

GRACE UNDER PRESSURE

By David Williams & Paul Dwyer in collaboration with the Sydney Arts & Health Collective

Education Resource Pack





ABOUT THE SHOW

Health professionals are with us when we're born, and they're with us when we die. They devote their lives to caring for us, but how do we care for them? Can a doctor or nurse give a patient the best possible care if he or she hasn't slept for days? What if they're also being bullied or sexually harassed at work? What if they complain about having to work excessive hours, but are told to stop whinging and suck it up? How do they cope with the pressure?

Based on hours of in-depth interviews with doctors and nurses about their experiences of training and working in hospitals, *Grace Under Pressure* is a surprising, intimate, and deeply moving theatre experience that reveals these hidden stories of health professionals in their own words. Ranging from wildly funny to utterly heartbreaking, the stories within *Grace Under Pressure* will leave no audience member unaffected. Beautifully staged and disarmingly performed, *Grace Under Pressure* is a truly unique theatre experience.

CREDITS

Writers: David Williams & Paul Dwyer in collaboration with the Sydney Arts & Health Collective

Performers: Emily Taylor, Meg Dunn, Sal Sarah & Tanya Schneider

Director: David Williams

Dramaturg: Paul Dwyer

Lighting Designer: Nicholas Higgins

Sound Designer: Gail Priest

Set & Costume Designer: Isabel Hudson

Company Stage Manager: Maureen Thomas

Touring Technician: Glenn Parry

Producer: Suzie Franke (for Alternative Facts Pty Ltd)

Grace Under Pressure was co-commissioned by Seymour Centre and The Big Anxiety, and developed with the support of the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies, University of Sydney. The Big Anxiety was assisted by the Australian government through the Department of Communication and the Arts' Catalyst—Australian Arts and Culture Fund. This tour of *Grace Under Pressure* has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body, and the Victorian Government through Creative Victoria.

CREATOR'S NOTE

This play was inspired by tragedy.

In early 2015 there were a spate of suicides by junior doctors in Victorian hospitals – four within a month. Whilst such events are distressingly common within the profession, four deaths in such quick succession rocked the health sector. Something was clearly wrong with the workplace culture of hospitals, and something had to change.

At the University of Sydney, a group of medical and nursing academics began an open and frank conversation – as people directly responsible for the training of health professionals, what might they do to try and shift these toxic cultures? For many of them, these issues were deeply personal – they had all worked in clinical environments themselves, and the pressures were viscerally familiar. As one of them, Dr Kimberly Ivory, observed in an article:

“In the nearly forty years since I started medical school, I have known of a number of suicides of colleagues and friends. And it has not just been suicides. There’s the exhausted resident who drove off the road to her death after 56 hours on-call. Then there’s the one who did the same, but survived. The actual suicides are simply the tip of an iceberg buoyed by the many that tried and failed, thought about it and changed their minds, numbed their pain with drugs and alcohol, or walked away from the profession completely in order to keep body and soul together.”

They began to share stories with theatre academic Paul Dwyer, himself the youngest son of an orthopaedic surgeon. Dismayed by these stories, Paul approached me to create a piece of verbatim theatre that might offer a space to shed light on these issues. The result of this is *Grace Under Pressure*, co-commissioned by Seymour Centre and The Big Anxiety Festival, which premiered in Sydney in October 2017.

Over a six-month period, Paul and I interviewed around 30 health professionals – doctors, nurses, and hospital administrators. We asked them to share the passions that drew them to medicine and nursing, about their journey through training and professional practice, about moments when they felt right at the edge of their competence and capacity, and about moments of joy and satisfaction, moments when they thought, “I’ve done good today”.

The responses were rich and generous. Ranging from wildly funny to utterly heartbreaking, the stories within *Grace Under Pressure* will leave no audience member unaffected. Vividly brought to life by a cast of four extraordinary actors, the play takes the audience on an unforgettable journey. There will be laughter, there will be shock, and there will be tears. These stories are from medical professionals who have worked in country, regional as well as metropolitan hospitals. These are the people who help bring us into the world and are there as we leave this world. We have or will at some point in our lives spend time in a hospital and be supported and cared for by hospital staff.

Grace Under Pressure has been described by hospital staff as “culture changing”, and has had a deep impact on medical and nursing staff who attended the premiere season in large numbers. This impact has resulted in multiple invitations from hospitals and medical educators to present parts of the show within their institutions.

As patients, we want our doctors and nurses to be perfect. We want them to be invincible, to be able to effortlessly manage all of our anxieties and fears in the face of illness. *Grace Under Pressure* allows our health professionals to be humans, and asks the public to have empathy for the often-extreme pressures that we place upon our doctors and nurses.

David Williams, August 2018



CURRICULUM LINKS

NEW SOUTH WALES

Drama

- Stages 5 - 6
 - Dramatic Forms and Styles: Verbatim Theatre, Documentary Theatre
 - Australian Drama

English

- Stage 5
 - Text Type: Scripted Drama
- Stage 6
 - Module A: Language, Identity and Culture

PDHPE

- Stage 6
 - Core Module 1: Better Health for Individuals

QUEENSLAND

Drama

- Years 9-10
 - Dramatic forms: Contemporary Australian Drama
- Years 11-12
 - Share: Verbatim Theatre, Non-Linear Drama
 - Reflect: Realism
 - Challenge: Drama in political contexts

English

- Years 9-10
 - Texts in Context: Scripted Drama
 - Interpreting, Analysing, Evaluating
- Years 11-12
 - Perspectives and Texts
 - Texts and Culture: Australian Texts

Health and Physical Education

- Years 9-10
 - Personal, Social and Community Health
- Years 11-12
 - Plan for Action in a Personal Health Context

VICTORIA

Drama

- Levels 9-10
 - Explore and Express Ideas
 - Respond and Interpret
- VCE
 - Introducing Performance Styles
 - Australian Identity

English

- Levels 9-10
 - Reading and Viewing
 - Speaking and Listening
- VCE
 - Approaches to Literature
 - Context and Connections

Health and Physical Education

- Levels 9-10
 - Personal, Social and Community Health
- VCE
 - Understanding Health and Wellbeing
 - Managing Health and Development
 - Australia's Health in a Globalised World

Civics and Citizenship

- Levels 9-10
 - Citizenship, Identity and Diversity

Capabilities

- Critical and Creative Thinking Capability
- Ethical Capability
- Personal and Social Capability

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Drama

- Years 9-10
 - Making: Drama processes and the Elements of Drama
 - Responding: Analysing and reflecting on intentions
- Years 11-12
 - Non-Realist Drama
 - Contemporary and Devised Drama

English

- Years 9-10
 - Interpreting, Analysing, Evaluating
 - Text Structure and Organisation
 - Texts in Context
- Years 11-12
 - The representation of ideas, attitudes and voices in texts
 - The effect of different media, forms and modes on the structure of texts and how audiences respond to them
 - Relationships between content and structure, voice and perspectives and the text and context

Health and Physical Education

- Years 9-10
 - Contributing to healthy and active communities
 - The health of specific populations



ACTIVITY 1: CREATING VERBATIM THEATRE

Every word spoken in *Grace Under Pressure* was spoken by a real health care professional in a recorded interview. Writers David Williams and Paul Dwyer carefully arranged these accounts into a sequence that they felt effectively communicated to an audience the experiences, opinions and confidential feelings of people working on the front lines of the Australian healthcare system.

Makers of verbatim theatre take a creative approach to curating the documentary materials they collect. While it's important that the audience hears the words of interviewees faithfully interpreted, the writers must find ways to arrange those words into a piece of theatre that takes its audience on a dramatic journey. This activity explores the process of using a recorded interview to create a short verbatim performance.

Step 1. Conduct an interview with someone in your life. You might choose someone who has an exciting life story, or who has insight into a topic that intrigues you. Consider what you find most interesting about this person and prepare questions that will draw-out that aspect of their personality through conversation. Record the interview (ensuring you have your subject's permission to do so) then transcribe their answers into text form.

Step 2. Arrange the sections of text into a sequence that you can present as a monologue. When doing this, think about the message you want your audience to take away from watching your performance. Consider:

- **What is your theme?** An effective piece of verbatim theatre needs a central theme to explore, otherwise what is there for an audience to think about during and after the show?
- **How will you arrange your material to accentuate your theme?** Remember that Verbatim Theatre doesn't have to follow naturalistic rules of time and place.
- **What sort of character (or characters) will you assume to speak your script?** Remember that your audience may not know your subject, so simply imitating them may not be the best way to get your meaning across. Consider what sort of relationship you want your audience to have with your material and create a character who best fosters that relationship.

Step 3. Perform your monologue for an audience. Afterwards, reflect on the following:

- What was effective / not effective about the performance and how could it be improved?
- How did watching a piece of verbatim theatre affect how the audience understood and related to the theme, as opposed to watching a work of fiction?





ACTIVITY 2: POINTS OF VIEW

By featuring many different voices and perspectives on health care, *Grace Under Pressure* presents audiences with multiple ways of understanding the issues faced by health sector workers. This ability to present diverse points of view is one reason the verbatim style is popular among artists who want to explore complex social and political issues.

This improvisational activity explores the ways in which the presence of multiple narrators affects the way an audience responds to a performance.

Step 1. In small groups, brainstorm a list of events that could be witnessed by multiple characters. These could range from the dramatic (an alien invasion, a car accident) to the mundane (an argument, the arrival of a new student at school). Choose the event your group feels has the greatest potential for drama.

Step 2. Each performer in the group takes on the role of a character who was present for the event, each with a completely different opinion about it: they might think it was terrible or exciting, or believe they have a unique insight into it compared to everyone else.

Step 3. Choose one person who is not performing to be 'controller' of the narrative. This person will have an instrumental role in the performance.

Step 4. The performers take it in turns to recount the event from the point of view of their character. Only one person speaks at a time, but then the controller claps their hands the current speaker must stop and the speaker to their left resumes the story (or the cycle begins again with the first speaker if everyone has had a turn).

Step 5. When the story is over, discuss with the audience:

- Which character were you most inclined to believe and why?
- What makes a character seem reliable or unreliable as a narrator?
- How does hearing about an event from multiple perspectives differ from simply having one central narrator, and how does the experience of being an audience member change?

ACTIVITY 3: ELEMENTS OF PRODUCTION

After you have seen *Grace Under Pressure*, reflect on the production elements that gave the show its visual and aural identity.

LIGHTING

The lighting in *Grace Under Pressure* is sparse and almost clinical in a way that evokes a hospital waiting room or an operating theatre. Lighting Designer Nicholas Higgins judiciously uses subtle tonal changes, adding warmth or coldness as the scene requires. Frequently the entire stage space is lit to give the performers freedom to occupy their own spaces. Occasionally, by contrast, the lit area contracts to highlight a particular performer or moment within a story.

Question: When did you find the lighting to be effective and why?

SOUND

Sound in *Grace Under Pressure* is used as a linking device, framing the transitions between scenes, or as a way of underscoring the action to evoke an emotional response from the audience. Sound Designer Gail Priest uses a sonic palette of electronic sounds with which she creates soundscapes that accompany the performers as they speak. Adding music to scenes can help set mood and tone, create a feeling of momentum or enhance dramatic tension.

Question: When did you find the sound design was effective and why?

SET DESIGN

Isabel Hudson's set design takes cues from the subject matter of *Grace Under Pressure* as well as the medium of Verbatim Theatre. A large, bare white circle on the floor forms the main playing space, the white contrasting starkly with the black floor beyond. This threshold is utilised by the director and performers: sometimes characters are positioned outside the circle and comment on the goings-on inside, and sometimes the act of stepping over the threshold marks a dramatic shift in character or tone. Microphones on stands dot the stage, their cables snaking away into darkness. Watching actors, speaking into microphones, saying words that were said by real people years before provides a potent symbolic reminder of the documentary nature of the work. Suspended above the stage is another white circle, designed and illuminated in a fashion reminiscent of a light in an operating theatre or above a dentist's chair, rounding-out the clinical theme that runs throughout the production.

Question: When was the set used in a way which you found powerful or surprising?

COSTUME DESIGN

Hudson's costume design continues the trend towards austerity and utilitarianism that is typical of the overall design philosophy of *Grace Under Pressure*. The performers' clothes follow a simple colour scheme of dark blacks contrasted with shades of white or cream. All the costumes suggest professionalism and look like they would not be out of place in any of the scenes within the show. The differences in each costume's textures and silhouette help highlight the differences between the collections of characters portrayed by each performer. The costumes serve the story being told without trying to tell a story themselves, shifting chameleon-like to suit whatever situation they are found in.

Question: When were costume elements used in a way that you thought was impactful?

Grace Under Pressure

National Tour 2020

Bendigo (Vic)

Thurs 5 March
[Ulumbarra Theatre](#)

Tamworth (NSW)

Sat 7 March
[Capitol Theatre](#)

Orange (NSW)

Tues 10 March
[Orange Civic Theatre](#)

Newcastle (NSW)

Fri 13 – Sat 14 March
[Newcastle Civic Theatre](#)

Townsville (Qld)

Tues 17 March
[Townsville Civic Theatre](#)

Cairns (Qld)

Thurs 19 March
[Cairns Performing Arts Centre](#)

Rockhampton (Qld)

Tues 24 March
[Pilbeam Theatre](#)

Penrith (NSW)

Sat 28 March
[Joan Sutherland Performing Arts Centre](#)

Wyong (NSW)

Tues 31 March – Wed 1 April
[The Art House Studio](#)

Queanbeyan (NSW)

Fri 3 – Sun 5 April
[Queanbeyan Performing Arts Centre](#)

Wangaratta (Vic)

Wed 8 April
[Wangaratta Performing Arts Centre](#)

Bunbury (WA)

Tues 14 April
[BREC](#)

Mandurah (WA)

Wed 15 – Thurs 16 April
[Mandurah Performing Arts Centre](#)

Margaret River (WA)

Sat 18 April
[Arts Margaret River](#)

Clayton (Vic)

Thurs 23 – Fri 24 April
[Monash Academy of Performing Arts](#)

Horsham (Vic)

Mon 27 April
[Horsham Town Hall](#)

Narre Warren (Vic)

Wed 29 April
[Bunjil Place](#)

Frankston (Vic)

Thurs 30 April
[Frankston Arts Centre](#)

Nunawading (Vic)

Fri 1 – Sat 2 May
[Whitehorse Centre](#)

Werribee (Vic)

Tues 5 May
[Wyndham Cultural Centre](#)

Parramatta (NSW)

Fri 8 – Sat 9 May
[Parramatta Riverside Theatres](#)

Wollongong (NSW)

Wed 13 – Sat 16 May
[Illawarra Performing Arts Centre](#)