

Christmas Concert

in TPH, 1975

Christmas 1975, I was one of the motley bunch of housemen charged with putting up a skit for the year-end concert in Toa Payoh Hospital (TPH), then the smallest general hospital in Singapore. 'Toa Payoh', hokkien for big rural farms was indeed then an expanse of pig, vegetable and other farms. Located in this backwater, TPH was where quaint yester-year diseases like murine typhus fever and paraquat poisoning were still encountered.

TPH's physical isolation gave it a rustic intimacy. From Thomson Road, a small long road flanked by lush vegetation went up-hill. Small picturesque bungalows where some consultants, including Feng Pao Hsui stayed marked the entrance to the hospital. Then, one would still have to go past the housemen and nurse's quarters, before the hospital, one nondescript slab block of eight wards would appear before your eyes almost by the way. The out-patient clinics were located in an adjacent one-storey annex. The event of the year, the Christmas concert was to be held at the multi-purpose hall down the slope. The

only other events ever held there were weekly badminton matches where we were told even Wong Peng Soon, once all-England champion and a friend of one of the doctors graced.

The multi-talented Lee Tzu Kuang, then a medical trainee was going to sing and strum his guitar solo to serenade the nurses. Less talented and certainly less inhibited, the medical and surgical housemen, Tan Hooi Hwa, Goh Chee Leok, Ilancheran, Seow Kang Hong, Peter Yong (now in Canada), Soon Lean Ee, and I had to resort to slapsticks. We huddled together and came out with a skit we called, 'Phallusemia'.

With the 'Koro' (hysterical shrinking of penis) epidemic fresh in mind, the fixation on the organ was not original. However, we thought a theme reflective of the combined medical and surgical effort - what with thalasemia and the chopping off operation. For the main prop, fellow houseman, XYZ and I sneaked into a badminton practice and picked up a cardboard canister, one-foot long, sans shuttle-cocks. We then stole into a surgical ward that night where XYZ used his newly acquired skill of fashioning splints to mould a most

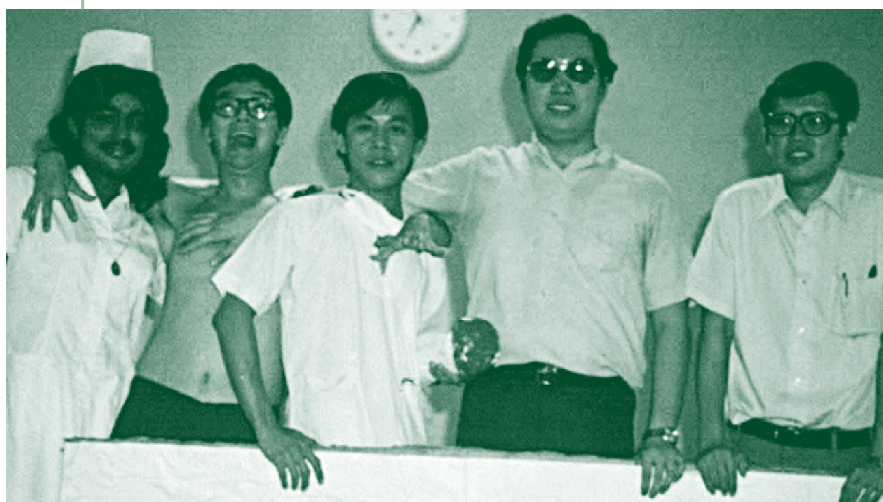
impressive member using the canister as the shaft on which he pasted Plaster of Paris. He put in the finishing touch alone in the privacy of his hostel room that night and painted the glands a shocking red.

We complimented XYZ for the realism of the prosthesis. Rumours had it that it could only be so because it was a 'self portrait'. The rest of the props included surgical gowns, an orthopaedic saw and other paraphernalia we borrowed from the theatre sisters. Such was the informality of TPH then that there was no need to get permission from higher authority for this or even other things.

The skit began with this initially very happy farmer whose penis grew and grew until his pride of manhood soon became a curse. His trousers could not even accommodate his one-foot member when it was in priapism due to hyper-viscosity as in thalassemia. Women dared not go near him. This poor man had to seek help in TPH. After some melodrama, he was pronounced to be suffering from 'phallusemia'.

The audience was sent into fits of laughter as a sexy bearded 'female' nurse intruded into the consultation room. He gyrated onto the stage, complete with long-hair wig, platform shoes, fully painted face and wearing a staff nurse's uniform complete with cap. And as the slapstick went, this nubile staff nurse was so over-whelmed by the size that 'she' threw professional discretion to the winds and went berserk with joy.

The climax was of course, the chopping off operation when for the first time, XYZ's artistic self-portrait was revealed in all its glory and gory to the strain of music from Stanley Kubrik's film "2001". The hospital did not have to apply for a performing licence those days. If the skit were performed today,



One of the photos of the skit from Goh Chee Leok's archive, which passed the SMA NEWS censor.



Group photo
of the Department
of Medicine,
TPH, 1975.

would it be classified 'Restricted Artistic (RA)' by the film censors and therefore forbidden to be performed in front of pubescent student nurses?

When 'Bobbitt-ing' is not even a word in the seventies, Oshima released 'In the Realm of the Senses' to critical film acclaim for its exploration of sexuality and power, domination and identity

ending in the severance of the member. Honestly, only the dismembering act is similar. The rest of our skit is too crass for any literary pretension. We did not have any 'chimm' philosophical or sociological statements to make. Why was it even produced?

We did it for laughs, to let off steam and to celebrate the spirit of Christmas in

a small medical community we grew to love. A quarter of a century has passed. We may have forgotten the murine typhus and other quaint diseases we encountered in TPH but scurried in the attics of our mind is 'Phallusemia', a disease created by us one Christmas past in Toa Payoh. ■

Cheong Pak Yean

SILENT NIGHT

Old Changi Hospital ICU, Changi Point
12 midnight IVs (intravenous medication rounds)
(When housemen gave practically all IVs)
11:50pm 24 Dec 94

The forlorn whispers of the ventilator
punctuate the quiet air,
misty with triumphant bacteria
we have spawned with our oversight

The night is old with admissions
Of fatigue and forgotten causes.
I look at him, or what's left.....
.....he breathes through machines
and eats through lines.
The ECG trace is but
the last gleanings of life,
now sequentially evaporated.

My somnolent eyes screw and train
on the aurous liquid, restless
in the confines of the bloated syringe.....
I expel every drop
into the half-filled microdrip;
it glistens and gleams like a sensual wine.
Still I suspect,

a glass of Montrachet* in a better time
will do more than this puny putt
to prolong a battered life.

The door swing shut behind.
My reticent steps dot the corridor
and echo the question I try to hide.
I cast myself afar
and flee into the Changi night:
of little fires that bob in the seas,
and winds that tranquilizes besieged psyches.
And in my thoughts I can hear,
frothy waves gently kneading
mercurial sands in the cool moonlight.....

No jingle bells
and no sleigh rides.....
and still I ask
will death cradle him tonight?
Merry Christmas. Silent Night.

WONG CHIANG YIN

* a prized white Burgundy Wine