

Rita, the Preening Pachyderm



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Having initially trained as a GP, I saw a different light and it led into clinical neurology, with research, teaching and public health along the way.

It is the pantomime season (“oh no, it’s not” if this is the summer issue) and a pink elephant called Rita will again grace and disgrace the Tyngewicke stage. But why a pink elephant and why Rita?

A wave of Basil Shepstone’s magic wand, **Figure 1** and a magic spell “a sprinkling of stars, a hey and a ho, it’s into the archive we must go” let us escape 2023 and its trumpety-Trump, and go back to the even darker days of 1939.



The first 25 years of Tingewick are documented in the archive by GE Moloney, presumably the Moloney that was Professor of Surgery in Riyadh, the author of “A Doctor in Saudi Arabia” and described by Terence Ryan thus “Ted Maloney (“operating as quickly as he eats”) in a Bentley swinging speedily into the car park”. Yes, young readers, doctors did once drive Bentleys. In 1939 the London hospitals were evacuated (neuroscience went to a field in Sussex) and Oxford students had to stay in Oxford for their clinical training where they were joined by London emigrés accustomed to an Xmas concert. The war heightened the need for escapism and in 1940 a pantomime, ‘Dick Whittington and his Dog’, **Figure 2** was staged. On the last night the instigator, the same Charles Fletcher **Figure 3** as gave the first dose of penicillin, announced the birth of a new society. A wild party that evening (the minutes proudly proclaim that “never before was so much drunk in so short time by so few”) was followed by an unofficial committee that vowed to continue the venture. These new members spent what was left of the night carousing to the heady sounds of Guy Lombardo and his Royal Canadians’ pop hit song ‘Pink Elephants’. The song **Figure 4** was written by Mort Dixon and Harry Woods, and you might tickle the ivory yourself at this year’s Xmas party if you really have nothing better to do. It can also be heard (or herd) at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgD_F1Kksgc. Thus, they called the society “The Pink Elephants” but changed



Image from General Files and Country Music, 1902-1948 (series 1), Sousa Archives and Center for American Music, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

it almost immediately to Tynchwycke, after Oxford’s first known medical teacher. Moloney writes that “a stuffed pink elephant was present at most meetings of the society, and a large one with human legs fore and aft has appeared on the stage”. There is certainly photographic evidence of a large-eyed and small-tusked elephant as early as 1948 **Figure 5**.

Like Dr Who, albeit with cheaper actors and lesser special effects, Rita regenerates at regular intervals but the archive has photos of only some of the Ritas. The 70s RITA had tusks and very big eyes. In 1983 the beast was, in my un-elephantine memory, fragile and smelly yet still working in 1985 **Figure 6**. Rita was renovated for 1989 (‘The Jugular Book’), with crumpled tusks and a prehensile trunk, **Figure 7**, with David Grahame-Smith writing that she was “once more in the pink, front and back. Give up the curry Rob, says Jason”. Not one of DGS’ better jokes; his ward-round jokes (another phrase to surprise the young) were legendary and “too many toxins” were removed from the drug charts with the stroke of a pen.





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In 1990 ('A Christmas Carbuncle') she was spotted as a very elegant elephant hybrid, **Figure 8** whilst the the latest, and bipedal, Rita, **Figures 9,10,11** seems to attend lectures, play drums and maintain a social media presence <https://www.facebook.com/rita.tingewick>. In other years she has been present in head only. **Figure 12, 13**.

Rita has featured in every fund-raising programme, and Tingewick memorabilia is still available, as ties, bow-ties and more, **Figure 14**. One former serenity might have mused on "what pink elephant garment can be issued to lady members in lieu of the society tie?" but please don't send suggestions.

Trawling the archives, the casual unquestioned sexism of the past stands out. "Opinion at meetings has been strongly in favour of keeping the cast all male". There were officially no female members of the society until 1969 (by a vote of 7 to 5 with many abstentions). Dr Smail, the serenity who campaigned for the admission of women, recalled in 2007 that "the 1969 production marked the emancipation of women within the Tingewick society – hard to believe that it took until then to give women equality in the Tingewick society when women were first admitted to medical degrees in the UK in 1876!!" With comments like "as for the female talent in Osler House, it has to be admitted that the quantity is very limited", it is remarkable that any woman student ever wanted to take part. What an irony that, in meeting after meeting, the honorable gentlemen of

Q: WHAT DO YOU CALL AN ELEPHANT THAT DOESN'T REALLY MATTER?

A: AN IRRELEPHANT

the Tyngewick society failed to notice the presence or gender of the very female Rita, the ...er...elephant in the room. Fortunately, like trunk calls on a telephone, those days are long gone.

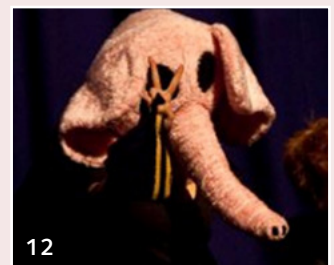
One peculiar aspect of the whole charade is that an actual hallucination of a pink elephant seems rare indeed in the medical literature, despite how often we hear it associated with excess alcohol or delirium tremens. A search of case reports located a single report of the hallucination of an elephant, but not a pink one and, in this case, in a patient suffering from schizophrenia. Is it too commonplace to report, or is it a myth? In the neurology world one might imagine a pink elephant appearing in Charles Bonnet syndrome or as an epileptic aura but if so, it isn't reported. Parkinson's and Lewy Body dementia patients frequently report visual hallucination but, at least in my experience, nobody ever sees a pink elephant. One might imagine them appearing in the phenomenology of LSD or MDMA but no, not here either. Wikipedia (no effort has been



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Q: WHAT DID THE ELEPHANT SAY TO THE NAKED MAN?

A: THAT'S ALL WELL AND GOOD, BUT HOW DO YOU EAT BUNS WITH IT?

spent in research for this article) argues that in the 19th century reports of seeing snakes were common, and from there it was a short and imaginative step to the pink elephant hallucination. The earliest recorded written example of a (partially) pink elephant comes from Henry Wallace Phillips in an 1896 short story "The Man and the Serpent" where a drunken man sees a "pink-and-green elephant". Jack London, in his autobiographical *John Barleycorn: Alcoholic Memoirs* (written 1914, published by OUP in Oxford World's Classics series in 1998), describes an alcoholic who, in the extremity of his ecstasy, sees blue mice and pink elephants. For further reading and some confabulation on the evolution of the pink elephant hallucination see the blog of Peter Jensen Brown <https://esnpc.blogspot.com/2014/08/the-colorful-history-and-etymology-of.html>.

The idea however was sufficiently embedded in the public consciousness that Disney's *Dumbo*, released in 1941, featured *Dumbo* and a mouse (Timothy) drinking champagne and then hallucinating Pink Elephants. This was to the tune of another song "Pink Elephants on Parade" written by Wallace and Washington for the film. It is an inspired technicolour animation (though perhaps we should wonder, as the internet does, by what). The first thing that the hungover Timothy says as he wakes is "pink elephants". Dixon and Woods' Pink Elephant song was published and released by Guy Lombardo in 1932 so it must be this rather than the *Dumbo* song that would have been the pink elephant song of the wild 1940 party. To add to the confusion, an instrumental version of this Pink Elephant song was released in 1933 by Joe Venuti and Eddy Lang's Blue Five, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2Pbjn472Bk>.

Incidentally, in 2007 the Portman Group, the industry-based regulator for alcohol labelling in the UK, did not uphold a complaint from a member of the public about the use of a pink elephant on the label of an alcohol bottle. Despite Jack London, Dixon and Woods, Disney and *Dumbo*, Tingewick and Rita, the panel considered that the association between a pink elephant and drunken or drug-related behaviour was not well known (<https://www.portmangroup.org.uk/pink-elephant/>). So much for self-regulation.

The neurological mechanism of hallucination remains unclear, and a brief wander into the literature (followed by a very hasty retreat) confirms a subject of great conjecture and intellectual torture. It certainly appears that one is more likely to hallucinate things from one's past, and thus are we all a little more vulnerable.

Moloney's account of the first 25 years, and the more recent accounts in the archive, leave many unanswered questions. The 1968 ('An Immaculate Conception') and 1969 ('Pwolapse, or Woom at the Bottom') shows feature Rita on the programme but not in the cast list. When did the Pink Elephant become Rita? Is RITA an acronym and if so, then what for? How many Ritas have there been? Who has played Rita? When did Rita start saving the day? When did she evolve from four legs to two? If you've read this far, you'll see that the Tingewick archive is fragmented and incomplete; if this article brings back reminiscence, information or pictures that would bolster the archive please consider sending to the archive at oma@medsci.ox.ac.uk.

One can't sum up better than Jonathan Pollock, author of 50 years of Tingewick (see archive), giving the best reasons for this loveable nonsense to continue, **Figure 15**. He might also have added that it has raised a vast amount of money for good causes, but like many Tingewickian things, nobody has kept a tally.

On the last night of the Fiftieth production last December, His Munificence remarked that the spirit of Tynchwyke is a healthy corrective to our obsession with political developments in medicine. If the fifty productions have had any common theme it is certainly that we should not take ourselves too seriously. As the opening chorus of *Cinderella* put it:

Cast away worry and cultivate charm,
And nurture a mind like a sieve,
Although we may strain to develop a brain,
It's much more important to live!

Laughter, after all, is good for you.¹⁰

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