Drama and Theatre

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time (Mark Haddon, adapted by Simon Stephens)

Summary

This coming-of-age play takes us on the journey of 15-year-old Christopher Boone, who exhibits behaviours consistent with those on the autism spectrum, though this is never directly stated. His teacher, Siobhan, guides him and the audience to understand who killed Wellington the dog, and how the teenager navigates life while believing his mother died of a heart attack two years before the play began. We discover she had an affair and couldn't cope with her son's condition, and his father has tried to hold things together for their son. The protagonist is a mathematical genius who gains an A* in Maths A Level.

Structure, language and themes

Part One: Discovery of the dog's murderer and the truth behind Christopher's mother, Judy Boone's, supposed 'death'.
Part Two: Through a first-person narrative in short, quick sentences, we see bridges begin to form between Christopher and his father, Ed Boone. Christopher gains an A* in Mathematics at A Level.
Themes: These include order and disorder, family and relationships and celebrating difference.

Historical, social and cultural context

In 2012, under David Cameron's Conservative Party leadership, there were significant cuts to Local Education Authority (LEA) funding for Additional Learning Needs (ALN). Social interactions can be challenging for both children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and their parents or carers, requiring additional support. Culturally, society often misunderstands how those with ASD respond in social situations.

Original performance conditions

The play was first performed in 2012, in the round, at The Cottesloe Theatre, Royal National Theatre, London, before transferring to the Apollo Theatre and the West End. It won seven Olivier Awards, including Best New Play in 2013, and later won the Tony Award for Best Play in 2015 after transferring to Broadway. The original National Theatre production was set on a grid and featured an innovative, minimalist design style, immersed in a multimedia set. This multi-sensory overload not only created an immersive experience for the audience, but also captured what it is like to be autistic through the eyes of the teenage protagonist, Christopher Boone. The performance adopted a physical theatre style.

Contemporary audience

An American study on autism diagnosis shows that numbers have increased post-pandemic, from 1 in 68 under-18s in 2010 to 1 in every 34 in 2020. This figure is likely to continue rising, highlighting the growing relevance of parenting and teenage life in today's digital world.

Characters & performance / Directing skills

Christopher (15): Intelligent. Confused. Determined.
Siobhan (27): Calming. Nurturing. Thoughtful.
Ed (Late 30s): Loyal. Caring. Pragmatic.
Judy (Late 30s): Honest. Romantic. Fragile.

The **ensemble** creates Christopher's world and multi-roles around him. Some take on characters such as the sarcastic, short-tempered and tense 40-year-old **Mrs Shears**, and the elderly neighbour, **Mrs Alexander**.

The fast pace of Christopher's thought process should be calmed by his teacher, but reflected in the erratic movements and fast-tempo vocal delivery of both the ensemble and Christopher himself, through a physical theatre style.

Originally, Frantic Assembly choreographed the ensemble's movement, and the original director, Marianne Elliott, wanted the audience in close proximity to 'breathe the same air as Christopher.'

Design

- **Set and props:** Minimalistic, multimedia, immersive.
- **Costume, hair and make-up:** Contemporary; naturalistic with elements of symbolism.
- **Lighting:** Non-naturalistic; strobes and LED effects to reflect Christopher's ASD.
- **Sound:** Piercing, atmospheric, digital.