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left: Chris Agnew; right: Professor Oedipus Punch, rod puppet by Chris for *Only Smarties Have the Answer*, by Aidan Shingler and the Antidotes, with operator Langley Brown

## Chris Agnew: who's pulling the strings now ?

*Langley Brown reflects:*

One of the pioneers of non-therapy oriented arts in health died on 3 July after a long and courageous battle with The Big C.

Chris Agnew established puppetry and performance at Manchester's St Mary's Hospital in 1979. I had met her and her soon-to-be-husband Doug late the previous year at a meeting to establish High Peak Community Arts, for which we served on the management committee that appointed Gerri Moriarty as first Director of what was to become a model of rural participatory arts practice.

No sooner had I introduced Chris to my colleagues on the Manchester Hospital Arts Team (now Lime) than she was setting up puppet making and performances on the children's wards and inveigling us visual artists into performing around the hospitals. She initiated an annual Variety Show that toured hospital and community venues, and which was directed and choreographed by Chris and her formidable Aunt Julie. My own renditions of *Any Old Iron*, *Albert and the Lion* and *Daddy Wouldn't Buy Me a Bow-Wow* I remember with a strange mixture of pride and cringe, as I do the characters I devised with Chris' enthusiastic and giggling support. The most notorious of these was Tearaway Tex, whose act involved an appalling rendition of *Home on the Range* followed by an escapology act from 'A Perfectly Ordinary Paper Household Rubbish Bag'. An impression of these shows can be gained from the response of an elderly member of the captive audience at one hospital who suddenly and loudly asked the show's MC Brian Chapman 'Does your *mother* know you're out?'

Chris and I then devised and toured a Punch and Judy show. The forerunner of more recent work with mental health activist/artist Aidan Shingler, this nostalgic and idiosyncratic show toured health venues for elderly people and children, as well as school and village fêtes in the Peak District.

Meanwhile, with Hospital Arts musician Roger Sim and artist Liz Faunce, Chris co-devised two health education shows, *Gurgly's Dickie Ticker*, which aimed to help children understand and adjust to being in hospital, and the self-explanatory *Tickle your Teeth Show*; as Roger said on hearing of Chris' departure: 'she turned me into Mr. Sparkle, and I never looked back'.

Together with Linda Moss, Margaret Blackwell and Bev Todd, Chris established arts activities at the Christie cancer hospital. Perhaps her greatest 'arts and health' achievement though lay in her developing and sustaining, with Roger Sim and activities organiser Jean Parker, performance work with elderly patients in Burton House at Withington Hospital. Here she engaged bemused patients,

managers, volunteers and care, ancillary and medical staff in a yearly programme of variety shows of a growing quality and exuberance.

Chris left Hospital Arts in the 1980s to become Community Education Coordinator for Buxton and the surrounding rural area, where she initiated and supported several health-oriented arts programmes. One of these was Spa Arts at the Devonshire Royal Hospital, Buxton, where she and I collaborated in developing performance and visual arts projects. At this time I was director of Start, a Manchester centre where artists worked with mental health service users. Our joint projects included *Head for the City*, in which members of local young people's disability group Connect 90 visited Start, and Start artists and members, including photographer Jack Sutton and myself, ran reciprocal arts projects at the Devonshire Royal.

Spa Arts became the foundation for the development of arts and health in Stockport. Chris and textile artist Adrienne Brown, who as a community education tutor had also worked at the Devonshire, were appointed joint coordinators of Stockport Arts and Health (SAH) in 1993.

After Chris left SAH to look after her still-expanding family, she worked with young Buxton people, including her own family of remarkable talents, to set up the *Funny Wonders* puppet company. Alongside this she was the formidable driving force behind the Buxton Puppet Festival.

In 2002 Chris and her artist husband Doug initiated Bridgehead, for which I helped devise a system of CoLabs to explore cross-artform collaboration. The aim was to roll out our discoveries to a widening web of local communities, establishing a creative nucleus in each. We saw the company as offering a way of investigating, reinvigorating, and sustaining the well-being of the artist and of their art. By this time, however, both Chris and Doug were experiencing increasing health problems - yet they continued to work with no sign of diminishing gusto and imagination. Chris and I collaborated with fellow Bridgehead artist Aidan Shingler to produce and perform Aidan's touring show *Only Smarties Have the Answer*, which deployed puppets inspired by Punch and Judy to animate Aidan's personal accounts of human rights issues in the psychiatric system.

As *Funny Wonders* and the Puppet Festival thrived in partnership with the Buxton Opera House, Chris' cancer returned and, although we knew she would not have long, within two years the end came as a shock for which we were still not prepared.

Chris had the knack, not only of making you laugh until you almost wet yourself and your sides ached, but of making you do things you would never have dreamt of doing but, when you did, you'd enter a parallel universe where commitment and utter ridiculousness merged as a powerful source of inspiration and wonder at your own potential - if only to do those daft things you'd never have dreamt of doing. This made her a rare mind-expander, a shaper of experience. Her enthusiasm was often scattergun and explosive, projects might not always come off, but her laughter and fierce determination achieved so much for - and (more importantly) *by* - so many more people of all ages than would have been the case had there been none of the dynamic force that was Chris Agnew.

A few months before her final exit Chris kindly donated the puppets she'd made for *Smarties* to the Arts for Health Archive at MMU. Now each time I enter the Archive I am greeted by her wonderfully pompous and fatuous Professor Oedipus Punch, and for a moment my eyes don't know whether to laugh or cry.

I am proud to have known Chris. She was only 61. This makes me cross. There was so much more she would have loved to do. But I know her legacy will be powerful and will persist within and beyond her own strong and creative family, within our local community, and within the hearts and minds of all who knew her.