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## Watching the Detectives

Alexander Kelly

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## WATCHING THE DETECTIVES

Alexander Kelly

Report compiled April 2021

### O GRANDE LIVRO DOS PEQUENOS DETALHES

English title: The Great Book of Tiny Details.<sup>1</sup>

2014. Theatre maker Paula Diogo invited collaborator Alexander Kelly to 'contribute text to a devising process' for 'a show about looking at the world differently'. Kelly, having recently 'discovered' an organisation known as The Department of Corrections & Clarifications,<sup>2</sup> whose job it is to 'make people's lives more interesting' by placing distractions in the street (single gloves and so on), wondered if that might be an area for exploration? Further research ensued.

2015. Diogo and Kelly discussed detective stories, and this too was considered a useful starting point. Diogo and the other deviser-performer collaborators, Michel Blois, Thiare Maia Amaral and Cláudia Gaiolas, asked Kelly to come up with 4 possible detective story plots. Kelly came up with 1 plot, about a missing Traffic & Travel Announcer, with 4 possible endings.

A DEVISED SHOW UNDERCOVER AS A TV DETECTIVE SERIES UNDERCOVER AS A PLAY 2015. Still expecting to 'write into a devising process', and produce sections of text not necessarily held together by anything as cohesive as a plot, Kelly joined the making process in Rio. The deviser-performers wanted more information about their characters & backgrounds. Kelly agreed to write something more akin to a play, whilst in fact borrowing the 4 x 12-minute story-block structure from a TV detective programme episode, specifically 1980s mismatched-buddy-will-they-won't-they-romantic-detective-comedy Moonlighting.<sup>3</sup>

Kelly produced 2 x 4-part/act narratives referred to as DETECTIVE and DEPARTMENT. DETECTIVE knowingly played with the tropes of TV & literary detective fiction, whilst DEPARTMENT utilised a story-within-a-story mechanic as members of the team pitched ideas to each other. Department staff adopted new names at work so as not to reveal their previous identities. Each strand was designed to be presented in its own order, but the devisers could jump between the 2 as they wished. Whilst in DETECTIVE the missing Traffic & Travel Announcer herself, Laura Pacheco, did mention getting an email from The Department of Corrections & Clarifications, there were no other narrative connections between the 2 texts. Opening in April 2015, O Grande Livro dos Pequenos Detalhes used about half of DEPARTMENT as an introduction to all of DETECTIVE.



<sup>1</sup> Produced in 2015 by the Portuguese collective Má-Criação for Oi Futuro Flamengo in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

<sup>2</sup> Making Third Angel's The Life & Loves of A Nobody, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Created by Glenn Gordon Caron, Moonlighting ran from 1985-1989.

Photos: Carlos Cabéra.





### THE DEPARTMENT OF DISTRACTIONS

2016. Discussions began within Third Angel to produce a UK version of The Great Book of Tiny Details. Third Angel Co-Artistic Director Rachael Walton asked Kelly to produce a new version of the text that made the connections between the two stories more explicit. Kelly set the order for the 8 sections, and made the role of The Department more explicit in the Detective story. Following the mechanic already in use, the Detective story became a show-within-a-show, acted out by members of The Department of Distractions, as it was now called.

Following the feedback that the text was far more satisfying on a 2<sup>nd</sup> reading, once you knew who and what The Department were, Walton again pushed Kelly to make the plot and the connections between the 2 stories much clearer.

### FOUND ON THIRD ANGEL'S BLOG (2018):

"In O Grande Livro, the employees get a fax (!) from 'the pissing England Office', and the employees talk a couple of times about some of the work the England Office have done. Back at Third Angel HQ, we began to wonder about a parallel show - a UK version, about one of the England offices.

As we spent some time developing this idea in 2016, it occurred to us that we had been tracking the work of The Department for years. Several of our enduring interests were arguably their work: urban legends, conspiracy theories, telephone boxes, empty benches, the true stories that we choose to tell (and retell) about our lives and other people and other places, clues left in the street or buried in maps or letters pages or puzzles, the small details that can have a large impact... We started documenting their work & cataloguing it here: #TheDepartmentOfDistractions."



### STORY VS. PLOT

2017. Kelly worked with dramaturg & performer Stacey Sampson to make sense of the plot alluded to by the 2 texts. The 4 endings to DETECTIVE became an office discussion about how the story could/should play out, before what had actually happened was revealed. Detailed timelines of what happened and what-the-audience-learn-when were worked out. Lessons were learned about how fixing one plot-hole can have a knock-on effect 12 pages later.

Rehearsals began, with Umar Butt & Nick Chambers joining the cast, and the spoken text still very much open to discussion, & re-writing by the team. The day-to-day work of The Department - and therefore the task of the show - was devised by the Company as a whole (including designer Bethany Wells, composer & sound designer Heather Fenoughty & technical stage manager Louise Gregory).

More plot-holes were identified. Kelly reported that the next re-writes were more a process of 'realising' what was going on than deciding: discovering the extent of The Department's orchestration of events. The end of the show moved from being a 'will this all get found out?' cliff-hanger<sup>4</sup> to being a series of re-framings to reveal what has been going on all along.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> That Kelly thinks of as being the same mechanic as the end of the Watchmen graphic novel by Alan Moore & Dave Gibbons (DC Comics, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Like The Good Place (created by Michael Schur, 2016-20).





### DEVISING ROOM CONVERSATIONS

1. The difference between clues embedded in the text (that everyone therefore hears, whether they recognise it is a clue or not), and visual clues incorporated into the stage picture and action, that, because there isn't a close-up, the audience might not see.

2. Whether it is good for an audience to know what/how much they don't know? Kelly often referred to Kathryn Bigelow's 1991 movie Point Break; rookie FBI agent Johnny Utah goes undercover to infiltrate a gang of surfers who may be the bank robbers The Dead Presidents (due to the masks they wear). Utah becomes friends with the surfers' guru-esque leader, Bodhi. Midway through the film, having to intervene in a heist by The Dead Presidents means that IF Bodhi's surfers ARE the bank robbers, then Utah's cover is blown, though we, the audience, still don't know if this is the case. Kelly reflected on the brilliance of the following sequence when Bodhi's gang call for Utah the next morning to go skydiving, when Utah – and the

audience – still doesn't know if his cover is blown. Kelly was a frequent rehearsal room advocate of this level of audience uncertainty. Re-watching the film in 2020, Kelly discovered that he had mis-remembered this: a scene just before the skydiving escapade does reveal that (Spoiler Alert!) Bodhi & co. are in fact The Dead Presidents and now know Utah is FBI.

### UNDERCOVER

In The Department of Distractions the story-within-a-story mechanic was explored further. The Department team begin to tell the Detective story The Case of the Missing Traffic and Travel Announcer as a way of working out how to play it out in the real world. They play characters in the story themselves, and reveal that (Spoiler Alert!) one member of The Department, Paladin, has been undercover, out in the world investigating the story, and will therefore 'play' his own alter-ego/undercover identity, David.<sup>6</sup>

Third Angel's theatre shows usually ignore the fourth wall. Performers, whether they are playing characters or themselves, make eye contact with the audience. They demonstrate the task of presenting the show. Some projects are specifically designed to encourage conversation with the spectators. In the first production of The Department of Distractions in 2018, the characters still found moments to address, or at least acknowledge, the audience. However, discussions instigated by Walton and Sampson questioned the logic of this, and the 2019/20 touring version of the show 'reinstated' the fourth wall.

In this version, though, the performers could still enjoy slipping in and out of character, commenting on the story, showing how visual tricks are achieved (an overhead shot of a body on the floor, for example) because it is The Department staff talking to each other during the task of explaining what stories they are working on.

<sup>6</sup> (Zwvpsly Hslya!)

Huk aolu pa abyuz vba aoha zvtlvul lszl pu aol zavvf aolf hyl alsspun ohz nvul buklyjvcly, avv.

Photo by Von Fox Promotions, edited by Wayne Gamble.



Update October 2021

### THE DISTRACTION AGENTS

2021. Third Angel released a sequel to The Department of Distractions, an experience delivered via video communications sent by email and resources sent by regular post. Individual audience members are recruited by The Department to become Distraction Agents and go undercover in their own lives. This remote/delivered performance is something Third Angel has experimented with before<sup>7</sup> and has been aiming to explore further.

### INFLUENCES & EASTER EGGS

Walton & Kelly are game-players and puzzle-solvers. The 2018 version of The Department of Distractions contained knowing discussion of some of the tropes of detective fiction, such as red herrings & Easter eggs. All versions of the show included many of these things as a stylistic and thematic device. In the 2017 re-writing process Kelly half-seriously set himself the challenge of including a reference to every other Third Angel show, as well as films, TV shows, comics and song lyrics. Inevitably, this burying of clues continued with The Distraction Agents.

### A PERFORMANCE PUZZLE?

The Distraction Agents allows audiences 3 levels of participation.

1. Instruction videos & induction materials to watch & read.
2. As 'part escape room': audience-participants are required to solve a set of puzzles to open a final 'reward' package.
3. The training gives the recruits ideas for interventions they can make into the world around them. These can be seen as thought experiments, or as tasks to actually carry out.

The Distraction Agents itself does not feel like one thing in disguise pretending to be another. Rather, it combines elements of TV drama, play-by-mail games, fanzines, puzzles, board games, gamebooks & detective fiction, into a playable experience. The question might be whether players are undercover as Distraction Agents or as themselves.

<sup>7</sup> In Pleasant Land (2004) and Favourite Ever Christmas Present (2010).







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## INDUCTION WEEK PASSBOOK



### DISTRACTION SPOTTER / ITEMS 1-6

	<b>1. BAG OR SUITCASE</b> Abandoned in woods Adrift Anywhere else	4 pts. 5 pts. 3 pts.	
	<b>2. HOODY</b> Pavement, wall/fence Worn by bollard	3 pts. 5 pts.	
	<b>3. CASH BOX, EMPTY</b>	5 pts.	
	<b>4. CASH</b> Single note Bundle Unmarked Envelope	2 pts. 4 pts. x 2	
	<b>5. CLOTHING, OTHER</b>	4 pts.	
	<b>6. CUDDLY TOY</b> Pavement Wall Softtoy Roadkill	3 pts. 4 pts. 5 pts.	