Brain Storm

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time
is a remarkable experiment in first-person theatre

By: David Barbour

The most singular Broadway hit of the season so far, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* achieves something that no other play has managed to do: It takes audiences into the mind of boy suffering from an advanced case of Asperger's Syndrome. We use the term advisedly: It never appears in Mark Haddon's international best-selling novel, nor Simon Stephen's stage adaptation. But there's no denying that Christopher Boone, the narrator and protagonist, experiences the world in a vastly different way from most of us. A genius-level student of math with an astonishingly precise memory, he is literal-minded to a crippling degree: Metaphors such as "the apple of one's eye" leave him confused and irritated. (Such a thing, he notes, is an anatomical impossibility.) He cannot bear certain colors, and others have a strange significance for him; if, on the way to school, he sees five red cars, he is certain he will have a good day. More troublingly, he cannot process situations that evoke complicated or contradictory emotions. And, most of all, he cannot be touched. (The best he can do in this

Opposite: Even the deck of Christie's set resembles graph paper. Below: When a stressed-out Christopher melts down, his emotional state is expressed in video images of falling letters and numbers.

Christopher waits for the Tube in Paddington Station. A trap in front of the actors represents the tracks, into which Christopher will jump when trying to retrieve his beloved pet rat.

department is gingerly touch palms with certain trusted adults.) If these rules are breached, he falls to the floor and moans like an animal in pain. To get through the day, he requires enormous, around-the-clock support.

As the play begins, Christopher is living with his father in Swindon, a small city in Central England; his mother, he tells us, died some time earlier. At the moment, another death concerns him: The dog belonging to the divorcee next door has been murdered, a pitchfork shoved into the animal's stomach. Despite his inability to tolerate unfamiliar people and situations, Christopher sets out to discover the dog's killer. Instead, he unearths a secret about his family that shatters his sense of security and sends him on a frightening journey to London to confront the truths that have been hidden from him.

Haddon's novel, which is written from Christopher's point of view, captivates readers with its remarkable ability to render the world as he sees it, with its strange limitations and oddly penetrating insights. This is enormously difficult to realize in theatre, in which the audience typically views the action from a position of omniscience. But Stephens, the director Marianne Elliott, and an inventive creative team have managed to create an environment that eloquently expresses Christopher's vision of the world; it's a fascinating experiment in first-person theatre.

Like Elliott's hit production of *War Horse, The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* has traveled from London's National Theatre to the West End to Broadway, undergoing many changes along the way. At the National, it was staged in-the-round in the flexible Cottesloe Theatre (recently renamed the Dorfman). It was reworked for a proscenium staging in the West End and also for its current run at New York's Ethel Barrymore Theatre. Everyone interviewed for this story notes that each version has become more elaborate, and also more refined in its design. The New York production is the most up-to-date iteration (although a UK tour begins this month), and, entering the Barrymore, one immediately senses that this will be a different sort of experience: The set is defined by three walls (and a deck) that resemble the kind of graph paper on which one works out mathematical equations. It is, in Elliott's words, "a magic box," in which video, lighting, and sound interact to create the world as seen by Christopher; it can also represent, in the most vivid manner, the brainstorms that occur when the world becomes too much for him.

Inside the magic box

Speaking to *Playbill Magazine*, Elliott recently said, "If the stage is [Christopher's] brain, and it's his workings-out—he

describes in the book that his brain is a machine—then I felt like it should be a machine that Steve Jobs or Mark Zuckerberg would be very, very proud of: a really brilliant, slick machine, but when it breaks down, it's like computer spam. We tried to explore all the moments when he was feeling things—again, [he] couldn't really articulate them—and try and express that somehow in the staging."

To realize this concept, Elliott took part in elaborate preparatory exercises with the set designer Bunny Christie. "Bunny and I must have spent weeks with bits of card, bits of paper, drawing things, arguing, discussing, throwing things, and eventually, we came out with this 'magic box'," she told *Playbill*. "Then we started going through [discussions of], 'Well, what could the magic box do?' Once we got through that, we probably then had discussions about, 'Well, how can we show how he loves numbers?' or 'How could we show this computer spam breaking down?'…Eventually, we storyboarded it all. We took a photograph of every single scene in the model box with all the figures in it, standing exactly how we would stage it,

so it was all prepped before we went into rehearsal."

Christie admits that the prospect of designing the so-called magic box was daunting: "The book is mega in the UK. When I told people what I was doing next, they'd say, 'That's my favorite book!' There was no way to match everyone's view of it. I just think we needed to be in Christopher's head, to see what that would be like."

She adds, "I wanted it to be a fun show for young people. The book really appeals to them, because of that dislocated feeling that any teenager has and that Christopher has in particular. I wanted it to feel like a funky, fun place, like a club rather than a stage set. I also looked at a lot of video games; we always wanted to celebrate the geek, that it was a good thing to be interested in technology."

Interestingly, Christie adds, "I did only a little bit of research into autism, and only superficially, because Mark Haddon is very clear that the book isn't a study of autism. Instead, I just concentrated on what Christopher is like. It was great to have the book, because it has all those lovely

Below: One of Ross' projections of the galaxy, as seen on the upstage wall.

diagrams. Lots of Finn [Ross'] projections, especially the street diagrams and plans and maps, are inspired by, or are directly from, the book."

Similarly, the concept of graph-paper walls was drawn from one of the book's plot points, in which Christopher is preparing for his A-level math exams. "In the UK, the exam you take for A-levels in math has that paper," Christie notes. "It was useful, because you can hide lots of stuff—traps and holes—in those grids." She adds that the rigid pattern of graph paper denotes that the set is "a safe space for Christopher, because it is ordered; it feels like the space in his head, and he's in charge of it." As a result, she adds, "We all became a little bit obsessed with the way each line matched up on it." (Scenery was built for the Broadway production by Milford, Connecticut-based Showmotion.)

However, Christie says, "At other times, when Christopher goes into a meltdown, the space can feel dangerous." Christie adds, "This is probably the closest I've ever worked with sound, lights, projection, and music."

Indeed, Ross uses the set as a canvas for a cascade of imagery that reveals the workings of Christopher's mind. The images also heighten the experience of the show in other ways as well. For example, entering the theatre, one sees images of graph paper imposed directly on the set, making Christie's basic scenic concept especially vivid even before we fully understand what it means. "It really makes the set pop and offers hints of what's to come," says Ross. "For Marianne and Bunny, it was clear that it was a matter of articulating Christopher's point of view," he adds. "In straight-up normal environments, you don't do this heightened form of design."

Still, most of the images are designed to support Christopher's mental and physical journeys. When Christopher draws a sketch of his street on the stage deck, we see the images being simultaneously "drawn" on all three walls. As he canvases his neighbors, looking for evidence of the dog's killing, pathways appear on the deck, leading to outlines of homes projected on the walls.

When Christopher boards the train for London, the train is demarcated by a series of windows, seemingly drawn in chalk, through which one sees the passing landscape. We also see maps of trains leading to London and of the London Tube, as well as an overhead photo of the Willesden area of London, which is Christopher's destination in the city. And when Christopher, overwhelmed by the sensory overload of London or touched by a stranger, falls apart, numbers or letters rain down on the walls, a signal of his deep distress; this imagery is especially appropriate because Christopher calms himself by performing mental calculations.

The close collaboration between Christie and Ross reaches its apogee in the London sequence. Ross'

looming projections of train schedules and various signs turn Paddington Station into a nightmare place, disorienting Christopher with the kind of strange information he cannot process. Arguably the production's most audacious effect features Christopher riding the escalator downstairs to the Tube station. The upstage walls moves toward the audience. The actor Alex Sharp, who plays Christopher, walks down a series of steps that project out from the upstage wall; these steps are framed in projections that reveal the interior machinery of the escalator, as well as a row of advertisements that he passes on the way down. It's a remarkable effect that beautifully articulates the utter strangeness (to Christopher) of this environment.

"When we moved into the West End, it was great to have these other surfaces to play with," Christie says. "I came up with the idea of the upstage wall coming downstage and Christopher coming down the stairs. I kept waiting for someone to say, 'Are you mad?,' but they didn't. Of course, there are safety guards built in."

Interestingly, Ross says that this sequence "is a quite accurate reflection of many Londoners' attitude to the Tube. Especially if you have issues around people touching you, the Tube is a terrifying place to be."

Ross was clear from the beginning that he wanted to use projections rather than LED video panels. "To me, LED doesn't have the subtlety that we needed, and, anyway, Christopher's world is black and white with perhaps a few other shades of color. Projections give you something more malleable and magical, more cost-effective, with lower energy costs and less weight." The images are delivered by nine Panasonic PTD 12K projectors driven by two Catalyst media servers, which in turn are linked to the production's ETC Eos TI lighting console. (Video gear was supplied by New York-based Sound Associates.) "A lot of it is linked by MIDI to QLab [the sound effects playback program] and to Eos, which triggers the cues," Ross says. "If we didn't combine control systems, we'd never get it." Like Christie, he says he became driven in his quest for precision. "There's something about Christopher that gets into you. I became obsessed with pixels that no one would ever notice, but I'd think, Christopher wouldn't accept it."

Lighting grids

As a further example of the production design's unity, the sets' walls and floor are studded with LED units, part of Paule Constable's lighting design. "When we were first in the [Cottesloe], which was in-the-round, Bunny came up with the idea of black graph paper and I came up with the idea of the pixels," Constable says. Early on, she adds, "We knew we wanted to use projections, but we didn't want it to be the only thing [on the stage deck], so we added a lighting grid, too. Of course, the only surface we could project on was the stage floor, which was also the only surface I could light. That was tricky; we couldn't use

One of the production's most striking effects shows Christopher walking down an "elevator" in the Tube.

followspots, which made it more difficult for me." Describing the grid, Constable says, "Under each frosted Perspex disk is an RGBVW LED cluster. We can pixel-map them for various cues."

And, of course, as the scale of the production expanded in subsequent productions, the lighting grid expanded to include the walls of the set; it is now used in many effects. When the video paths appear leading to the homes of Christopher's neighbors, the LEDs embedded in the deck are part of it. In another instance, Constable says, "When Christopher talks about wanting to be an astronaut, we draw constellations on the wall. Every time a line crosses the grid, the projection illuminates one of the lights. You can't tell what is embedded LED and what is a projection. It should feel like an Etch-a-Sketch."

Beyond such effects, Constable had her work cut out for her, because the lighting constantly reconfigures the space to fit the demands of the story, while changing angle, color, and intensity to suggest Christopher's mood swings. (Also, a number of boxes, on stage, which are used as props, have LED units embedded in them. And

the outline of the murdered dog appears at center stage, and is lit from below by LED units.) Some of the most striking effects are disarmingly simple: At one point, we see Christopher isolated in a small block of light, cringing as three adults, standing around him, their faces obscured by darkness, argue about him. "I really love that moment," the designer says. "I worry that it's a big risk. But it's about Christopher and how scary it is when the grown-ups are arguing."

"I had the idea that Christopher would love playing with lights," Constable says, adding that the light rig is largely exposed because "we needed to make a machine in which Christopher lives. It's a kind of theatre machine, a structure in which lighting is part of Christopher's world. I said to Marianne, 'You know that every one of these moments might have to be a lighting cue.' We broke everything up into tiny moments, showing what he is seeing, opening them up to take in other people, then going back to him. In the first three-hour session, I said, 'We've absolutely created this monster; every moment is a lighting cue, if not three or seven.'" Still, she adds, the first time out the show

was fully cued, using the Cottesloe's rep plot, in three days.

In contrast, the lighting is relatively austere in scenes set at Christopher's school, featuring Siobhan, his teacher and the only adult outside his immediate family with whom he has any rapport. "The school is the safe place for him, an open space that is quite calm," Constable says. "If we made some cues there like we do in the more complicated sections of the show, I and the audience and actors would all explode." Scenes in Christopher's home are approached in a similar manner, although created with a warmer, more tungsten look.

As the production has expanded in scale, so has Constable's work with Ross. "Finn and I hadn't worked together before, but he's wonderful," she says. "We're triggering his projections through the light board, which is great because it means we're constantly communicating about cue structures. On every level, visually and in terms of rhythm, we're talking to each other." She adds, "We were constantly developing the look in previews. At some moments we could throw the ball at Finn and everything became about projection; there are almost moments when it is lighting and projection. It's a really intense game of tennis, and sometimes we're both on the same side of the net."

Planning was, and remains, the key to success, Constable adds: "It's all about coordinating the lighting and video on three walls and the floor. When we moved the show from in-the-round to end-stage, we anticipated those parts of the show that would be different. We discussed, as a creative team, where we had to create new content. Every time we've done it, we wanted to improve it. The journey in the Tube has become more intense."

The moment in the Tube that Constable refers to is the most harrowing bit of staging in the production. Christopher is waiting for the train to arrive. A trap in the deck opens up to represent the train tracks; it contains a set of LEDs that create a sinister uplighting effect. Christopher's beloved pet rat—the only creature he can freely touch—gets loose, and he jumps onto the tracks to retrieve the animal just as a train is arriving. A terrifying combination lighting-and-sound cue, representing the approaching train, adds to the suspense. "Being surrounded like that [in the Tube station] is the worst moment for Christopher and we needed to make it seem awful for him," Constable says. "We now have four versions of it."

The oncoming train light is created by a pair of ETC Source Four PARS hidden the trap representing the Tube tracks. Also, Constable says, "When Christopher falls onto the tracks, we use strobes and a lot of smoke. When another passenger pulls him out of the trap, "a [Martin Professional] Atomic goes into a maximum strobe moment, turning super-blinding white as he comes out."

Aside from the usual conventionals, Constable's rig includes Philips Vari-Lite VL3500s, Martin Professional MAC TW1s ("more than you can shake a stick at"), and ETC Revolutions; the latter two units are especially prized by her for combining a traditional tungsten look with the amenities of automated gear while remaining relatively quiet. "The rig over the stage is very steep," Constable adds, "because it all fits in the box and on a little cross boom in front of the proscenium. I think we have only 12 units at the front of house." (Also used are Look Soutions Unique hazers.)

Since moving the show to a proscenium configuration, Constable has made ample use of followspots in order to pull the actors out of the set. "When Christopher wanders around the streets, knocking on everyone's doors, we follow him with a followspot," she says. "We can draw the houses and other images around him," feeling confident that he will stand out clearly. "When he gets to Paddington Station, it's heavily about projections and lighting pixels, but we follow him with two followspots." The followspots are 10° ETC Source Fours. Lighting gear was supplied to the production by PRG. As mentioned earlier, the lighting console is an ETC Eos Ti, which also drives the Catalyst media servers. "You can imagine the universes," Constable says. "There's so much data. The pixels alone are three or four channels, and there there's the lightboxes and everything else."

Like the other designers, Constable adds that her guiding light was Christopher, a character who seems to have become real for everyone involved in telling his story: "My bottom line with anything that we do is, Would Christopher enjoy it? I think he would love all the complexities of the data involved."

Music of the mind

Ian Dickinson, of the London gear supplier and design house Autograph Sound, has a hugely complex task, as he provides reinforcement for Adrian Sutton's original music and also creates an array of sound effects—including auto traffic, ocean surf, and the roar of an oncoming Tube train—many of which reveal Christopher's state of mind.

Much of his creative work involved coming up with those moments of sensory overload that cause Christopher to break down. "Marianne had a very strong vision of where we needed to get to and we worked within that," he says. "We did research on how children with autism respond to sound and light. I worked with what the actor playing Christopher was doing in terms of trying to externalize what is going on in his head. I also played around with the idea that he finds comfort in the stillness of white noise."

A fundamental concept had to do with loudness: "All of the train and Tube effects are overly heightened so they feel really too loud and in his face." Most of the time, the
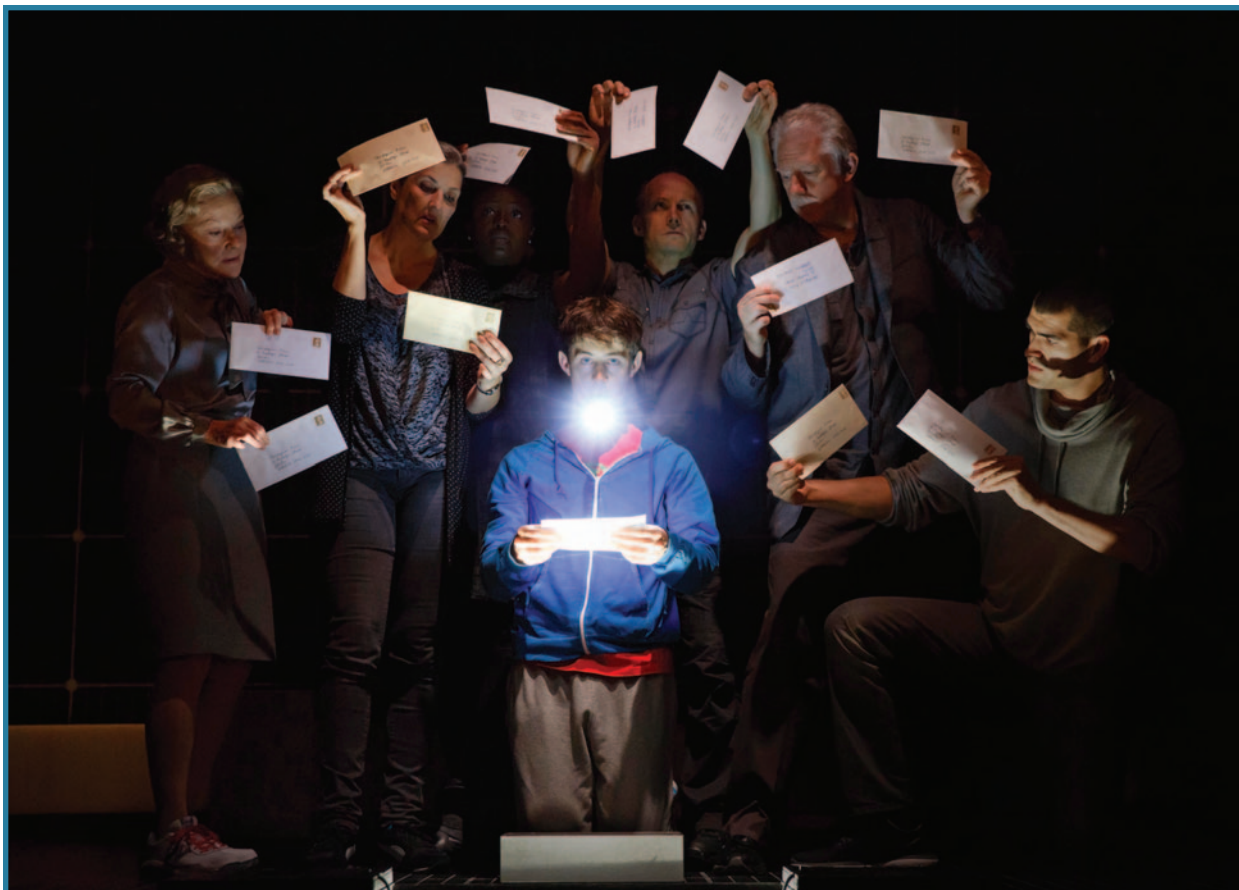
Christopher is surrounded by Tube riders, with a map of the Tube system projected on the upstage wall. Constable's lighting carves out a tiny space that emphasizes the boy's feelings of claustrophobia in a crowd.

effects work in tandem with Sutton's music: "Sometimes I find a way to supplement his music and sometimes he would take a back seat while I add in the overload. For example, when Christopher lies down on the boxes on the train"—the lightboxes mentioned earlier become seats on the train—"Adrian's music takes us into that moment, then it becomes very spare and I have a very filtered low thrumming sound of the train in movement, which you don't really realize. It's an example of letting what Adrian does breathe a little."

The sound rig consists of a main proscenium hang of six Meyer Sound UPA-1Ps, chosen for "their power and coverage, and because they fit nicely with the show's aesthetic," and a center fill of Meyer UPA-2Cs. In addition, Dickinson says, "There are four UPA-2Cs in the set's back wall, which I use quite a lot for atmosphere, and 12 [JBL Control 1s] in the floor, shooting up through the grille in the deck, for doorbells" and other atmospheric effects. Filling out the rig are two rows of d&b audiotechnik E5s in the

orchestra, 12 for delays and seven for front fill, and a modest surround system consisting of 11 JBL Control 1s, plus four more for rear orchestra delay. Four Meyer USW-P subwoofers provide low end. Another dozen Control 1s handle balcony surrounds. Also on stage are four Meyer UPA-1As in the set walls, another UPA-1A on the overhead truss, and two UMS-1Ps and two L-Acoustics MTD108s for additional trap effects.

The production features a subtle use of microphones, which are only obvious when Dickinson makes use of reverb for certain effects. "We use foot mics and it's very tricky," he says. He notes that, for the Cottesloe production, "We discussed miking everybody, but I personally don't like plays that are miked. But in each incarnation we've added more. Siobhan does a lot of storytelling over the score, and her voice needs a little lift. Whoever has played Christopher has never wanted a mic, and we've managed to get away with that. But in New York, in the trip to London and Tube scenes, we do lift his

Christopher discovers a set of letters that reveal a secret about his family.

voice a bit. It's problematic, because the mic is covered in his coat. For the UK tour, which will play some very huge houses, we're looking at miking everybody." The mics used are a DPA 4066 for Christopher and DPA 4061s for the other principals, along with Sennheiser EM 1046 receivers and S 5212 transmitters. The foot mics are DPA 40212 and 4060s. Sound Associates provided the sound gear.

The show is run on a DiGiCo SD9 console, with QLab3 playing back effects and music, and Dickinson also notes the linkage with sound and video. "In addition to QLab3, we use Ableton Live for little shifts in the music, which occur on a nightly basis," he says. "Within Ableton Live are MIDI triggers, to make light cues happen on the beat." He adds, "The show uses MIDI a lot, as virtually every scene change has to be sharp and clean; sound, lighting, and video all fire together—triggered from QLab, which triggers lighting, which subsequently triggers video."

Speaking of the constant refinement of the show's design, Dickinson adds, "In the Cottesloe, we were trying to balance the power and energy of the music cues. It was quite a relief to get into a proscenium house; it really helps

us, vocally." In any case, he says, "We got it sounding nice in the Apollo [the play's first West End venue] and we learned from that to make it nicer in the Gielgud [to where it transferred]. We're constantly working on it. We all love it, as a creative team, and it's a joy to pass on to the actors."

Other personnel include Aurora Productions (production supervisor), Gina Scherr (US associate lighting designer), Rob Casey (UK associate lighting designer), Shawn Duan (associate video designer), Joanna Lynne Staub (associate sound designer), Jonathon Lyle (video programmer), Beth Berkeley (production sound), Gregory Husinko (production electrician), Mike Martinez (production carpenter), Brent Oakley (head electrician), Timothy Perry (automation carpenter), and James Cariot and Stuart Metcalf (properties).

As noted earlier, the designers have become more and more infected with Christopher's love of precision. For example, Christie says, "Adrian Sutton has composed all of the music around prime numbers. I think it's just delicious that he has done that." The result is, in the words of the *New York Times'* Ben Brantley, "one of the most fully immersive works ever to hit Broadway."