

Chapter 2

The “Lottopus” Series

The theme and points of departure

The “Lottopus” series is the first of its kind for the company. Its intention is to involve community and company members’ outcomes within the same piece. This contrasts with prior experiences of back-to-back performances of community outcomes along with touring a company work.

Typical for the company’s approach is the fact that the theme: games, competition, strategy involves things known and shared by everyone. It allows for a variety of aspects of everyday life to be put under a microscope to be reinvented in a creative manner. One interesting point is that obvious references to art works based on the theme of the last one hundred and fifty years have thus far not been taken on board during the devising process. Individuals and groups have suggested their own sub-themes and developed them during the two residencies that will be discussed in some depth below.

During an initial period it was decided to have company members establish their own personalities²² for performance. A number of characters from a whodunnit akin to a Cluedo-type game (Clue in North America), turned out to facilitate company members’ devising some material that they might perform as part of combined works. The acquired knowledge of, say, a Mrs. Peacock, Reverend Green or Professor Plum allowed us to take something very known, apply the ‘1% tilt’ as we do and develop it within the context of any “Lottopus” project. It also aided in the creation of characters, wherever relevant, during our residencies.

Here is how we described the work in excerpts from our programmes: “a devised piece based on the spirit of games and competition, in particular a well-known board game. The project was initially inspired by the social icon known as the Lottery which merges with the hard work of an Opus whilst combining the ordinary, the extraordinary, discovery, enjoyment and humour”.

This was a new approach for us, so we decided to begin with the company looking into how we could develop site-type specific works²³ involving a promenade. We created somewhat more than the bare bones of scenes for company members only, leaving adequate space for further definition once we were working with our community groups. This ensured our being able to harmonise these scenes well with those developed during residencies, taking performance venues and individual spaces into account.

*The two documented residencies*²⁴ The following discussions follow a single structure for clarity. This structure has been constructed to allow us to review a variety of aspects of the two residencies, in particular those involving devising raised throughout the previous chapter.

Our two residencies are typical and unusual at the same time. They are typical as they were both arranged with educational organisations as is fairly often the case, one at university (Higher Education) level, one at college (Further Education) level.²⁵ They are unusual as the community groups involved did not choose each other but became one by way of recruitment.²⁶ Audiences were to consist of invitees along with the general public.

“Lottopus 1” – Bridgewater Hall residency

Participants Thirty-two students from the Department of Contemporary Arts, Crewe and Alsager Faculty of The Manchester Metropolitan University. All were pursuing either the BA (Hons) Creative Arts or the BA (Hons) Combined Studies degree, normally involving students studying two arts subjects concurrently. Twenty students represented dance and twelve music; inevitably cross-overs took place.

The performance venue The company had been invited to run a number of projects at the Bridgewater Hall, Manchester’s magnificent major concert venue. This project residency was quite exciting for us as we were both instantly overcome by the architecture of the new building, one involving vast open spaces as well as smaller, more focused areas – all based on sophisticated geometries. There are windows everywhere looking out towards very attractive kinetic urban environment ‘theatre sets’. The acoustics range from the most

expansive to the surprisingly intimate. This first project was to involve a promenade performance throughout the entire venue *except* the main concert hall. The space included foyers at three levels, staircases, lifts and the smaller performance space, the Barbirolli Room. Performances took place on the 27th and 28th of February and the 1st of March 1998.

The residency Prior to commencing the project, discussions were held with staff and students. The aim of the project was to follow the devising process culminating in public performances. It was to emphasise cross-arts collaboration. Four introductory workshops, which – similar to the entire residency – normally started off with separate one-hour music and dance technique classes, provided the platform for the participants to understand and taste the company’s working process. Following this, members of the company led an intensive week-long residency with subsequent visits to the site. One rehearsal took place during the final week before the three performances.

Evaluation and triangulation was easy, both within small groups as well as in the large group context, with the company and with other students and staff members, three of whom acted as rehearsal directors towards the end of the devising process.

The devising process We ‘created circumstances’ through our introductory workshops concerning how we work and demonstrating some of the ‘whodunnit?’ characters’ movement material. This material was to be structured and used in the finale tango section – described below – and other sequences. These workshops provided a foundation in terms of working style and dramatic content. All of this helped facilitate the choice of the games-based notions. During this process we made it clear that to enable our intentions to be received, the ‘1% tilt’ would achieve more significant results than ignoring any conventions or acquired knowledge our public might have. With this in mind, the ‘why’ we do what we do is a natural product, be it a difficult one for students who have not been challenged in this way before. The feeding back of intention, motive, material and (later in all cases) structure created an ideal foundation for heightened ownership. Regular feedback mechanisms were set up to avoid one group (that is,

of dancers or musicians) getting too far ahead of the other as our goal was to have dance and music support one another.

The students were offered the opportunity to put together their own small groups during this period. Self-selection can be a positive thing in terms of empowerment and the desired comfort factor within the working environment. Each group chose a word (sub-theme) to work on in small group devising. Interestingly, none changed throughout the entire project. All groups made a selection relating to what might be called 'games people play' as opposed to games of sport; therefore, similar to the South Hill Park residency, the National Lottery was not adopted as a sub-theme.

This cross-art devising process was new to a number of participants. It meant that questions of initiative and leadership needed to be carefully dealt with to avoid shy members' becoming background artists and extrovert members' taking over too much. Let's look at an example. A group of dancers and two electric bass players started creating material separately based on the chosen theme. Their first full group session took place somewhat late, by which time the dance was tightly structured and the music was more free and improvised. All involved felt that what had been devised seemed to be somewhat incompatible; the music tended to be atmospheric, slowly evolving, the movement material more structured, representing a different dynamic altogether. It is here where different working vocabularies and methods led to a moment where outside advice became useful. This involved both dancers' and musicians' describing what they were creating, what tools they were using to reach this and why they had chosen their approaches. Once this had been established, all discovered that their 'problem' was not as great as they had perceived it. Having shared their experiences, they then took great care in trying things out together and explaining how their work was being developed. It therefore comes as little surprise that it was possible to combine a great deal of their original material together into their final merged work, which in no way lost sight of the theme and the two groups' as well as each individual's abilities.

The next two examples concern large group collaborations. The first of these examples, the tango finale, is atypical in that the choice had come from the company. We had previously generated material and

had created the skeleton of a structure which served as a good basis for a longish scene (ca. 4 mins. 30 seconds). The choreographic director created movement sequences with the dancers which used the key murder weapons (e.g., rope, candlestick, dagger) as stimuli. This material was then manipulated, spliced and juxtaposed using a range of dynamic and spatial aspects. Furthermore, two of the dancers had created a duet based on a stereotypical tango applying the '1% tilt'. This was also developed by and with the students.

The musicians worked on the tango in the following manner.²⁷ Based on the initial full-group workshop they then commenced composition sessions destined to identify all sorts of devising problems. They were asked to learn the fundamentals of tango writing and then to attempt to devise one. They sometimes worked in smaller units or even individually to generate material. This exercise demonstrated qualities of the musicians that some peers might not have previously identified. These ranged from imagination, dynamics and confidence to conservatism. A few lazier ones came up with less material, but of the tangos created and workshopped, two showed great strengths and great differences as well and were unanimously chosen for further development. One was a more traditional, skilled tango and the other was one that fit well into the company's style of including humour wherever possible whilst applying the '1% tilt'. Taking the sonata as our rough guide, a tango in two themes was created with a totally unexpected ragtime interrupting it somewhere in the middle for even greater contrast and laughter. What looked to be a very difficult exercise provided some of the best music the company had ever seen developed.

Company elements of note: Surrealism (movement material including the simulated use of some of the murder weapons and the inclusion of a ragtime in the middle of the tango's structure); found objects (movement material); the '1% tilt' (the use of the tango with all it implies and how this was treated).

The second example has to do with the fact that often a group of young people feel that they must become somewhat schizophrenic whilst making contemporary art as the art of their daily life, primarily popular art, is rarely or never included. It was decided to make a surrealist dance (read: techno) number in which the most prevalent

component, loudness, becomes impossible as some thirty unamplified voices were to provide an entire dance soundtrack.

Here the dancers (of which only one studied music) had no qualms about participating in music-making as they were all familiar with the techno genre. First the group set out to identify fundamental ‘constant sounds’ (for example, drum and bass tracks) and then to add effects through the use of the most versatile instrument, the voice. After some initial embarrassment by a few, the delight of discovering how dance music actually is pieced together was communally shared. The singers – that is, all student musicians and dancers – worked with the company’s dancers (see Illustration 1) investigating how to structure the dance and to create a transparent musical score for that structure so that at the performance there would be a clear notion of length. The music took the form of a ‘techno choir’ producing and recreating vocally the sounds associated with that genre.

Company elements of note: humour (the material and the context); the ‘What? factor’ (as soon as recognition of ultra-loud intimate music taking place in the form of an old fashioned choir); recycling and found sound objects (the students’ recollection of the material and structuring of techno).

A final example is provided to demonstrate how in one case staying with the theme was combined with the notion of process as a structuring element. A student choreography was recycled using bricks, an object from everyday life. Having been suggested as potentially appropriate for the project, the original piece was adapted to focus on the theme by demonstrating how young people play games of possession. (A young voice shouting “Mine!” comes to mind.) At the same time, company members were tackling problems of structure in the totality of the Bridgewater Hall performances. Not only was the placement of single scenes important, but also a number of transitions were needed to lead or accompany members of the public from one point to another. It was decided to create a number of miniature brick scenes from the original choreography – a theme and three variations – each lasting no longer than one minute, to serve as transitions at four different locations. Secondly, the composer – as there was but one musician involved with these dancers – decided not to use the bricks theme at all in any obvious fashion, but instead to develop four

miniatures that build up to a climax in the fourth transition. This composer was a specialist in music technology, a frequent internet user in fact. His four pieces follow a process of construction from a fairly incoherent electroacoustic pop number to a final one minute piece that leads to the climax where John F. Kennedy is heard declaring: "*Ich bin ein Berliner*", sound material pulled off the internet. Of course it is only once one connects the vocal sounds with the Berlin Wall that the link to the bricks can be made. These transitions, the first and last appearing on the video, demonstrate the combination of ultra low-tech (the bricks) and reasonably hi-tech sound work, as pleasantly suited for each other (see Illustration. 3).

One other subject that deserves attention is that of 'newness'. How innovative was 'Lottopus 1' and how innovative were the separate sections? Before one can answer these two questions, we must investigate to whom the word newness is being applied. Some of the adventure in the devising process demonstrated newness to the performers/devisors where a 'seasoned' member of the public might be able to contextualise the innovation in a different manner, and, conversely, someone unfamiliar with the genre may find everything highly innovative. The amount of newness varied greatly in the separate sections leading to a performance work that demonstrated participants' diversity. If there were no through-line, this would have led to a very episodic performance, but as there was the theme and the Cluedo-type materials that were virtually omnipresent, this did not prove to be a handicap. Newness was present in each and every section, all of which were accessible, making the finished product a colourful one as well as one that combined challenge and enjoyment.

Structure and running order Other than the one set of four one minute transitions performed by the 'bricks' group, there were no pre-imposed structural devices of any sort for the smaller groups. This led to different structuring principles being applied as the groups became increasingly process or block-oriented and sections became more 'narrative' or 'episodic' accordingly. What this demonstrates is that there is no axiom that defines how structure should be determined within this type of devising process once it has been decided that the process is not structure-driven.

How did we deal with the dynamic curve in this project? As in any time-based activity, the use of tension and release, as old-fashioned as that may sound (call it breathing), needs to be reckoned with. If climax, inertia, diversity and contrast are not taken into proper account, this will lead towards less successful results than when this element of dynamic evolution forms part of the structuring process. This notion of dynamic curve operates at the level of single sections of a piece as well as entire performances. Company project leaders take an advisory role in discussions of this type. As these students were working at the level of Higher Education, this rarely proved necessary in terms of the individual sections.

As far as the running order is concerned, the primary focus, alongside the use of space,²⁸ is again the dynamic curve. Having visited the site several times before the students joined the company there, a basic running order was established (in consultation with the students). There turned out to be very few changes on the spot once everyone arrived. Those that did evolve made the piece more seamless, often involving the inclusion of transitions, the avoidance of revisiting a site once used, use of a specific space. Other than the knowledge that the piece was to end with the finale section and begin with the introduction of the characters, nothing was predetermined. The dynamic curve/contrast/usage of site formula proved the best manner of creating the running order.

Rehearsals at the site Rehearsals at Bridgewater Hall preceding the performances were noteworthy for a number of reasons. The most relevant was seeing the participants' delight – after long descriptions of the venue – when they became aware of the beautiful, vast spaces on offer. This meant their rediscovering the work and making the dances more site-specific through the discovery of aspects of their spaces including acoustic, geometry and the specific aspects and views of each area. As we drew closer to our performance dates, the excitement rose as the piece became increasingly site-dependent.

The Bridgewater Hall was, at the time of writing, a very new venue. *Idée Fixe* was one of the first community arts groups, particularly incorporating innovative music and dance, that had been invited to use the foyer spaces. We not only learned about the elegance and potential of the specific sites, we also became very aware of the newness of our

venture, negotiating do’s and don’ts throughout our visits. This led to some amusing scenarios, but also provided us with an excellent opportunity to integrate with people working at the venue who will know what to expect – in as far as one can describe expectation in terms of experimental work – during the company’s future residencies there.

The performances These did uncover aspects no one could have predicted beforehand. Between the first and second performances we had to make minor adjustments allowing for better sight lines for the public. The finale seemed to take up slightly too much space during the first performance, offering the public little space in which to enjoy it. For site specific artists who are unable to do a run-through with a full public (like most of us), taking these aspects into account is a non-trivial process, but a vital one.

As with any work, the piece developed from performance to performance. The nerve levels were probably highest at the first run. As people became increasingly used to the spaces and to a public, they seemed to become more ‘at home’ with performing in front of an audience. This led to greater ownership and, where relevant, spontaneity. Please refer to the video for a “Reader’s Digest” version of the performance of “Lottopus”.

A brief evaluation Our flexible framework calls for project evaluation at the end. Besides stating the obvious, that we, company members, students, their departmental staff, the hosts at the venue and those members of the public from whom we received feedback, were generally pleased with the process and outcome of this residency, there are a number of points worth sharing.

- If we were to ‘rewind the tape’, the dancers and musicians in some of the small group pieces needed to work more closely from the start.
- This residency illustrated how carefully one must take account of the number of community participants, total time for preparation and amount of performance work to be generated.
- More time was needed with all involved at the performance site. This was a logistics exercise given the 50km distance between the workshop spaces and the venue. Even one early visit would have

had the students realising that their performance space(s) was normally larger than the one in which they were rehearsing. The site could have been slightly better used if this had been the case, although in general we felt that the site was well incorporated into all performance sequences. On the other hand, we also might have had more rehearsal time for noticing the logistical problems of the promenade and of the division of the performance/spectator space for any given sequence. The final performances lasted almost five minutes longer than run-throughs due to the complex and sometimes unexpected logistics of where best to place the spectators.

- Nonetheless, we believe that we succeeded in the project's aim of achieving an exciting cross-arts performance based on the company's approach to devising.
- Both the venue and the university have learned about the intricacies of such a project and both have investigated better logistics for such residencies/events in the future. As with any project, the company are now much better equipped in terms of dealing with eventualities based on this residency.
- Staff involvement from the university in the Bridgewater Hall project was consistent throughout. This means that the learning experience involved students, staff and company members alike. This is important as it allows Idée Fixe to achieve its stated aim of ensuring continuity.

Dramaturgy To conclude the discussion of this residency, our notion of dramaturgy deserves some attention. Musicians and dancers, some of whom also have had theatre experience, were involved. Most wanted to approach the challenge of the theme from a fairly non-literal point of view. Although it is not our goal to take artists away from areas where they feel comfortable, the theme does offer a way for people to become articulate about their art-making. Some groups succeeded in doing this better than others. The company 'in role play' from the first moment in this performance had already taken steps to treat aspects of the theme by creating characters that could be adopted to take on the challenges of each sequence they were in. Although it seemed unnecessary to ask these mature students to do the same, an exercise including that aspect might have made some of the results a

bit less cryptic in terms of thematic treatment. Given the constituency of the South Hill Park residency, use of characters proved to be a must.

“Lottopus 3” – South Hill Park Arts Centre residency

Participants Twenty-two students from East Berkshire College (Langley) studying BTec Performing Arts. None of the students was studying music; the vast majority had a drama emphasis. Nevertheless, music crept into the residency in a number of the sections created by these students.

Performance venue South Hill Park Arts Centre including the Wilde Theatre. The performance represented the last event of our two-year residency in Bracknell, Berkshire. As this is a multi-purpose venue, the sizes, shapes and purposes of the areas we visited were entirely different than those at the Bridgewater Hall. Several rooms, foyers, staircases, an outdoor garden, a cellar theatre, a café and the main theatre were ports of call during the promenade performance. The performance took place on the 28th of April 1998.

The residency The emphasis in this residency was on the students being able to devise and perform together with a professional company. The Head of Department clarified that it was his hope that the students would be able to develop their movement skills and creativity. Obviously, as the Berkshire students were younger and involved in an earlier phase of their education, clear direction was needed in terms of creating and developing material as well as in terms of demanding an atmosphere for the discipline needed in professional working circumstances.²⁹

*The devising process*³⁰ Two company workshop leaders, Evelyn Jamieson and K. B. Sedman, worked with the entire group each day for a week at the college, moving to the venue for two days including the performance date. Each day commenced with a dance technique class enabling the students to explore physical challenge and develop movement memory. Classes also focused the mind and the body underlining the professionalism and discipline required of any performing artist.

The next phase of the daily routine consisted of a workshop involving the participants' devising movement and sound material in small groups. Evelyn Jamieson had discussed the whodunnit characters and the qualities associated with them early in the week as it was clear that working from a character base would be the most comfortable approach for the participants. This allowed for an element of something to hold on to for all involved to be included immediately. They then looked into which qualities they wanted to develop and how they would go about this. The small groups were primarily self-selected and investigated essences of a single character ranging from a Sherlock Holmes-like character to a Miss Scarlet-like Cluedo personality.

Initially there was a tendency towards the mimetic. This would have been inappropriate given *Idée Fixe*'s approach, but by applying the '1% tilt', the participants were enabled to make some unknown material from the known, i.e., creating the mildly abstract or surreal from the literal.

Feedback took place on a regular basis as newly developed or revised material was shared constantly allowing for participants within small groups, but also within the entire group, to evaluate each other's work. In this way, everyone was kept up to date on how the entire set of sequences was developing, keeping the so-called 'something to hold on to factor' in everyone's mind. Of course, throughout the week, some created material was pruned as evaluation demonstrated that this material was unlikely to achieve successful outcomes.

In most cases movement material influenced sound production – often involving the voice. In the 'wall scenes' movement material was initially generated before the group investigated the sound. The dynamic of the movement representing the search for clues and the anticipation of the moment led to the development of the reactive sound qualities. In some other scenes movement and sound could be jointly created after the first exploratory workshops. In one case a text was written before movement development was investigated.

An exception musically occurred when the group heard a recording of the techno piece devised for the Bridgewater Hall performances. A number of students were so taken by this music that they requested the

opportunity to recycle it. A company member joined them in preparing and performing material for this section.

Not only was the Manchester techno piece recycled (the company also performed their choreography to a recording of this piece in a totally different space), it was also decided to recycle the finale tango music which was included in workshops from day one of the residency as well as in the performance itself.

This residency led to different aspects of collaboration than in the previous one. In this case collaboration occurred between the student group and the company in the first instance as well as within the student group itself. The Manchester residency involved separate and combined music and dance devising, along with the company, leading to a much wider collaborative experience.

By the end of the week there was a significant amount of small group material, duets, solo material and full group sections developed to take to the site the following week. A rough draft of the running order was made after the week, in the knowledge that certain sections were clearly going to work best in specific locations. The company had inspected the entire arts centre for appropriate performance spaces before the residency had commenced. A midweek visit confirmed which spaces were most appropriate for the developing sequences.

Rehearsals at the site The young artists became inspired and excited by the buildings and the spaces in which they were performing, not only influencing, but also lifting their dynamic, expression and performance levels. The parameter (other than the dynamic, which was universally increased) most influenced by the move to the site was the participants' use and sense of space.

The performance Again the reader is referred to the video for an abridged version of the result. The students gave their all to the performance. The through-line of the work and the quality of the performance were in no way disadvantaged by their lesser experience. The fact that this was a group that did not include musicians obviously led to an extremely different performance than in Manchester. Selections from this "Lottopus" performance have been interwoven with the Bridgewater Hall recordings on the recording.

An unfortunate aspect was that fewer friends and family attended than one might have expected, so we were unable to investigate how the students' achievement might have influenced developments sketched elsewhere in this booklet.

For the company the performance became much more dramatic, being influenced by and combining with the students' material. This demonstration of flexibility illustrates how *Idée Fixe* takes into account not only physical space, but also other elements including other artists when reshaping a work for individual performances. This flexibility involves expression as well as material. Back to back representations of the 'same' scene in the two venues on the video illustrate this to some extent.

Our entrance into the Wilde Theatre from the theatre café/foyer completed the promenade.³¹ This entrance by way of the same doors and aisles the public utilise transformed this performance venue into a site, a site celebrating a number of traditions. The "Lottopus 3" version of the tango was intended to heighten those celebrations for spectator and participant alike.

A brief evaluation As the Bridgewater Hall project preceded this residency and performance, we are aware of our having learned from our own experience. Obviously circumstances are dissimilar just like they are between any two projects. Nevertheless, we can speak of a feeling of slightly greater efficiency as we were able to predict 'mishaps' and other adventures with greater accuracy in Berkshire. Furthermore, our experiences during the two-year residency meant that we felt at home with and knowledgeable of the site much more than Bridgewater Hall. We will be able to make a similar statement on the latter as that residency continues. In other words, knowing a venue, its ethos and its clients is a great advantage when assembling a project like this one.

The unpredictable nature of the audience did make certain aspects of evaluation (e.g., follow-through) difficult. Nevertheless, similar to the previous residency, we have every reason to be satisfied about the outcome as well as the process.

- Some small groups better utilised their site than others. In a few cases, students seemed still to be working out their 'tale' or scene

in the venue as opposed to shaping it to the challenges of the new surroundings. Others simply found the adaptation difficult (for example, in the case of text projection from a large outdoors space through the half-opened windows separating them from their public).

- Time planning felt better. That is, no new material needed generating after the first week. This meant we were ready to move to the site for further development. Of course, if one has the opportunity to work exclusively at a site, this point is redundant. After our experience of running these residencies, our view is that great effort must be made to maximise on-site time for site-specific work.
- It is believed that the students gained a great deal of insight from this experience in terms of movement skill, development of choreographic and sound material, collaboration, discipline, interpersonal skills and of the artistic experience from conception to sharing. They knew why they were creating what they created and were generally able to communicate this well.

A final word

The company represents a step forward to anyone who joins it. Still, some (for example, international professional artists) may consider it to be a retrograde step. Why is this so? Working for and with a company like *Idée Fixe* is like a return to the womb of an artist. As we attempted to clarify in the first chapter of this booklet, many of our principles are as old as art. We clearly are celebrating late twentieth century desires (obsessions? – remember, *Idée Fixe* means obsession) for innovation whilst embracing universal understandings of heritage and tradition. This return to where we once began has repercussions.

One of these is worth sharing as it is a direct result of the “Lottopus” project. The company no longer tours. It will not perform single performances, independent of residency or relevant training. It is not a slot in a theatre’s yearly calendar. In short, not only does the company not quite fit in well-established single art-form categories, it cannot operate in the same manner as most professional artists or ensembles. This makes marketing our wares – not to mention securing proper funding – most challenging.

The fact of the matter, perhaps ironically, is that we normally have to turn down more work than we can undertake. As the approach is still so unorthodox, taking the risky step of turning the company into a full-time venture is a bit too adventurous for us at the moment. We nevertheless prefer to allow our idealism to lead, therefore avoiding bringing us into the compromise of using up a great deal of energy in whistle-stop tours that virtually negate our aims. Perhaps one day we will 'go back to Go' and be enabled to operate from one single locality. Or will jet set or even virtual community arts (perhaps involving facilitation on-line) become a mode of operation in the twenty-first century?

