An Insight Into Curious Movement  
by Scott Graham (Frantic Assembly)

How can physicality tell the story of Christopher Boone? Here is a boy who does not want to be touched, who compromises the minimal amount of physical affection with his parents and who avoids most social interaction!

The break-through was realising that everything within Curious Incident is told from Christopher’s viewpoint. This meant that the fears and anxieties suggested above are infinitely more vivid than if we were considering Christopher Boone from anyone else’s viewpoint. That meant that we could not just create a train station as we know it but what would be a world full of the terrors and absurdities in the view of Christopher. We had the freedom to see the world he does, to explore it, to be trapped and frightened by it.

We had to work out the logic of touch within the play. Christopher does not allow it but if we were to create the worlds I am talking about, the freedom to float in space and the terror of being alone in a frightening world, then we needed to find a way for the actors to be able to touch the actor playing Christopher without diluting this logic. This came from simply allowing Christopher to be the story teller. If it helped him illustrate a point then the actors could help him do so, lifting him high as he talks about what a great astronaut he would make. Christopher would probably not acknowledge them. They are at his service.

At other times they play strangers or neighbours and then their touch is unwelcome. At these times Christopher is hyper aware of them!
Accessing Christopher’s Mind

As stated above, depicting Swindon train station was never going to be about architectural accuracies. It is not about the Swindon train station that you might know. It is about the station that the frightened mind of Christopher finds when he embarks on his epic journey to London.

What we wanted to create was how the habitual patterns of commuters must have impacted upon Christopher as he bravely tries to work out how to buy a ticket and get to London. Each person he sees would not give a second thought to the logic and rules of this world but to Christopher is was alien and baffling. Our ambition could easily be alienating and baffling to the performers too so we broke the creative process into building blocks.

‘AND THAT WAS HOW I FOUND THE TRAIN STATION’

We knew this would be count heavy so spent a bit of time teaching the team how we were going to refer to the music bars so that everyone knew what we would be talking about and would hopefully not get lost! This was priceless and should not be skipped!

We would present bars of eight like this

1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,
2,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,
3,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,
4,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,

with the first number indicating which bar in the sequence we are talking about and all of the other numbers being the counts of the bar. This was the first building block.

We started with something that would feel familiar and manageable. We got the group to walk in square, starting on their right foot and walking forward for 8 counts and then turning left on the 8th count. They continued walking for 8 counts and then turn left again until we end where we started. We continued this until we are back at the beginning or until the group appear to be comfortable with the counts, rhythm and transitions. They are essentially marching in a square. There was nothing particularly challenging about this. It was just the second building block.

Having mastered counts of eights we then tried something more difficult. Christopher would find eight dull and would be far more interested in a prime number. We are also much more programmed to hear and understand our music in eights as most of our popular music is in 4/4 time. We changed the number to five!

The strangeness of this number will present a challenge. We are not used to how five feels, unlike four and eight. The odd number also meant we were beginning each turn on different feet. We also made it a bit more complex, walking forward for five counts and then immediately setting off on a circle of five count/steps that finishes where it started. Then continued forward for another five. Next you can turn to the left and walk for another five counts.

This is four bars of five counts. The circle is on the second bar. The left turn is on the fourth. Bars one and three are merely walking forward.

Bar five turns left again and they were now facing down the room. The original square has now become a rectangle and they have worked their way up the right-hand side and across the top of it. Bars five through to eight are a repeat the actions of bars one to four and took the performers back to the starting position at the bottom right of the rectangle.

Once the performers had got this we could then add choreographic complexity. Once that was mastered we could then add character complexity and detail but that is an additional building block and could only be approached once the choreographic complexity was down.
In bar four (the turn across the top of the rectangle), instead of turning to the left, we had them turning to their right and walking backwards across the top of the rectangle. This should still begin on the left foot and meant that the transition into bar five should still be on the right foot. This meant that as they headed into bar five in the opposite corner of the rectangle from the beginning, they could just repeat this pattern, taking them back to the start.

Once they got this we went even further with the complexity but to write this down here might melt heads and keyboards!

What we had at this point was the basic pattern. We could chop it into and reverse it. We could split groups up so that they would then be walking towards and through each other. This level of complexity only comes after mastering various building blocks. This is where you should bring your own creativity and test your performers ability (resilience, patience, will to live!)

If all this talk of counts and bars is feeling daunting, rest assured it is much simpler to do than it is to read or write it! Progress was swift because we did not throw too much at them too quickly. Because of this we could get performers to look in set directions, reading information screens and checking for departure times, checking watches and tickets, all set on certain counts.

A little reminder about context. After all that counting and walking the performers were in danger of forgetting they were actors. It was time to explore the character complexity. What was each character’s* reason for being there? What kind of day had they had? What might they be carrying? Where were they heading? This might be what a busy station concourse must look like to a bewildered Christopher but we wanted them to have some individual quirks too.

Having created the pattern for the commuters we could then unleash Christopher. He ran away from their movement, got caught up, dodged and jumped out of their relentless process. It was easy to pick out his anxiety from the busy masses.

There were many further complexities and details. People looking for friends, people desperately late for trains, people absorbed in newspapers, etc. If you were to try this or take this process on, the possibilities are vast and entirely up to you.

*These were not characters in the script but built from the type of people we thought might populate Swindon Train Station at that time.
Luggage Rack

Christopher takes refuge in the luggage rack of the train on the way to London. Again, this was not going to be a literal representation. If this situation offered Christopher solace then we should look to where else presents comfort and safety in his life. We thought about his love for computer games and puzzles.

We used 9 boxes as luggage and positioned them in a square (3x3). We then asked Christopher to lie on them as comfortably as he could. It was simply a task of taking one or sometimes two boxes away at a time as people came to collect their luggage. Each person would change the number of boxes available to Christopher. Thus, the predicament of being discovered became a task of staying on the ever-decreasing number of boxes. Something that might have appealed to Christopher.

It would have been easy to have allowed Christopher to move around and occupy only one box but it was much more fun to get him to spread himself out across the boxes, presenting a genuine predicament and peril. Only at the very end does he find himself on one box.

Pinball (Paddington Station)

If Christopher was thrown and disturbed by Swindon Station, what was he going to make of Paddington? Simon Stephens offered some insight but probably not in the way you might expect. He wrote pages of noise! He listed the cacophony of noise and information overload that greets Christopher as he steps off the train. While not telling us what to do it certainly informed us of the impact this moment should have on Christopher. Again, it was not about realism but trying to create a reality built from Christopher’s anxiety levels.

We considered how Christopher might run around the station, bumping into people, desperate to avoid contact, looking for signs and shielding himself from the bombardment of information. We created a pattern of dodges and near misses, of bumps and recoils as he struggles in the chaos.

This pattern was pretty high energy but was rooted in naturalism. We then repeated the pattern but looked to explode each moment and interaction. Turns became leaps, bumps became jumps and catches, each one inspired by the interactions from the first pattern. This gave us an interesting challenge and stopped us from resorting to just throwing in a dynamic moment for the sake of it. There would be nothing necessarily wrong with that but I think we were probably inspired by the purity of composer Adrian Sutton’s palette and responded accordingly! (The soundtrack is brilliantly created from prime numbers, electrical frequencies and gaming sounds. All of which would be floating around Christopher’s head)

The effect of this was to create a situation where Christopher was perilously close to being out of control. We wanted his tempo to be totally different from those around him as he careered around the station. That is why the scene was referred to as Pinball. It was a clear reminder of the ambition behind it.

One of the benefits of moving from the original in the round version to the proscenium West End version was the addition of great walls creating the impression that the action was all taking place within a huge box. The first thing I did when presented with the walls was to find a way of getting Christopher to walk along it as if the walls were the floor but seen from above. The thinking here was that it
not only highlighted the level of his anxiety, where he is literally climbing the walls, but also to show the absurdity of everyone else from Christopher’s perspective. To do this, his walk along the wall must be measured and precise. He must be the normal and everyone else must be strange.

Every effect takes time to perfect and this is point of this story. That morning when I embarked on this task I used four strapping National Theatre performers, enlisted from another show, to attempt to lift Christopher and make him walk along the wall at 90 degrees. By lunch time everyone was exhausted and two of them were in the nurse’s office. The point I am making is that we persevered. We learnt from failure and embraces that failure as the necessary educational steps. Very quickly, in the actual rehearsals we were having all of our cast members wall walk, even our Mrs Alexander performers well into their 60s or 70s. we had cracked it. We could even do it with one lifter and Christopher but used two as the dismount is much more elegant with two!

The current version has no walls so now our task is reversed. How do we capture that feeling without the help of a set? As I write this that remains the task and with everything on Curious incident it is a huge and exciting one but as ever, I am sure the purity and singularity of Christopher’s brilliant mind and unique point of view will help us find the way.