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Why I . . . perform

GP Maria Waters tells **Kathy Oxtoby** about her love of performing

Kathy Oxtoby

Maria Waters enjoys building connections with people. As a GP partner at Elthorne Park Surgery, a busy urban practice in Ealing, London, she says, “I love being able to connect with patients, and to be of service to them. It’s a real privilege.”

She feels that same connection with people when she performs on stage. “I love that moment when you know you’ve connected with the audience.

“Whether it’s a complicated monologue or a tricky Sondheim song, when an audience recognises something in your performance that relates to their own lives, that’s when you know you’ve connected with them. And that moment is magic—the ‘sweet spot’ of performing. There’s nothing like it,” she says.

Over the years, Waters has had many of these magical moments, with leading roles in musicals such as *West Side Story*, *Gypsy*, *Sweeney Todd*, and in classic plays like *Abigail’s Party* and *Lady Windermere’s Fan*. She has been the lead singer in a band since medical school, and has directed a few shows, including *Little Shop of Horrors* and Stephen Sondheim’s *Assassins*.

Waters has been a performer all her life. Her debut was at infant school when she gave an impromptu performance of “I Don’t Know How to Love Him,” from the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, aged five. “I told my teacher that I wanted to sing a song for the class. It seemed the most natural thing to do. Everyone clapped—it felt great.”

Right through school, Waters continued to sing and act, but says a career as a performer was never a serious option. “I enjoyed science, did voluntary work at the local hospital, and decided on a career in medicine.”

Once at St Mary’s Hospital Medical School in London, there were plenty of opportunities to perform, including as lead singer in Dutch Courage—a band put together during freshers week—and many musicals and plays.

Since qualifying as a GP, she has continued to sing and act in amateur and professional productions. She performed with the Royal Shakespeare Company in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at both the Barbican and in Stratford-upon-Avon. She has also appeared in major musical theatre productions at the Minack Theatre in Cornwall, and with various amateur dramatic companies in London. She loves the musically challenging songs of Stephen Sondheim, and can turn her voice to jazz, rock, pop, and folk music.

Taking part in productions is “an exciting endeavour involving many people working together to deliver the final product,” she says. “Theatre people are very

passionate about what they do, and they are invariably great fun.”

Singing and acting offer “a complete contrast to my day job,” she says. “It’s an opportunity to express a part of myself that can’t be expressed at work.”

She looks to bring a “truth” to her performances, drawing on her observations as a GP. “When you’re performing you may have to portray all sorts of difficult emotions. I bring to my performances some of the experiences I’ve witnessed in general practice—those very real moments of people’s lives.

“I remember being asked to perform Shakespeare’s famous ‘Seven Ages of Man’ monologue. And I thought, ‘I’ve witnessed all of this in general practice.’ What you see as a GP is the stuff of life. I feed that into my performances.”

Through her love of singing and acting have come enduring friendships. “Two years ago I sang with my old medical school band Dutch Courage at a big reunion party. And this December I’m looking forward to singing at the opening night of a blues club which has been set up by the same band’s guitarist.

“Sharing your love of performance with those who are as passionate about it as you are, brings real joy,” she says. “And when you get that true connection and warmth from the audience—it’s an amazing feeling.”

How to make a change

- If you want to get involved with performing, search the internet for local amateur dramatic groups
- Go to a local amateur production to get a flavour of what’s involved
- You don’t have to “tread the boards” to get involved. If you don’t want to perform you could help build sets, produce, or direct
- Getting involved in performing means you can become part of a community outside of medicine, and meet new, like minded people
- Be prepared to be brave and bold—you will reap enormous dividends