

Workshop Diary: Katy Rudd

Planes, trains and automobiles

Katy Rudd was Resident Director during the initial rehearsal process and is Associate Director for the UK Touring production. This diary gives a flavour of the discoveries the Company made during the early workshopping process.

Research: School Visits

Before rehearsals began, we researched what it's like to be a young person living with behavioural difficulties. This was important, because although Christopher is never described as having Asperger's Syndrome he clearly displays issues with making sense of the world, processing information and relating to other people.

To help us understand his world, a few schools kindly opened their doors to us, allowing the cast and creative team to meet pupils, staff and families living with, and affected by, autism. Luke (Treadaway, playing Christopher), Marianne Elliott (director) and I worked with four schools (Riverside School, Southlands School, Spa School and Treehouse School), visiting them a number of times.

The first was Southlands School in Lymington. Southlands is a residential school for boys aged 7-16 with a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome and other associated difficulties on the autistic spectrum. Marianne and I boarded a 6am train and arrived at 9am, in time for assembly.

At Southlands you soon realise you are in a very special place. The staff are united by their laughter, warmth and dedication to their pupils. Walking into the hall, a Year 11 pupil played the piano from memory. It was a note-perfect, unwaveringly poised performance. To me, the boys in assembly looked and acted like any other teenage boys.

The theme of their assembly was the 'Global Population'. The teacher leading it said she was going to 'shrink the world down' so that it would have a population of 100. At this, a Year 7 pupil shouted, 'I don't want to be the size of a pea!' He was quickly reassured that he was only being asked to *imagine* the size of the world if it had 100 people in it. How frightening the world could seem if you believed someone had the power to shrink you down to the size of a pea.

Afterwards, we met with the Head Teacher. Marianne and I had no personal experience of autism and we had pages of questions, so we asked Naomi to take us back to basics: What is autism? What is the spectrum? What is Asperger's? How do you diagnose it? What does autism look like? What does it sound like? What causes it? Can you cure it? Is it hereditary? How can you manage it? What impact does it have on families? How does it

make you feel to have AD? What prospects are there for young people with AD? What support is there? What is *stimming*? What is *twirling*?

The answers were complex. These are the questions that every family confronted with autism must face. To deepen our understanding we focused on various characteristics of autism. One which is important and prevalent in the novel and the play is high anxiety.

Naomi asked us to imagine a bath tub full to the brim with water. That, she said, is often the level of anxiety that her pupils start with at 9am, when they come to school. Such high anxiety means it only takes something very small to make that water – or less metaphorically, their emotions – spill over the edge and cause great distress to the pupil and their peers.

Naomi gave another example of the level of anxiety felt by young people with autism. She asked us to imagine lying in bed and fearing that there is someone outside the door trying to get in, then make this feeling last the entire night. She questioned how rested we would feel in the morning after a night spent in fear and how this would affect our anxiety levels. She said many of her students feel like this on a daily basis.

* *Stimming* is short for 'self-stimulatory', or 'stereotypic' behaviour. In a person with autism, *stimming* usually refers to specific behaviours such as flapping, rocking, spinning, or repetition of words and phrases. *Twirling* (of fingers, hair, objects) is a form of this repetitive movement.

Week One, Day Two

Workshop: Creating homes from home

After a Frantic Assembly-style warm-up in the rehearsal room, the company paired off, joined hands and took it in turns to lead their partners around the space.

Exercise 1

Individually, the company were asked to physically map out a room in their house. They included objects such as windows, fireplaces, doors etc. Each person had to come up with a 20-second physical sequence.

The sequences were taught to each other in groups of three and joined together to make one long sequence. Groups performed these sequences and were given objectives to make their actions more fluid or specific.

Luke performed his sequence solo, with text, and without looking at his hands. This gave Christopher a striking physicality, it looked like he was on auto-pilot.



Exercise 2

The company split into two groups. One member of each group was asked to clearly describe a room in their house. The company then built it using boxes, card, pens, chalk, string – and pretty much everything else they could possibly find in the rehearsal space!

The actors were allowed to direct the construction of their rooms. The company were asked to think of a way of creating the same room in 20 seconds and also in 10 seconds.

We talked about losing literal ideas/props and going back to the first exercise when the actors depicted these objects through movement. We discussed what objects Christopher would find most interesting.

In one actor's bathroom the objects were the blind (made of rolled brown paper), the bath (made of four plastic boxes), the bookshelf behind the toilet (physicalised by another actor), the fireplace and the map of the world (which spun around Christopher).

In another's bathroom these were: the bathroom mirror, the shower, the stones and the sloped eaves (which Christopher banged his head on).

Whilst this was being devised, Luke improvised two physical sequences for both rooms. Luke and the company then put these together.

Luke then moved from one room to the next. This introduced a hallway or 'no-mans-land' which Christopher had to negotiate. He tried not to step on any of the floor cracks.

Luke introduced a model plane which he played with throughout. It flew around the map, ending up with him in the bath (a plastic box).

The company lifted Luke in the bath, and started to fly him around the space: all the time Christopher was flying his plane and as the company put him back down, he landed the plane.

We then took all the objects away and used only movement. This felt like Christopher was in complete control. We had created Christopher's world.

Reflecting on the exercises

Discussing the exercise, Marianne said she felt like objects became characters, as if Christopher had given them thoughts and feelings. One actor said she felt as though she was playing a character in the space, reacting to objects in a different way.

Howard (Ward) and Nick (Sidi) both felt as though they were playing their teacher roles,

supporting and challenging Christopher on stage, seeing him through each sequence. It was observed that when Christopher is challenged, the atmosphere is more interesting.

The introduction of the model plane into the exercise led us to discuss how Christopher would play. We also discussed loneliness both as a positive and a negative: Christopher finds sanctuary in solace, but it can also be a frightening and distressing place.

Week One, Day Five

Workshop: A Beautiful Mind

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time is perceived by some to be a sweet story; this week in rehearsals has illustrated that it is also dark, messy, sticky, violent and poetic.

The company discussed what we've learnt so far:

This story is an unapologetic celebration of the human being. It is Christopher's story: he has a unique mind, a unique logic, this has to affect how we interpret it.

Flash-backs are Christopher's memories – and these are not clean, rose-tinted memories.

All characters are fallible.

There is no commenting on the action, it all happens in the moment. Characters tell the truth, even if it's awful. We need to remain present and truthful to Christopher.

We are under CHRISTOPHER'S RULES.

The company was struck by the success of physical work and the language we have created. Within it, we were able to fly Christopher through space, float and swim. The company found the physical work emancipating, which allowed them to stop *thinking* and feel closer to the characters.

It feels right that rooms should be abstract and focus on detail, allowing us to see Christopher's world through his eyes.

Christopher directing the action really works: he is in total control.

Roger is emotionally removed from Christopher; the lack of tolerance he shows towards him highlights Christopher's selfishness to the audience.

We have to be clear about who is talking and where we are. Time shifts also need to be really clear.



Questions

Whilst the company was reaching a set of decisions, there were also a number of questions to address.

Ensemble

What is the role of the ensemble? Are they sat around the space? Are they Christopher's brain microbes? What does it mean when they are in the school aesthetic? Are they teachers?

What is happening on the peripheries? Are the company always there? Are they sat/or stood? What are the company wearing? What elements of costume are important to Christopher? What would he see or focus on?

The School Performance

Is Christopher imagining the school performance? How does the book/narration get passed?

Siobhan

Who is Siobhan reading the book to? Audience? School Children? To Christopher? Is this the first time Siobhan has read the book?

The Story

One actor observed that it should never feel like *The Truman Show*, like the company is in control and therefore making Christopher redundant. It is Christopher's story.

Roger and Judy

We only ever see Roger and Judy's relationship as dysfunctional. Is it therefore too easy for Judy to leave Roger? Would Judy have left if Christopher hadn't showed up? Does Christopher rescue Judy?

Trains

If Christopher is facing an issue that is too big to deal with, we should see him busying himself with a task, like playing with the train set. We held a meeting with key members of the creative team, to discuss how the train activity could work.

Train set: How do you get rid of it? Do you get rid of it? What is the progression of the train? We see Christopher play with the train, hear the train spoken about in letters; he decides to go to London, we seem him then actually taking and experiencing the reality of the train journey.

Exercise 1: Train sets

In pairs the company constructed train sets. They were tricky to build. Creatives decided ensemble looked like children. Trains only seemed successful when Christopher played with them.

Exercise 2: Train Coming, Train Stop, Train Going, Silence

The company were divided into two groups and set parameters. Group A was only allowed to

move two steps while group B was allowed to use the whole space.

Train coming – step into a huddle and look right

Train stop – look centre, inhale

Train going – look left and move out of huddle

Silence – close eyes

