

How are we spelling it this year?

Will McConnell and Derek Roskell reveal some of their experiences of *Ktynchewyke* '89.

Is there life after *Ktynchewyke*?

Five grubby programmes in the bottom drawer. A rolled up poster on the wardrobe. A bright pink Rita badge lost somewhere behind the desk. A lever arch file hidden beneath a pile of Ossicles, Observations and Medical School Gazettes. Full of scripts and half-written scripts. Rehearsal schedules and notes saying, "Sorry, can't make it on Friday". So, as the memories of *The Jugular Book* drift slowly towards that irretrievable gyros where lurk the active site of chymotrypsin, the mysteries of Kipps' apparatus and the location of my Frumil tourniquet, the time has come to commit to parchment the long and awful experiences that have become known as *Ktynchewyke* 1989.

The year was 1989 and thoughts of civil unrest in Bulgaria just six thousand miles away could not have been further from our minds. It was an idyllic summer morning as we set out from Liverpool aboard HMS Vauxhall Nova. We headed westwards, reaching the Roaring Forties and occasionally the Screeching Seventies on dual carriageways, until we came across Shell Island - a rather tacky campsite next to an Air Force base in Harlech. We pitched camp in a clearing next to a tap and within walking distance of the toilets, and so began our gruelling ten days in retreat; our only shelter - a six berth frame tent, our task - to write *The Jugular Book*.



It had all started at the cast party after *Tinj'wyke* '88, when *The Jungle Book* was first suggested as a theme. As we had only ever seen clips of the film on "Disney Time", and "Screen Test", a matinee visit to the Phoenix, Walton Street was essential. Seventy three minutes, four ice creams and six pages of notes later, the matter was decided. It seemed ideal - no plot, good setting, plenty of characters, even a little love interest - though we'd have to tone it down a bit for *Ktynchewyke*. A few days later our ten strong writing team met for the first time. They were never to meet again. Although the intention had been to achieve as wide an input as possible into the show, it soon became clear that a large writing team would be unwieldy and cause loss of plot continuity. Later, most of these people would find themselves heavily involved in other aspects of the show.

During the next six months, *The Jugular Book* (or *The Fungal Book*, as it was provisionally known) was put on simmer whilst attention was diverted by a spoof video, a cabaret, the *Tingewick* revue and a little bit of Pathology and Surgery. So it was that day in June when we arrived in Wales to tie up our ideas and write the script.

We had several principles in mind. With a cast of around forty, it was important to have plenty of good parts rather than allow a few to dominate the story. Every member of the cast should feel that the effort was worthwhile. The characters must fit into a coherent story, the humour arising from interactions within the plot rather than from a succession of tenuously linked sketches. The show should be relatively short and songs kept to the minimum length needed to capture their essence. One thing we particularly wanted to avoid was what we call "leg bag humour", which has long formed the mainstay of medical revues. You can imagine the scene: an aspiring Fred Astaire springs on to stage in top hat and theatre greens and launches into "I'm putting on my leg bag". Just half an hour of writing in that vein and the show would be finished. In more ways than one.

As it turned out, we left Wales without completing the script - in fact, without starting the script. Still, we'd had a few beers, exchanged life stories and spent a day in a slate mine sheltering from the rain. More importantly, our adventures had inspired a few ideas. Our camping exploits were the basis for the amateurish explorers, and a visit to a Ffestiniog slate mine, with its son et lumière show ("Picture if you will the scene unfolding before you...") and souvenir shop (slate barometers, slate-in-a-snowstorm, souvenir slate passport binder etc.), provided perfect



material for the explorers' discovery of the Lost City. The characters had been decided upon, and the plot was complete. All that remained was to convert the story into script, which would require that most elusive of commodities - jokes.

The next major milestone was the auditions. We were dumbstruck, not just by the talent of our fellow medical students, but also by their modesty. We soon learned that: "I play the piano a bit", meant: "... a bit like Vladimir Ashkenazy", and: "I have acted before", meant: "...before a packed house at the Theatre Royal".

So, with the cast chosen, we could at last start writing the script. One week before the first rehearsal and five weeks before the show, we had the first of our daily eight hour writing sessions. It was a slow and steady business, with occasional moments of inspiration. Three minutes of performance would take anything from four hours to two days to write.

We started with a framework for each scene, to which we would add visual, and finally verbal, jokes. Derek's flight of ideas would produce a huge spectrum of gags from which Will would pick the best, cut it to shape, sand it down and polish it down to a gleaming jewel - or, more commonly, a small, insignificant pile of grit. When the going got really tough, we would experiment with "formula" jokes; e.g. just fill in the blanks in: "You're as _____ as a _____ in a _____". These can be quite successful (witness four series of Blackadder), but at other times may be a complete disaster (witness Act One, Scene

One, line 143). On the night, the most successful jokes were the visual ones, e.g. the photograph of Grinner's profile with extending nose and the giant banana falling from the sky. Certainly an element of the ridiculous gives any joke a better chance of succeeding. The writing sessions were not, however, all sweetness and light. We did have some differences of opinion. Will would insist on inserting a joke every third line, even if it took all day to think of it. Derek, meanwhile, disliked the idea of carefully contrived "formula" jokes diluting the action (or lack of it).

Tingewick, by its very nature, does present a few problems of its own. Writing for actors playing doctors playing characters is not easy and, although "in jokes" are expected, too many will leave the audience baffled. However, the biggest problem is Rita. Disciples of Tingewick will be aware that the hero of the show must be Rita, the pink pantomime elephant. She can't talk, she can't see and she occupies half the stage - hardly a vehicle for great hilarity, despite hours of dedication put in by Rob Buttery, building a prehensile trunk. We got over this problem by encasing her in stone until the end of Act One; only to reappear briefly for the Community Song and Grand Finale.

After four weeks of writing, and two weeks before the opening night, at two minutes to midnight, the final joke was penned; Basoo's line: "Yes, it's very cramped - like being on the same planet as Mr. Westaby's ego". Just in time for Derek to complete the typing before the whole script was vetted by His Munificence, Professor Grahame-Smith.

As the writing progressed the rest of the Tingewick machine ground into action. Sophie Hambleton burnt the midnight oil at both ends, scoring, harmonising and transposing the music for the songs we had adulterated with new words. Writing those lyrics was a varied experience; sometimes straightforward, if only one joke could sustain the whole song (e.g. *The Winner Way*), at other times complicated, if, for example, we had to preserve the original rhymes whilst keeping the song relevant and funny (e.g. *Rare Opacities* :

“You know that I’ll improve your style,
By spending a while in my X-ray file”

was not an easy line to write). Probably the greatest challenge for Sophie was *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Taking

Sophie, the cast would be rehearsing the dance under Naz and Will would be directing the scenes. In spite of the desire to spare time and patience by not over rehearsing or over directing, many characters would be rehearsing most evenings and lunchtimes as the first night approached.

During the four weeks before the show, lurking under Lecture Theatre Two in the small room known as the “Tingewick Cupboard”, Steve Lord was building the set. Steve had the wonderful ability to accept all our demands without batting an eyelid, raising an eyebrow, or blacking an eye. We had only to say: “Oh, and Steve, we want to fire Wendy across the stage. Can you build us a cannon?”, to have plans drawn up next day and a week later it would be built. And what a fine cannon it was. The use of dry ice was a little less successful. We had hoped to fill the stage



the cast through its harmonic acrobatics was a demanding test of her patience, and both cast and band were frequently brought into line by her penetrating glares. Whilst Sophie was busy on the music, the choreography fell on the shoulders of Naz Rahman. Naz managed to devise dances perfectly suited to the ability of the dancers. Each routine was not only entertaining to watch but also entertaining to learn.

Thus, one week after we had written a scene or the lyrics to a song, the band would be rehearsing the music under

with an early morning mist as the curtains opened for Act One. Unfortunately we hadn’t anticipated the Tingewick Hall hot air ventilation system, which created an effect more as if someone backstage was boiling a small kettle. Steve was also the person chosen to fend off the fire and safety authorities, who subjected him to the most demanding viva of his career so far.

Whilst Steve and his few dedicated helpers were building the set, Jane Ashworth and her bare-footed band of Bohemian assistants were busy painting it. Fortunately

for our jungle set we had captured Jane in her "Green Period", and after a few weeks painting she had developed green fingers, green feet and a small trail of green footprints across Tingewick Hall.

Small props were the domain of Laurence Leaver. Some he built Blue Peter style, whilst others were acquired after long distance sorties. Who would have thought that the whole of Oxford could run out of custard pie foam?

The business side of the show was in the hands of that cute furry animal, Wendy Tyler, or, as she preferred to be known, Her Versatility. This is probably one of the lonelier and more time consuming jobs in Tingewick, and Wendy spent many a day walking the streets soliciting advertising for the programme. She also held the purse strings of Tingewick, keeping a careful eye on the extravagances of our grandiose ideas.

Five days before the opening night the show was first brought together for rehearsal in its entirety. This was followed by two technical rehearsals using the expertise of sound man Duncan Basset, and very sound he proved to be. The sound system is the largest single expense of Tingewick, but it is essential for the professionalism of the show, particularly of the songs. If the words could not be heard, there would have been no point in writing them, and, even with Steve Lord's powers of construction, you cannot make a sound system out of papier maché. Getting the sound balanced required considerable patience from all concerned, especially when the system inadvertently became disconnected.

The lighting was in the capable hands of Mark Middleton. Originally, the Grande Finale was to be the opening of the sarcophagus, with dry ice and lasers in the style of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The sarcophagus was to have contained a small bundle of white paper - *the White Paper* - so that, when the power was eventually revealed, nobody would actually want it. This all changed. By the time we started writing, jokes about the White Paper had descended from sharp, amusing satire into bitter, political banality. We therefore swapped the White Paper for something even more terrifying - a real life consultant. This also added "consultant interest" without interrupting the flow of the plot. The lasers fell by the wayside for both technical and financial reasons. However, Mark still produced an excellent and chilling effect at a fraction of the cost.

It was at the first dress rehearsal that the costumes were first worn - and worn out. Fiona Gribble and Jan Campbell-Ross had spent many weeks devising and tailoring the costumes. We always knew that, for a show with a castful of animals, costumes would be a major endeavour, and Fiona and Jan spent several weeks hunting down cheap material and sewing it all together. The results were beautiful and several of the cast were keen to keep their

costumes after the show. Unfortunately, Naz's energetic dances caused several monkey costumes to burst open during the first dress rehearsal so Fiona and Jan had to return to their sewing machines for a final frenzy.

The second dress rehearsal was almost perfect, and we were now ready to go public. By Wednesday, 6th December we had done all we could; it was now up to the cast, the band and the backstage hands to ensure that the show went smoothly. We discovered the meaning of palpitations as we waited for the lights to go down and the curtains to open. Our months of writing and rehearsal were about to be tested. As it turned out, each performance went without a hitch. There was even an opportunity for an impromptu dance on stage as the band played the *Top Cat* theme before the curtains opened for Act Two. The only job left for us to do, beyond playing our respective parts, was to decide what the real-life doctors would be forced to do when they were "invited" on stage.

Wendy had previously invited various combinations of main characters to the show on certain nights, with suitable performances in mind. Inevitably, of course, they couldn't come on their allotted nights, and we had to do a complete rethink just before the performances. Even then we had to have spies at the front of house to confirm that our targets had arrived. In the event, Dr. Simon Winner obligingly made himself look completely stupid for the audience's delight. Dr. David Geaney had a little trouble reading the script - but soon caught on that the lines printed in bold, underlined, and marked "DG" actually referred to him. Dr. Michael Donaghy, heart throb of the RI, took much persuading to come to the show on the Friday night; his performance taught us never to work with children, animals or neurologists. Dr. Dinah Parums is reported never to have said: "Mm, excellent", since appearing on the Ktynchewyke stage. Earlier in the week Dr. Fred Wright had expressed a desire to decorate Mr. Kettlewell's face with a custard pie on behalf of the Churchill theatre staff. We decided to allow him this indulgence, his script ending with: "FW flans MK". Little did he know, however, that Mr. Kettlewell's script ended with: "MK flans FW". Sweet revenge.

Mr. Julian Britten, Mr. Jo Smith, Dr. Derek Hockaday and Prof. David Grahame-Smith gave exemplary performances as the Genie of the Sarcophagus on the various nights. The final night was extra special since, in celebration of Tingewick's fiftieth anniversary, many past "Serenities", who had attended a special tea party in the afternoon, were in the audience.

Later, after the Saturday crowd had left, all that remained for Ktynchewyke '89 was the AGM in the Hall, followed by the cast party at Osler House. Before that, the Hall had to be cleared, the set dismantled, and the costumes folded and stored. It was as if nothing had happened at all.