009  
© Robert Workman



Every Y Touring production uses a battery of expert consultants – often doctors or scientists. They work with the playwright to ensure that the issues really are accurately presented and due consideration given to all points of view. This is about informed reasoning not indoctrination.

Then there's its Theatre of Debate project, another aspect of Y Touring's work which impressed me when I experienced and investigated it. I sat in on a two day event at which more than 60 pupils and teachers from eight London secondary schools met eminent doctors and scientists to discuss medical ethics. Also present were 15 playwrights, and representatives from both Y Touring and the National Theatre.

A number of new plays were commissioned as a direct result of the Theatre of Debate event I attended back in 1999 and I later went to a follow-up session to hear rehearsed readings by actors of extracts from work in progress. And there have been other Theatre in Debate plays since, including *Starfish*. Theatre of Debate has now been running for more than ten years.

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But does that mean that the company produces formulaic ‘issues-led’ drama which lacks merit and conviction as theatre? No, and for me that's an emphatic no.

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But to get this issues business out of the way drama simply reflects life and its issues: *Macbeth* is about ambition and what happens if it gets out of control. *Hamlet*, among many other things, deals with coping with parental remarriage. *History Boys* explores the meaning and purpose of education. *Ghosts* is about the effects on a family of an inherited sexually transmitted disease (a rather Y Touring-esque topic, come to think of it). Y Touring is simply working in the time-honoured tradition of meaty plays.

Neither is Y Touring's work ‘just’ Theatre-in-Education (TIE), part of the drama world which has attracted an unfairly dismissive reputation – mostly ascribed to it, I suspect, by critics who've

seen very little TIE.

Since the 1970s, when it began to catch on, I have seen many examples of TIE which typically involve companies taking drama and drama work into schools rather than the pupils going out. Beyond that it's a pretty broad church, can be almost anything and relate to any curriculum area. Rarely, though, have I seen bad TIE from anyone and never from Y Touring. In general the sneers are unjustified.

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At its best TIE – if the format is a performance for students to watch as Y Touring's work is in the first instance – shows students that the magic of riveting theatre can be created anywhere, even in the most untheatrical of environments: a school hall without stage lights and a couple of screens, for example.

They learn that ‘theatre’ doesn't have to mean plush seats and a proscenium or thrust. Audience members can be seated within inches of actors and feel totally absorbed into the drama because of that proximity. First and foremost a Y Touring show is a theatrical experience not a science or PSHE lesson.

So Y Touring's work is essentially ‘theatre for young audiences’ – a concept and term that makes ‘TIE’ sound a bit last century, although a rose by any other name . . .

Theatre for young audiences has grown and grown in recent years. Unicorn Theatre, which opened in 2005, was London's first purpose-built theatre for children and young people. Polka Theatre in Wimbledon and Half Moon Theatre in Limehouse continue to produce excellent work for young audiences and there are many British touring companies which take work all over the UK and beyond to appear in a wide range of venues including schools. And all the big producing companies such as NT and RSC have some young audience work in their programmes.

Y Touring is a vibrant part of this trend. Witness the shortlisting of its play *Breathing Country* by Ben Musgrave – about the role of electronic patient records – in Theatre Centre's 2010 Brian Way Award for a professionally produced play for



young people. Here was a Y Touring production being judged simply as entertaining, imaginative theatre not for anything overtly didactic. If the didacticism was there it was secondary.

It is an indication, incidentally, of just how seriously work for young people is now taken that Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance is teaming up with Unicorn Theatre to teach the UK's first MA in Theatre for Young Audiences from this autumn.

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Yes, there is a lot of science underpinning most Y Touring plays but that does not detract from artistic quality. There's a lot of science – and other disciplines – in several of Tom Stoppard's plays and in Brecht's *Life of Galileo* but that doesn't diminish them as works of art.

On the contrary I think Y Touring is cheerfully bridging the gap between arts and science which, as C P Snow, trained scientist and novelist, observed as far back as 1959 in his *The Two Cultures* lecture, are dangerously polarised in this country.

Too many teachers in too many secondary schools still, 50 years after Snow coined the term, allow the ‘two cultures’ mentality to flourish. English and drama teachers, typically, know little or no science and don't seem particularly ashamed of it. Their science colleagues often (but

not, of course invariably) write off English Literature as being nothing but silly stories and not worthy of serious investigation. Of course I'm stereotyping but over my many years in schools first as a teacher and now as a journalist I have met plenty of both types.

Yes, a company, such as Y Touring, which uses good quality drama – which would work just as well in a theatre as in a school hall or community centre or medical centre – to invite audiences to consider scientific issues in an informed way is doing a valuable, perhaps unique, job.

So happy birthday Y Touring. You've come a long way in your 21 years and changed a lot of lives, including mine. Had I seen *Starfish* before my father's illness I think I would have thought his predicament through in a different way. Perhaps he would have done too. Either way we would both have been better informed and better able to reason logically.

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*Cracked*, 2001  
© Robert Workman

*Starfish*, 2010  
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