



My Own Invention

Telling Tails: Children's Literature Goes to the Hospital

Gideon Koren

Gideon Koren is an Israeli-Canadian pediatrician, clinical pharmacologist, toxicologist, author and a composer of Israeli popular music. In 1992 he founded the Bear Theatre at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, the only such theatre worldwide where health professionals perform weekly for hospitalized children and their families. The musical "Tails" — script, songs, direction and children's book by Koren — has served as a model for other hospitals. In July 2007 the theatre celebrated 15 years and 750 shows. At the hospital, Koren goes by the nickname "Gidi" and takes pride in wearing eccentric hats to the performances of "Tails."

As a doctor and children's author, I have two distinct careers. This is the story of how they came together.

I arrived in Canada in 1982, after writing Hebrew children's books and music in Israel for over a decade. Three of my books were commercially staged; six were recorded as records and audio cassettes. While establishing my academic career in Toronto at The Hospital for Sick Children and The University of Toronto, I continued to publish children's books in Israel. But I missed the direct contact with children through the stage and the recording studio. After nine years, I realized that I was missing a vital and intimate activity, and ignoring a major personal need. However, I did not have either the time or the inclination to go back to producing commercial shows, albums and books.

One day it dawned on me that the solution was close at hand -- so close, in fact, that I had failed to see it. At the Hospital there was a steady flow of hundreds of children and parents in great need of theatre. I first considered producing one of the shows that had had long and successful runs in Israel. Then I realized that my potential audience had special needs, and might benefit from a different message. The theme of "being different" and "self-acceptance" appealed to me, as I have always been appalled by stereotyping and amazed at how the self-esteem of children is profoundly affected by serious illness. Once I identified the theme, the play and book wrote themselves over three evenings in the fall of 1991. I was used to intense periods of writing from my days in studio production, but this time it was different -- I wrote it in English!

In 1992, we set up the Bear Theatre. (The Hospital's logo is a bandaged bear.) To the best of my knowledge, this is the first and only regularly performing company of health professionals based in a pediatric hospital. We wished to share our non-medical selves with our patients and their parents, in order to help humanize the hospital experience. Hence, *Tails: A Fairy Tale on Furry Tales*, an original musical about being different.

On entering the theatre, the children and parents receive a pair of animal ears. The play starts with Quincy Taylor handing out tails to members of the audience and the cast:

Quincy Taylor came to town
with his rolling wagon,
carrying hundreds of furry tails
for cats and dogs and dragons.

Only Honey Bunny, who arrives late, does not get a tail. He retires to his bunny hole, lonely and sad.

Enter Eagle Joe, a space pilot looking for someone to accompany him on his flight to Venus. All the children fill out application forms, with the help of the cast. But Eagle Joe can't take just anyone:



"My shuttle is small,
and everything is so tight,
there is no room for tails at all.
so this is a tail-less flight!"

The children remind the Penguin Teller (the narrator) that Honey Bunny does not have a tail. They help wake him up to tell him the good news about the flight. To his surprise, he is chosen because he does not have a tail. The musical ends with the song, "Everyone is special in his own way."

There is considerable audience participation: singing, dancing, waking up Honey Bunny, filling out the forms, etc. At the end of the show, one of the application forms is drawn, and the winner receives a copy of the book. All the children receive a colouring sheet. Finally, a postcard is sent home to the children, wishing them well.

To establish the company, we advertised in the Hospital's weekly newspaper. Fifteen health professionals were chosen from the more than sixty people who came to the auditions. Three people were selected for each of the five roles, to allow for various shifts, vacations, etc., with no single person expected to perform every week. The cast of fifteen included nurses, child life specialists, social workers, physicians, secretaries, graduate students and volunteers. In addition, ten volunteers from the Hospital and the community took responsibility for stage management, wardrobe, sound, props, lights and other theatre functions.

A group of professional artists from the Toronto movie industry volunteered to build the stage and props, and prepare the costumes. The Hospital for Sick Children's Foundation covered the cost of materials, sound, makeup and other necessities. After six months of intensive rehearsals (January to June 1992) the first show was performed on July 6, 1992. Ever since, *Tails* has been performed without fail every Thursday at 6:00 p.m. in the Rainbow Room to an audience of between 40 and 80 hospitalized children and their families.

Since eighty per cent of the Hospital's children change weekly, the majority of children and parents are new to the show. Yet children who experience long hospitalizations have seen the play as many as thirty times. (The "application forms" help us track who has seen the play and how many times.) These children know the text and songs by heart, recognize all the characters and correct them when they make "mistakes". The Bear Theatre is particularly important to these children and their families, as in the case of Ben.

Four year old Ben was a liver transplant recipient. Due to rejection of the new liver, he had to undergo various treatments over prolonged periods of hospitalization. He used to sit in the front row of the theatre and dance with the team. When the music tape of *Tails* came out, he received the first copy, which he cherished and listened to many times a day. Ben died during an operation to replace his failing new liver. When members of the Bear team attended his memorial service, they were moved to hear the happy music of *Tails* in the church. Ben's mom explained that "this is the music he wants to listen to now."

Quite often the children recognize their nurses, physicians, social workers or child life specialists on stage. The response is overwhelming. Children and their parents meet their health professionals in a more intimate, humanizing way. The program also reinforces the Hospital's reputation as a caring place, where the staff perceive their young patients as individuals rather than simply "cases".

Last but not least, the Bear Theatre has turned the cast members of *Tails* into more complete human beings. We feel a strong sense of catharsis and happiness during and after the show. The contact with often very sick children and their struggling families is for many of us an almost religious experience, as when a young mother smiled for the first time since the diagnosis of her son. It is not unusual to see parents in tears as, during the performance of this upbeat musical, they fully understand the theme of finding happiness in who we are, and not trying to be someone else.

Today, after five years and 250 shows, an interesting dynamic has been set up between the book and the play. While the book is static and the text cannot be changed, the play is enriched by new ideas which often start from successful or funny onstage errors. For example, when Honey Bunny tries to



buy a tail from the audience, the Penguin Teller tells them: "Your tails are part of your body now and you can't give them to anybody." A slip of the tongue led one teller to say, "and you can't give them to anybunny!" I promptly adopted this line and incorporated it into the play.

Yet, when cast members suggest changes to the narrated parts that also appear in the book, I have to resist, since many of the children have memorized the book and expect to hear the same text when they see the show for the second, third or thirtieth time.

The brief, rhymed text of the book does not allow the depth of characterization one can achieve in a one-hour show. Moreover, the staged play offers music, costumes, light and audience participation. But the book, being short and simple, allows children with chronic illnesses, cancer or end stage kidney disease, the catharsis offered by a text they know by heart. One can see them whispering the lines during the show, like a prayer.

Tails is a healing experience for me and my thirty colleagues on and off the stage. Thursday evening is the highlight of my week. Touching the minds and souls of children through *Tails* fills me with immense joy, as a doctor, writer and human being.

Gideon Koren
