

Rehearsal Diary Elvi Piper (Assistant Director)

This adaptation of 'Curious Incident' has been edited by Simon Stephens into a 90-minute version, and re-staged in the round for schools' audiences.

W/c 13 August - Pre-Week

Prior to our first official week of rehearsal, six of the company of eight actors come together for three days of work at the National Theatre Studio, led by the production's associate director Anna Marsland and movement associate Steve Kirkham. These pre-rehearsal sessions focus mainly on some of the production's iconic movement sequences, created originally by Frantic Assembly's Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett with director Marianne Elliott.

Anna Marsland also presents a model of the design for the production: a grid-lined dance floor (like a piece of graph paper) with the 'chalk' outline of a dead dog at the centre of it. Around the edge of the stage are white wooden benches from which props can appear. Three breaks in the benches provide the entrances and exits, with our audience on all four sides of the stage. In addition to these benches, our set consists of ten boxes, all of which are marked with a prime number (from numbers 2–31). At the beginning of the show the boxes are on stage, ordered in sequence along the long sides of the rectangular space. The set is like a physical representation of Christopher's – the main character – mind; ordered, mathematical and based on

specifics. Everything in this space reflects our protagonist's brain.

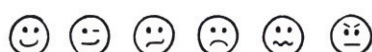
In these early stages, we also share a vast quantity of research and resources– DVDs, documentaries, books, images and articles. These materials help the cast to start thinking about Christopher's extraordinary mind and how he experiences the world. Anna leads a series of exercises to focus on the story of the play. First, we decide on seven sentences which summarise the key points of the narrative, then condense these to just three sentences, before boiling down to just one sentence (like a tag line for a film) which encapsulates what we believe to be at the heart of the play. These sentences help us explore the driving forces within the play. On our final day of these pre-rehearsals we create a timeline of the entire play, showing not only the scenes and events within the narrative, but also events that have led us to any given moment. This timeline will live on the wall of the rehearsal room, to help the actors place their character's emotions at any moment during the play, and to provide a quick-reference guide to how, when and where scenes take place as we work on them in detail during rehearsal.

W/c 20 August WEEK 1

We move into our rehearsal room at the National Theatre Studio, which has a full mark-up of the floor grid and set. The stage management team join us in the rehearsal room, supporting the technical elements and logistics of this seemingly simple, yet actually hugely complex and technical, production.

We begin each day with group yoga, followed by circuits of cardio exercise and strength training to support the cast with the intense physical requirements of the play and to develop the precision and skill to undertake

the lifts and movement sequences. Each day is divided into morning sessions which focus on movement, and scene work in the afternoon. Steve Kirkham is leading on staging the movement sequences in the piece, and Scott Graham joins us to create some new choreography. Movement and physicality are integral storytelling tools in the production, and there are sequences that require extensive drilling and reworking for this staging. Each of these sequences has a nickname – for example, Christopher's solo sequence where describes his desire to be



an astronaut (imagining he is in a spaceship) is called 'Constellations'.

Further examples of these sequences:

- **Astro-boy: following 'Constellations' Christopher's vision for his life as astronaut expands and the ensemble join him to bring it to life – 'flying' him through outer space.**
- **Polperro: Christopher recounts a memory of his mother on holiday in Cornwall, on a beach in Polperro. The audience can see Judy (his mother) being lifted by three members of the cast as if she is diving through the waves.**
- **Pinball: As Christopher navigates Paddington Station, he is flung like a pinball through busy commuters in a flurry of lifts, flips and twirls supported by the entire company.**

Each morning we focus on a couple of these sequences to find the safest way of performing them, whilst maintaining the aesthetic and the storytelling drive.

We begin to explore the scenes in our afternoon sessions. The scenes in the play do not necessarily take place in chronological order. The narrative jumps backwards and forwards from opening moment of the play – Christopher's discovery of the dead dog (Wellington) –and his subsequent quest to solve the mystery of who murdered him.

Anna asks the actors to think about their character's backstory and to place where their character is in their narrative and emotional arc for each scene in the play. We explore the relationships between

characters, and create the moments that may have taken place directly before the beginning of the scene. We discuss the given circumstances of each scene, and pinpoint the objectives of each character in the scene; sometimes characters have 'super-objectives' which exist throughout the scene, with 'sub-objectives' that exist at different moments within it. Objectives are what they want to achieve, both consciously and subconsciously. To identify an objective for a character we also examine what obstacles they have to overcome, or navigate, in each scene, and which – if any – of the characters is driving each scene to achieve their objective and overcome their obstacle.

We use 'actioning' as a device for exploring the text of the play, a method employed by Marianne Elliott in the original rehearsal process for the play. Actioning requires the actor to divide their lines into thoughts or sentences and apply a transitive verb (an action word) to each line. The verbs must be something the actor can 'do' to another character and the word should fit into the following structure: I (ACTION) you; for example, 'I exhaust you' or 'I tempt you'. This supports the physical and emotional drive of the text and the characters' objectives – the text isn't just the emotions of each character, it's about the impact each character has on another.

At the end of the first week we welcome the final two cast members to rehearsal. They've joined us after completing the international leg of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* tour. With the full company assembled we have a 'meet and greet' where the National Theatre staff come to meet and welcome the team. Then we do a read-through of the whole script – an exciting end to our first week.

W/c 27 August WEEK 2

Week two follows a similar pattern to week one; mornings begin with a warm-up and are focused on movement, with afternoons dedicated to scene work. The strength and precision of the movement sequences grow daily, and we continue to examine each scene in detail before placing them in our stage space.

There are a number of other sequences and elements of the production which we start to introduce into rehearsals this week. The

first of these is 'chalking'. In three scenes between Christopher and Siobhan (his teacher), Christopher draws chalk faces on the floor to illustrate his understanding of certain emotions – these faces are taken directly from Mark Haddon's novel. It is important that these are precise and clear and happen in specific areas of the stage.

Another key element of the production is 'boxology'. This is a term coined by the show's original creative team and, as the



name might suggest, it is a science of sorts and mirrors Christopher's mathematical world. The design for the play includes a series of boxes that move around the stage to build Christopher's world. They form different spaces, as well as having additional functions throughout the play, and are each labelled with a prime number. Some contain props, one magically lights up, and others are solid enough to stand on. At the start of the play the boxes are set in parallel lines at either side of the stage in numerical order (2–31). From early on in the production, they move in and out of scenes to create places in the narrative – for example, a counter at Swindon Police Station when Christopher is arrested at the start of the play. The journey of these boxes around the space is an exercise in accuracy – each one has to enter specific scenes and then return to different placements on the floor grid in order to

correctly complete a journey throughout the play. This may seem easy (and hopefully it looks easy in the production), but economy of movement is vital to the style of the show and the precision of 'boxology' is a huge part of that. We navigate this 'science' with a series of grid drawings that detail the movements of the boxes scene-to-scene – not dissimilar to a football manager's play diagrams.

As we approach the end of our second week of rehearsals, we piece together what we have been working on and do a 'stagger-through' of the first half the play.

It is exhilarating to see where the movement sequences blend seamlessly into the scenes. The 'boxology' comes into play, as the set pieces begin to move around the space and build each new place in the story simply and efficiently. We also introduce a number of the personal props used.

W/c 3 September WEEK 3

Week three of rehearsals sees us move to a larger rehearsal space where the full set and seating can be laid out as it will be in schools on tour. Rehearsals follow the format of previous weeks – warm-up and movement in the mornings, and scene work in the afternoon. We focus on the second half of the play in this week, both the physical sequences and scenes. However, the importance of revisiting and consolidating scenes is also important. The cast continue to build their physical strength and fitness each day as well as focusing on voice. Many cast members play several roles with a variety of accents in the play and sometimes speech happens over the musical score and during physical sequences. Therefore, the vocal strength of the cast is extremely important. Kay Welch, our voice coach, works with the actors regularly, building on these aspects and preparing the cast for the touring weeks (12 weeks with 5–8 performances per week).

We continue to work on some of the more precise elements of the show – for example building the 'train track', which is something that Christopher does throughout the first half of the play. He has a train set that he loves and scene-after-scene he constructs an elaborate track (complete with stations, houses, figures, and trees) which snakes around the stage. Shiv Jalota (playing Christopher) has to construct certain elements of the track during the scenes –

it is precise and fiddly and has to complement the scene he is playing. Sometimes he builds slowly and calmly as he discusses a happy memory, at other moments he frenetically constructs a large sections of track. Each part of the track is stored in one of the benches around the edge of the space. Shiv has to devise his route and remember where each piece is stored so he can collect the right section in the right order. We start by placing pictures on the boxes to help Shiv find the right one in each scene and then one day Shiv says he is ready to try it without the pictures. He nails it first time and slowly the mechanics of where things are and how they fit together starts to melt into the action of the scenes.

This week sees more elements of the show appear in the rehearsal space. Costume fittings take place and the cast begin to use key costume elements in rehearsals. Shoes are particularly important – with the complexity of the movement sequences and the lifts, the cast need an opportunity to practice using the right footwear and costume.

We introduce more of the brilliant sound and music, continuing to tighten the timings and transitions to ensure everything marries together perfectly. By the end of the third week we go for a stagger-through of the whole play with all these new elements to help Anna pinpoint what we will need to focus on in our final week of rehearsals.



W/c 10 September WEEK 4

The final week of rehearsals requires us to focus on the transitions – the moments that stitch scene to scene. The pace of the play requires efficiency of movement and sudden snaps from one moment to another (sometimes jumping expanses of time in our narrative), as well as swift movement with boxes ('boxology') to tie everything together.

We begin run-throughs of the play – stopping to work on specific moments, or examine staging, with sightlines of the audience a key consideration. We work with full costume where possible, timing quick-changes for the cast and problem solving the practical details of transitions and logistics both on and off stage.

Throughout the process of staging this production there has been a reworking and reimagining of moments, which in previous productions in large theatres used trapdoors beneath the stage or a full blackout between scenes. It is satisfying to see how these challenges are tackled with brilliant new ideas and creative problem solving. For example, following the construction of the toy train track we then have to clear the stage completely to stage the scenes on Swindon Station. In previous productions an interval allowed the stage to be reset but in this version, the entire cast clear the stage whilst remaining in character and within a scene.

The final element to add is the post-show APPENDIX where Christopher shows

the audience how he solved his favourite question in his maths A-Level exam. This involves the whole company using a series of large colour shapes that fit together on the stage to illustrate how Christopher used Pythagoras' theorem to solve the equation.

Finally, we have two days of technical and dress rehearsal – where we keep stopping and starting to create lighting and sound for each scene and ensure the cues and levels are correct. The stage management team create a setting list for where each prop starts and how it gets from one place to another through the show. They also create their 'tracks' so they know where they need to be during performance – from supporting a quick-change one minute, to operating a torch 'follow spot' on an actor the next, and setting and removing props to ensure the smooth running of the show.

The dress rehearsal and first preview see all of these elements – the movement, the narrative, the transitions, the appendix and all of the technical elements – come together to create a slick and beautiful tale, told through the brilliant eyes and brain of our protagonist Christopher. However, the celebration of the end of this part of the process can only be momentary – the hard work of maintaining the strength, precision and pace of this exciting production will continue throughout the tour.

