



Echoes Through Time: The Story of Care

Commissioned by Coram

Written by Brian Mullin

Devising group: Fran Agyeman, Billy Wagon Horrix,
Aaliyah Larose, Kian Kingsley, Khadar, Lucelle, Reece, Rose.
Devising workshops facilitated by Vicky Moran and Brian Mullin

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Presented by Coram as part of the Voices Through Time: The Story of Care
programme, made possible by the National Lottery Heritage Fund

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Introduction

Coram is the UK's first and longest continuing children's charity, established in London in 1739 by Thomas Coram as the Foundling Hospital. Coram commissioned this play script as part of its Voices Through Time: The Story of Care programme (2019-2024), which was made possible by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

At the heart of the Voices Through Time programme was the digitisation and transcription of thousands of records from Coram's vast Foundling Hospital Archive, a rich historical resource well known around the world. Alongside the work on the archive, Coram ran creative projects with care-experienced young people, including the theatre-making project that produced this script. In these projects, care-experienced young people used, illuminated and reclaimed the story of care, drawing on the stories that emerged from the archive of individual children, known as Foundlings, who grew up at the Hospital.

The archival records document the lives of the first children to be 'in care', usually in the words of the people who ran the Hospital, such as the Secretary, Matron, and Governors. The archive does include letters from the Foundlings, usually when they were doing their apprenticeships as teenagers, and in these, we hear from them in their own words.

During its two centuries of operation (1739-1954), the Foundling Hospital admitted 27,000 Foundlings, usually as babies. For their first five years, the children lived with foster mothers, known as nurses, who lived in the English regions. Then, the children entered the Hospital for their education. Radically for the time, all of them were taught to read, and many to write.

The Foundlings started their apprenticeships at ages 10-11 in the 18th century and ages 14-16 in the 19th century. They lived in the house of their master or mistress for the five- or seven-year term of their apprenticeship. The boys learnt a trade or went into military service. Some girls were apprenticed to a trade, but most went into domestic service. Apprenticeships gave them the skills to go on to earn a living. At the age of 21, they left the Hospital's care, but former Foundlings were able to call upon the Hospital for help beyond this in times of trouble.

By 1936, the Foundling Hospital had broadened its work beyond its residential children's home, which was closed in 1954. The organisation became known simply as Coram. In the period through and beyond the World Wars there were huge changes in public attitudes and support for children in care, with Local Authorities being given formal responsibility for children and families in 1948. Today, Coram continues to champion the rights and welfare of children through adoption and fostering, advocacy and legal support, education and skills, ensuring that children's experiences and voices are heard in decisions that matter, now and forever.

The Cast of the Play's Premiere: 4 April 2024, Hoxton Hall, London

Ben Treloar, Darius Kangudi, Fran Agyeman, Imran Bellioum, Janna Dibaga Sylla,
Keziah-Kae Mensah, Maryam Mahmood, Teo Dumont, Tiana Valman Nyari

How the script was made

This play script was created in collaboration with a group of care-experienced young people across a three-month development period in 2023. The words, views and perspectives of the members of the devising group are woven through this script – it would not exist without them.

The group drew on stories of young people who were raised at the Foundling Hospital in the 18th and 19th centuries. Although this was a different experience from care today, the young people in the group shared with the Foundlings a core experience of separation from their birth families – for a variety of reasons – and of the many emotions that can accompany this.

Unlike the Foundlings, young people today enter into care at a variety of ages, usually as a result of a legal process. They are placed in a variety of settings. As with children generally, they are likely to have more autonomy in their life choices and more widely recognised rights than the Foundlings did. They have many more opportunities to speak up for themselves, but navigating the complexity of today's care system can offer its own challenges and varied outcomes.

This script is a piece of historically informed emotional imagining. To read, study or perform it is a layered experience, with the past and present of care intermingling.

Because the details of the Foundlings' lives are narrated by others in most of the archival records, we do not know how they would have expressed their experiences of care in their own words. The devising group was encouraged to explore the Foundlings' lives by stepping inside their historical experiences and asking what they may have felt. In some cases, those feelings were similar to those experienced by the group; in others, they diverged.

All of the Foundlings mentioned by name in this script were *real people*, and the script indicates when their own words are used. Except in these cases, the ensemble cannot claim to speak definitively in the voices of the Foundlings. Instead, when collectively embodying a Foundling story, they speak from a place of *what if...*, empathetically positioning themselves with one foot in the past and one in the present.

We hope that this piece helps readers, performers and audiences to do the same.

Online Resource Pack about *Echoes Through Time*

Find out more about the topics and people covered in the script of *Echoes Through Time* in the resource pack on the [Coram Story website](#).

The pack has fact sheets about the Foundling Hospital and today's care system, a production guide, films and photos of the premiere, and more.

Notes for performance

- The play is suitable for audiences aged 14+.
- The play is written for a company of young people, aged 14 to 24.
- The number of performers is flexible; seven or more is probably ideal.
- Aim to cast a group that reflects the diversity of genders, ethnicities, sexualities and disability statuses amongst young people in care today.
- In terms of props and tech, the stage directions reflect one way to approach performance – you're encouraged to discover your own creative solutions.
- Please try to keep the relationship with the audience interactive!

The script

- Any performer can speak any line.
- Divide the lines up however makes sense.
- Everyone in the ensemble can represent anyone in the script.
- The stage directions are in brackets in italics.
- The symbol '/' denotes a point of interruption.
- The script contains three modes of speech:
 1. When someone speaks as a Professional the lines are in **bold**. In the premiere production, the Professionals always spoke into mics.
 2. When the ensemble has conversations, lines start with a hyphen (-) to indicate changes of speaker. These can be between however many voices make sense for your group.
 3. When the ensemble channels one of the Foundlings' lives (usually indicated by 'You are called...'), be as playful and creative as you can. The ensemble is half-in/half-out of the Foundling's experience, remaining themselves but imagining what it might be like to live in those circumstances. The central Foundling does not need to be represented by a single actor, but instead their persona can slip playfully amongst the group. Use objects, choral speaking, costumes and movement to bring the stories and emotions of those segments to life.

The setting

- This play takes place in-between past and present.
- Time is fluid, ranging from 1741 to today. Explore how sound might help convey that.
- The action occurs in waiting rooms, dining rooms, classrooms, dormitories, foster homes, shared accommodation, workplaces and church services, past and present.
- It ends when the young people leave care.

The Script

Echoes Through Time: The Story of Care

(As the audience waits, an old-fashioned tombola sits onstage, spotlit. Filled with white and black balls, it rotates silently on its own.)

(Maybe some microphones hang from the ceiling.)

(Eventually, some performers enter and address the audience.)

(They use the mics to speak as 'The Professionals'.)

This could be a fresh start

If you're ready to take it?

Not just for you, but for your children

And *their* children

And on and on.

If you had the chance to give them a better life

In a place of safety and opportunity

Wouldn't you take it?

- *(interrupting)* **We can't help everyone, though**

- **Of course, we have limited spaces**

- *(looking out at audience)* **And so many people in need...**

But we try our best to be fair!

As our Secretary John Brownlow wrote

In the *History and Objects of the Foundling Hospital*, 1865:

'It is the fate of all human Institutions to be imperfect.'

- **And when it comes to providing care... well...**

- **Things aren't all black and white.**

- *(Glancing at the tombola)* **Even when they might seem to be...**

(One of them draws out a black ball.)

The black ball:

Homeless, abandoned

Unsafe, unwanted.

Nowhere to go but the Workhouse

A life of grinding hardship for you,

No real future for your child.

But imagine if you could draw a different outcome...

(They draw out a white ball this time.)

A new chapter

A blank page

- **We just said it's not black and white.**

- **Of course no outcome is guaranteed.**

But if you draw a white ball, well...

Your child will have a safe place here in our care

Along with food

Education

Vaccination

So many things that *you* can't give them

Who wouldn't want that?

(Throughout the audience, cloth bags filled with balls get passed around.)

Now's the moment, everyone

Take your chance!

(Audience members draw from the bags.)

What have we got?

(Every single ball they draw is red.)

(The Professionals look at one another, then back to audience.)

- **Right, we forgot to mention that.**

- **Every system is more complicated than it looks**

- **Red means you have to wait and see**

- **Another place might open up**

- **You're probably asking: When will we know? And how do you make the decision? It can be / confusing not to...**

- *(Interrupting)* **We have to move on from that.**

Who drew the white balls?

(Amongst the audience, other members of the company stand up, all holding white balls.)

Come on, don't be afraid!

Come take your place up here

We haven't got much time

(The other performers make their way onto the stage.)

(to audience) **The rest of you will have to wait. Hold onto those balls!**

(to company) **You are the Lucky Ones**

You may not understand it now, but you will, believe me.

Brought here as babies

Your new chance at life starts now

Number 13621

Number 19958

Number 09853

Number 19915

That number is your destiny

Be grateful that you have it

And a safe place to sleep

And learn

And grow.

This is a prospect that many have wanted

You'll have a new name

A new future:

Eleanor Weathers

Augustus Browne

Thomas Waugh

Agnes Harvey

Your life will become organised

Regular, reliable

And *you'll* become ready for a future position

That's right: your own livelihood

If you're willing to work for it.

You won't remember this day – or where you came from

You're going to make a clean break

But you should never *never* forget how lucky you are

We're going to make something of you!

Has anyone got any questions?

(Hands of all the company members shoot up, they start speaking at the same time etc.)

(The Professionals interrupt with a new voice now, more modern.)

- **Alright, alright!**
- **That's a question for your social worker**
- **Key worker**
- **Therapist**
- **Wait for the LAC review**
- **You've got your foster carer, advocate, IRO**
- **Matron, wet nurse, schoolmistress**
- **Right, now it's bath time**
- **Prayer time**
- **Curfew**

It's not that we don't care

But we've got so many other children to deal with, just like you

You've got my number yeah? 09853 19958?

It will all get explained

We're here to support you.

(The Professionals disappear, leaving the company alone.)

(They look around the theatre space.)

- **Anyone else thinking this is like the Hunger Games?**
- **It's the opposite**
- **Huh?**
- **In the Hunger Games they didn't wanna get chosen**

- Yeah plus these babies were actually *saved* from dying
- Which babies?
- The ones who entered the Foundling Hospital
- Is that where we are?
- Why'd they have to go to hospital, were they ill?
- Not that kind of hospital, it was the first-ever children's home
- But that was like two hundred years ago. This isn't time travel.
- So where do *you* think we are, then?
- (*Looks around*) This is like... erm...
- Feels like limbo, somewhere in between
- We all know *that* feeling, right?
- Things were totally different back then. Kids were dying in the street
- And the government didn't help
- So then if your mother got a white ball in the ballot thingy...
- You got in here and had a chance
- The odds were still stacked against them
- It's the same for us. And no one explains the rules
- Yeah what's a 'lack' review? Is that like all the things we lack??
- LOL
- You haven't had one?
- I just got my first placement
- I hate that word. It's just different places where we live
- Yeah *a lot* of different places

- Not everyone gets moved around. I've been with the same carers for years.
- Luck of the draw...
- LAC means 'Looked After Child'. All these different people get together
- Carers, teachers, social workers
- To check on how you're doing
- Even with all of them involved, there's still plenty of things we lack
- Starting with a family
- Just cos you're in care doesn't mean you haven't got a family!
- Yeah my Mum just took me to Nando's
- That doesn't mean we have security
- Or freedom.
- Who does? At least it's better than the situations we come from
- Don't start imagining things about me. Just cos I'm in care doesn't mean I have some tragic backstory. I'm not EastEnders.
- Sure but something happened to all of us, that's why we're in this system
- At least we've still got our names.

(Beat.)

- What are you talking about?
- Those names they said before. Thomas Waugh, Eleanor Weathers...
- *Someone* was paying attention!
- ...Agnes Harvey, Augustus Browne. Those names just got given to them.
- Some of them didn't have names to begin with
- The Hospital baptised them so they'd get a fresh start

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- 'You are now called Eleanor Weathers...'
- A name with no history
- Not part of the Weathers family
(*One specific ensemble member pipes up.*)
- Sounds good to me
- You wanna be called 'Eleanor Weathers'?
- I want a clean break. That's why I'm changing my name.
- Like *legally*? You can do that?
- It takes a while, I haven't signed the papers yet
- What are you gonna be called?
- I'm not gonna say, still trying it out
- Wanna try another one on? You look like an Augustus to me
- Agnes!
- Shut up, this is serious. Your name is a canvas of character
- It's just a word
- But it's the start of your story...
- Yeah, and I wanna write mine myself.
- How do you think Eleanor felt?
- Maybe she liked her name
- She's not here to tell us...

(For the first time, the ensemble start channeling a Foundling story. They'll do this a lot.)

(During these sequences, personas and lines are traded playfully amongst them.)

You are called Eleanor Weathers and it's... the only name you ever knew

Your origins are a mystery

To you, that is

Someone knows.

Maybe it's better that way –

Maybe it's not.

(There's a swap – someone else starts a new approach...)

You are called Eleanor Weathers and what you *do* know is your number

13621

It's held on a necklace, one of the few things you have

When you're sent to the country,

Less than one year old.

Your earliest years in a safe, loving setting –

- How do we know?

Cos they send an Inspector to check on you yearly

In the care of a wet nurse

You roam and crawl freely

And feel, for a time, like you're part of a family...

- Again, how do we know?

(There's another swap, and a new approach to the story...)

You are called Eleanor Weathers and you have this number round your neck

That sets you apart, once you realise its meaning

Maybe you don't think about it

Or you try not to

But maybe you've got questions

Where do I come from?

Why do I have to go?

(The imagining breaks down for another conversation.)

- Go where?

- Back to the Hospital, age five they start school

- But did they ever see those families again?

- We get moved around like that

- Four times for me

- That's not even a record, you know...

(One performer takes out a makeup case.)

- Blusher, locket, ticket stub, photo from a photo booth

- You learn to pack things up

(Each performer holds out some personal items.)

Objects that look ordinary, average, *aren't*.

Not when you know the story:

The key that unlocks the memories...

- Look. What do you think *these* are?

(Someone draws back a curtain, revealing a backlit cloth that has silhouetted objects pinned to it. The ensemble goes to examine them.)

- Scraps of fabric
- Ripped from something...
- A little fish?
- A coin
- A playing card
- Must mean something to someone
- *(Reading)* 'You have my heart though we must part'
- Something precious.
- But why're they hanging here? I'd never give up something like that!
- Mothers left them like a token, in case they could take their children back
- *(Reading)* 'We shall have you home when we get over the little trouble we are in'
- But if they're still here, that means...
- They never got claimed
- Mysteries never explained.
- Sometimes it's better not to know. Whenever I get a bit of intel, it sets me back.
- Nothing? Zero?
- I get told if they ask for contact. I guess it's nice to know they wanna know but I don't wanna know.
- I see my mum every month. She's more like a friend now.
- And if they start acting up, you can just say *bye!*
- I tell myself she's doing her best. She's got her own story...

(Suddenly, the Professionals appear again – and speak directly to the audience.)

The number of unfortunate births has not abated:

Each season brings even more mothers to our doors

**So we've instituted new procedures:
If you come pleading to have your child admitted
You must submit a letter of Petition
Detailing the circumstance of your misfortune.**

(The ensemble step forward.)

- In other words, you've got to explain why you deserve it

- Sounds like when I apply for Universal Credit...

- *(Going into the audience)* We can help!

(They approach a specific audience member.)

- What would you say?

- Why should you and your child be given help?

(There's a moment of trying to get the audience member to explain their situation.)

- That all may be true, but they've got criteria they're looking for...

**Those who are unlettered
May benefit by finding a person of learning
To shape the language of their petition**

- Try this. We won't even charge you...

(They hand the audience member a Petition Letter to read out loud.)

*'Honored Gentlemen and Governors of the Foundling Hospital,
I, Mary Hall, humbly beg you will be so good as to take into your charity a child born
October 6th 1776 that I had the misfortune to have by a young man.'*

- That's good, but they're going to have more questions

- It's not easy to tell a stranger, but can you share something more...?

(They hand another audience member another Petition Letter to read out loud.)

*'Your petitioner was promised marriage, but when her time came near, the man left her in
a very deplorable condition with a young child which she is quite incapable to maintain,*

having sold most of her clothes for the support of herself and her child. She has no other prospect but must perish for want of common necessities.'

- Selling your clothes? That's horrible...

- Who could say no to that?

**Our Inspectors will enquire after references
To ensure we help those who are otherwise virtuous
Sober, hard-working, and honest
Who can regain respectability and start anew**

(The performers speak to the audience member.)

- Is there anyone who can vouch for you? A relative?

- Maybe they haven't told their family about this...

(Another performer reads a character reference.)

'The unfortunate young woman is sister to my wife. As soon as we discovered her to be in the family way I desired her to leave, and never see us again.'

- What about your job?

- That's tricky, too, though...

(Another performer reads a character reference.)

- 'Mrs. Mayhew would gladly retain her but it would be a bad example to the other servants. The circumstances of her fall raised the suspicion that she was somewhat of a loose character...'

(Performers turn sympathetically to the audience member.)

- I'm sorry, you've gotta be feeling stressed

- So many hoops to jump through

- Isn't there anyone respectable who'll speak up for you? Who do you think?

(They get the audience member to look around and choose one last person.)

- Them? Alright, let's see...

(They approach the selected audience member and get them to read a final letter:)

'The conduct of the Petitioner previously to this event was exceedingly correct – in fact, a better girl never lived. I would swear that the child is her first – the affair has been kept a profound secret. Should the petitioner be relieved of the child she will remain with us. My wife and the petitioner take in needlework.'

- (To the original audience member) That was good! Best you could hope for.

- (Embracing audience member) Good luck. We'll be thinking of you...

The Hospital will consider your petitions.

(Turning to ensemble) **But for the children already in our care,**

The time with your wet nurses has ended,

And your daily life here begins.

(A bell rings.)

Boys to the left and girls to the right.

(Members of the company leave the audience and start to line up.)

We have structure here – you need it.

The script is set, say prayers.

Bend your head, get washed.

Bend your knees, scrub floors.

Single file, sit straight and wait —

For breakfast.

Hammer sounds, fold hands.

Hammer sounds, say grace.

Hammer sounds, you eat —

In silence.

- (*Whispering to one another*) You get used to things here pretty quick

From prayers to meal to school

An hour for play

And back again:

It all goes like clockwork.

(*The Professionals survey the group.*)

Time.

Is of the essence.

You have ten years with us, so use that wisely:

Time in the school room,

Learning your letters

Follow in your hornbooks

And make the sounds

- ab eb ib ob ub

- ba be bi bo bu

Out there they don't think you deserve an education:

We do.

Boys and girls alike

Give any child a model to follow,

Something aspirational,

And soon you'll see,

Despite any stain of birth

What they can be.

(Pulls someone out of the crowd)

Like John Crowdhill

Top of every list

Ticking off accomplishments

(The company starts to channel John's story.)

You are called John Crowdhill and as the lessons ticked by

You made use of every minute

Others got serviceable roles

Helping in the kitchen or the laundry

But you were singled out –

Working in the Secretary's office – at the age of *eight!*

Always ahead of time.

You are called John Crowdhill and doesn't your progress show

How far each of us can go?

If we tick all the boxes –

Dedication, precision, regularity –

We can take time into our own hands

As you did, age fourteen

Apprenticed to a watchmaker

Making timepieces fit for a King!

And now the name 'John Crowdhill' is engraved
On silver watches that you've made yourself –
The name your mother gave you left behind –
With gears that move reliably
With precision
Just as you did
tick tick tick
Turning the dial of your life forward.

(The company divide into groups. The girls are doing needlework.)

So many ways to mark the time
A trade for every child.
For Girls it is the stitch:
With keen eyesight and a steady hand
You learn to thread a needle:
Soon you've mended thirty socks
Then made six pocketbooks

(The boys are learning to march.)

And over on the other side, the Boys' pace is set as well:
With drums, trombones and trumpets
You march in sharp formation.
And those who have been left behind

Get stitched back into society

Trained to serve and march and mend our lives

Just as we mend our socks:

With thread so firm you'd never know

The cloth was ever / torn.

- Damn it!

(One of them has stabbed their finger.)

(The Professionals arrive.)

You're much too careless, Agnes! Will you never learn to concentrate?

(The angry performer storms off to the side...)

One hour for playtime

(The others look over at the other performer and discuss.)

- You think they're OK?

- Not every system works for everyone

- Imagine if you had ADHD back then. All that stitching, drumming, keep in line would've done my head in

- Sometimes I like a bit of structure to be fair

- I say don't rock the boat. Just go along with it...

(They start playing a game, tossing their white balls around the group.)

- But it can be too much. My first foster carer was so strict. Like, room inspections, 'sit at the table so I know you've done your homework,' iPads locked up after 8pm.

- They cared about your education

- People learn in different ways

- And some of us need additional support

- We've got that, haven't we?

- Oh yeah, if I start sneezing there's probably a specific social worker who's supposed to hand me a tissue...

- But she's not the one who can help with what you really need

(The performer who stormed away now steps into the middle to grab the ball.)

- Cos they're *professionals*, right? And they go off the clock. Time's up!

- Can we just go back to the game please?

- It's all about *boundaries*. 'I'm afraid I can't help you with that.' 'Those messages were not OK.' 'I'm sorry you're being bullied, I can refer you to counseling to help you deal with it.'

- Things won't be like that forever

- I don't need a referral or a meeting, I need someone I can count on.

- Just be grateful we've got people trying to help.

- I shouldn't have to be grateful for the bare minimum!

(The performer looks like they're about to throw the ball at someone.)

- Hey, hey, hey!

(Another performer puts a hand on their shoulder, leads them off for a side conversation.)

- I used to get angry like that. Until I learned some discipline.

- I don't need more rules.

- My key worker said rules are what they impose on you, but discipline is something you teach yourself.

- And how long did she stick around?

- I still talk to her now, she's like my mum.

- But she's not, is she?

- My biological mum didn't give me discipline. She'd just leave me home alone with my teddy. I'd yell at him and say how bad he was. And then when I got to the children's home, I'd yell at the other kids, too. And hit them. But my key worker taught me to go to a quiet place and take deep breaths...

(They do this. It sort of helps.)

- Feels a bit better, right?

- Maybe. But sometimes you just want a hug.

(The company put away the balls and channel another Foundling story.)

You are called Thomas Waugh and you must've felt lucky

Because you had more time than most in the country

More time in your nurse's arms

She called was Mrs Taylor

But she let you call her 'Mammy'.

But how lucky was that really?

Because it didn't last.

You are called Thomas Waugh and once you got apprenticed

At the age of ten

Learning to make glass

Your master was a different kind of man

He expected you to be as well:

A grown man takes correction without tears

A grown man learns the cost of things

Like that fifty shillings worth of glass you broke

For which you were 'corrected'

With a rope

You are called Thomas Waugh and you must've loved to run

During your days in the country

Because you ran away from London to Sandridge

Twenty miles, how'd you manage that?

Not just once but three times

To be back in your Mammy's arms.

You are called Thomas Waugh and it seems obvious where you wanted to be

But each time the Inspectors came to take you back

They had a job to do

And so did you:

We all have to grow up, get work, do things for ourselves

Some of us just sooner than others.

(There's a burst of electronic beeps and office noises. The Professionals hurry in.)

- I'm soooooo sorry to keep you waiting. It's just that I've got so many other children to see. How long's it been?

- Only an hour, it's alright...

- Oh no I meant, in the new placement. Two months isn't it?

- Yeah, I think so.

- And home-wise, better than the last one? Foster carer? Siblings, all good?

- Yeah I guess um, I don't /

- *(looking down at notes)* **Uh-huh, uh-huh. And school-wise? Maths-wise?**

- Maths is getting better.

- **Excellent. And you've still got that new friend?**

- Yeah I do /and

- **And how's Mum?**

- I hadn't finished

- **I'm sorry, go on.**

- Don't worry about it, I understand

- **What were you going to say? Anything difficult at home?**

(Pause, as the chorus around the stage, speak inner thoughts)

My fists are curled

I'm bearing the weight of the world

Not moving a muscle

Not saying a word

(The original child responds.)

- No yeah, it's good. A lot better. Nothing I can't handle.

- **That's good to hear. You're such a dream.**

(The Professional starts packing up their things.)

- **Goodness me, tick tock! I've got so many other children to get to...**

- Um maybe next time we could talk over my UCAS forms

- **Oh that's a question for your virtual school. They're the experts.**

- Oh sure but I just thought / that

- I'll have the education team text your foster mum. But, honestly, with the good reports you've had, you're going to ace all that anyway.

- Thanks.

(Professional glances at their watch.)

- Would you look at that! Bang on time. Thank you for being so easy!

(The Professional steps away from the mic and disappears.)

It's easy being easy

Just another name on the check list

Easily replaced and easily looked over

Looking down

At their notes

Down the list to see who's next

Would you look at that!

Good reports

You're going to ace it!

You're going to set an example for the others...

(The ensemble channels a new Foundling story.)

You are called Samuel Inman and you made a name for yourself

In a shop window

An inspiration for the others

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Samuel Inman, young man of industry!

Ingenuity!

You knew how the system worked:

Each year of your apprenticeship

If all goes well

You'd visit the Hospital at Eastertime

To get a reward for work well done.

And if all *seven years* go well

Well, then you'd get

FIVE WHOLE GUINEAS

That's half a year's wages, right in your pocket

Most would be more than satisfied but...

You are called Samuel Inman and you ask for more

More *work*, that is

More responsibility

Agreed with your master: three more years as an employee

Which earns you a gift from him worth

TWO HUNDRED POUNDS

And now anyone can see for themselves

What you built with that

Whenever they pass Lambs Conduit Street:

'Master Samuel Inman, Printmaker and Engraver'

From Foundling to Master!

A shop full of paper, pictures, placards

You became a sort of poster boy

Proclaiming to others the path to success.

- But who's that on the other side of the street?

- Walking in the other direction?

(They redirect the story, to a different Foundling.)

You are called Eleanor Weathers and you can't set up a shop

Yes, you've learned skills:

How to do household business,

Even embroidery.

But you've also had headwinds blowing against you.

Each time you're been sent out, you must think

You're finally safe from the storms of life –

But then one morning you wake up

And that security's gone:

They're gone, your master and mistress

Run off, scarpered.

Your *clothes* are gone,

They pawned them.

No fault of your own,

Storms rain down just when the sky looks clear.

You are called Eleanor Weathers and with stress like this

Is it any wonder you pass a painful kidney stone?

It must've torn something up inside

Because now you can't control your waters

Embarrassing for a girl to tell.

You can't hold down an apprenticeship either

Makes you feel defective

But remember: you can't control the hand you're dealt

And the Hospital is there to help.

- You see what it's like? Just when things are working out

- At least she had the Hospital to take her back

- And who've we got? Other people have families to carry the weight

- Just cos you're in care doesn't mean you haven't got a family

- You keep saying that, but sometimes it does

- No, never. Cos no matter what, we've all got our / chosen family

- *Chosen family*, right. It's a beautiful idea. But really they're just my friends, they're all still my age – and they haven't got money. Most of them go home for the holidays, and where do I go? I have to figure it out for myself.

- Not completely. That's why we've got foster parents, key workers...

- But there's always a word in front.

- Huh?

- *Chosen family*, *foster* parents. Family's supposed to be *unconditional*, isn't it? No needs assessments, no care plans. Just natural, just given.

Just. One. Word.

I'd like to know how that feels.

(Maybe there's a thunderclap overhead – but it's just a brief, sudden shower.)

You are called Eleanor Weathers and you've certainly weathered some storms

Your whole life you've had to think about survival.

At least at the Hospital there's a roof and some rules

They know what you've been through

And they give you some work, teaching knitting to the children

Still, though, you decide to raise up your voice

A girl in front of the Committee

Overcoming embarrassment because

You need pads for your condition

That cost three pounds a year:

They give you that

Along with room and board

Nothing luxurious

But enough to survive

For the rest of your days...

Until:

(A new character steps into the story.)

A ray of sunlight

That's a new feeling, isn't it?

Gliding over your skin, a gentle touch

Warm, soothing:

George.

- They didn't do it like that in those days!

- When they fancied someone, I'm sure they got the message across

- But they couldn't, like, touch each other

- Haven't you seen *Bridgerton*?

You are called George Grafton and you don't go out like the others

You're treated as a special case

Cos they all have a track, don't they?

Go out, get apprenticed

And step by step

They have a trade.

But because of your clubfoot

Turned in on itself

You do things a bit differently

Don't take those same steps

You work inside

Until this girl –

Woman, really, ten years older –

Sees you as 'special,' but not in that way

Not 'defective' but *perfect*

For each other

George and Eleanor:

(They stand facing one another.)

You two have something in common

This journey of life

This skill of surviving

One step forward, two steps back –

Eleanor, you've had nearly everything taken from you

Three jobs, your clothes, your hope

Now George gives you himself, if you'll accept

I do

I do

George learns to make shoes

And step by step, you'll walk the road together

Maybe slower than the others, but you'll make it

You'll make a home outside these walls

For richer or for poorer

In any weather that comes along

With someone who is yours

Unconditionally

At last.

- **Well, that's a hopeful note isn't it? It seems like things have been going well?**

- Who are you? You all keep changing.

(The Professionals have returned now. It's a big meeting day.)

- **I'm the Independent Reviewing Officer. My job is to make sure that your care plan is meeting your needs. We have some others here with us today...**

- **I'm the social worker**

- **I'm the foster carer**

- **I'm the designated teacher from school**

- **I'm Dad**

- **I'm Mum**

- **We've got a lot to cover, not just home and school but I hear you've been doing work experience? One thing I want to reassure you, though, is that this is *your* meeting. You've got the power here – I'm just going to / facilitate and**

(There's a sudden interruption – and a jump back in time...)

- 'I have tried my best, but it's no use! My mistress is so disagreeable that there's no encouragement at all to do well.'

What's this? We have an apprentice addressing the Committee?

- I am called Agnes Harvey, Foundling no. 19915, and these are my own words:

'Sir, I do not know what my mistress complains about for I have done a good deal of needlework and I am always doing something or other for her. Let her say what she will, I know I have done my best.'

As ever, we shall seek reports from our Inspectors. Now, if you please /

(Someone else speaks up.)

- Sir, let me add my voice! I am called Rachel Symonds, Foundling no. 19849, and these are my own words:

'My mistress declares this is the last Sunday I shall be in her house, but what it is for I cannot tell you. Going to bed on Saturday night very tired, I overslept. I do my duty as far as I can but I have more than I can do properly. I have had a great deal to put up with and you are my only friends.'

And as your friends, we caution you as to the future. You have kind mistresses, do all in your power to please them.

- Sir, if I may?

Who's this speaking now?

- I am called Mary Apsley, foundling no. 17845, and I wanted to offer some hope to these girls.

(To the others) I was with my first master nearly two years and was several times before this Committee. But I was transferred to Mr DuCruz of White Lion Street. My new master always gave me an exceeding good character. After I'd served the remainder of my time there, he recommended me to procure another eligible position.

Thank you, Mary. You see, girls, what is possible if you turn over a new leaf?

This Committee shall consider your requests, but remember: if you resolve from this time to mend your ways and be good girls, all will be forgotten.

Now, please, it is time to move on...

(As the three Foundling girls step away, modern voices speak)

Same as ever, isn't it?

Nomadic girls with no foundations

I ain't talking about makeup, I'm talking about placements.

Got used to being excluded

Was I ever going to be included or was I deluded?

Didn't want a new school or a new PRU

To be the new kid

All cos I didn't lead the life that *you* did.

What I wanted was freedom:

Maybe that seems like a dangerous fantasy

Maybe it seems like escaping reality

It's the power to stay breathing while grieving

While moving toward believing:

The mindset to overcome the past

With a fresh start coming, tough times won't last...

(Two performers are pulled out of the group to channel new Foundling stories.)

Two Foundlings facing tough times

Two different wings of the Hospital: Boy and Girl...

You are called Augustus Browne and you were first apprenticed to a furrier

Although you were 'industrious'

And 'well-conducted'

He said you could not learn

Every fur you touched you spoiled

You are called Mary Wentworth and they sent out to many, *many* households

Where you kept spoiling your relationships

With 'sulky temper'

'Frequent quarrels'

Time in the Reformatory didn't help:

You, too, could not learn.

How many attempts will it take?

You are called Augustus Browne and you *have* learned to stick to a beat

In the Boys Band

Always in step

With your trombone

And clarinet

There must be somewhere

You can put that discipline to use?

But *you* are called Mary Wentworth and that wouldn't work for you

Every mistress gives the same report:

'She likes to have her own way'

You'd sooner ramble the world

Than stay anywhere you're placed.

But it turns out that *you*, Augustus, are the one who'll see the world

In the way that lads like you

So often do:

In uniform.

Still marching

With your trombone

Now with a bayonet

Readying for the Crimean War...

- I am called Augustus Browne, foundling no. 19958, and these are my own words:

'I have seen a great many Soldiers here who cannot spell or write their own name, therefore I value a great deal more the Education I received at the Foundling. Once I'm sent on to a foreign station, I shall not fail to communicate with you all...'

But *you*, Mary, could never abide a uniform

Hated the standard-issue Foundling dresses

And demanded eighteen shillings

From your account

To buy some other clothes

To go seek your own future:

- I am called Mary Wentworth, Foundling no. 19960, and these are my own words:

'I wish to leave and get a place and be paid for my work. Let me go upon my own hands and if I fail, why, that is my fault. I will try to govern my temper, but sometimes I have a hard struggle.'

Two Foundlings head off to face the world

One who always follows orders,

Another who won't take anyone's advice...

- 'I only want to leave and where next I go, God only knows...'

Augustus, you write back to bid farewell in sonnet form

You always did well with structure, didn't you?

- There is a little parting word

Which few can say without a sigh

No wonder when its sound is heard

It claims a tear from friendship's eye...

- (*Augustus and Mary speak together*) Goodbye...

You were called Mary Wentworth and you had two guineas in your pocket

When we saw you last.

The Hospital made sure you had that,

Even though you'd left their protection

How far did it take you?

Out of the records, off the map...

(*Mary disappears.*)

Whereas you, Augustus, had a brand new family

The youngest in a Band of Brothers

Sent to Constantinople

Doing your best to please

So much promise at age sixteen...

You were called Augustus Browne and you never saw any fighting

But still the beat faltered

Your heart skipped

Illness, cholera –

Not the invasion you expected.

Mary was never heard from, but you returned to the Hospital

Not as a boy any longer

But as a medal of valour

A token for your fellow Foundlings to remember

How well you'd been brought up

To serve

To follow

Always, everything

Done to perfection.

(The entire company hold still, feeling a sense of loss.)

- Hello, my darlings...

(For the first time, one of the Professionals takes time to connect with the young people, shaking hands, touching their shoulders.)

How are we today? You all seem very quiet.

(The company doesn't say anything. Sounds of the organ bring us into the Chapel.)

The Chapel of the Foundling Hospital is a special place. Yes, we have our grand organ, donated by Handel himself, but this is also a place where former pupils keep returning to, to see old friends and find peace...

Let us put our cares aside, shall we? And begin, as ever, with the breath.

(The organist indicates for the audience to join in the breathing exercises.)

Breathe in slowly, through the nose. Yes, *all* of you, this will be relaxing. Try to fill your lungs. Extend... extend... And slowly out. Breath is what sustains you, what gives you life and voice.

Now the challenge: can we all make one sound together?

With our lips together, can we hum a simple tone?

(The organist leads the company in humming one tone.)

Every choir of note has one special quality: the ‘blend’. Your individual voices come together to sound as one. To do that, you all must *listen* to each other.

(The organist turns to the audience.)

Let us all try. I don’t care the note you choose, but I would like us to blend.

(To the company) **Go and join them, show them how it’s done.**

(The company position themselves around the audience.)

Altogether, breathe in, choose your note, your lips together and now...

Hummmmm...

(With some encouragement, hopefully the whole room is filled with a mutual hum.)

Beautiful, my darlings! And now we must sustain it! However strong or weak your own voice is, maintain the collective sound. Breathe when you need to, but try to sustain – and blend!

In unity you are powerful, my darlings, you can make the sound of angels!

(The organist allows the sound to fill the space and enjoys it.)

Well done, all of you.

(As the audience voices subside, organ music takes over to underscore.)

The prayers and hymns you recite here have important lessons – but I hope that when you leave these walls, *this* is what you’ll carry closest to your heart: the time we spent breathing as one, supporting one another.

Our lady soloist is indisposed this Sunday. I need some individuals who are willing to raise their voices in her stead?

Don’t be shy! I know you’re not accustomed to standing out from the group, but this is a chance to share words of praise and gratitude.

Let this week’s gospel be your guide:

For I was hungry and you gave me food...

I was thirsty and you gave me drink...

(Company soloists step forward to offer thanks as music swells beneath them.)

- When I was in the Reformatory, you climbed through the window to bring me half your dinner. Because you knew what loneliness felt like.

- You called my mobile every single day in lockdown, even though it wasn't in your job description, because you knew I needed to hear another voice

- When I was bullied and called slurs by the other students, you didn't blame me, you were the only teacher who fought back for me, fierce as a mother lion

- You remembered the story I told you and bought the perfect gift for my 21st

- You gave me discipline

- You shared your fears with me

- You extended my apprenticeship

- You held my hand

And now each time I boil rice

Or put on this bracelet

Or put part of my paycheck aside to pay my bills

I think of you

- Rachel

- Ashley

- Henry

- Miss Heatherington

- Mammy

- Nina

- Mr Atchison

Because every Institution is made up of individual people, moments, choices

Some of which go beyond the requirements

And aren't recorded in the General Committee's minutes

Or case files of reports and outcomes

Amidst all the hammers, stiches, prayers, Zooms, forms, assessments and nameless numbers there was also...

YOU

So perfectly specific

And when these days in care are left behind, I won't ever forget what you did.

The system gives organisation and safety to our lives –

In YOU I found love.

(A silence fills the space.)

Did you get to say everything you needed to?

(There's a burst of phones and alarm beeps.)

My goodness time goes quickly, doesn't it?

(The company all stand round the Professionals, confused.)

- What do we have to do now?

- We've had so many meetings and reviews, can't we just / sit and

This one's required by law.

- Usually my social worker / just

Personal advisor.

- Huh?

Things change. Before you were what we call a 'relevant child' and now you're a 'former relevant child.'

- They're putting even more words in front

You should've done a Needs Assessment to create your Pathway Plan?

- Erm...maybe?

You have different rights the older you get. As your Personal Advisor I'll work with you til age twenty-one / to help you

- I thought it was twenty-five.

That's if you continue on in education.

(The young people discuss.)

- So we get more help if we study? Sign me up

- How're you gonna pay tuition fees?

- Well I want to do law so...

(The Professional interrupts.)

Hmm... Have you got a backup plan?

- You said we had choices

It's always good to be realistic.

- Listen, I got into uni *and* a scholarship. You can, too.

- *(Back to Professional)* My foster carers are helping with my applications, thanks

I see you've opted to stay put, which makes them your 'supported lodgings'

- They're not lodgings, they're Bill and Nancy

And on that note, we'll want to get you on the housing register...

- I'm not ready for my own flat!

Of course not, but the lists are long, you ought to get on them *now*.

(Again, the company discusses.)

- Independent living's alright
- *Semi*-independent
- They give you freedom, you just sign in and out
- They do check what you're wearing
- How's that freedom, if we can't wear what we want?
- It's in case we go missing.

(Beat.)

- It's not all grim, mine has games night and we cook together once a week
- Which local authority's that? Can we switch?
- Luck of the draw again
- My key worker used to help me with this stuff...

They've got other children to help now. You have a new team.

- And you've also got us.
- I'm near the top of the list in my borough. Wanna be flatmates?
- I guess we can figure out something while we wait
- And pack up everything til then

(The company go to the curtain of tokens and start packing up their personal items.)

There's just one other change, actually.

(The ensemble groan.)

But this one *you* chose...

(The Professional hands one of them an official-looking paper and a pen.)

- My name.

(The others rush over)

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- I forgot about that

- We've tried on so many identities I lost track

- But this one's real

- *(Reading)* 'I absolutely and entirely renounce, relinquish and abandon...'

- I could never do that

- *(Hesitating)* I wanted this change so much. But what if it all just stays the same?

(The others offer encouragement.)

A new name is a wish, but it's not a magic trick

It wasn't then and isn't now

The things you lived through aren't erased

No one draws a ball that's purely blank

(They all hold out the white balls they drew at the start and break them open – inside are replicas of fabric tokens from the Foundling Hospital: handmade hearts with ribbon.)

We carry so much inside our hearts

The happy memories, and the painful ones

- A pocketwatch

- A piece of rope

- A ring

- A song

- A Bible from the Foundling Hospital

Take these small parts of your past – and inscribe them with a wish

(The ensemble writes onto their fabric tokens and speaks each wish aloud.)

- 'The keys to my own flat'

- 'A law degree'
- 'The government to listen to our voices'
- 'My artwork in a gallery'
- 'Someone to cuddle with'

(As they pin these wish-tokens onto the curtain, someone turns to the audience.)

- You can do it, too.

(The audience are encouraged to open up the red balls: inside are more fabric tokens.)

- Find your own token and write a wish for someone in care

(The audience writes as the ensemble speaks.)

History's not only meant for looking back

It's layered with everything we bring to it

And guides us for whatever's next.

Would anyone like to share their wish?

(Moment for some audience members to share aloud anything they've written.)

- Whether we've spoken these or kept them in our hearts, everyone deserves support to make these hopes come true.

- If you like, you can add your wishes to the wall

(Members of the ensemble go around collecting the tokens from the audience.)

(Meanwhile, others turn to the performer with the pen.)

- OK, time to sign. And start a new chapter
- It better be a good one
- It can be, things aren't the way they were back then
- We heard some happy stories, like Eleanor – the one who found love

- That wasn't the end, actually...
- I don't want to hear it!
- There were twenty-seven thousand Foundlings, so many other stories
- *We need to move on.* Their lives are not like ours.
- We have more rights now.
- Yeah, the girls all grew up to be maids
- *Almost all*
- And they couldn't be Muslim
- Or queer
- Some of them might've been, actually, we don't know that...
- Because they barely had a voice!
- But Eleanor did. Listen:

(The others stop as the performer with the pen starts channeling the story.)

I am called Eleanor Weathers and you might remember me

I came to this Hospital aged three months old,

Grew up here.

Lots of water under the bridge since then.

I've always stood on my own two feet

Helped my husband stand on his

But then he passed

And there's rent to pay.

So now I'm back

Aged fifty-one

To ask for help

Not *ask*

No handouts

To offer work and earn my keep.

(The lines of the story can start to pass around the company.)

I am called Eleanor Weathers and I've had storms in my life

I've loved, I've lost

I've tried new things

Failed at many

And started over

Which is why I could stand before that Committee

To ask for what I needed:

A proper job

With a higher wage.

And you can, too.

They *listened*.

Am I a poster girl? A big success?

I'm just a woman who cuts children's hair

Week in, week out, walking back and forth

From the very place where I was raised...

But hair keeps growing back.

(The ensemble look to the performer holding the pen.)

It's true that none of us can get by without some help

But remember it was you, all along, who put in the effort

Whatever the name you sign on this paper

Whether you're called Eleanor or...

(In turn, each member of the company speaks their own name aloud and signs.)

...or any other name you carry in your heart.

(The paper is folded up and placed into the tombola.)

Things have never been fair

They've never been equal

But still

You are still

Moving forward

Whatever the weather

Every step, in whatever direction

You move toward the horizon.

(The ensemble depart the theatre space.)

(When the audience leave, they'll find all their tokens and wishes pinned to a display in the foyer, for everyone to examine.)

(The show is over but the conversation continues.)