

**'TRANSPLANT... SIDE SHOW OPERATING THEATRE'  
CRITICAL RESPONSE BY MEGAN SPENCER**



*"Transplant: An "INTIMATE, MAD AND MYSTERIOUS EMERGENCY ROOM DRAMA" by Such As They Are".*

It has to be said: 'Transplant' was a hoot! What a fun, engaging performance to be part of – and we were! - especially as the last Seedpod production of the year.

Around 10 of us unsuspecting mugs waited in the stairwell of ICU, having no idea of what was behind those darkened, closed doors in front of us.

Soon we were ushered into a makeshift waiting room in the underground bunker, speaking in hushed tones as beeps, breaths and other strange machine-like sounds emanated from a mysterious curtained area at the back of the space. (The sounds were courtesy of 'Transplant' artistic collaborator, Jacques Soddell).

It became apparent as we waited, that we were indeed in another hospital environment at the 'ICU', not unlike the 'Anamnesis' Seedpod #2 performance from earlier in 2012. Only this performance experiment was much lighter in tone. The ghosts were very much absent from the machine – in their place were humans (us, 'the Observers'), Dave Houston ('the Doctor'), Mark Penzak ('the Surgeon'), and 'the Frog' (operated by puppeteer Eliza-Jane Gilchrist).

The Frog's presence was perhaps the most important, very much designed to remind us where we have come from, and likely where we will end up should we continue to batter our environment; ie back in the ground and the primordial swamp.

Another figure proved to be instrumental in the 'narrative' of 'Transplant'; the 'Patient'. (More about him/her later.)

So there we are seated in another area, a cordoned off 'sterilisation unit'. The Doctor was very quiet and unassuming. He explained to us that we needed to be brushed down and sterilised before we could enter the next 'area', which turned out to be an operating theatre.

Upon entering we were asked to don light blue sterilisation gowns and latex gloves – always fun to put on, especially in front of strangers!

From his bag of tricks the Doctor took out various 'tools' and asked us a series of questions. He then performed on us – or asked us to – various actions in order to shed germs, bacteria, and any other invasive organisms which might disrupt/contaminate the next 'procedure' (whatever that might be...) It was all very

gentle, and helped to create anticipation for what was about to come.

Some of us had to brush our teeth; others clean ears, blow noses or clean fingernails (after an 'inspection'); Dave brushed all of our shoes down vigorously; it all seemed to make sense to him somehow. We were on a ride that could not be aborted. There was no going back now...

The genius of this part of the show was not only banding us together as a group of participants, but as a group of potentially unclean participants – a given of the human condition. I certainly began to think about what germs I might be carrying and where – Dave encouraged us to volunteer anything that might 'jeopardise' what was to come even though we had no idea what that might be!

The sight of this man brushing a rotating feather duster under a stranger's thongs was hilarious... It was a bit like a scene from Woody Allen's *Sleeper*; we were all stuck inside the white sterile unit that was the science lab inside his brain, without knowing what was about to happen.

In that sterilisation room, we also became united as fatally flawed, fleshy bags of bacteria, dressed in hospital gowns. (Did we need them to protect us from something too?)

After about 10 minutes he lead us via carefully marked paving stones to another area; the Operating Theatre. ("If you deviate from the stones I'll have to take you back to the sterilisation area and begin the procedure all over again" he warned us, smiling.)

But none of us strayed from the path. The ten of us were instructed to gather around the operating table. The sounds were loud now, with certain actions coordinated to spot sound effects in the soundtrack, by the performers.

Our funny bones were tickled too – such was the absurdity and delight inherent to the 'procedure' we were about to witness.

The Surgeon stood with a maniacal grin gazing down at the Patient. Laying out on a gurney and with all manner of equipment invading his 'body', a life size Patient (part animatronic , part puppet) was in the midst of an operation.

Something was lost inside of him. It turned out to be a Frog. A very cheeky weird little Frog, participating in a game of hide and seek with the Surgeon (who seemed frustrated, bemused, and at the end, in wonder). Frog croaked its way through Patient's entire system – intestines, lungs, heart.. We watched the Surgeon as he groped through the Patient's insides, determined to find this 'disease' which ailed him so... The denouement was spectacular; glitter erupted from the Patient's mouth and floated over us as the Frog eventually made his presence known in spectacular fashion, now transplanted onto a glorious tall flower stem, now very much a biological part of Patient's body. It was all very pretty.

“Without you I’m nothing” is all I could think; *without these frogs we’re goners...* The very barometers of the health of the planet – and in this case the health of our puppet Patient. We are so co---dependent on other organisms for survival.

Point very taken. And, thanks for making us laugh. It certainly was ‘stand up’ surgery. And for giving us ‘latex fingers’ – the lingering smell of the gloves was a souvenir from the performance.

Certainly ‘we’ were very much a part of this experiment; *Transplant* at Seedpod was a trial performance for a larger one that will feature at the 2013 Castlemaine State Festival. Feedback was requested after the show from participants, for the performers to take away and refine.

I found it a fun, immersive, interactive and thought-provoking experience that embraced our collective neuroses around the human body, infection, sickness and survival. The soundtrack was terrific too: it sounded like *were* in an operating theatre.

The performers made great use of the space – it couldn’t have been more suited to the environment were in, that of a decommissioned regional hospital. With minimal props and resources - and strategic eerie lighting - they infected the space with a palpable energy and plausibility.

My only advice would be to perhaps be even more rigorous in the ‘sterilisation’ phase and have some dialogue to throw at the ‘Observers’ to orient their minds even further towards the themes of the show, such as cleanliness, infection, micro-organisms, prior to taking them into the (operating) Theatre.

So that when that that Frog Flower pops out of the Patient’s guts (hello Ridley Scott’s ‘Alien’ sans the gore!), our amphibian friend will have even more evolutionary meaning attached to his ‘grand entrance’.