

A Pluto Productions Play



Written by
Brian Daniels

Commissioned by



Royal College
of Nursing

BLUE



Pluto Productions is a drama-based education charity that specialise in writing and performing plays based on health and social care themes. Artistic Director Brian Daniels is commissioned to write bespoke plays that professional actors perform script-in-hand.

Discussions that follow each performance allow audiences to discuss difficult topics in an open learning environment –prompting change and reflection.

PAUSE, REFLECT, RESPOND: A BLUEPRINT FOR HOPE

We speak to Stephen Jones, RCN's Head of Nursing Practice, about the alarming statistics that kick-started this project, and why we need honest conversations about the pressures of nursing in the UK

Blue deals with some strong themes. Why is there an urgency to explore these now?

The play grew from the RCN's work around understanding factors which can underpin suicidal ideation among the UK's nursing staff.

In recent years, there's been a steep spike in nursing staff seeking help for suicidal thoughts. Our own advice service saw a 76% rise in nursing staff seeking support for suicidal ideation in the first half of 2024.

Our work clearly showed that distress is not simply a matter of individual resilience. It's shaped by workload, workplace culture, discrimination, fatigue, moral distress, caring responsibilities outside work, and whether staff feel safe enough to ask for help.

Why choose performance to explore these themes?

Blue was commissioned so we could encourage honest conversations about the pressures experienced by nursing staff, and the human cost of working in systems where care is often delivered under sustained strain.

Nursing is visible at moments of care, crisis and recovery, but the personal realities behind that care are often less seen.

Through its characters, Blue invites us to notice what can sit beneath professional competence: exhaustion, grief, loyalty, humour, fear, compassion, and the difficulty of saying "I am not okay" when others depend on you.



Is Blue relevant to a wider audience too?

Absolutely. Although the play speaks directly to nursing, it's not only for them. It's for families, colleagues, employers, educators, policy makers and the wider public, too.

How does Blue connect with the RCN's wider work?

Blue connects with the RCN's SCoPE standards (Standards to Support Compassionate Practice Environments). SCoPE aims to support practice environments where compassion, inclusion and psychological safety are actively considered and built into everyday culture.

What would you like audiences to take away from watching Blue?

We want Blue to create a space to pause, reflect and respond. We're not only asking you to watch the play; we're also encouraging you to take time afterwards to reflect on what the themes mean for you and the wider nursing community.

CHARACTERS

Zoe

I'm 55 and I feel tired all the time. My brother Tom and I were adopted by Grace and Henry. They were kind and caring people – not rich but loving. I was the first child they adopted and then when I was five, they adopted Tom. It was clear from early on that Tom had learning challenges. I always felt it was my job to look out for him – I think that's where the idea to become a nurse came from. I don't want to be working full-time anymore but I must support my two daughters who both want to go into nursing, and we can't manage on my husband's pension and benefits. I just feel that everybody at home depends on me and at work the pressure keeps building up as any staff who leave are not being replaced.

Mark (Zoe's husband)

I've had the co-codamol, but what I really need is physio and proper treatment. I've been on long-term sick so long now that I'm out of the habit of working. It was being a nurse that did my back in, all that moving and handling. I did 25 years with the NHS. I think that's long enough, don't you? I can see that it's all taking its toll on Zoe. I just need the motivation to get out there and do something useful. Someone suggested work in a charity shop. It's not a bad idea. I might explore that – at least it would give me something else to do. If I watch another episode of Judge Judy, I think I'll go mad!

Tom (Zoe's brother)

Someone told me that my real parents were drug addicts. I don't know if it is true, people can say mean things sometimes. I've been sort of independent living for a few years now. I get lonely. My sister and her husband come round sometimes. I've never had a proper job. People don't really want to be my friend. My brother-in-law has promised me a laptop. They're bringing it next week as a late birthday present. I can't wait.

Wendy

I enjoy being a counsellor although I have to deal with a lot of vicarious traumas. I know though that it helps my clients to express their thoughts, feelings and challenges with me. I was always a 'good listener' if there is such a thing. People have always confided in me. I'm just reflecting on the word 'enjoy' about counselling – not quite the right word. I find it fulfilling that people have trust in me. I hope that my clients always take something positive away from their sessions with me. I know that I do from them.

Libby

My dad was a doctor, and my mum was a nurse – well she was Assistant Chief Nurse actually – so it was a bit of a no brainer that I would go into nursing. I love it. I had a room full of dolls and soft toys, and I would nurse them all and entertain them. I think this is what an only child is good at – surrounding themselves with other beings. Nursing can be exhausting but the rewards are amazing – to gradually nurse a very sick person back to health is one of the best experiences. Zoe has been my mentor and has taught me so much and I want to re-pay her by making life easier, but I am not sure how to. I will figure it out though. I always do.

Rafi

It's not easy coming from a big family. There are eight of us, five girls and three boys. My parents are second generation immigrants from Pakistan. I was the first of the boys to be born. What my parents wanted most for all of us was an education. I was always so scared of disappointing them. They were determined I was to qualify as a doctor until I failed one exam after another. I carry a lot of guilt and anxiety. I feel guilty about letting my parents down and scared they will discover that I am gay. They would reject me – I know that they would.

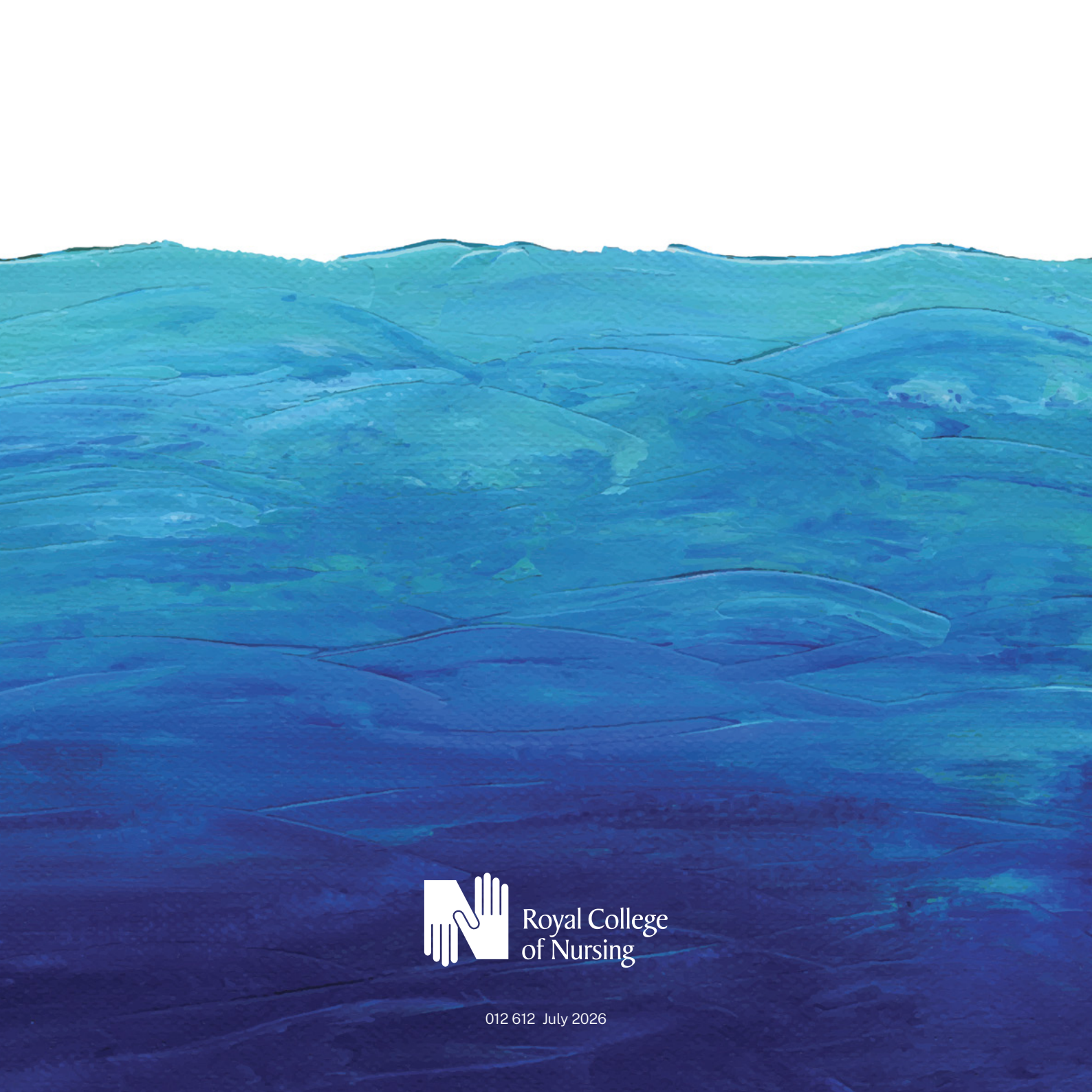
Fola

I am Nigerian and proud to be. Racism is the biggest challenge I face as a nurse. People often treat me like I'm stupid because I have an accent when I speak, even though I sailed through the nursing course and I'm excellent at my job. My tutors told me I should go back to uni and train as a doctor. I would have liked to, but how can a girl from my background afford the fees? I find mental health nursing challenging, but as a nurse I get to spend more time with the people I work with and support them on their recovery journey, which is a privilege to be part of.

Laura and Amelia (Zoe's daughters)

Laura: I always knew I wanted to go into nursing for real. I'm in my final year now and loving it, but my younger sister has just been accepted into nursing college too – she's always been like that, always copying me.

Amelia: I'm excited about starting college, but my parents are saying that they can't afford to support me. They managed to pay for my sister easily enough. Everyone is always so busy they haven't really got time for me. I do have a boyfriend though – although that's a secret.



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