Angel Exit Theatre

THE SECRET GARDEN

EDUCATION PACK
Contents

1- Introduction by Director
2- Synopsis of the Play and Key Ideas
3- Cast and Characters
4- Staging of the Play- Jacques Lecoq & Physical Theatre
5- Interviews with Creative Team – Actor, Designer & Composer
6- Frances Hodgson Burnett and the Victorian Era
7- Theatre Games and Devising Exercises
8- Useful resources
1- Introduction by Tamsin Fessey - Director

Why we chose *The Secret Garden* and the challenges of adapting and staging it.
Lynne and I had vivid and fond memories of reading it and seeing a TV adaptation when we were children and so it sprang to mind when we were looking for a show which would be suitable for the whole family. On re-reading the novel we were struck by the fact that it was all about grief and loss, and quite dark and difficult subjects for young audiences but that it dealt with these subjects in such a light, playful way, which left the reader feeling revitalized and in awe of nature. We love the fact that Mary Lennox is a spoilt horrible child at the start of the story but that she goes on such a massive journey of discovery. This makes for a great central character. We were also tantalized by the world of Misselthwaite manor, a huge grey house full of secrets on the Yorkshire moors. The sense of intrigue and suspense is exciting to us. The challenge of creating a garden on stage was also appealing.

We immediately decided to have a puppet for the robin, who is so central to the storyline, and I think he comes across really well in the stage version. There is just the right amount of human-ness in him to make him engaging without making him into a Disneyesque bird. In the book there is a whole chapter from the robin’s point of view which we were going to use but we cut it out in the end and just decided to have little moments where the robin seems to be talking to the characters and audience through his reactions. Once we’d decided to have puppets this was also the obvious way of representing Dickon’s animals, although we only have a fox and a mouse. I’m really pleased with how this has translated to the stage.

The Use of "Chorus" in the Show
The chorus has been one of the trademarks of our shows to date. We love having a chorus of storytellers who can set up and manipulate a world which the characters can inhabit. They are the link between the audience and the characters, they can comment on the action on stage, they can help provide humour and lightness of touch. They can move time on a few hours, weeks, months, change the set and become characters in the flash of an eye. They are what moves our theatre beyond naturalism.

This chorus is slightly different to the one we used for our last show, *Moonfleet*, because in that show the chorus arrived all together and all of the characters came from within the chorus, but this time Mary exists independently of the chorus at the beginning. One of the big questions we posed ourselves during our research and development weeks was who are the chorus? Obviously they are shape shifters and can play many different characters but what do they represent? What angle are they telling the story from? We decided to make them the “green shoots” they represent the positive life force which goes throughout the story. They are nature’s healers. They arrive to help Mary on her difficult journey. They gently nudge her in the right direction and watch over her.

How Angel Exit Works on Bringing a Play to Life
The process we followed this time consisted of:
- Initial meetings with Co-Producers, engagement of creative team and some actors (January)
- A week of research and development in May – The chorus. This week only involved actors and director.
- A week of research and development in July – Design, puppetry, character improvisations. This week involved the designer, stage manager, composer, script adviser and puppet maker.
2 - Synopsis of the Play and Key Ideas

The Secret Garden is set in 1899. Mary Lennox is shipped from the vibrant country of India after a cholera epidemic kills her parents and their staff. She is taken to Yorkshire, to her uncle’s mysterious old house, Misselthwaite Manor, on the North York moors. Her Uncle is absent and Mary is looked after by Martha, and the strict Mrs Medlock. Mary is left to play alone and as she is looking around the gardens she meets the gardener, Ben Weatherstaff, and his friendly robin. She also finds a garden that seems to have no way in. the robin helps her uncover the key and then the door and Mary goes into the secret garden, a wild place that helps Mary to understand nature and helps her begin to open up and feel happier about herself. This journey is continued as Mary meets Dickon, Martha’s brother who has an affinity with the animals and the moor, and then by following strange wailings in the house she discovers a sickly boy who turns out to be her cousin, Colin. Colin has been shut away by his Uncle who is mourning the loss of his wife, Colin’s mother. The mother died while she was in the secret garden and this is why the garden has been locked
up. Mary and Dickon help Colin out to the garden where he learns to walk, and like Mary, learns to be a better person and to overcome his grief and loneliness and make friends. Colin believes that the garden has magic powers and he uses this to call his father back from his travels. When Archibald returns he discovers that he has a fit healthy son, and he too is helped to master his grief through the power of the garden.

Tamsin and Lynne had already discussed the key ideas of the story with Phil (our script adviser). After the actors had read the script a few times we asked everyone to note down three key ideas that they got from the script, and then we discussed them. The same ideas kept coming up with slightly different wording. They are the themes and ideas that affect all of the characters in the play to some extent. If a theme is only relevant to one character then it is not a key idea.

The three that we decided were most important were:

**Grief**

Nearly everyone in the show seems to be mourning the loss of someone close to them. Mary, Colin, Archibald and Mrs Medlock are obvious examples of this, but even the fox is found as a cub when its parents were drowned, the robin seems to have lost its family when it was a fledgling, and Ben has some kind of unspoken grief. Martha and Dickon do not suffer from grief so directly but we decided that their father seems pretty absent so he has probably died, and the actors decided that one of their siblings had died while still an infant as would have happened frequently in those days. The Sowerbys are used to the cycles of nature and seeing things being born and dying. They are closest to this circle of life, and so are less obviously mourning.

**Growth**

The garden itself is almost a character in this play. It has been a symbol of self discovery in literature for centuries. Through watching the garden grow and change, Mary, and then Colin are able to grow themselves. Dickon and Ben also take great pleasure in seeing things grow, and Ben’s wife Lilias loved watching things grow. It is the power of nature which enables Mary to go on such a journey.

**Friendship**

Often with key ideas the opposite is also encompassed, so in this case, loneliness. Friendship/ companionship/ familial love is what all of the characters are missing at the start of the play (apart from Dickon and Martha, who provide the mirror to show Mary what she is lacking). By the end Archibald, Mary and Colin have formed bonds of friendship, and this has reunited the household of servants as well.
3 - Cast and Characters

We have changed some facts about the characters from what it says in the book. We have aged Mary, Dickon, Martha and Colin up, and Ben Weatherstaff down, and some of the facts we give here are artistic license.

Staged with only five actors, *The Secret Garden* uses multi-role playing. Mary is played by one actor. The other four actors make up our chorus. They appear first as chorus and then become the other characters in the story.

Actor 1 – Mary Lennox  
Actor 2 – Chorus, Martha, Robin  
Actor 3 – Chorus, Colin, Mrs Medlock, the Fox  
Actor 4 – Chorus, Dickon  
Actor 5 – Chorus, Archibald Craven, Ben Weatherstaff, the Fox

The Chorus
We call the chorus the “green shoots”. They arrive during Mary’s moment of despair and they trigger her journey towards recovery. They cannot tell her what to do but they can gently nudge her in the right direction. They embody the positive sense of growth and the power of nature, they are a healing force. They are very close to Dickon and the animals in spirit. They are intuitive, instinctual and in tune with their surroundings and have heightened senses. They also like to have a bit of fun.

Mary Lennox
Mary Lennox is twelve years old. She is not a pleasant character at the start of the story. She is unhealthy, neglected by her parents, but spoilt by her servants. She gets her own way, speaks her mind and has no friends. She is essentially lonely. She doesn’t like dirt or being outside, she has lived a very protected life and doesn’t even know how to dress herself. She changes after she has discovered the garden, and watched things grow. Although it seems to become Colin’s story once she discovers him, the fact that she is helping someone else to heal is the ultimate stage of her own journey. She goes from being selfish to selfless. She learns to care.

Mrs Medlock
Mrs Medlock is the housekeeper at Misselthwaite Manor and is in charge while Archibald Craven is away. She is a menacing presence and she is charged with keeping the secrets of the house. However even Medlock is cowed by the tantrums and demands of Master Colin. Mrs Medlock lost her husband 10 years ago.

Martha Sowerby
Martha is gentle housemaid, promoted to ladies maid on the arrival of Mary Lennox. She is slightly clumsy and unsure of herself in this role, and is constantly worried that she will lose her job. She comes from a family of eight children and knows that her income is vital to help her mother. She loves her brothers and sisters and mother, and often talks about them although she only gets to see them once a month.

The Robin
The robin has lived in the garden since it was born. Robins are quite territorial and don’t mind being around humans. This one is particularly close to Ben and then to Mary. Frances Hodgson Burnett had a robin in her garden that she came to see as a friend (see Frances Hodgson Burnett section below).
Ben Weatherstaff
Ben is a retired sea captain, and lives in a small cottage on the moors. He comes to work in the
garden every day. He is kept on because Lilias Craven liked him. He is a lonely figure who
gradually softens towards Mary, as he realises how like him she is. Ben suffers from Rheumatism.

Dickon Sowerby
Brother of Martha, Dickon is fourteen years old. He can charm animals and he understands them
intuitively. He lives with his mother on the moors and spends all his time out there rain or shine.
He grows vegetables in a garden to help his mother.

Captain the Fox
Found by Dickon almost drowned as a baby and nursed back to health, Captain has become
Dickon’s companion. He often comes and walks by his side. He is still a wild fox however and
often needs a lot of coaxing and is easily startled by new people and places.

Archibald Craven
Archibald is in mourning for his wife Lilias who died twelve years ago when she fell from a branch
in the secret garden. She was hurt badly so that she gave birth early to her son, Colin, and died shortly after herself. Archibald is unable to look at his son because he reminds him too much of Lilias and because he is scared that Colin will die soon anyway. Archibald goes walking in the mountains to try and forget his sadness. He particularly likes the Tyrol. He is a generous soul, and used to be a much loved intelligent man. He has slightly crooked shoulders, but rumours have spread that he is a hunchback.

Colin Craven
Colin Craven is twelve years old. He has been kept in his room, overprotected and told that he is ill since he was a baby. He never knew his mother and his father won’t look at him. He has terrible tantrums, and the staff of the house are frightened of him. He has been made ill through his tantrums and his body has become weak through lack of use, however there is nothing medically wrong with him. He is terrified that he might die and it is only through meeting Mary, hearing about the garden and discovering it that he learns to walk and laugh like any other boy. He is a clever child and has learnt all about the world through his books before he actually discovers it for himself.
Jacques Lecoq founded a school of Physical theatre and ensemble creation in Paris. Lecoq is one of the biggest names in contemporary theatre. He expounded truly original methods of performing and in doing so changed the face of international theatre. He opened his theatre school in Paris in 1956 and taught his unique theatre methodology there until he died in 1999. In *The Moving Body* Lecoq shares his philosophy of performance, improvisation, masks, movement and gesture. Neutral mask, character masks, bouffons, acrobatics, commedia and clowns are all famous components of the Lecoq training.

Physical theatre is a term used to describe a mode of performance which prioritises the physical, visual and multi-sensory aspects of a production over the text. This does not mean that there is no text, but that the text of the play must be immersed in or work alongside the physical representation or interpretation of the language. Physical theatre can draw upon dance, mask work, puppetry, acrobatics, clowning, mime, buffoon and music to add to the theatricality of a play. Multi role playing, chorus work and larger than life characters are also common in physical theatre.

The physical theatre of today has its roots in the work of European Theatre practitioners such as Jerzy Grotowski, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Antonin Artaud, however, more ancient styles of theatre including Greek theatre and commedia dell'arte, were already using many of the traditions common to modern physical theatre.

Angel Exit specialise in ensemble storytelling, frequently using a chorus who can narrate, move scenery, create soundscapes, portray another character’s inner emotions, and comment on the action, and all of this is aiming to support the action of the scenes.

Influential physical theatre companies who have inspired us include Complicite, Frantic Assembly, Kneehigh Theatre, Improbable and the David Glass Ensemble.

Angel Exit Theatre use a devising process, a collaborative way of creating new plays (see the process section of the directors introduction), which sees everyone from the actor to the stage manager, the designer and the composer contributing ideas which the writer and then the director shape. This is different to the writer/director lead theatre which is common in this country.
What does ensemble mean?
The definition of ensemble in the dictionary is:
- a group of musicians, actors, or dancers who perform together.
- a scene or passage written for performance by a whole cast, choir, or group of instruments.
- the co-ordination between performers executing such a passage.

For me, the key to being part of an ensemble is about working together as a whole in co-ordination with your fellow performers on stage. It isn't about you or your individual performance or how you are acting something but it is about the awareness that you are part of the bigger picture – that everything you do on stage affects someone else. Being part of an ensemble means that you are aiming to work in complete harmony with the other actors, as a team, as a whole – not in opposition but together.

Can you describe a day of rehearsal on The Secret Garden?
We always start rehearsals with a stretch and a warm up. We are a company who like to work physically and so being warmed up and ready to work, without injuring ourselves, is really important. We also play games. Games are really important to working together as an ensemble, getting to know each other and working with each others rhythms to build complicity as a company together.

After a warm up and games we usually start working on scenes. Either together or we split up into smaller groups to work on different things so that we can come back and show the other group and what we have created.

After lunch we all come together for another warm up, more games and then work on more scenes. We quite often started on The Secret Garden with reading a scene a few times. Then getting up without the script and improvising the scene we just read. Trying things out and not being too worried about the "right" lines or the exact staging. At the early stage it's more about getting a feel for the characters in a given situation rather than about the specifics.

How do you create a character?
Martha is considerably younger than me so I started trying to think physically about giving her a different energy and physicality to myself to make her look younger. I also knew she was going to have to have a Yorkshire accent. I bought a CD called Access Accents: Yorkshire which I have been listening to; this helps me get my mouth around how Martha speaks. We also did quite a bit of work on the character's back-stories so we can fill in the gaps in the play and have a more rounded picture of what our characters are like real people. It's vital to know what they do when they are not in the scenes in the play. This helps you to create a more believable character. It's also fun. We work out things like the characters birthdays, their favourite things to do, how they feel about their job or their surroundings. I also did research into the life of a housemaid in Victorian times so I knew all about the jobs Martha would do and how this would affect the playing of my character.
What's the difference between playing a character yourself and using a puppet to play a character?
In some respects there isn't that much different. You still have to see the puppet as a character, and you have to know the thoughts of the puppet at each moment. The main difference is that you have to be technical and specific in the way you move; much more so than when you are just playing a character. I have to be careful not to make too many faces! I have quite an expressive face and I have to try really hard not to make the facial expressions of the Robin – but let the puppet speak for himself rather than me showing the audience what the puppet is thinking using my face.

How did you create the puppetry scenes?
We initially gathered up some props and some little model robins which we used during our first stage research and development. Once Polly Beestone (our puppet maker and consultant) got involved she make a mock up Robin created from a flower pot with screws for eyes and a wobbly head made from a door knob. We played with this which helped us to discover what we wanted from the Robin. We decided that him having wings which could fly was more important than a beak that opened and what sort of materials we wanted him to be made from. We met Polly again and she showed us a prototype, which is very much like the Robin we now have in the show, I experimented with how to move him and all the measurements of my hand were taken so he would fit me and be easy to operate.

We began by improvising just with the puppet before putting him in scenes. Then improvising within given scenes before choreographing more specifically the exact movements of the Robin. There is a lot of trial and error too. Sometimes you can put yourself into the scene and act out the movements of the character so that you can just concentrate on thought process.

What's your favourite thing about creating a new show?
I love that no one else has ever performed these lines before or that no other company has ever presented this story in the same way that we are going to. It's really exciting to start out on a new show and have all the anticipation of what you are going to be able to create. There are no limitations. With your ensemble you can create anything – an elephant, a manor house, a walled garden or a train carriage; it's a real thrill!
Jodie Gardner – Designer

What was your starting point for designing the show?
The process began with initial research into the Victorian era, and then into the characters in the book. I also look into colours, textures, and really I can take research from just about anywhere. I create visual boards for the mood of the entire look of the production, and then from here I begin creating designs.

Did you design everything in the show?
I designed the costume, set, and props for the show. I then had a team of makers who created the costumes, a set builder to help construct pieces, and an assistant to help me with sourcing props. The designs begin as final illustrations and then develop as the process continues. By the end the designs in my sketchbook are full of annotated notes and fabric swatches.

What’s the biggest challenge in designing costumes for a show where the actors play more than one character?
The biggest challenge is creating costumes which can come off and on quickly but also keeping the look of the era. We have used poppers and Velcro to replace buttons which can often be difficult to work with in a short time and in the dark!

Do you liaise with other members of the creative team or do you work independently?
I tend to work best when I research and design independently. I then share ideas when I meet with the company to talk through the designs. After this point the work involves collaborating with all members of the team. I have worked closely with Polly, who has designed and created the puppets for the show. We met and shared ideas and swapped fabrics in order for the entire production to blend well.

How long does it take to design and make everything?
The design process began this summer and I spent around a week researching and creating illustrations for the show, then we went fabric shopping, and the making and sourcing process has taken around three months in total. There are lots of elements to the process so it takes a long time from start to finish.

What would be your advice to someone who was interested in becoming a theatre designer?
I would say that it is worth going to do a Foundation year in Art in order to experiment with different forms of design. There are lots of degree courses available in costume, some focus on making, and some on design. I studied at The Arts University Of Bournemouth and this course suited me as I was able to experience both sides of the profession. I was able to work on real projects and meet people in the industry. I met Angel Exit through a ‘live’ project whilst in my final year and now I am working for them as a professional designer! After studying I would say it is best to be open to any work and to write to companies and designers you like the look of. Any experience is good and most people are more then happy to have people come and help out, even if for a day, it all helps towards becoming a designer.
Tom Ball – Composer

How do you decide what kind of music will be in the show?
Obviously reading the book was important in forming an initial impression, and then after discussing things with the director we agreed a general direction in mood, tone and style. Then it's a question of letting lots and lots of different ideas flow and see what comes out in the wash. The initial creative 'splurge' phase is important - that way, the music will sort of present itself to you.

What are the main elements and influences for the music in The Secret Garden?
The general idea is to try and support the play's exploration of nature, discovery, awakening, magic, travel, loss etc in as child-like and dreamy a way as possible, without hopefully resorting to cliche or being too twee. There's probably a nod to English psychedelic pastoralism and ambient folk, especially the music of Virginia Astley, who released a pioneering ambient album in 1983 which for me evokes perfectly the spirit of The Secret Garden, or at least my take on it. I also wanted echoes of the Indian beginning to reoccur throughout the play, with odd touches of sitar here and there.

Which is your favourite bit of music/ the bit you are most proud of in this show?
Probably the main Secret Garden Theme, which hopefully conveys some of the rush of discovery and uplifting feelings of rebirth and awakening present in the play. I was looking for something that gives the impression of a garden coming alive, the whole thing a living creature.

What are the main differences with writing a piece of music for your band and writing a piece of music for the theatre?
With music for theatre or film you have to support the action on the stage or screen. It's a totally different process from writing for or with a band. With writing for the band, it's really about a groove or melody or words or a chord progression that triggers something within you and makes you want to write on. With theatre you have to take direction from the director and from how the actors are portraying their characters in a scene. And also you have to take into account the set and costume design, as there's no point in these being at odds with the music. The whole show has a feel, an atmosphere, an idea, and the music has to reflect, support and hopefully enhance this.
The Secret Garden is set sometime in the 19th Century. Peter Hunt, (editor of the OUP edition), believes it is set in the 1860s. Frances Hodgson Burnett (1849-1925) doesn’t specify a date in the book, but it has a definite Victorian feel. We decided to set it at the turn of the century, so there is the sense of change new things stirring not just within the garden and the children but in the world at large.

1836 – Queen Victoria crowned
1845 – Glass tax is abolished making greenhouses cheaper
1849 - Frances Hodgson Burnett is born
1850 – Invention of postboxes
1853 – FHB's father dies of apoplexy
1857 – The invention of pasteurisation
1858 – The Indian Mutiny which leads to the India Government Bill
1859 – Charles Darwin publishes Origin of Species
1860 – American civil war begins and lasts until 1865
1861 – FHB's 1st child, Lionel, is born
1868 – Benjamin Disraeli becomes prime minister and the modern conservative party is founded
1873 – FHB marries, The typewriter is invented
1874 – FHB’s 1st child, Lionel, is born
1876 – The telephone is invented
1878 – The electric lightbulb is invented
1879 – The cardboard box is invented
1880 – Elementary Education act is passed making education compulsory for 5-10 year olds
1884 – The Jungle Book is published by Rudyard Kipling
1885 – The birth of the motor car
1886 – Little Lord Fauntleroy is published
1887 – The gramophone is invented
1888 – Jack the Ripper, The Football league is formed, Adolf Hitler and Charlie Chaplin are born
1890 – FHB’s son Lionel dies of consumption, aged 16
1891 – The flushing toilet is patented by Mr Crapper and becomes more common
1894 – The Jungle Book is published by Rudyard Kipling
1895 – The National Trust is founded
1898 – FHB divorces and leases Maytham Hall, where she writes in the garden, which will inspire The Secret Garden
1901 – Queen Victoria dies

Frances Hodgson Burnett moved back and forth between England and America, and suffered many losses including her father at a young age and her first son Lionel.

She wrote an essay entitled My Robin about her time in the garden at Maytham Hall near Rolvenden in Kent. Here she describes the robin:

“An English robin differs greatly from the American one. He is much smaller and quite differently shaped. His body is daintily round and plump, his legs are delicately slender. He is a graceful little patrician with an astonishing allurement of bearing. His eye is large and dark and dewy; he wears
a tight little red satin waistcoat on his full round breast and every tilt of his head, every flirt of his wing is instinct with dramatic significance. He is fascinatingly conceited - he burns with curiosity - he is determined to engage in social relations at almost any cost and his raging jealousy of attention paid to less worthy objects than himself drives him at times to efforts to charm and distract which are irresistible.”

She writes about the beginning of their friendship:
“He began to perch on twigs only a few inches from my face and listen while I whispered to him - yes, he LISTENED and made answer with chirps. Nothing else would describe it. As I wrote he would alight on my manuscript paper and try to read. Sometimes I thought he was a little offended because he found my handwriting so bad that he could not understand it. He would take crumbs out of my hand, he would alight on my chair or my shoulder. The constant I opened the little door in the leaf-covered garden wall I would be greeted by the darling little rush of wings and he was beside me. And he always came from nowhere and disappeared into space”

(For full essay see Peter Hunt’s Oxford University press edition of The Secret Garden).

7 - Theatre Games and Devising Exercises

Timeline
Decide when your play is set and then go one hundred years back from this date. Compile a big timeline for the show by asking each actor to give 4 key dates in the lives of their character (including when they were born.) These can be invented memories or actual events from the script/book. Also ask each actor to find out four key dates for general history in this period. You can add to this any knowledge of your writer’s biography, and any dates, which arise from specific areas of research which the actors and director undertake. Our timeline included important dates for Frances Hodgson Burnett, the history of gardening, the rule of India and Victorian Britain. It is a bit like the one included above with added facts about our characters. This helps to give a good sense of the world in which the play is set. We were surprised at what a modern world our characters were living in.
Four pictures to tell the story
If you are working on a specific scene, get all of the actors in the room to split into groups and decide on four pictures to tell the story of the scene. Present these to the group. This will be a useful way of deciding on the key moments/ events in the scene, and what you need to highlight. Every stage picture must support the story. You may find that you can tell the whole story with no words.
A variation on this is to assign each group a different scene. Don’t tell the others which scene each group is working on. When you watch the pictures back see if people can guess the scene.

Character Speed Dating – Shared Memories
All the actors enter the room together in character. Explain to them that they will have two minutes to chat to another character and then you will ring a bell and they must find someone else to chat to. Each character must try and chat to all the others. They must start their chat with “do you remember when...” and the other character must reply with something like “Oh, yes, and then we...”. They must elaborate on the original memory. The aim is to establish a shared past between the characters. Sometimes these memories will be invented and sometimes they will be able to remember events talked about in the play. At the end of the exercise get everyone together, out of character, and ask them to tell the group some of the shared memories. We had a lovely moment where Martha remembered one Christmas when Mrs Medlock gave her a hand-embroidered handkerchief. These little memories often recur in future character improvisations.

Chorus as an element – mud
Our chorus are closest to the material of mud. We decided that they have grown out of the earth and this is where they feel most comfortable. To discover a quality of movement Tamsin got everyone to lie on the floor and imagine that they were buried under a thick layer of clay – mud. They were not to be alarmed by this as this was a comfortable resting place for them. Gradually they had to work themselves free of the mud and imagine that they were moving through it. They Burrowed through to the surface and could move along it, still with a thick layer of mud on them. We experimented with the rhythms of movement this encouraged, with how heavy this made them feel, with how this made them move when they came across each other and how it affected the breathe. We then imagined the earth drying off gradually and crumbling from the body, leaving the actor free to move in a different way. This kind of movement work through visualisation and association with a material is a very useful way of creating a combined physical vocabulary, which influences the way our chorus moves around the stage.

Set up an environment for someone to explore
We have a scene where Mary is exploring the rooms in a house. Tamsin asked the actress playing Mary to go and work on something in another room while the rest of the group created an environment for Mary to explore. The actress had no idea what would happen when she came back into the room, and the rest of the group had no idea how she would react, so we got some good honest reactions. The group had to find a way of encouraging Mary to walk down a corridor and try different doors and then decide what things were in the room for her to discover. They were allowed to use things in the room as props but no words. It created a genuine adventure for Mary. You could do this with any environment that a character is entering for the first time.

One Object Only
Set the actors a task of telling a story using only one object. They must try and use the object to create as many images as possible. We use garden tools to represent a lot of things in this show – a roof beam, a corridor, a train carriage, a bedpost, a door frame. In our previous show we used planks of driftwood. Giving yourselves a strict limitation like this often inspires a creative use of props.
Balancing the stage
This is a good one for stressing that every movement made by someone on stage is significant and impacts on all the other characters and chorus member sharing the stage. Get everyone sat around the edge of a large square space. In the middle of them is the plateau. It is balanced on a central pivot. Ask one person to stand in the centre of the stage. They are the leader. As soon as they leader moves, someone else must step onto the plateau to balance it out. Continue this for a while. If the leader sits down then the 2nd person becomes the leader and someone else must jump on to balance them out.
You can vary this by having a chorus of people balancing the leader. Their combined weight equals the leader’s weight so they have a lot of potential options. They can split up or stay together.

Grandmother’s footsteps with obstacles
Most people know the traditional grandmother’s footsteps. Someone (A) faces the wall. The others must start at the opposite end of the room and advance while A is not looking. If A turns around and catches anyone moving that person must go back to their starting place. You can add obstacles and rules, such as a chair that everyone must touch, everyone must sit on the floor at least once on their journey, put a hat on, jump etc. We also like to play it that there are several actions that the group must do together, eg they must all shelter under the same umbrella at some point, all be touching the same chair at the same moment etc so that the group have to work together as an ensemble to get everyone to the same point together. This was especially useful when we had Ashleigh, who plays Mary as A, and the rest of the group, the chorus, as the advancers. It promoted a good sense of togetherness in the chorus, and a sense of anticipation and suspicion in Mary, as well as a lightness and sense of fun.

8 - Useful resources
To learn more about the company visit our website:

http://www.angelexit.co.uk

http://www.ecole-jacqueslecoq.com

The Secret Garden – Frances Hodgson Burnett, Oxford University Press, edited by Peter Hunt

The Moving Body - Jacques Lecoq

Beyond The Secret Garden – Ann Thwaite (a biography of Frances Hodgson Burnett)