

Taking cystic fibrosis to the stage

Doctors take up a whole range of weird and wonderful hobbies when they retire: some go cruising around the world, some finally perfect their golf swing, others begin painting or pottery, or lawn bowls. Stephen Cronin, a recently retired consultant paediatrician from County Durham and Darlington National Health Service (NHS) Foundation Trust, UK, turned instead to creative writing. "I hadn't written any fiction since I was 16", he explains. "I ran a cystic fibrosis (CF) clinic for about 12 years and so I've had a lot of time with CF patients and [their] families, and I've become very involved in the impact on their lives. The inspiration came when I saw two CF patients chatting to each other in a corridor. They're not allowed to talk to each other because of the risk of cross-infection. It seemed strange to have people who had a natural affinity because of a joint experience but who could never meet—that felt to me like a theatrical or story-based problem." Cronin suggested to Jodie Symington, one of the patients in that corridor, who became his friend, that she should write about her experiences of CF and, when she didn't, he was inspired to do so instead. The result is *Cepacia*, a one-act play that premiered on Aug 13, 2018, at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the world's biggest arts festival.

Having originally thought the play could become a television or film script, Cronin—who describes himself as "profoundly dyslexic"—instead began developing the concept with Amy Brownlee, head of the drama department at Durham School, a co-educational day and boarding school in Durham, UK. Working with pupils at the school, Cronin refined the dialogue and began integrating elements of dance and physical theatre. Members of the cast also met Symington, who spoke to them about her experience of living with CF. "It was quite shocking", remembers Jayne Etherington, a first-year psychology student at the University of Nottingham, UK, and a former pupil at Durham School, who plays Jen, the female lead in the play. "We had talked about CF during development, but it was still an abstract concept until Jodie came in. It was fascinating to hear about it, and she brought in her nebuliser and all her tablets. The sheer amount of work and treatment that she needs to do to go about her everyday life was really shocking. When she came to see the preview and said we'd done a good job of portraying it, that was the best part of the night for me."

The storyline focuses on Jen, a 15-year-old girl with CF living in a children's home in Hackney, London, and Alex, a 16-year-old boy with CF studying at Eton College, the famous public boys' school near Windsor, UK. The two meet in an online CF chatroom and Alex takes Jen to the Glastonbury music festival for her birthday. Chatrooms were one of the key themes for Cronin; he wanted to explore the idea of people with CF meeting online, but then what happened when individuals disappeared from the online world because

they had died. One of the most striking elements of the show was how the narrative flowed; the script packed a lot of storytelling into 50 min but at no point did it feel rushed. The dance element of the show worked well, with the actors shaking plastic bottles containing pills to create a beat and then sighing, coughing, and gasping for breath in time to the rhythm. The staging was also imaginative and effective—four rectangular boxes on wheels were used as the main element of the set, with props and costumes hidden inside, and the actors manoeuvred them to form beds, seats, and even a tent. They also stood on them at various points to add height to the set, which was an important factor with the audience sitting around three sides of the square stage.

Two elements of the show didn't work quite so well; although the pill dance was effective, the physical theatre used to depict a fight between Jen and her father felt laboured and didn't fit with the rest of the narrative. Varying the pace of the storytelling can be a useful tool, but the sequence felt as though it interrupted the performance instead of enhancing it. Physical theatre lends itself well to CF stories, such as 2015's *Hey, I'm Alive!*, but didn't work in this context. Similarly, once the show had reached its climax, a voiceover gave statistics about the life expectancy of people with CF, which felt disjointed and unnecessary, especially as the figures were in the printed programme. Yet those niggles didn't detract from an entertaining piece of drama, which avoided preaching to its audience. "The risk was that it would be seen as a campaigning piece, but it's not", added Cronin. "I've raised a lot of money for the CF Trust and I'm happy to be a campaigner, but this wasn't about that. This was about the nature of the story, of people who have this joint experience but aren't allowed to meet."

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<http://www.shadowdreams.co.uk/cepacia/>

For more on the **Edinburgh Festival Fringe** see <http://www.edfringe.com>

For a review of *Hey, I'm Alive* see **Spotlight** *Lancet Respir Med* 2015; 3: 759