

## Tynchwycke is Twenty-Five

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1964 was the silver year of the Tynchwycke Society when the 25th Christmas pantomime was staged. Some have asked how it all came about and I have collected some data from those who knew its birth and infancy and have added some personal recollections since my first acquaintance in its sixth year.

In the early 1930s pre-clinical students visited the Radcliffe for some clinical instruction much as they do now, while those staying in Oxford to take the 'bugs and drugs' course attended a clinical course and were signed up for 6 months of clinical work. The house staff, with one H.S., one H.P., one H.Obst., and one Cas.H.O. could muster a four for bridge and might even have arranged a foursome for golf. In 1936 a broadside of banknotes hit the Radcliffe and in 1938, some of the recipients with their attendants marched in.

As far as can be traced, for ever back into the dim past, the nurses had helped to celebrate the Yuletide with a concert of several polite items under the auspices of the Matron. The residents, now swelled in numbers, were bold enough to believe that they might also be able to contribute something to the Festive fun in the Christmas of 1938 and the Matron of the day gave permission for a performance by the residents many of whom had had experience of Christmas entertainments at the London hospitals. The leading light as actor-manager and producer was Dr D. H. G. McQuaide, who was then House Physician to Professor Witts and is now a general physician at Northampton General Hospital. The first half of the performance was the traditional concert by the nurses while the second half was in two pieces; one being a short pantomime, 'Cinderella', an amusing professionally written piece, with the producer as Fairy Queen, while the other was a brief old-fashioned melodrama, complete with villain, village maiden and country squire, with a title of high moral tone, 'Virgins Vindicated'. The fierce eyebrows and mustachios, the rosy cheeks and long tresses were applied by Dr A. Robb-Smith, while in the orchestra, churning out German's 'Country Dances' on a superb violin, one of several of his own construction, was Mr Eric Peet. The play caught the consciences of the kings and queens, and a precedent had been established.

During 1939 it became clearer to some members of the Government that the country had to prepare for war, and amongst their decisions was one that the London hospitals would need to be evacuated and with them the London medical schools. And so that year a murmur went down Ministerial halls that the medical students from Oxford who would normally go to the London hospitals should stay on in Oxford and have their further education at a clinical school to be formed and based on the Radcliffe Infirmary. Dr



Robb-Smith in his history of the Oxford Medical School has recorded that an informal group met at Dr A. M. Cooke's house and it was decided that Oxford graduates could take their clinical training at the Radcliffe and a statute was introduced empowering the Regius Professor to collect fees. The seed was re-sown, and after a lapse of over 100 years Oxford students were enabled to take the whole of the medical course in Oxford, as had been the custom for several hundred years before that.<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of October 1939, the clinical students came to the Radcliffe to which some additional clinical teachers had been imported. During November and December the many graduates from the London schools who had been in the habit of expecting a hospital and medical school to provide a Christmas concert met and decided that there was no time either for writing or for producing that year and so nothing was arranged.

In the first week of November 1940, Charles Fletcher, then first assistant to Professor Witts, suggested that a Christmas entertainment be put on, but there was little enthusiasm. Because, in more recent times innumerable citizens have turned off or on their tele-switches on account of Charles Fletcher, it is worth noting that this Admirable Crichton left Eton on a scholarship to Cambridge where he collected a double first, a rowing blue and theatrical experience, while finding time for singing, dancing and the piano, and later, at Bart's he collected his share of various prizes. With the advent of war so many people had to make their own entertainments, and thus it came about that Charles Fletcher directed his energy and enthusiasm again to theatricals. He persisted with his idea for a Christmas pantomime and got some support. There was a meeting of students to discuss the project on November 25th, and due to Charles Fletcher's ability and enthusiasm a pantomime was got under way, being entitled 'Dick Whittington and his Dog', and was written and produced within 3 weeks, the producer playing the lead as Dick.

The style of pantomime was created by Charles Fletcher and is somewhat peculiar to the Radcliffe Infirmary, being the story of some familiar pantomime, loosely interpreted, introduced to bind together various skits on Radcliffe affairs, each item being on the lines of the short ward shows customary at some of the London teaching hospitals. The first run through was on December 21st, the dress rehearsal was ghastly, but the main performance went very well. The presentation was by the 'Radcliffe Raspberries'! At the end of the last performance Charles Fletcher announced from the stage the birth of a Society, only 6 or 7 weeks previously.

Afterwards in the old room for the residents there was a party which began just after midnight and became rather wild. The war was well under way and the minutes record that 'never before was so much drunk in so short a time by so few', in a typical and topical parody of the war's most famous sentence. The producer and others, routed by the noise of the 'few', adjourned with Dr Robb-Smith for an unofficial Council meeting to his



house at 19 St. Giles, which was between the house occupied on the one side by the Radcliffe physician, Dr Hobson and on the other by the judge on his visits. Surrounded by such respectability and flushed with the giddy wines of success and the bottled variety they decided that the venture must be carried on while their gramophone churned out the strains of a new record called, 'Pink Elephants', later adopted as the pantomime theme song, and the name was to provide the emblem, a pink elephant. In fact they liked 'Pink Elephants' so much that the name was adopted for a short time as the title of the company, until a meeting at His Munificence's Chambers was called for St Valentine's Day (February 14th to those cold of heart) to review the past Christmas performance. Amongst various matters discussed they decided that the names 'Radcliffe Raspberries' and 'Pink Elephants' did not lend sufficient dignity for perpetuity, and might be open to misunderstanding so Dr Robb-Smith made the immortal suggestion that it should be called the Tynchwycke Society, bringing a hush to the meeting for no one else could understand why. So he explained that Nicholas Tynchwycke was the first known medical teacher in the University of Oxford being a Fellow of Balliol and physician to Edward I. The company were prepared to overlook these latter features after hearing from Dr Robb-Smith, as he has related elsewhere, that in 1302 Tynchwycke rented from the University an inn in Catte Street, this being known as the physicians' quarter until the seventeenth century. Adjoining this inn was the Physic School which was owned by what was known then as St John's Hospital, where he lectured. All these interesting habitations went the way of many others when Hawksmore built the Codrington Library at All Souls in the eighteenth century. Tynchwycke was a cleric physician holding two livings and was a prebend in addition, though he continued to live in Catte Street and probably died there about 1340 leaving his property to the University. With such testimonials and venerability Nicholas Tynchwycke proved an easy winner in the eponymic race at the party, and, being duly adopted, he now lends distinction to the Tynchwycke Society, while his memory has been toasted annually since at the meetings of the society after the final night of the Christmas pantomime. The name lends itself to much variety in spelling and over the years one has seen among many other forms, 'Tynsschewick', 'Tinchwic', 'Tyn-GG-wije', 'Tngwk' and 'Ptyngewycke'.

At the same meeting on St Valentine's Day a constitution, very frail, was drawn up, and further nomenclature already suggested at the unofficial Council meeting was adopted. The title of 'His Munificence' was chosen for the President. The splendid origin of this title is that it was applied to Dr Robb-Smith who entertained everybody so lavishly; also the Secretary was dubbed 'His Serenity', for no other reason than that he was always harassed, while the Treasurer was hopefully described as 'His Solvency'—a title that has taken some living up to by various holders of the office. The members of the Society are still known as 'Pink Elephants', a stuffed pink elephant being



present at most meetings of the society, and a large one with human legs, fore and aft, has appeared on the stage.

On October 22nd, 1941, Peter Reynell staged his production, the 'Pink Elephant Revue', which was the first production staged under the name of the Tynchwycke Society and was a series of short turns serving as a talent-finder for the forthcoming Christmas pantomime, but the immediate object was to collect money for a canteen, £30, being amassed and when a building permit was refused, the funds were dispersed to various worthy causes, including a quarter to the Society itself. The original date chosen for this revue was October 18th, St Luke's Day, but with a nurses' dance the preceding night and a party of bishops visiting the Radcliffe that day it was felt safer to fix for the later date.

The 1941 Christmas show was 'Cinderella', a very polished affair, for which Lord Berners, a distinguished composer and artist living in Oxford, wrote a special polka for the Ball scene, and 'Bert', one of London's principal make-up experts, about whom more later, arrived to exercise his skills.

With the reduction of travel due to the war and such enthusiasm for amateur theatricals the Society decided to tackle a summer production in the form of a straight play. The one chosen being 'The Flashing Stream'. The event was a great success. Then, as winter approached again, a pantomime was created and staged, and so it has been since. A second play, 'The Moon in the Yellow River', produced by the late Brian Johnson was staged in the following summer.

The problem of the summer production has remained part of the heavy humour of the inner circles of the Tynchwycke Society, for year after year the matter of a summer production was raised, always hopefully, but only once did it ever come to fruition again when in 1948 the society staged the play, 'The Wind and the Rain', which nearly caused the company to fold up, for at the point in the play where a drink of champagne is called for, the actors decided that only the real thing could give authentic atmosphere, and the quantities that they felt the scene demanded in order to strike the right note, and its repetition night by night, nearly caused the members to call the Treasurer, 'His Insolvency'.

From 1940 to 1946 Dr Robb-Smith led the Society as 'His Munificence' and saw it through the early years, putting it on a firm basis of good fun and good fellowship, as well as good production. Also from its beginning and during this time Mr Macbeth served as 'His Solvency' keeping careful accounts (as the author can vouch for) of the various expenses of the society, while his ancestors would have approved of his success in extracting the necessary bawbees from captive audiences. Mr Macbeth then became another model 'Munificence' from 1946 to 1949. From 1946 to 1949, the author served as 'His Solvency' and then from 1950 to 1961, as 'His Munificence'. From 1951 to 1956, our Administrator, Mr E. J. R. Burrough, served as 'His Solvency', and from 1956 to 1961, Dr John Boldero acted as 'His



Solvency', when Mr Tom Patterson took over, and at the same time Dr Boldero took over as 'His Munificence'. The latter two are both in office at the present moment. Mr Burrough, on several occasions wrote excellent reviews for the Society in the *Gazette* and Dr Fred Wright has been the official photographer under the title of 'His Luminescence'.

In the very early days the art of wigs and make-up was in the hands of Dr Robb-Smith until Charles Fletcher imported one of his former patients at Bart's, a professional, 'Bert', who kept a small shop for wigs in Soho and who, until 1951, regularly came from London to give of his best. His work was excellent, but in the way of things, as a professional, he needed his due and the Society found difficulty in continuing the payment for this item and decided to manage with local talent. Mr Macbeth nobly turned his hands, accustomed to cruising about the depths of the E.N.T., to this superficial aspect and gave us some remarkable cause for praise and fright, until 1958, saving the society a large sum; and since then Mrs Boldero has given her time and high skill to the rapid prestidigitation of so many of our students into nurses and doctors.

While the paintwork moved from the professional to the gifted amateur the patchwork very early was taken over and handled for many years by the late Mrs F. Hobson, wife of the Radcliffe physician, who was assisted by a series of young ladies, and more recently, with changing marital patterns, by the wives of students. Mrs Hobson related to the author how there came into her possession some of the uniforms and costumes worn at the Great Durbar in India in 1903. These had been presented to her mother, who was at the 'Slade', by Queen Mary who always went to the 'Slade' shows and who asked Mrs Hobson's mother if she would like some bits and pieces; so with drawerfuls of beautifully made materials and badges she was sought after for costumes for fancy-dress balls and that is how in time, many a piece which had graced the far-distant royal occasion found its way onto the Tynchwycke stage, and how a Radcliffe Caliph had on his hat upside down the pearl encrusted insignia and royal decoration of an Indian State. Mrs Hobson thought that Charles Fletcher's costumes, like his scripts, were very near the bone.

The Matron has very kindly given the use of the Recreation Room in the Nurses Home for the production each year at some inconvenience to her nurses who are deprived of a large common room during later rehearsals and staging, but the nurses, as generous as ever, have appeared to enjoy the productions and not to mind the sacrifice which the Society has greatly appreciated. Also the Society has been full of understanding that the party on the final night which used to take place until very late (or very early) on the stage in the same hall in the midst of the Nurses Home, for the peace and well-being of our nursing sisters, was moved on Matron's wise advice, and is now held in the lecture theatre of Osler House.

Year by year improvements have been made in the amenities, mostly out



of funds provided by the audiences. The stage has expanded, footlights and overhead lighting improved and spotlights added while the scenery was improved and replaced. The latent talent amongst our student body has been quite spectacular and the 'flats' for scenery have given scope for a number of our artistic members. Popularity spread and the number of performances both evening and matinée were increased. Originally, patients walked or were wheeled to the performances in large numbers, a custom very popular in the bleak days of the war, but after the war it was felt that, though many of the hospital lay staff welcomed the chance of attending, the patients might not be so appreciative of the fun. About 1500 to 2000 persons have been seeing each pantomime and the society felt puffed with pride at the appearance of review notices in the *Oxford Mail*. Various ladies have given much help behind the scenes and whether or not to have women in the cast has been debated at times and a short trial several years back of a singing turn by some nurses was not popular with the nursing staff, and opinion at meetings has been strongly in favour of keeping the cast all male even, if sometimes, somewhat but not quite female in appearance.

A Tynchwyckian contribution not to be overlooked is their annual ward collection for a fireworks display for the children in the hospital on November 5th. This is usually as spectacular as other Tynchwycke productions with bigger and better bangs and bonfires as time goes on and no serious casualties have been reported to any children under the age of 90.

What that medieval teacher of medicine, Dr N. Tynchwycke, would feel about his name being thus perpetuated one can never know, but if he is ever watching his followers in action he must be, I am sure, very proud.

Before 1950, secretarial duties, authorship and production were mostly divided efforts, but since then these have all been mainly in the hands of 'His Serenity'.

The productions to date with the persons chiefly responsible for them are listed below.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without the reminiscences of Dr Robb-Smith and Mr Macbeth I could not have written this article. In addition they both gave a lot of time to reading, correcting, and adding to my notes and have approved of the facts, at least, of the final version. Dr McQuaide helped with his memories of the 1938 production, and David Ramsay made a list of the productions from the minute book. I am most grateful to all of them.

#### REFERENCE

- <sup>1</sup> ROBB-SMITH, A. H. T. (1958) The Oxford Medical School and its graduates. *Oxford Medical School Gazette*, 10, 135.

#### LIST OF CHRISTMAS PANTOMIMES

- 1940 'Dick Whittington and His Dog' or 'Who'd be a Patient'  
Producers: Charles Fletcher and James Angel.

- 1941 'Cinderella' or 'There's many a Slipper'  
Producer: Lionel Grunbaum.
- 1942 'Aladdin' or 'There's the Rub'  
Serenity: John Hawkey  
Producer: Oliver Lloyd
- 1943 'Red Riding Hood' or 'For better or for Nurse'  
Serenity: Brian Johnson  
Producer: Hugh Davis
- 1944 'The Sleeping Beauty'  
Producer: Joe Loudon
- 1945 'The Babes in the Ward' or 'Put more Colon'  
Producer: C. Wynn Parry
- 1946 'Malice in Slumberland,' a Christmas Fantasy  
Producers: Philip Nichols and Ronald Macbeth
- 1947 'Robinson Crusoe' or 'Two in the Bush'  
Serenity: Philip Nichols  
Producer: Brian Johnson  
Author: Peter Reynell
- 1948 'Ali Baba and The Forty Thieves' or 'Too Many Crooks'  
Serenity: John Hamill
- 1949 'Nightjar's Wing', The Very Late Victorian Melodrama or  
'The Probationer's Peril'  
Serenity: J. R. L. Carstairs  
Producer: Robert Levens
- 1950 'Jack and the Beanstalk' or 'The Houseman's Hangover'  
Grand Half-Century Performance  
Serenity: Tony Balfour
- 1951 'Humpty Dumpty' or 'The Neurosurgeon's Nightmare'  
Serenity: Brian Davies
- 1952 'Cylinderella' or 'The Dermatologists Delirium'  
New-Elizabethan Production  
Serenity: G. St. John-Ives
- 1953 'Pus in Boots' or 'The Paediatrician's Problem'  
Special Coronation Year Production  
Serenity: Ron Charlwood
- 1954 'Snow White' or 'CO<sub>2</sub> and the Seven Warts'  
End of Rationing Production  
Serenity: N. V. Morgan
- 1955 'Enemesis' or 'The Nutcrackers' Nightmare'  
Radcliffe Reconstruction Production  
Serenity: E. W. Sturton
- 1956 'Handsome and Dettol' or 'Almonarchy'  
Petrol Rationing production  
Serenity: T. J. Ryan
- 1957 'Kind Hearts and Coronaries' or 'Registrars Never Forget'  
Sputnik Production  
Serenity: D. G. Sargent
- 1958 'Under Milk Drip' or 'Now we are Sick'  
Darwin Centenary Production  
Serenity: M. Drake
- 1959 'Look Back in Rigor' or 'Ice Cold in Alex'  
Wildcat Production  
Serenity: J. Evans



- 1960 'Lady Chatterley's Liver'  
Complete and Unexpurgated Production  
Serenity: D. Speller
- 1961 'OI TP IT I' (The Troggs) or 'Oedipus in Boots'  
Wind of Flatulence Production (repeat performance)  
Serenity: P. Snell
- 1962 'Little Red Ridinghood', or 'The Battered Bride'  
Official Secrets Production  
Serenity: E. M. Sutherland
- 1963 'The Rivals' or 'They Stoop to Anything'  
Decline in Moral Standards Production  
Serenity: R. J. T. Thorne
- 1964 'The Reluctant Heffalump'  
Serenity: David Ramsay