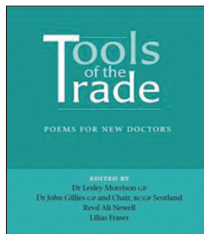


Out of Hours Theatre



this pocket-sized anthology of poetry given free to all graduating medical students in Scotland this year as a memorial tribute to Dr Pat Manson. In their foreword, the editors express their hope that this little book will be 'a friend to provide comfort and support' to newly-qualified doctors who are urged to 'use the poems as tools to connect with your patients, your colleagues, yourself'. I hope they will; there is certainly much here to challenge as well as comfort.

Of the 51 poems, a handful are from well-known poets such as Emily Dickinson and Seamus Heaney but most are from poets unknown to me, quite a few of them doctors. There are recurrent themes — children, hands, death, and obstetrics — but still a wide variety of emotions and topics are covered. Inevitably the human body is never far away, whether being likened to a guest house:

*'This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.'*

Or to a home being burgled:

*'I glimpse a thousand silent break ins;
The scalpel's shining jemmy pops
A window in the body.'*

With space at a premium in such a small book, I did wonder why there are four blank pages for notes, which seem pointless as several more poems could have been included. Nevertheless, a totally brilliant idea that I hope other GP colleges worldwide will imitate.

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THIS MAY HURT A BIT **BY STELLA FEEHILY, DIRECTED BY MAX** **STAFFORD-CLARK**

St James Theatre, Victoria, London
Wednesday 14 May 2014

This little gem of a play about the NHS is like a punch in the gut, brief but memorable. It is partly a paean to the founding values of the NHS and partly a polemic about its dismantlement, and while it does have a plot, the scenes are more like a series of sketches interspersed with singing, dancing, and jokes. It loosely follows one family's various encounters with the NHS with all the mishaps, staff shortages, mess, and terror that a brush with the health service can entail. Early on, the son is told he has a 'prostate the size of a space hopper' while his mother who is admitted to a fictional North London hospital called 'The Harrington' notices a 'small stool in the shower tray and I don't mean the three legged kind.' It is overtly political in places with characters often directly soliloquising to the audience. Memorably, one of the cast members dressed as a weather girl talks with an asinine smile about the forecast for the NHS in the regions: needless to say the outlook is poor, especially for the North.

Stella Feehily also makes use of political characters from the past and present: Bevan, Churchill, and Cameron all appear

in chorus roles presenting opposing views about public and private ownership. You are left in no doubt as to her viewpoint as she has an advisor warn Cameron in an early scene regarding changes to the Health and Social Care Bill, 'well Prime minister, you can put lipstick on a pig — but it's still a pig'. This production uses an ensemble cast who are all excellent in their different roles. There are a few familiar faces: Stephanie Cole is especially good as the matriarch, bringing humour and pathos to her role as the patient, but she is not alone. From the brusque urologist doing a rectal exam to the Eastern European nurse talking to a dead patient because of 'regulations and protocols', the characterisations are so accurate so as to make the audience wince with recognition. The production drew a standing ovation at the end that was as much due to the skill of the cast as to the strength of feeling it aroused in a partisan audience. Therein lies the paradox of political theatre: it's not the people who go to see it who most need to hear its message.

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Problems exposed: Brian Protheroe and Tristram Wymark in This May Hurt a Bit.

