



# The Great Train Dance

**Rosie Kay**, Artistic Director, Rosie Kay Dance Company, is inspired by steam railway and makes a dance on and off the rails

**On 23 July this year, dance and theatre took over the Severn Valley Railway (SVR).** A preserved steam railway line was an unusual choice for a site-specific work, but one with huge charms, atmosphere, excitement, romance, and logistic challenges! I was attracted to the idea of making a work that was not only going forward in time, but also travelling in distance – so that when you thought of how the piece would work, you have to think in

several dimensions – in time and in a moving space, inside a train and outside in different locations in the landscape.

The Great Train Dance grew from a childhood obsession with trains, passed to me by my trainspotting father. While other girls had posters of pop stars, I had posters of the Mallard, The Flying Scotsman and could spot the difference between a 0-6-4 and a 4-6-0 from a hundred yards. When the

Cultural Olympiad was set up in the West Midlands, with an emphasis on ‘People Dancing’ and local and cultural heritage, I saw this as the perfect opportunity to create a performance event that would be unique for my company. Within the structure of the creation would be a large element of participation and training. I wanted this to be a one-off event that gave opportunities to young people, dance leaders and



All photos: The Great Train Dance, Rosie Kay Dance Company. Photos: Brian Slater. Left: Emily May (CAT) and Chris Linda. Top: Brookes Academy of Dance. Above: New College Telford

professionals as well as create a memorable day for everyone who took part in it as performers or as active audience members.

I began by working out the structure of the event. This could be broken up into several parts. The first section would be in Kidderminster SVR station with my professional company, musicians and Centre for Advanced Training (CAT) setting up the story for the audience and creating the tension and chase that would be followed through the full event. The audience then followed the full company onto the train and action interventions that happened within each of the six carriages at intervals. All along the journey were dance groups outside the train, performing on platforms,

stations and even next to a reservoir and along the river Severn. These outdoor performances were led by regional dance leaders and created with their own dance groups to a given brief. Then the whole work culminated in the locomotive museum, where the story reached its conclusion in front of preserved engine 'GORDON' and finished with a high-energy grand finale dance. This meant that I was in charge of the overall structure, and would choreograph the beginning and end and shape the middle sections, and each of the trained dance leaders would be in charge of their own section of the work, with a 12-week lead up to the event.

In order to truly involve the dance

leaders, we deliberately didn't set the story too early, but let it grow from our experiments as a company. Training sessions included looking at site-specific works, understanding how to communicate quickly through dance, and how best a clue could be understood by an audience. All this research helped me and my team, made up of Hannah Sharpe, Company Manager, Cecilia Carey, Designer and Ben Payne, Dramaturg create the story around the location and the structure. We watched a lot of films and looked at a lot of imagery and settled on the idea of the journey of adolescence – the place between being a child who wants to be with their parents and the young adult who craves independence, freedom and

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excitement. We wanted the work to really reflect the stations and locations along the way, and we wanted the piece to have a slight Alice in Wonderland feel – where people transform and time can slow down or speed up. I also knew I wanted live music, and collaborated with Percy Pursglove from Mubu Music, to form the idea of a travelling gypsy style band, whose musicians could roam around the train or join together to play on platforms and in stations as a quartet. The last part of the puzzle fell into place when 14 year old CAT student Emily May asked to join the company for work experience during the company creation period. We had our leading character; and she was exactly going through the transformation we were discussing artistically.

With Emily renamed as Nellie, we concocted a story of her birthday trip to the station with Mum, Dad and Granny, where she bumps into a gypsy band, and more importantly meets a gypsy boy called Gordon (played by professional Chris Linda). He steals her magic clock and ticket and runs off onto the train, telling her that if she can guess the letters of his name during the journey, she will find out not just what his name is, but also what lies ahead in her future. She then has the train journey to gain the answers to his name hidden in the journey, aided by the audience who are given a special map to fill in, observing the dances outside the train to gain the clues. Once at the end station the letters are put together by a dance group, and then the ending is revealed in front of 'GORDON' the train, as young Nellie and Gordon are joined by older Nellie and Gordon who are celebrating their wedding anniversary. Everybody then rushes back in to dance a huge comic finale dance!

Rosie Kay Dance Company was to



be joined with the 25 CAT for the West Midlands students. To make this work we decided that each character was to form a team. So Michael (Spenceley) the crazy conductor was joined by four station officials, Gordon the gypsy boy was joined by a raggle-taggle gang of buskers, the grumpy dad (Chris Vann) was transformed into a rhino as he passes the Kidderminster Safari Park, and his team become a collection of nervous meerkats, strict governess mummy (Tilly Webber) has a gaggle of naughty schoolchildren with her, and glamorous granny (Sung-Im Her) became the Queen, with a huddle of silver surfer pensioners. Nellie was joined by a group of female trainspotter friends, all on the lookout for GORDON and the clues to his name. The outside groups had to show the journey of time, from the 1950s to the present day, as well as give a dance clue for the audience to

fill in on their maps. First clue was 'HOPSCOTCH' danced by groups in spotted polka dot 1950s skirts. Next clue was 'SWING' with dancers in 1960s black and white pop art costumes and funky helmets. As we past the reservoir, a huge collection of 1970s athletes represented the 'OLYMPICS' with sports dances and five coloured rings. By Arley we had reached the 1980s with a 'DISCO' group in bright colours and legwarmers, and the final clue (hard to get) was a group of 1990s anarchists who were 'RIOTING' in a field. The letters spelling GORDON were formed from each of the clues, which was demonstrated by another group at Highley who danced a letter dance until the name was revealed.

The work had to be timed in detail, so I began a process of storyboarding it, much as you would a film. I was greatly aided by the timetabling team at the Severn Valley Railway, who gave



us a special timetable for our unique train. I then had to calculate where we would be at each moment, and then create timetables for each key group in the train as well as the groups outside the train. Along with this Hannah and I had to go around the region getting permissions from Severn Trent Water authority and local farmers for us to use their fields and lands!

Hannah and I sat down and worked out every single group's individual journey and timetable. For the outside groups we had the issue of getting them to their location and back on the day (the easiest way was by train, as these places are quite inaccessible by car and road), the length of time they had to perform and making sure their message was well communicated and costumed. For the professionals, CAT students and musicians, they had to form together at the beginning, then negotiate each carriage of the train, at exactly the right moment (so as not to conflict with the outside groups), get everyone off the train at Highly, then reform for the grand finale dance. Each single element of the work needed to have a well-briefed leader, with their own personal timetable, be responsible for their group's health and safety and keep a constant eye on the time. Also there was to be no dress rehearsal, it was all just to come together on the day! At the same time, the most important element was the audience's experience – would they understand the puzzle? Would they be able to spot the clues? Would the story hang together on the day?

Finally, after much planning, the event happened, not once but twice on 23 July, each time with different groups outside. I had decided that we were going to rely on our planning and the spontaneous and magic quality of being a true one-off, and not rely on too much radio coverage. The Severn Valley has also very little mobile



All photos: The Great Train Dance, Rosie Kay Dance Company. Photos: Brian Slater. Top: Michael Spenceley, Conductor. Above: Emily May (CAT) and Chris Linda





Sung Im Her, Chris Vann, Emily May (CAT) and Tilly Webber, The Great Train Dance, Rosie Kay Dance Company. Photo: Brian Slater

coverage, so we really were going to have to trust in the plan and I had to put my trust into every single individual group to get the timings correct. The first journey was extraordinary. I had no idea if it would hang together, and I had only ever imagined the groups dancing outside! Crowds gathered at Kidderminster station, and excitement built as the story unfolded, until people were herded onto the train, armed with maps and pencils. The train slowed as it passed the Safari Park, and the carriages came to life with dancing rhinos, frantic conductors, bossy governesses, break dancing gypsies, trainspotter girls and regal pensioners! As we entered Bewdley a whole platform of girls in 1950s polka dot skirts stood frozen and then began dancing a complex and funny hopscotch. All along the journey children were screaming out attempts to answer the clues, as dancers appeared by reservoirs, limbs appeared next to our windows as the train slowed through request stops, and the whole audience moved over to the right to watch a dance group 200 metres away creating rioting

formations and letting off smoke bombs! The landscape came alive and the audience didn't know what was happening next! One brief hitch came as we needed to move 250 people across the bridge to get to the engine house and we were confronted by a display of live owls, and after the crazy events of the train, people assumed it was part of the show! Finally squeezed into the Engine House we had a beautiful and touching end to the whole event.

There are known knowns, unknown knowns, and unknown unknowns. Our job as a company was to think of every single eventuality. We had to plan almost every single person's experience of the event – the dancers, the children, the participants, the musicians, the dance leaders and most importantly the audience's journey. Not one thing could be ignored, and safety had to come first every time. I then had to train each leader and professional performer to know exactly what they were meant to be doing, where and when.

There was no time or budget for trials or real time rehearsals, so this had to be in place and secure before

the event itself. Then on the day, I really had to trust them! In work like this you have to be incredibly organised for it to have a spontaneous feel, and you really have to think in several dimensions – we were moving through time and space in a moving object, and thank goodness the train driver was sympathetic and seemed as bewitched as the audience.

I was completely blown away by the performances of the young people in particular. The CAT students revelled in dancing alongside professionals, and the standard of the outdoor performers was great – it is no easy feat to perform to people who are right next to you or through a glass window of a train, but their concentration and enjoyment was evident.

The thing we couldn't ever control was the weather, and we had various Plan Bs in place. But the weather was on our side and the sun came out and the English countryside had never looked more magical or special.

This event really was a dream come true, and was an exciting and enjoyable challenge to create and for the dancers to be part of. Thanks to all the incredible dancers, musicians, young people, participants, dance leaders and collaborators who really pulled together to make this an unforgettable day.

**contact** info@rosiekay.co.uk or 07961 434256 / **visit** www.rosiekay.co.uk/the-great-train-dance for a clip of the day and a listing of all the groups who participated.

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