



The Gecko Process

Amit Lahav, Artistic Director

The process for all the shows I have made starts by allowing the initial thoughts and ideas, scenes, characters - whatever these might be - to emerge. This process can take a long time and you have to be patient. You have to be alert and ready to pick up the “emails” as your brain sends them through.

At a certain time you have to organise these ideas, to try to understand the value of what they are. These ideas slowly build up to something, slamming together when you have no idea what the result will be but they will always take you on another journey.

The final concept can take a long time to come together, once it has we will then start creating and designing the physical and technical elements associated with all Gecko shows.

Then it has to be tested out with an audience. We don't think “let's put it together and just see how it is to play in front of an audience”; it's much more significant than that. The audience is as important as any element of the show, like a character, a performer or the lighting... and their response instantly changes what the show is.

Because of the long process, everything is an influence in some way - so many things can impact on the process. It's a little bit like standing in front of a blank canvas, you might have an initial idea, then you might read a book or watch a film, you might have an argument or have a dream, or something else might encourage you to think “there needs to be a chair in the painting”. When you add in the chair you realise that the table no longer works so the focus becomes about a coat stand, which then needs a coat to bring the coat stand towards the chair. The same concept applies when we're creating a production; we start with a blank canvas.

Everything happens together. It's not like a conventional theatre process where somebody is in a rehearsal room with a script and then they add the lights. All the various elements have to happen together, so those things are being thought about from the very first day.

For me, the main language for the audience is not words. Language comes from the same place as movement; it is an emotional vehicle but it is not the only means by which the audience understands the storyline. It is visual language which interests me more.

As with all Gecko shows, the first performance represents a new start and trajectory for the piece. I find it almost impossible to *know* a show until the audience interacts with it.



An outline of the creative process

The idea

Amit dreams up 'the seed' of a new show, for example;

- **The Arab and the Jew:** How does Al feel about his 'Arab-ness' and Amit about his 'Israeli-ness'; how do we feel about each other?
- **Missing:** a woman with a decaying soul, a missing child and a scientist who is fascinated by the human soul.

How these 'seeds' arrive varies from one piece to the next: they become the catalyst for new ideas and images and as subsequent investigations unfold the central idea can and will shift. The Race started as a piece about servicing one's life and ended up being a piece which explored pending fatherhood.

Investigating the first idea

Initial ideas are tested out physically; in the past this has happened as part of Gecko residencies with students. These themes are then explored with Gecko performers.

Development of new ideas

Amit then reacts to the early exploration with new ideas and images, new starting points for investigation, possibly a new seed, music ideas arriving from physical discoveries, music ideas to stimulate new movement discoveries, early structural/design thoughts. An explosion of ideas will emerge in this time.

Testing a draft sequence

This will involve putting a run or sequence of ideas together, possibly with some early structural apparatus (e.g. a wall). This test will give a sense of what the world might be.

Creating the 'world'

Amit will try to hone in what the world of the piece is. For example:

- **Taylor's Dummies:** (inside Taylor's head, underground jazz worlds emerge, dingy home existence, sparse and empty, in this show Taylor played by three men encapsulates the world)

Working up a draft storyboard

Amit will make a 'flag in the sand' storyboard. There will be ideas which sit obviously next to each other, and there will be elements that seem very disconnected but Amit will have an instinct to test out.

First draft of the show

This process could take two weeks. Ideas are improvised, choreographed, rehearsed and transitions created. A first draft sound world will also be in place at this stage. Work will continue on the storyboard throughout this process, and will continue for the weeks that follow as Amit reflects on the various outcomes and discoveries made.

Second draft of the show

A new storyboard is created and a two or three week process will lead to another version of the piece. This version is often very different from the first; most of the material will be different and the sense of the world, the concept and the feel of the piece will have changed. This version will have a full lighting journey throughout it and there will be at least three performances for audiences who are seeing a work in progress.

Third draft of the show

An adaptation of the second draft will follow soon after. The company will have two weeks to disassemble the show and remake it. The technical world of the show will change extensively, but the concept, feel, design of the show will clear mark it as an adaptation.

Developing a version to tour

The process of making a version of the show for touring will take many months of reflection by Amit and in this time he will re-write the show. He will have an absolute understanding of the world of the piece and therefore all of its elements will flow clearly and a new storyboard will be created. A design will be worked up and most of the large or complicated elements of the show will be built in preparation for a rehearsal process.

The company will spend four to six weeks creating the new show which will have little surviving material from the previous version; four weeks to build the physical aspects of the show in a space, and to create and choreograph the material, and two weeks for technical work on a full equipped theatre stage with all of the light and sound elements of the show.

This process will take us right up until an opening night. Further adaptations will emerge during the first tour.

Further development

It is possible after extensive touring and another period of time in a rehearsal space for a further version to emerge, but this is dependent on Amit's satisfaction with how the show has developed, grown and settled down.

In a sense, the show is never made, and work continues on the piece for the duration of its life, although at a less and less dramatic rate over time.



Q&A with Amit Lahav

For someone who has never seen Gecko's work, how would you describe what the audience will see?

When you come and see a Gecko show, you sort of fall into a dream – or a nightmare, depending on your relationship to your own dreams and nightmares. This is a very imaginative world which is full of contrasts. Every part of the show is like a painting: it's very beautiful, and each moment is crafted very carefully so you never really know what's going to happen next. There are always tricks; things that will emerge from unexpected places, or someone could fly, so there's a surprising element. And there's a scary element, because it's dark and the shows are a reflection – and a comment – on life. That doesn't always make for beautiful things like *pretty* things, but beautiful in their ugliness as well. We love to look at how ugly a person can be, and that in itself can be a beautiful thing to see.

These elements are there really to take the audience to another dimension. I think every part of the show is an invitation that says 'I invite you to re-imagine the world'... Hopefully you can accept that invitation and we can fly, for an hour and ten minutes.

What is, for you, the difference between dance and physical theatre?

I think the difference is a lot to do with expectation, and by that I am revealing that there is no difference in my mind - I don't think about the distinction. However, with physical theatre the process can lead you on a journey and into a world of symbolism more intrinsically than dance does. With the unfolding of a narrative in physical theatre you're more bound by the rigours of construction.

Given that your performances do not have the rigid structure of a script, do they change from one show to the other?

They don't change fundamentally, in the same way that a scripted piece of theatre doesn't change. However, because the potential for interpretation is much broader, the flavour and atmosphere can be radically altered - rather like a band feeding off an excited audience.

Gecko use a wide range of language in their shows, what is the significance of this for you?

I've never been interested in using English and language as the main form of communication between the pieces and the audience. However, I am fascinated by the use of voice in performers and I wouldn't ever want to make a show where performers couldn't use their voice. I love language so having international performers who can use their own languages, and for there to be numerous languages on stage, has become something that works very well for Gecko. It's clear to the audience if there are several languages on stage that there is no one spoken language of the show, and that sort of disarms a certain part of the brain which is craving that sort of communication, therefore enabling audience members to engage in a more musical way and allowing the piece to become more visceral, so that they can interpret the show personally. The use of language in shows is about the pleasure of hearing voices, rather than an intellectual process. Movement and voice come from the same place - and both drive intention.

What is the most difficult element of the creative process?

Making a Gecko show is an extremely difficult process... it's difficult to say which aspect is more difficult than others because it truly is an organic process that requires care on every single level. Because you are building up all elements of the show at the same time, you can't really take your eye off any one aspect.

For the technical stuff to be right, one has to work endlessly again and again on the functionality of the show, moving a screen at exactly the time that you are moving a person and a chair and a light. There's a painstaking

quality to that, it instantly moves out of the realm of being technical and becomes poetic. Those functional things drift into the realm of poetry, and the things that you imagine to be poetic, like some of the movements, become very technical because you want them to have a precision to them. The composition of everything is a very difficult element. Having one singular idea is great, and you can really work up that singular idea. But actually bringing all of the ideas together and having a whole meaning or a sense that there is a composition to it is probably the thing that takes the longest and therefore is the most difficult.

If I had to pick one specific aspect that was particularly difficult I would say it's the poetic, transformative parts of the show which have personal meaning for each and every member of the audience. When I find those usually quite metaphorical ideas, I always have a feeling that this is going to be something that will be broadly interpreted, and if it sits within the show then those things are real gold. Thinking about a puppet is one example; with a puppet you tend to either take the puppet and it becomes a very emotional, personal thing about you as child - or you can think in a conceptual way about it and it becomes something that has a meaning to do with the world and to do with innocence. That's one example of how a transformative idea can work.

What input does the cast have on a show?

When casting the show we tend to look for certain qualities and an openness that suits the Gecko working process. Qualities include bold, physical expressiveness and experience of working across art forms, such as dance/theatre/circus. Often performers come by recommendation from trusted friends and colleagues.

Each performer brings different ideas and strengths to the room and sometimes it's a case of drawing on these. At other times I will have a very clear idea of where a scene/sequence needs to go and will guide the performers to that point. Often performers will be asked to offer something up based on what the scene could be and then this will be expanded and moulded into what is right for the piece.

What are Gecko's main influences?

10 years ago when I started the company, I pushed myself to work with people that had a sort of singular vision about how they wanted to make theatre. They were visionary theatre makers – people like David Glass, Stephen Berkoff, Lindsay Kemp, Ken Campbell. I worked with these people and I discovered that what infected me the most was their passion, and the way they threw themselves into their world. It gave me a license to be confident. I didn't become influenced by any one singular person, or any one singular style, I just had a burning desire to make work and to express myself. I am influenced by everything I see and everything I experience – the relationships in my life, by film, theatre, dance; I think that I'm influenced all the time so I could definitely not say any one particular thing.

Describe a normal rehearsal day

The performers need to be connected to each other and they need to be able to produce fantastic, profound work. That doesn't just happen by entering a room and starting. We will spend an hour, sometimes two hours, getting the performers into a certain place where they are absolutely on green in terms of being alert and able to respond and produce a phenomenal movement. Sometimes that movement is about how they respond to each other and what they give to each other. A lot of the preparation is making the performers be in a certain state of readiness, to give, to receive, to respond, and to be freely instinctive about what they are doing. A lot of Gecko work comes from an instinctive place, and that doesn't just happen when you walk into the room; you need to do a lot of preparation to be ready to do that.

How physically rigorous are your shows and what training do you follow?

The shows are very athletic: they are demanding both physically and emotionally. We spend a substantial amount of time training in all ways to prepare for performances - this involves yoga, fitness, meditation and sport. The shows require the precision of a musician in an orchestra and the aggression of a boxer!