

The Flexible Performer in Applied Theatre: In-hospital Interaction with Captain Starlight

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how Australian non-profit organisation the Starlight Children's Foundation employs professional performers to play the role of Captain Starlight in order to distract, entertain, and interact with children and young people in hospital. Drawing from the author's experience working for the organisation, it will provide an overview of Starlight's programs, before locating the Captain Starlight program within the field of Applied Theatre, and then describing how theories of clowning, improvisation, and theatrical performance are conceptualised and practised within that program. It then presents an account of a moment of performance, before arguing that the approach adopted by Captain Starlight bears much in common with the process of 'flexible performance' identified by Tim Fitzpatrick in the commedia dell'arte. Ultimately, this paper finds that by generating performance in this manner, Captain Starlight creates an interactive space for children and young people to exercise their agency within the hospital setting.

INTRODUCTION

Every year, approximately 3.8 million children access hospital services in Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018). Of these, almost 1 million will face lengthy admissions with invasive, and often painful procedures, separation from familial and social networks, and limited opportunities to exercise their freedom and independence (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018). Such experiences have been shown to be traumatic for children and young people, with outcomes such as separation anxiety, sleep disturbances, emotional disorders, hyperactivity, and aggression observed to persist for months, and even years (Mazurek Melnyk, 2000).

In Australia, the Children and Young People's Rights in Health Care Services Charter¹ has been developed to provide guidance to service providers, in order to ensure that 'children and young people receive healthcare that is both appropriate and acceptable to them and to their families' (Children's Hospitals Australasia & The Association for the Wellbeing of Children in Healthcare, 2017). The Charter recognises that 'children and young people experience illness, injury, and disability in a different way from adults' and as such, are 'entitled to special care and support' (Children's Hospitals Australasia & The Association for the Wellbeing of Children in Healthcare, 2017). It recognises that every child has the right to 'consideration of their best interests[,] to express their views[,] to respect for themselves as a whole person[,] to participate in decision-making and, [...] to participate in education, play, creative activities and recreation' (Children's Hospitals Australasia & The Association for the Wellbeing of Children in Healthcare, 2017).

It is this latter point which is addressed through the work of Australian non-profit the Starlight Children's Foundation (Starlight). This article will explore how Starlight uses professional, costumed performers known as Captain Starlight to entertain children, with the aim of improving their hospital experience. It will argue that through a unique approach to interactive performance, these performers recognise the agency of children in an environment where they traditionally have very little.

¹ Henceforth referred to as The Charter.

THE STARLIGHT CHILDREN'S FOUNDATION AUSTRALIA

The Starlight Children's Foundation was established as a registered charity in Australia in 1988 with the aim of 'brightening the lives of seriously ill children and their families' (2019). Like its namesake organisations in the United Kingdom and North America, in Australia Starlight runs a range of programs that cater to the needs of children in healthcare services, including a wish granting program for children who are seriously ill, one-of-a-kind experience programs, and making entertainment devices available in major paediatric hospitals. However, unlike its UK and US counterparts, Starlight in Australia delivers two major programs that utilise trained performers.² The first of these, the Starlight Express Room, is a dedicated non-medical space within each major paediatric hospital in Australia (nine in total), that children and families can visit to play with toys, video games, participate in arts and craft activities, watch movies and music videos, and interact with Captain Starlight. The Captain Starlight program, the second major program and focus of this article, uses trained performers to lead the activity in the Starlight Express Room seven days a week, to deliver a daily television program through an internal hospital channel, and to visit children on wards and in clinics who are too sick, or otherwise unable to come to the Starlight Express Room.

The work of the Captain Starlight program can be located within the field of Applied Theatre, defined broadly by Baxter and Low as 'theatre-making with, for and by particular groups of people and in locations that are not traditionally associated with theatre' (2017, p. 5). In this regard, Applied Theatre shares much in common with Community Performance, described by Petra Koppers as a mode of performance that is

not individually authored: the end product, if it comes into existence, is not predetermined by an artist who directs people toward this goal. Instead, the outcome is (relatively) open, maybe within a thematic field opened up by the facilitator, but full of spaces and times for people to create their own expressive material. (2019, p. 4)

² The Starlight Children's Foundation (UK) conducted an 18-month pilot of the Captain Starlight program using Australian Captains, ending in 2018. This pilot is currently under review.

Several recent studies have highlighted the benefits of using Applied Theatre in health care settings (Baxter & Low 2017; Brodzinski 2010), with Sextou and Hall in particular identifying theatre as 'a specialized input into hospital life', providing children with 'entertainment, distraction from the experience of illness and relaxation as an important strategy of their well-being' (2015, p. 81). Such benefits reflect the aims of the Captain Starlight program, as I will now explain.



Figure 1. Captain Starlight in the Starlight Express Room. Courtesy of the Starlight Children's Foundation.

WHO IS CAPTAIN STARLIGHT?

Captain Starlight is a carefully developed persona with an associated mythology; an alien from outer space who flies a rocket ship down to Earth every day, parking it on the roof of metropolitan paediatric hospitals in order to capture the imaginations of sick children and to help to create a 'healing environment filled with entertainment, fun, laughter and joy', distracting children from 'the pain, fear and boredom that hospitalisation brings' (Starlight Children's Foundation, 2019a). Captain Starlights are usually recruited to work in specific teams, operating out of individual Starlight Express Rooms located in major

paediatric hospitals in Australia's capital cities. It is not uncommon for an individual Captain Starlight to work in the same hospital day-in, day-out, which means they are more likely to have repeat interactions with children experiencing lengthier admissions. As such, the repertoire of material performed runs the risk of becoming familiar or stale to children who encounter Captain Starlight every day. This challenge, of bringing a fresh performance to the same audience every day, coupled with the responsibility of running the Starlight Express Room space, makes unique demands of the performers who play the role of Captain Starlight.

Whilst the first Captain Starlight employed in 1991 was a teacher, the organisation quickly became aware that additional skills were required in order to deliver the program as it had initially been conceived. Today, Starlight employs over 180 Captains Australia-wide, and when recruiting, seeks individuals with training or experience in theatre and performance. The process includes standard recruiting practises such as phone interview, psychological evaluation, and face-to-face interview. However, in order to be successful in their application with Starlight, would-be Captains also have to pass through a series of auditions which require them to deliver a prepared performance, lead a child-appropriate activity, as well as participating in paired and group improvisations. Such a process is designed to assess applicants against criteria such as 'performance expertise, [...] sensitivity and excellent interpersonal skills [and] ability to work as part of a cohesive team' (Starlight Children's Foundation, 2019a).

HOW IS PERFORMANCE UNDERSTOOD WITHIN THE CAPTAIN STARLIGHT PROGRAM?

Once an individual is successful in their application to become a Captain Starlight, they participate in an education process that augments on-the-job training with specific, intensive skills development. This training is designed to prepare Captains to execute the 'Performance Matrix' (Figure 2), an approach to performance in hospital spaces, such as wards or clinics, which ensures that each moment of performance is aligned with the aims of the Captain Starlight program, and the goals of the organisation (Starlight Children's Foundation, 2019b). The elements comprising the

Performance Matrix are 'Performance Fundamentals', 'Sensitivity', 'Child Centred Experience', 'Positive Disruption', and 'Pair-



Figure 2. The Performance Matrix. Courtesy of the Starlight Children's Foundation.

work', with each of these composed of individual sub-elements.

The Creative Director of the Captain Starlight program, Jono Brand, explains that any Captain Starlight performance may include 'in

particular clowning—simple, naïve clown—improvisation, and theatre as well. With the Captain Starlight program, we borrow a lot of our philosophies from those particular styles of performance’ (personal communication, February 27, 2019). This is reflected in the Performance Fundamentals node of the matrix, with concepts such as ‘accepts offers’ and ‘finds the game’ (Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2019b) familiar to the style of improvisation attributed to pioneers Viola Spolin and Del Close and practiced at well-known schools such as Upright Citizens Brigade and Second City in the United States, whose influence has spread to training institutions and improvisation communities all over the world. Similarly, concepts such as ‘naivete’ and ‘the flop’ (Starlight Children’s Foundation, 2019b) are drawn from clown theory, particularly as practised by Jacques Lecoq:

The clown is the person who flops, who messes up his turn, and, by so doing, gives his audience a sense of superiority. Through his failure he reveals his profoundly human nature, which moves us and makes us laugh. (Lecoq, 2018, p. 156)

The use of this style of performance is a cornerstone of Captain Starlight’s approach and assists Captains in achieving the aims of the Child-Centred Experience node of the Performance Matrix. Brand explains the importance of the flop in the hospital environment: ‘It’s empowering for a child to feel like they’ve got more knowledge than an adult, especially given their interactions with doctors, where they’re often at quite low status’ (personal communication, February 27, 2019). Indeed, on my first day as a Captain Starlight some seven years ago, Brand—who trained me—explained that most of what he did as Captain Starlight was (simply) play low status, and said that whenever he was in doubt, he would just take his glasses off and pretend they were a telephone. By drawing upon the principles of clowning, particularly on the concept of naivete, Captain Starlight is also able to achieve the goal of Positive Disruption in performance. Brand explains that this concept of naivete

fits really well with the mythology of Captain Starlight. The character themselves comes from Planet Starlight, they’re here on earth with not that much knowledge, trying to figure out how the

world works with optimism and positivity and curiosity. (personal communication, February 27, 2019)

Although Captains have individual nicknames for ease of identification—such as Captain Gigantor, Captain Side Pony, or Captain Dash—and possess unique traits and characteristics, all Captains share a common mythology that, as I will argue later in this paper, is one of the key elements drawn upon in their generation of performance.

The influence of improvisation and clowning techniques is also evident in the way Captain Starlight observes the Sensitivity node of the Performance Matrix. This is of vital importance in the hospital setting, for obvious reasons. On any given day a Captain Starlight might encounter in excess of a hundred different children and their families, from diverse backgrounds, at different stages of treatment for innumerable illnesses or injuries. As such, their performance environment is constantly in flux, with audience needs changing on a moment by moment basis. Like the clown who must establish contact with her audience and allow her performance to be influenced by their response (Lecoq, 2018, p. 157), Brand explains that in an environment such as this, Captains must maintain a constant connection with their audience, and one another:

They're watching very keenly for any cues from the audience, as in the child, but they're also staying really connected with each other. Which is really important in a hospital because you've got two sets of eyes there, one of you might see something that the other doesn't see that might lend itself to a change in interaction, or even to think, "I probably shouldn't be here right now". (personal communication, February 27, 2019)

Here Brand also touches upon the final node of the Performance Matrix, Pairwork, which requires Captains to be 'sensitive to their fellow performer[,] open to new ideas and just running with it' (personal communication, February 27, 2019). Perhaps the most profound influence on Captain Starlight's approach to pairwork is the concept of 'major and minor' attributed to the teaching of Philippe Gaulier, and reflected in LeCoq's teachings on the relationship between the 'whiteface' and 'Auguste' clowns, described by de Fallois:

The beautiful dialogue between the white face and the auguste does not set at each other's throats the superior and the inferior, the executioner and the victim, the exploiter and the exploited. The two partners are at the same level. They are two equal forces, two principles one as positive as the other. The white face is no more superior to the auguste than thought is to action, or serenity to emotion. (as cited in Davison, 2008)

In practice, this 'beautiful dialogue' sees Captains maintaining a delicate balance from performance to performance—and within individual performances—as they routinely swap roles between major and minor, with the major taking the lead in an instance of performance, and the minor stepping back or creating space in order to provide support. Never explicitly stated, this balance is enacted and maintained through Captains' sensitivity to their audience and environment, and informed by what they interpret as most appropriate for any given situation.

Having provided an overview of how performance theories are conceptualised and practised in the Captain Starlight program, I will now provide a brief description of a Captain Starlight performance, in order to illustrate how this Performance Matrix is enacted.

A VISIT FROM CAPTAIN STARLIGHT

Captain Starlight carefully enters Leila's bay and whispers "would you like a visit?"

Leila nods, "yes."

"Oh, great!" Captain Starlight tiptoes over to Leila's bed. "Can I use this chair?" she asks, looking to Leila for permission.

"Mmm-hmm," Leila replies.

"And can I use this curtain?" she asks again.

"Mmm-hmm."

"I can?" Captain Starlight smiles and tiptoes over to the curtain. She gently draws it across to separate Leila's bed from the adjacent bed, where another child is resting.

"Look at this beautiful backdrop," the second Captain says.

"It's amazing," Captain Starlight replies, "but I think it needs a Captain in this chair. May I?" she asks Leila.

"Mmm-hmm," Leila replies.

"Thank you," Captain Starlight slowly, gently, sits down in the chair. "Oh gosh, Earth chairs are so comfy" she remarks, a warm smile spreading across her face. "We're from Planet Starlight" she says to Leila, "and our chairs are made of things like marshmallows, which are very comfy, but sometimes a bit sticky."

"Yes," concurs the second Captain, nodding his head in solemn agreement. "Hey, what's on your beautiful backdrop Captain?"

"Oh," says Captain Starlight, sitting back and taking in the view (of the hospital curtain), "well, I'm pretty sure it's a ..." she turns her head back to Leila, looking for approval "tropical ... island ... sunset?" she ventures.

"No," Leila replies.

"No, it's not a tropical island sunset. At all," says Captain Starlight, with a serious shake of the head. "I'm pretty sure it's ... a palace."

"-Yeah," Leila interjects.

"It's a beautiful palace," states Captain Starlight.

"Oh, amazing," says the second Captain, "and you're the Queen, on your throne?"

"Am I the Queen?" Captain Starlight asks Leila.

"Yeah."

"I am the Queen, obviously. And you're the ... ?" she looks to Leila, leaving a gap for Leila to fill.

"Princess," Leila replies.

*"You **are** the Princess. And Captain is the ... ?"*

"Can I be the donkey?" the second Captain asks.

Leila giggles.

"Is Captain the royal donkey?" Captain Starlight asks her.

"Yep!"

“Oh yes, I’ve always wanted to be a royal donkey!” he exclaims with delight.

Captain Starlight stiffens her back, adopting a regal pose, and turns to face the second Captain. “Royal donkey, may I have my instrument please?”

“Oh yes, here you are your mad-” he stumbles over the word as he rushes to hand over the ukulele, “-madamejest, madamejesty.”

“Madamejesty,” Captain Starlight nods in approval. “Thank you very much your...”

“-Eeyore!” he erupts, seemingly involuntarily.

“-Donkeyness.”

Leila giggles again.

“Princess, I have a song that I have written just for you,” announces Captain Starlight.

“Well as the Royal Donkey I have to play along.”

“As does the Princess, of course. I’ve got your royal shaker here, you’re familiar with a shaker?”

“Mmm-hmm,” Leila replies.

“Of course she is, she’s a Princess,” states Captain Starlight. “There you go.” She reaches out and hands a shaker to Leila. “Ready?” she asks the second Captain.

“Ready,” he replies.

“Ready?” she asks Leila, who nods.

Captain Starlight then proceeds to play ‘A Banana Is A Banana’ by Australian children’s entertainer Justine Clarke, singing the lyrics as the second Captain and Leila keep the beat with egg-shaped shakers. Captain Starlight is smiling, her kind eyes wide as she watches Leila, making sure the performance is okay. Her voice is bright, but soft enough so as not to disturb the child in the adjacent bed. When the song finishes the Captains and Leila give each other a gentle round of applause, with Captain Starlight applauding Leila’s “amazing shaking”.



Figure 3. Captain Starlight interacts with Abbey, aged nine. Courtesy of the Starlight Children's Foundation.

ENACTING THE PERFORMANCE MATRIX

In this brief excerpt from a Captain Starlight performance,³ we can identify elements from each node of the Performance Matrix, as outlined in the Captains' Playbook. Examples of these include:

- Performance Fundamentals: Throughout the performance, the Captains *accept offers* from one another, and from their audience, and constantly *check in* with the child, Leila, to ensure that permission to continue the performance is still in place.
- Sensitivity: The Captains demonstrate *spatial awareness*, and awareness of the *hospital environment* through their gentle movement and lowered voices and, recognising that this child

³ This particular performance continued for some time, with the second Captain eventually adopting the role of major and generating a performance in response to a book that he found next to Leila's bed.

is perhaps shy, *tailor the performance* to her needs, as they interpret them.

- Child Centred Experience: The Captains facilitate *child-led engagement* by creating space within the performance for the child to contribute, allowing her to decide the setting of the performance, and her own role within that performance.
- Positive Disruption: Captain Starlight *positively reframes the hospital experience* by reimagining a hospital bay as a beautiful palace, inhabited by interesting characters.
- Pairwork: The Captains demonstrate exemplary awareness of the *dynamics of pairwork*, creating a performance around one Captain's proficiency with a ukulele, thus adopting *major and minor* roles, which they observe throughout the duration of the performance. (Starlight Children's Foundation, 2019b)

The above examples represent just a handful of elements from a performance that—although apparently simple—is complex, and deeply nuanced. Whilst there is no denying Captain Starlight provides a source of distraction from the trauma of the hospital environment, is a source of fun and excitement to the children who encounter them, and ensures that—as per The Charter—children have the right to 'participate in education, play, creative activities and recreation' (2017), I argue that the benefit of Captain Starlight goes far beyond this. Through their unique approach to performance—combining elements of clowning, improvisation, and theatre—Captain Starlight creates an interactive performance that makes space for children to contribute, and exercise their agency over the event itself, which has important consequences in an environment where the agency of children is often diminished. In order to demonstrate how Captain Starlight is able to create such a performance, I'll now introduce a model for analysing performance that I have found to be particularly useful.

THE ELEMENTS OF A FLEXIBLE CAPTAIN STARLIGHT PERFORMANCE

I have written previously (Ashford, 2018) about the suitability of the model of 'flexible performance' developed by Tim Fitzpatrick (1995) in his analysis of *commedia dell'arte*, to the task of understanding how

performance might be generated in interactive theatre. Fitzpatrick's model outlines 'a performance characterised by somewhat flexible accessing of prepatterned material stored in memory' (1995, p. 47), and as such, has much in common with that of a Captain Starlight performance, as I will now demonstrate.

Central to the Captain Starlight approach is the understanding that no two children are alike, and therefore, that no two performances should ever be the same. This requires that Captains are constantly generating performance in response to their audience, their environment, and any offers they might receive, as has already been explained. As such, Captain Starlight performances are not—nor could they ever be—scripted, but rather, are generated in the moment of performance. That is not to say that individual elements of a flexible performance such as this cannot be scripted. The use of the song 'A Banana is a Banana', by Captain Starlight is one such example. Like Henke, who observes the 'interaction between oral and literate media to be a hallmark of the *commedia dell'arte*' (2002, p. 31), Fitzpatrick does not locate flexible performance within a practice of 'free improvisation', pitted against 'tightly-scripted and directorially controlled performance', but rather in the 'mid range' between these poles, with the freedom to oscillate between the two (1995, p. 48).

Fitzpatrick defines flexible performance as:

A mode of performance in which the performer, given the limits and possibilities concomitant with his/her role in the context of situation and the more or less explicit goals which he/she brings to this situation, has both the liberty to generate with some flexibility actions and words appropriate to the context, and also the resources to do so in a coherent, pertinent and acceptable way. (1995, p. 48)

Fitzpatrick stresses that flexible performance such as that observed in the *commedia dell'arte* should therefore not be considered 'a *type* of theatre, but a *process for generating* theatre, a process quite different to text-based processes' (1995, p. 59). Unlike tightly-scripted performance, where the degree of flexibility available is comparatively limited, the performer in the *commedia dell'arte* has the freedom to generate their performance through the 'structural interplay' between

the three performance elements available to them—role, resources, and goal—and is able to ‘roam around the triangle’ formed by these elements, leaning more heavily on any individual element—or combination of elements—based on their interpretation of the audience’s response to the unfolding performance (Fitzpatrick, 1995, p. 59). Such a schema can be applied to the performance described above, whereby the interplay between the elements of role (Captain Starlight, the mythology), personal resources (ability to play the ukulele), and outline (to create instances of positive disruption within the hospital environment), allows the Captains to generate a performance in response to their audience (Leila) (Fitzpatrick 1995, p. 59). In fact, this brief example is illustrative of the benefit of such a method of generating performance, in that it creates space for others—in this case the child, Leila—to contribute.

From the beginning of the performance, Captain Starlight ascertains that the child is shy, or not particularly responsive, and opts therefore to lean into the role point of the triangle. This allows the Captain not only to introduce herself, but also to introduce the mythology, which establishes the opportunity for curiosity and exploration, and invites the child to occupy a position of higher status within the interaction over the Captains, who appear to be impressed by a simple chair. The second Captain then uses a resource, the (presumably) stock line ‘what’s on your beautiful backdrop Captain?’, which leads to an interaction between Captain Starlight and Leila that allows the child to have input over the scene of the performance, in this case a palace. All the dialogue that follows is thus informed by this input, as the Captains work to generate their performance in response to Leila’s offer (they could never have envisaged before the performance commenced that they would be playing the role of a Queen, or donkey), and oriented towards achieving their goal: positive disruption. The song that follows—as has already been stated—is a prepared and rehearsed resource, however, again, Captain Starlight may not have known before she entered the room that she would be using it. Had the child the Captain encountered been boisterous, or more responsive, she may have opted instead for a different resource altogether, such as a magic or slapstick routine.

CONCLUSION

By generating performance in this manner—through the interplay between the elements of role, resources, and scenario—and in response to their audience's reaction, Captain Starlight creates a space for children and young people to contribute to the performance, and thus exercise their agency. Defined by Janet Murray as 'the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices' (1998, p. 126), Captain Starlight's recognition of the agency of children and young people in the hospital setting makes possible the realisation of 'the potential for experience in the aesthetic realm to have an influence on individual and community life' (Brodzinski 2010, p. 157). In a 2013 Social Return on Investment study of the Starlight Express Room program commissioned by Starlight and undertaken by PricewaterhouseCoopers, a number of key benefits to children, young people, their families, and the broader community were identified, including increased entertainment, reduced anxiety, less missed appointments, increased socialisation, and an improved workplace environment for services staff (2013). Further, PwC found that for every dollar invested in the Starlight Express Room program, the social and economic benefit to the community was more than quadruple that amount (Starlight Children's Foundation, 2013). Whilst it must be noted that this study did not explicitly focus on the Captain Starlight program, particularly the ward-based performance which has been analysed in this paper, the presence of Captain Starlight is instrumental in the success of the Starlight Express Room space, and in the organisation's ability to improve the experiences of children and young people accessing hospital services in Australia.

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