

# theatre alibi



# Cobbo

by Daniel Jamieson

**Education Pack**



*Derek Froom & Craig Edwards with swan puppet*

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**Written by Daniel Jamieson**

**Photos by Steve Tanner**

*Cover image: Craig Edwards as Cobbo*

**You can also download the script & production photographs**

**A DVD is available from Theatre Alibi at £15 + vat**

Thanks to Jordan Whyte, Craig Edwards, Trina Bramman,  
Thomas Johnson, Nikki Sved & Henry Hawkes

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# Theatre Alibi's Style of Work

## Why tell stories?

We think humans need to tell stories. More than that, we think this need to tell stories is part of what makes us human, part of the unique intelligence that makes us different from other animals. Telling stories, listening to them, watching them, talking about them, thinking about them... without necessarily realising it, we're processing our experience in a very sophisticated way when we're doing these things. When we imagine a story we rehearse our own urges and inclinations in hypothetical scenarios, like children unconsciously practising how to behave by playing games. By "playing out" stories, we expand our sense of who we are and what choices we have in facing the challenges of our lives.

If we're constantly using stories to get an angle on a chaotic world, then as the world changes, so must our angle. Theatre Alibi is always searching for the right stories to tell and the right way to tell them to question the world as it currently stands.

The way we've chosen to tell stories is through theatre. The immediacy of it appeals to us. In theatre the actor is present in the same room with the audience. As a result, and this is absolutely unique to theatre, a split reality is presented to the audience in which the actor is both himself, here and now, and someone else in another time and place, a character in a fictional world. When we approach our work, we try to take advantage of this split reality. We often begin shows with the actors talking directly to the audience, beginning to tell a story and then slipping from describing a character into becoming them. So unlike many theatre companies we usually choose to reveal to our audience the moment when the actor takes on their role.

Because reality and fiction are a hair's breadth apart in theatre, it encourages the sense that fiction *belongs* to reality – it isn't some sort of theme park where things happen that don't relate to reality, it's a gift we have to perceive the richness of real experience. The proximity of real and imaginary in theatre encourages us to relate one to the other. And because theatre admits "play" into the heart of real life it might, in some small way, refresh the playfulness of our lives.

In keeping with these thoughts, here are some of the ways we choose to work:

- We reveal transformations: actors leap from being themselves to being a character (or several) and back again before the eyes of the audience. Simple props and set are taken up by the actors and used to suggest places and things that weren't there before (a duvet becomes a field of snow, a walking stick becomes the rail of an ocean liner).
- We develop our actors' resources to help them suggest other characters, things and places: their voices, dance skills, puppetry skills etc.
- We enjoy working in unconventional theatre space, where audiences are made especially aware of the "here and now".
- We incorporate other artforms into our theatre to make it more effective at whisking people from the "here and now" to the realm of the imagination: music, sculpture, photography, film etc.



Jordan Whyte as Annie

# Ideas behind the show

**Daniel Jamieson** (writer)

Some stories spring from one idea, others come from a handful of smaller inspirations that grow together and become intertwined. *Cobbo* was the latter.

Here are some of the seeds that went into the mix.

I usually write in the Library. While I work I often notice out of the corner of my eye a librarian quietly taking a book from the shelves and dipping into it for several minutes before carrying on with their endless tidying. Perhaps they do it to familiarise themselves with what's in stock, but I like to think they do it for themselves, to escape momentarily to an inner world. The thought of a hidden world in the mind of a librarian, where all sorts of extraordinary things are going on, I find very appealing.

Then a couple of years ago I saw a young woman reading to a swan down by the river. I loved the idea of someone (perhaps a librarian!) secretly sharing their inner life with a bird through a mutual delight in *Madame Bovary*. The memory stuck in my mind vividly but it didn't occur to me at the time that it might constitute the basis for a play.



*Cerianne Roberts as Ginny*

More recently, the act itself of thinking about subject matter threw up themes of loneliness and madness. I like to walk. It helps me think. I spent several days walking along the River Exe mulling over ideas. Gradually, the remoteness of the place and the separation from daily routine started to act on my mind. Strange ideas began to hatch and mutate, then soon came to seem quite normal. Only when I got home and someone asked me what I'd been doing all day did the oddness of my thoughts occur to me. It shocked me how quickly the gap between perception and reality can open up when we're quite alone. If a character with a churning mind had no-one to come home to, how far might they wander off into another realm?

Coming back from one of these river walks I noticed a swan's nest right by the towpath. They make it there every year, seemingly oblivious to how close they are to a human thoroughfare. Several times I'd seen sticks and stones round the nest thrown from the path. This year there was one abandoned egg lying there. The parents must have been too stressed to stay and incubate it properly. There's often a fuss about this sort of thing in the local paper, and quite right too. And yet the tone of outrage sometimes seems a shade too passionate – a paradoxical twist of human nature that we might identify more with a stricken swan than with another human being.

Also, I'd long been interested in people hearing voices and having visions. I read a book suggesting that hallucinations were once part of how our minds worked every day. Instead of considering our experience consciously and acting accordingly we would literally hear voices that told us what to do. Our minds spoke to us directly, disguised as others. Nowadays, the author suggests, the only remnant of this ancient way of thinking are the hallucinations experienced by schizophrenics. I was intrigued by the notion of a visionary companion of our own making, a projection of the innermost workings of our minds.

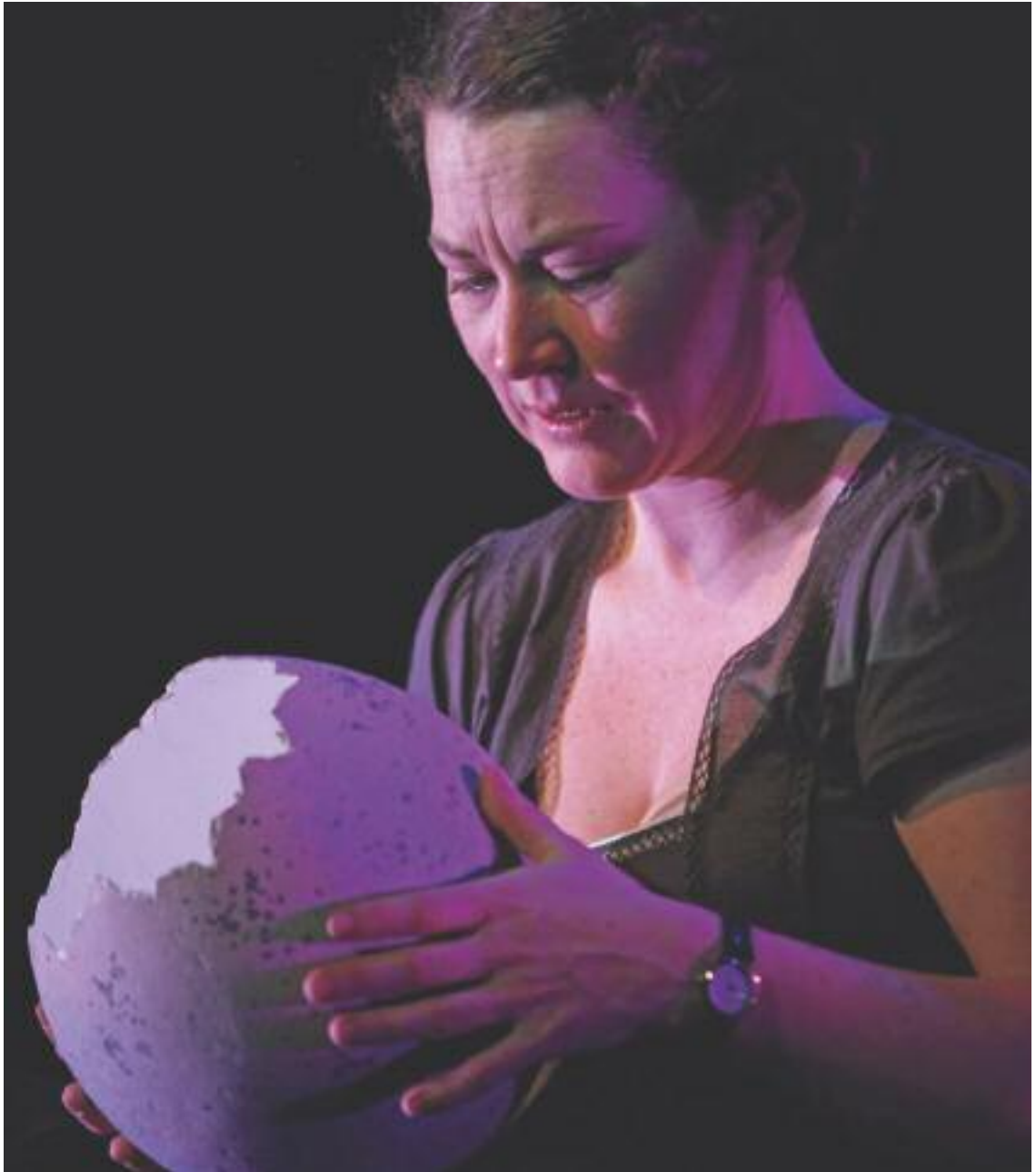
That's how **Cobbo** came to be about a lonely young librarian who makes for herself a sympathetic companion in the person of a talking swan.



Craig Edwards & Jordan Whyte

## Timetable of Events

<b>Autumn 2007</b>	Writer generates a variety of ideas for a new show and chooses with the company to develop <b>Cobbo</b>
<b>January 2008</b>	Theatre Alibi applies for a grant from the Arts Council to tour the show nationally
<b>April 2008</b>	Arts Council award funding and writing begins
<b>Summer 2008</b>	Tour is booked
<b>August 2008</b>	Research & Development Week. Artistic team (director, writer, designer, actors & stage manager) spend a week trying out ideas of how the show might be staged
<b>October 2008</b>	Set design finalised
<b>November 2008</b>	Set Construction begins Publicity designed
<b>January 13th 2009</b>	Set delivered
<b>19th January – 18th February</b>	Main rehearsal period
<b>16th – 19th February</b>	Production week Lighting and sound rigged and plotted, tech and dress rehearsals
<b>20th February</b>	First Performance of <b>Cobbo</b>
<b>February – April 2009</b>	Regional and National tour
<b>April 2nd 2009</b>	Feedback meeting to discuss how everything went



*Jordan Whyte as Annie*

## Inhabiting Annie

**An interview with Jordan Whyte**

### **Who is Annie?**

Annie is a librarian and she lives on her own in a flat down by the river. Both her parents are dead and she doesn't have a close family or network of friends. She lives quite independently and doesn't socialise much. That's where we meet her at the start of the show. She has a routine which we get a taste of in the first couple of scenes – at work, going down to the river, feeding the swans, reading her book, going and buying her food, going home, going for a run in the mornings.

## What does she want?

My initial reaction was, what does anyone want? I'm not sure Annie knows at the beginning. I suspect that if she let herself think about it, there are things she wants that are probably beyond her reach. That's why she has this very nice little solo routine going on, because that fills the day and fills her life. There are indications in the text of what she's missing. That would be a relationship with anybody for a start! Also, a life outside the protective shell that is her routine. The first real glimpse of this is in the book she's reading, *Madame Bovary* by Flaubert and how she's captivated by its romantic world, particularly by the dance. Then, more mundanely, you get a sense of what she's missing by the things she believes the shop assistant is thinking about her. They're all negative things that are projected by her lifestyle for one. Fears and worries that are projected onto the items in her shopping basket: meal for one - doesn't have anyone to share her life with; pork pies - fat; chocolate mousse - greedy. She feels that the something missing in her life is someone else.

## What's her part in the story? What happens to her, in a nutshell?

Annie's the central character so it's her world that we're entering. What happens in the show is what happens to Annie. I think her unconscious comes up and bites her on the arse! You can only ignore things for so long. When you do that it's like trying to stuff more and more rubbish down into a bin. There's only so much emotion that you can push down. At some point you lift the lid and it explodes out all over you! One morning Annie's unconscious mind steps in and takes over, and decides to provide her with what she secretly desires. Not necessarily in the easiest form - it doesn't just give her a nice man!

## Why a swan?

It's to do with the circumstances of her life. She lives down by the river, she's spent a long time watching a swan's nest, she's seen it get vandalised and invested a lot of her emotional time in willing this sole, surviving egg to hatch. So there's already an emotional investment there, probably the only thing we see that she has an emotional investment in. She continues to go down to the river once the egg has hatched and feeds the cygnet, looks after it. When I first read the play I also thought, she's a librarian and there are all sorts of literary precedents she'd know about to do with swans, going right back to ancient Greece, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, fairy tales where frogs turn into princes, *Swan Lake*... it's not such a massive leap of the imagination. Swans inherently have a mystique and grace, and an otherness, which you can project upon. And they are handsome and beautiful and unattainable. Because of their mystery you can project onto them what you want.

## How did you build Annie's character?

The only thing you have at the beginning is the script. So the first thing I did was read and reread and reread the script, because each time you read it you pick up more details that you haven't seen. The more familiar you become with it, the more things stand out from the text. So I started by sitting down and asking myself basic questions about her, trying to write down things that you might just take for granted, like, well, where are her family? And, oh, she's reading *Madame Bovary*, and she's a librarian and she lives on her own. From that, I went on to look for indicators in what other people say about her or what she says about herself. You can find out a lot about what she thinks from what Cobbo says because it's all stuff she's projected onto him. Things that the shop assistant says are things that Annie thinks about herself. There are quite subtle things that you can tell about her in there, things that you might miss in a first reading.

For instance, when her mum asks her if she wants to keep her egg, Annie's instinctive reaction is to give it back because she says she'd damage it. This says something very clear about how she

perceives herself. And her relationship with her mum, the way that they talk to each other – things start to creep out of that. Then you have to extrapolate using your own imagination. I thought it's very interesting that she chose to read Madame Bovary. Not just because it's romantic but because of the kind of romance that's in the novel. It's not Mills and Boon. It's not a magazine, it's not Jane Austen, it's a particular type of literature and from that, I just let my imagination wander off. Doing spidergrams, writing down anything that occurred to me – if those are the books that she likes, what sort of art does she like? I don't think she'd be a fan of 19th century romantic painting – Ophelia in the stream and all that kind of stuff. However, I did think she'd like Seurat, scenes on the riverbank. I don't think she'd be too keen on Edward Hopper – too close to home. It all helps fill in what she might really be like.

I didn't have a very clear idea of her physical appearance at first, but we know that she runs in the morning, that she doesn't have a very high opinion of herself, doesn't spend a lot of time caring for herself. She's probably quite practical. She has a job where she doesn't have to dress up but she'd be expected to be smart to a certain level. I don't think she has a huge chest of drawers covered in make-up or that she goes to the hairdresser very often. Those details help to colour in the portrait.

### **What was hardest about inhabiting Annie?**

The hardest thing about playing her is that she's quite introverted. There's a big chunk at the beginning of the play where I realised I don't say anything. I'm present and observed. So much about her is what she holds in and doesn't say. Like her inability to say no: to the shop assistant; to Iain when they go to the cinema – all of that is shown rather than expressed by Annie. She doesn't express herself well at the beginning. It's only when she gets into a relationship with Cobbo that we begin to hear her voice. That's difficult. It's hard getting an audience to empathise with a character when they're not giving much back, that's surprisingly difficult.

### **What do you enjoy about playing her?**

What's enjoyable about Annie, in spite of all that, is her positive nature. Because when love comes calling in the shape of a man-swan, she embraces it. She goes with it. She doesn't necessarily make all the right decisions en route but when we see her blossom as a person, it's fantastic to let all that suppressed emotion out! We glimpse her potential.

### **What journey do you think she's gone on by the end of the show? How has she changed?**

I think we've seen her go through all the ups and downs of a first relationship. It's not all a bed of roses, not just because he's a swan. There's the whole, tentative, getting-to-know-you routine, and domestic arguments, through to planning a future together. So to look at it positively we do see what she is capable of, if the circumstances were right. She's stood up for herself. That's part of her blossoming. At the beginning she wouldn't say boo to a goose, someone who's mortified by what she imagines a shop assistant thinks of her, who can't tell Iain to go away but, by the end, thanks to Cobbo, she's stood up for herself. She also made some pretty bad decisions along the way, like going to see Ginny. But on the positive side, she's stepped out of herself.



# Being Cobbo

## An interview with Craig Edwards

### Who is Cobbo?

I think he's a wish fulfilment. Annie is lonely and she wants someone, or something, to fill her life and care for her, and for her to care for. And so she creates this person who talks to her. Because she's so lonely she regularly goes down to the river and reads her book to this swan who seems to be listening to her. That's the match that starts the fire in her imagination. Maybe this swan is the only person who can really understand what's in her heart. That's who I think Cobbo is. She's wished for something and it's come true. That's scary as well, like, if you open the genie-bottle, what would you wish for? You have to be really careful what you ask for because it could all go horribly wrong. I think Annie has to deal with the consequences of the fact that this swan starts to talk to her. She gets drawn into his world and he gets drawn into her world.

There are difficulties – as there are in any relationship, but the fact is he's not human ... and human beings don't generally have relationships with things that aren't human beings without being frowned on, or locked up.



*Craig Edwards as Cobbo*

### What's his part in the story? What happens to him, in a nutshell?

When Annie meets Cobbo she starts to shut herself off even more from the outside world. Her relationship with Cobbo is the catalyst for that. So she spends more time away from work and rejects quite firmly other people trying to get in contact with her, like her workmate Iain. In the end she plans to isolate herself even further by going to live on a houseboat so she doesn't have to deal with anybody else. She won't be able to go to that supermarket again either, the one where she took Cobbo...! So that's his part in the story. Annie's relationship with him gives her the strength to back out of society. In a way that's what happens with most relationships. There's a period when people start seeing each other when other people say, "Hey, we don't see you anymore! Where have you gone?" The relationship takes over. Sometime that's a welcome thing and sometimes it isn't.

### How did you build his character/ come by his physicality?

I think everyone's got their own way of doing things. I tend not to do any research or pre-work other than to keep myself physically fit so that when I come to work and have an idea I can see it through. I tend to work from the inside out. I go for the emotional truth of a scene and see what that does to me physically rather than go for the physicality and work backwards. Because this story is essentially about a relationship, that's what was important for me – to get the relationship right. And then out of that emerged the difficulties of being a swan having those emotions. The two things start to go hand in hand after a while. Even now, towards the end of rehearsals, I'm discovering things about him physically that I couldn't have discovered at the start of the process because

I've gone on the emotional journey first. I guess, occasionally, because I live in Bristol and there are loads of swans there, I'd look at a swan and think, "How am I going to do that? That's impossible, because I'm a totally different shape!" But if you communicate with an audience in a truthful way they'll believe you. So for me the question was, how I can tell the audience truthfully that I'm a swan? And for me the answer comes from an emotional rather than a physical truth - I believe the audience will always imagine more than I can physically show them. It was nice on Day One to have things like wings and flippers to try out. Quite quickly I had to trust that people on the outside of the process like the director, the designer, the other actors and the writer could see that it looked ok being a swan without having to have things like a beak. Like everything in theatre it's a collaborative effort. In the end Cobbo's character is determined by what the writer has written. Cobbo's not a suave, James Bond fantasy in swan form. He gets things wrong and he's funny and he does outrageous things. He's not just any old swan, he's a particular sort of swan.

### **What do you particularly enjoy about playing Cobbo?**

I've played lots of animals in the past. Being involved with this kind of physical theatre, you do. But what's nice about playing this particular animal is that he talks and he's naughty and funny, as well as being very honest and having real emotional qualities. Because he's not a real thing, he's in someone's head, there's enormous freedom in how you play him. With physical theatre, characters aren't rigid and an audience can fill in the gaps with their imagination, which means they're much more involved. I guess there aren't many stories with talking swans in, so for an actor it's a nice opportunity. There's much more freedom to explore different things through playing Cobbo than through playing Uncle Vanya!

### **What do you find difficult?**

It's physically quite demanding because I have to walk and behave in a way that isn't normal to me. The more time goes on, the more physically adept I'll become at flying, swimming, eating without using my hands and hissing! I guess what's been really difficult (and that's also been part of the pleasure of it too) has been letting go of any sense of my character's desires and needs, because they're all wrapped up with Annie's desires and needs. My character isn't an independent being, he's totally linked to another character. Most dramatic scenes are driven by two characters with opposing needs that clash. That's what drama is. But Cobbo and Annie are in tandem with each other and the clashes are with other characters. At times I've thought, "What does my character want to do here?" but it doesn't really matter because it's all about what she wants! So I just have to let go. It's the first time I've played an imaginary character like that.

### **What journey has he gone on by the end of the story? How has he changed?**

By the end of the story he's experiencing what it's like to be in a relationship. When you fall in love it's very exciting but very scary too because you think, "What happens if I lose this, what happens if it all stops tomorrow?" And Cobbo does experience loss. He realises he's had a relationship with someone else prior to his relationship with Annie. Obviously it's all imagined, but he is really feeling these things for the first time. That's difficult. When you've had one love in your life that ends and then you have another love that reminds you of your previous love it can be joyful and very painful at the same time. During rehearsals we talked about how, when the fantasy first emerges, Cobbo isn't quite formed yet. The longer the relationship goes on, the more formed and concrete he becomes. He starts off as a baby, goes through a toddler/teenage phase and becomes quite adult by the end. He goes to a place where he worries about things. So he has changed.

# Designing the Set

## An interview with Trina Bramman

### Talk us through the set design. What are we looking at?

It's mainly made of timber with some steel. It's a platform that slopes down to the front. There's some plastic tubing but it's mostly steel tubing. The feathery bit that curls at the top is made out of Flexipli. Flexipli is very thin plywood that can be bent without breaking. The floor is a painted, thick, canvas floor cloth. The set is sprayed with paint - the scenepainter uses a compressor and a spraygun loaded with a succession of different colours that are laid on one by one.

### How did you arrive at the set design? What factors influenced it?

I shouldn't say this because it isn't an aesthetic thing... but the main influence was the fact that we were going to have a marimba and a drumkit on stage in a very small space and we had to fit them in somehow. So the first thing I was trying to do was to fit all the instruments in, working round them and seeing what space I had left. I knew I had about half the floor area and some height left for the structure of the set. As for how it got to be how it is, well, the play's about a swan and there are watery elements in it, so I started looking at feathery shapes and wave shapes and leafy shapes - they seemed like they might be a good way to use the space, and also to frame the musicians. I didn't really look at pictures or photos as inspirations for this show. I find it a bit distracting sometimes when I'm starting with an idea. If I'm looking at someone else's work it's hard not to latch on to some aspect of what they've done. But I did lots and lots of scribbles of my own, drawings that I threw away until I had something I wanted the set to look like. Sometimes there are clearer pictorial influences, as with the Caravaggio show that I designed for Alibi (Caught). With this one I had a breakthrough when I was catching the train in to my studio in Nottingham. I'd been working on the design for a few days already by then and hadn't had any particular inspiration. I was sitting on the platform waiting for the train and there was a feather on the ground near me. I thought, that's an interesting shape! If you turned it on its back it would be a good shape to use the awkward space that we have on stage. It was probably a pigeon feather and I shouldn't have been touching it! I had it in a box for the first design meeting with the director. I've probably still got it somewhere. That's what sparked me off. You struggle at first trying to find the one thing to get you started, but as soon as you find something, it sparks everything else off.



*Rough first model of the set by Trina Bramman*

### What's the flavour of the prop and costume design? Why?

The flavour of the prop and costume design is quite reactive to the set. Things need to look not too alien in that world. The egg and the swan took textures from the set and were made to look part of it. Even the costumes are responding to the colours in the set. The general feel of the colour on set is quite plain but within it there are lots and lots of different colours, blues, greys, reds, greens - if you look closely you can see all the little spots of colour. Some of the props and costumes are picking up on those brighter colours in the mix. It felt like chairs were a no-no on the set straight away because it was such a strange looking world... sometimes when you put



*Final model of the set by Trina Bramman*

something very real on a strange looking set it works, but not this time. But some everyday supermarket packaging is used as props in this show, which looks ok. It's a real mixture between very beautiful looking props like the swan and ordinary things.

### **What was the hardest part of designing the show?**

Usually the hardest part for me is just getting started. But with this show, in particular, the locations are all very different and it was hard finding a poetic way of incorporating all of them and at the same time none of them. Indoors, outdoors, everywhere - the set has to be everywhere and nowhere. But that's the same with designing a lot of Alibi shows. The whole space issue wasn't really a problem. In a way it gave me a place to start from. It was worrying at first when they marked out the huge space that we needed for musicians but actually that already gives you a shape. You're not working with an empty room, you're working with something.

### **What came easiest?**

Once you've got your initial idea it all flows from there, once you know you're playing with a certain shape. I like to work from shape and form to start with rather than colour. I find it easier to work three-dimensionally. Once I've got something that's the shape I want, the colour and everything else follows after.

### **What's your favourite part of the design?**

I'm quite keen on all of it! Often you like some bits and hate other bits of a design but with this one I find it a pleasing shape to look at all round. It's been a nice one to work on.

# Solving a Moment

## The Nest Floating Away

The image of a swan's nest recurs throughout the play: Annie remembers the vandalised nest at the beginning that Cobbo hatched from; she makes a nest with a duvet to lay the injured Cobbo on when she first brings him into her flat; she crawls to a swan's nest in the reeds after nearly drowning in the river and lastly, she dreams her mother floats her off on a swan's nest to start a new life "...somewhere Scandinavian". This last nest was always going to be the most difficult to show on stage because it's supposed to float "...out into the flood... out on a wild sea." How this last nest moment was staged would inevitably influence how all the other nests were made.

From the outset the writer imagined the nest would be a swing. He was inspired by the large, round, basket-like swings you see in children's playgrounds that can swing in any direction. It's not the writer's job to design the set, but the idea of a swing seemed irresistible when imagining a big nest rising up on flood water then being tossed about on a rough sea. But when the designer and director seriously thought about making a large swing on stage they quickly realised it was highly impractical. The show tours to a variety of venues. Not every theatre would have somewhere strong enough and the right height to hang a swing. To make a structure to support a swing would be problematic. Something strong enough would be heavy and bulky to tour and would necessarily dominate the set design. Also, where would this huge nest go during the rest of the show when it wasn't being used?

After much deliberation, the set design included a counterbalance mechanism instead. This would allow an actor to lever a small platform into the air with Annie and the nest perched on it and bob it round as if floating. It was decided the nest itself would be developed in rehearsals. As the company devised the show their first attempts at the



*The final set by Trina Bramman*

earlier, static nests were made with a modified duvet placed on the set by a storyteller at the right moment. The duvet was refined into a "skud", a sort of beanbag from Ikea that has a dip in the middle like a doughnut. This felt more nest-like. However, when it came to staging the floating nest with the counterbalance and skud-nest, there were difficulties. To bring the beanbag on stage and fix it on the counterbalance at the right moment would be fiddly and distracting. There was a danger of the beanbag (and the actress) being pinched by the mechanism when the nest came down to rest. Also, the sight of the actor heaving on the lever was rather more interesting to look at than the image itself – not the desired effect!

In the end we turned to a much simpler and, hopefully, more effective solution – to use the set itself as a nest. The structure of Trina Bramman's design is a wonderful, dream-like object. Although abstract, it contains elements of a curled feather, a boat and yes, a nest. By a shift in the lighting the whole thing seems to float. When Annie finds herself in her dream, we have her walk about on the whole set as if it is one large, floating nest. When her mother appears, chopping underwater at whatever holds the nest in place with hedge clippers, she is peering and cutting under the set itself. To send the nest out into the flood Annie's mother pushes on the edge of the platform and Annie stumbles as if the whole thing has lurched off on its journey. The illusion of being tossed on the waves is made simply with sound, music, light and strong physical performance.

# Practitioner Fact File – THE DIRECTOR

**Name: Nikki Sved**

## Why did you choose to be a director?

I was more interested initially in being a performer. But at university everyone got a chance to direct and it was then that I discovered that I could do it and I liked it, and that my interest in performing informed my directing. I carried on performing when I left university, but I think the lifestyle of a director began to appeal to me more and more – having to sell yourself day to day as

a performer didn't appeal to me very much. I would have found it difficult. Also, it's easier as a director to follow your own path artistically. I'm now the Artistic Director of Theatre Alibi.



*Derek Froot as Iain & Jordan Whyte as Annie*

## How old were you?

I went to a drama group once a week from the age of seven to eighteen. I decided to be a performer then! It was at university when I was about twenty that the thought of directing entered my head, although I was given a bit of *Twelfth Night* at school to direct when I was fifteen and I really enjoyed that.

## Where/how did you train?

As I said, I belonged to a drama group, which was run by an inspirational woman. I was in school plays, did Drama O Level, Theatre Studies A level, and a degree in Drama at Exeter University. My training as a performer continued at Alibi – we got the opportunity to work with an inspirational Polish theatre company called Gardzienice, and I learnt on the job from Alibi's then Artistic Directors.

## What's your role in the process of making a show?

The writer often generates several different ideas for a show and I help choose the best one to develop. Then I read initial versions of the script and comment on them. After that, I start thinking about what means we might use to tell that story - what sort of music we might draw on, what the set should be like, how we would people the show, what sort of actors we ought to be using. Then I cast the actors. You find actors in a mixture of ways. Sometimes you're lucky enough to have worked with people that you think will be just right. Sometimes you see someone in a show who you think will be just right. So, I bring things together prior to rehearsal – people and resources.

Before we go into rehearsals, there's a research and development process. It's a bit like a playtime.

We spend a week working on an early draft of the script with the actors, the writer and the designer when we try out ideas to see if they will work. It's a really nice time ahead of rehearsals when we can try things out and if they fail miserably, it doesn't matter at all. You can take risks and try things that you've never tried before. It's a scary job making a piece of theatre. That fear can be unhelpful creatively. So, a research and development week is a way of freeing things up and allowing yourself to make more exciting and interesting decisions. As a director, I select which bits we're going to work on. I choose what seem to be key, defining moments that set the tone for the whole show. Also we tackle moments that beg a theatrical solution, things that you wouldn't imagine could be put on stage.

Between the R&D and the rehearsal process I discuss things with the writer that came up in the R&D. The other key bit of work that happens between the R&D and rehearsals is working with the designer to develop the design. It's helpful to have the designer on board from very early on in the process. Our particular style of work means that the action on stage is very integrated with the set. This requires close collaboration between the director and designer. As a director I have to think very practically about what has to happen on stage. That's a good input to the design process.

With the rehearsal process itself, a lot of the things I do are the same as in the R&D. I'm selecting what to work on and when, making sure we get through the material in time. I'm co-ordinating and bringing together all the elements, keeping my eye on the whole picture. Although people are throwing in ideas all the time, it's me who gets to say yes or no to them, because it's helpful to have one person doing that. In the end I would probably never say no to an idea if lots of people were saying yes, because I trust the people that I work with. Also, it's my job to put my own ideas in. The other thing that I do in the rehearsals is to develop performances – I help the actors to access a performance, to find the ways that characters show how they are feeling, and to discover who the characters are. My job is also to stage the scenes, to work out how to show the action in the script, but also basic things like how to get a chair off stage at the end of a scene.

Toward the end of rehearsals you have the tech week when you add the technical elements to the show. I make decisions with the lighting designer and the sound designer about how sound and light will work from moment to moment. Because I've been in rehearsals with the actors I know and understand the scenes. The lighting designer will have a very particular skill in terms of, say, having a sense of colour on stage but he doesn't know the show as well as I do. So, in the tech, we marry the two things together - it's a very intense and hefty job.

Once the show's opened, my job is a matter of looking at how it works with the whole additional element of audience response. You learn a huge amount from having an audience there. Often they respond in an entirely different way to how you expect. I'm in the luxurious position of being able to watch the audience and the show. I'll watch and make notes over several nights, then we give ourselves time to make some changes in response to those first few performances. After that, I'll be a baby-sitter for the show – I'll go out and see it several times on tour. Often shows get better and better as actors get to know it. It's also possible for things to go off the boil. So I go out on the tour now and again and give notes to the actors, which helps keep the show alive for them.

### **What is particular about working for Theatre Alibi?**

How the work is generated in the rehearsal room feels very particular. The storytelling is very particular too, if not unique. We try to make shows where we enjoy what live theatre can offer us. You often see images being constructed rather than it happening in secret. We never switch off the lights to change the set (which often makes life difficult!). We really enjoy revealing the transformations from actor to character and from location to location. We also draw on a particularly wide breadth of forms – music, film, puppetry, our set designs are quite sculptural.

# Practitioner Fact File – THE DESIGNER

**Name: Trina Bramman**

## Why did you choose to be a designer?

It was when I was looking for university courses. I was doing my Art and Design foundation course, and I had to choose something to do. I'd already decided that I wanted to do something artistic. It wasn't so much that I desperately wanted to be a theatre designer, I looked through prospectuses and the course jumped out at me. I was interested in working big, and I was also interested in making models, and when I went to visit some of the courses, I could see they were making scale models and I was entranced by them - there's something magic about scale models. Also, I saw them working on big puppets on one of the courses, big body puppets. The variation between the styles that you work in appealed to me. It seemed you could do virtually anything.

## How old were you?

I would've been 19. That was during my Foundation year – 18, 19? I always knew I wanted to do an artistic job. I was good at other things too, but I liked Art most.

## Where did you train?

Nottingham Trent University. I did a three-year degree course in Theatre Design. It gives you a chance to test your skills in all areas of theatre design – costume, lighting, propmaking. Also, you do a placement, which gives you a chance to go and work in the business. I did my placement at Komedia in Brighton working on a children's show similar to the ones I've done at Alibi, on a similar scale. We were in a church hall, working until two o'clock in the morning, so I was used to the hours before I even started earning money as a designer!

## What's your role in the process of making a show?

My role is to create everything that you can see on the stage, apart from the lighting. I work alongside the director, the musical director, the writer, the lighting designer, the actors, the musicians. It's a collaborative thing – we work off each other. We're all working together at the same time, and I take on their ideas as they work with what I give them. I create the world of the show.

The first stage is getting the script and reading it. The first thing I do is just read it for fun. You can't help but see things in it the first time. But the second time I might do little sketches in the side of the script, just things that come to mind. You start to think about the problems it throws up, the things that seem impossible to create on stage. There are always things that seem impossible.

Then we all get together as a team, all the people who are going to be working on it, and spend a week looking at the



*Craig Edwards as Cobbo on Trina's set*





*Derek Froot with chick*

difficult bits of the script, seeing how we can solve things. During that week I do little, private sketches that I don't show anyone. Also I note down the ideas that come up, if they need a chair or a platform, for example - practical things that get worked into the show, not so much aesthetic things at that point. Things that I need to take into consideration.

At the end of the Research and Development week I have a meeting with the writer and the director to discuss where the design might go visually. Then I go away and panic and start drawing things on the train on the way home, making sure I haven't forgotten anything, writing things down. Then I start coming up with the first ideas. That's usually drawings to begin with. I begin by drawing really loose sketches that no-one else would probably understand, and then I start making little models. I talk these through with the director and the writer just as a first stage and then go away again - there's a lot of working and reworking. When I've got a more definite model to show, I go through the script with the director and see how the set that I've designed might work for each part of the show.

Then it's refining it and finalising it and getting together technical drawings ready for it to be built. I also liaise with the painter about the textures and colours I want. Then we go into rehearsals. It goes mad from then on because we start making things and just getting on with it.

### **What's particular about working for Theatre Alibi?**

The fact that we all start production time together and the production team are making the props and costumes at the same time as the actors and director are creating. So we don't know about our last bit of making until the actors have finished their last bit of making. We always have a good whinge about this but it makes the whole thing more vibrant, more interesting. They're not just props that you don't care about, they're important things, key things and it's nice as a maker and a designer to be working that way. If we just made all the props before rehearsals started the quality wouldn't be as good because a lot of the decisions are made in collaboration with everything else that's going on. If you made things beforehand they wouldn't serve the action so well. I don't know how many other companies get that luxury. The design team make lots of compromises dependent on what the action needs, which is very different to rep theatre, where the design process is very separate.



*Nick Baron playing the marimba*

## Practitioner Fact File

# THE COMPOSER/MUSICAL DIRECTOR

**Name: Thomas Johnson**

### **Why did you choose to be a composer/MD?**

I studied English Literature at university. I'd specialised in Drama, but completely from an academic point of view. And I hadn't actually done any theatre at all prior to that. But I've been a musician since I was six years old. I came out of university thinking, "What the hell do I do now?" By pure chance my cousin was working with a touring circus that summer and he said, "Do you fancy just joining in for a laugh for the summer?" My cousin and I had been playing music together since we were children so I thought yeah, why not, it'll be good fun to do that for a while after college. So I went and toured the South West of England with the circus, with my cousin, playing mad music. At the end of that summer it just came together in my mind that I'd been really interested in Drama from an academic perspective at University for three years and I'd been a musician since I was six, but doing music with this circus just made something happen in my brain. I thought, this is what I want to do - I want to do theatre in a practical sense but bring my musical skills and experience to bear.

### **How old were you?**

I was twenty-four, something like that.

### **Where did you train?**

I did English at Oxford University, but I had no formal music training as a composer. I started on the violin at the age of six. I went through the process of a classical training. Then, when I was twelve, I bought a guitar and taught myself how to play. Much later when I was 24 or so, I learnt the accordion for a theatre show, and I've ended up playing the accordion quite a lot since then. But fiddle is my first instrument still.

## What's your role in the process of making a show?

The first thing I do is read the script. Not particularly carefully, just read it to get the general sense of it. Then I have to decide what musical instruments to use. That's the very beginning of the job and in a way it's harder than it sounds. Within that decision I start also to think about the style – whether or not there's going to be period music, whether or not it's going to be geographically specific to where the play is set, is it going to have a folky feel, a classical feel, a jazzy feel, talking very broadly. Then I have to find the musicians and employ them, which takes ages. This is all quite a long way ahead of time, before the production starts to rehearse.

Then I'll read the script again, but very much more thoroughly this time, so I really get the shape and rhythm of it. I'm looking at this point for where the music should go in the play, picking moments where I think there's a gear change in the dynamic of the play, the rhythm of it. I go all the way through the script marking where music goes and also what it might feel like, "This paragraph might be clarinet and mandolin, that bit might be a soprano sax solo." While I'm doing that I start to get a sense of different themes that build up throughout the whole show. And I'll start to make those decisions when I read the script. I'm not particularly thinking what the music is at that point, more like titles. That's all done before we start rehearsing.

When we start rehearsing, I write the music. I don't write any music until the first day of rehearsals



*Howard Jacobs playing sax*

because I want the music to be completely integral to the whole process. I don't want to go off on a tangent that isn't useful for the show, so I make sure I'm constantly writing music in response to what I'm seeing in rehearsals. Writing the music can take up to four weeks. The writing process is a combination. First I'll sit in rehearsals watching the actors work with the director, taking notes about how long scenes are lasting, the feel of the scenes and how the music might work. Then I'll go away and write some music and teach it to the musicians and help them find the right interpretation. Then the musicians and I will go in to the rehearsals and place music into a particular scene. That happens back and forth through the whole rehearsal process.

There comes a point when you've got to the end of the play when you go back to the beginning and tighten it all up. The director does that as well, but my job is to make all the music sound nice and make sure the actors and the musicians know how the music works with the text. Also, I tighten up all the cue points and make sure it's all flowing with a really good rhythm.

Then the show opens and my job after the show opens is to take thousands of notes. That's to help the musicians and the actors know where they're making mistakes, whether a particular piece of music could be louder or whether they could hold back the moment to start it, for example, lots of really detailed things. I'll do that on the first and second night. Then I'll come back half way through the tour and do another load of notes and then that's the end of my job!

## What is particular about working for Theatre Alibi?

It's a lovely company to work with. Very friendly. Very organised. There's a lot of technical support, a lot of people around to help you. Sometimes I'm working with a company and I feel in a bit of a vacuum. There might not be anyone who can go out and find me CDs or a piece of music I want to hear, for example. There's a lot of support at Alibi.

Stylistically, I suppose, Alibi is much more a storytelling company than most companies I've worked with. Which is interesting for me, because it's subtly different to what I'm used to. I find that exciting.

# Rehearsal Games and Exercises

A sense of 'play' has always been key to Theatre Alibi's approach, informing every aspect of our theatre making, from team building and warm-ups to generating, rehearsing and performing each show. Below are some of the games and exercises we use :

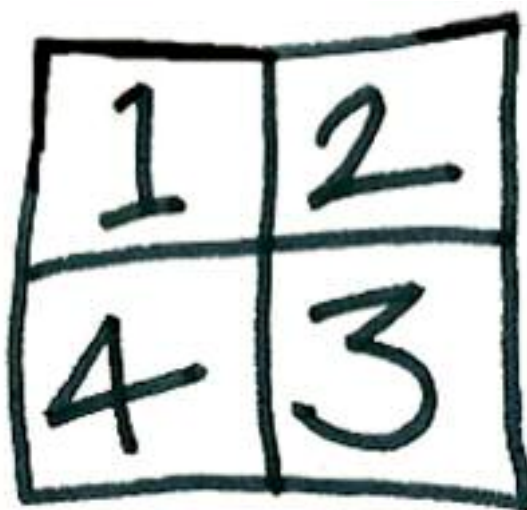
## Making a Graph of the Show

We use this exercise at the beginning of rehearsals to get a sense of the shape of a show.

In small groups, spend some time thinking what is the central question the show asks the audience. The question must have a yes/no answer. For example, "Will the central character ever find happiness?" Or "Will x and y ever get together?" Or "Is Z a good person?" Or "Will grandpa's silver watch ever be found?" etc. On a large sheet of paper draw a graph. The horizontal axis represents the sequence of events as the story unfolds. The vertical axis represents the answer to the question, with YES at the top and NO at the bottom. Draw a line on the graph to show what the audience might think at each moment in the story. You should end up with a pattern of peaks and troughs that show the shape of the show.

## Four Square

Mark out a square on the floor with masking or electrical tape about four metres by four metres. Divide the square into four equal squares and number them clockwise 1,2,3 and 4. Get a large ball or football. One person stands in each small square and the rest of the players form a queue outside the big square. To play, the person in box 1 serves the ball by bouncing it once and hitting it upwards with the palm of their hand so it lands in someone else's square. That person returns the ball by hitting it upwards with the palm of their hand into another player's square and so on. Play continues until someone fails to return a shot or someone knocks the ball right out of the square. The disqualified player joins the back of the queue and a new player steps into square 4. All the other players move round clockwise towards the server.



## Shoe Game

Everybody takes off their shoes – one person has them all in a pile at their feet. Stand in a circle. The player with the shoes takes one and throws it to a player on the other side of the circle. That person throws it to another player and so on until everyone has caught and thrown the shoe and it has returned to the first player. Carry on throwing the shoe in the same pattern. When everyone is used to this, player one picks up another shoe and throws it after the first, so there are two shoes travelling back and forth across the circle. Gradually player one introduces more and more shoes until, ideally, they are all in circulation.



*Derek Froot with swan puppet*

### Throw a ball behind you

To be played in groups, with one ball between you. The person who has the ball throws it over their head behind them and someone else must catch it. The aim of the game is collectively to prevent the ball touching the floor for as long as possible. The game is improved if everyone is moving around the space. Players can suggest ways in which the game may be played more effectively

### Keep a ball in the air

Stand in a circle and keep the ball in the air by tapping it upwards (as in volley ball), passing it across the circle. Begin by counting collectively and see how high you can go before the ball is dropped.

A few thoughts: Don't apologise! Take your time and relax. Try not to be 'frightened' of or to 'attack' the ball. Take suggestions from participants for rules that might allow the

group to keep the ball in the air for a higher count. It's a good game to return to several times over a period of time and see how skills improve.

### Grandmother's Footsteps

One person (Grandmother) stands at one end of the room, facing the wall. The rest of the group stand at the other end of the room, facing Grandmother. They try secretly to approach Grandmother, who at any moment can turn around. If she sees anyone moving, they are sent back to the beginning. Try to see how far you can get away with cheating!



*Craig Edwards, Cerianne Roberts as Mum and Jordan Whyte*

## **Yes Let's!**

Anyone can suggest an activity and everyone shouts out "Yes Let's!" and carries out the suggestion with as much enthusiasm as they can possibly muster. No one is to suggest "Let's stop"! It's a useful game to refer back to if you're trying to remind pupils to approach suggestions with a spirit of commitment.

## **Touch backs of knees**

Get into pairs. Each person tries to touch the other on the back of their knees, whilst avoiding being touched themselves...

## **Impulses**

Partners face each other. One of you will be sending an impulse (A) and the other receiving (B). On an out-breath, 'A' touches 'B' on the shoulder, stomach or forehead. In response and on an out-breath, 'B' moves away the specific part of the body that has been touched and then returns to a neutral position ready for the next 'impulse'. Try to work as precisely as possible.

## **A point of balance**

Work in pairs. Face your partner and stand with your toes almost touching. Hold each other's hands, maintain eye contact and slowly lean back until your arms are straight and you've found a point of balance. Slowly bend your knees, keep leaning out and move down until both of you are sitting on the floor. Come back to standing, while leaning out and finally draw yourselves towards each other so that you're no longer taking each other's weight. Try to complete the exercise with no talking.

## **The wrong name...**

Each person walks around the room, points at objects and shouts out the wrong name for them!

## **Opening the door**

Working individually, and on a given command, each person mimes opening a door, seeing what is behind it and responding to it. A long lost relative, a disgusting ball of slime, an adorable kitten... It's important to try not to predict what's behind the door. Surprise yourself.

## **One word storytelling**

Tell a story in pairs. Use one word each. Don't pause. How is the game improved if you keep active? Walk around the room. Try playing a game at the same time. Mirroring? Touching the backs of knees? How does the game affect the story? Watch other pairs at play.

## **Keeping equidistant**

Each person chooses two other members of the group. Don't say who they are. On a given command they must attempt to remain an equal distance from each of them.

Some members of the group can step out and watch if the game is repeated. Look at the quality of interaction and the movement of the group.



*Craig Edwards as Cobbo*

## Text and game play

In groups of two or three write a love scene, preferably with some element of conflict. Keep it simple, just two or three lines each.

Once everyone is secure with their lines, try playing a game while speaking. Allow the game to influence the speaking of the lines. Really play the game, don't show it.

Try out different games. What effect do they have? Try contrasting games – very still ones perhaps or ones that need a great deal of movement. Do they illuminate the text in a particular way? Select the game or games that work best and show your piece to the rest of the group.

You might want to use this as an acting exercise, using the game play as part of the rehearsal process working towards a more naturalistic version. Remove the game but ask the actors to work with the memory of having played it

You may choose to use the game play to inform staging or indeed as part of a devising process that incorporates games as part of the finished piece.

Another option is to use game play that isn't necessarily obvious to an audience (for example games that use eye contact) as a means of maintaining genuine interaction between performers.

## Props becoming different things

Select a prop and use it as something different, so a toy spade can become a dagger or a turnip can become a ticking bomb! Limiting your means creatively can squeeze you into being inventive and playful.

## Suggested Reading

<b>Theatre Games</b>	Clive Barker
<b>Impro</b>	Keith Johnstone
<b>Impro for Storytellers</b>	Keith Johnstone
<b>101 Drama Games</b>	David Farmer