

Wise Children's Lockdown

Tea & Biscuits with Emma Rice & Mike Shepherd

Emma:

Hello. I'm Emma Rice, the artistic director of Wise Children and you're listening to Wise Children's Lockdown.

Emma:

Our Lockdown project is about us finding ways of staying close to each other. On this show, I call up an old friend, play some records and most importantly, get to chat and reminisce. Come and join us for Tea and Biscuits.

Emma:

Hello, and welcome to Wise Children's Lockdown Tea and Biscuits and today I am talking to the legend that is Mike Shepherd. Hello, Mike.

Mike:

Hello, hello.

Emma:

Right, so the first question I have to ask you is what is your virtual or actual biscuit that you are eating now?

Mike:

Well, funny you should say this because I have made a biscuit that I think is quite tasty but the other people in lockdown with me have rejected it and actually being very critical of it. I'm in a freaky paradise otherwise known as the Kneehigh barns and on the hill above the beach there's [inaudible 00:01:16] house, which is just the most beautiful house and it's got the most beautiful vegetable garden and I wrong the owners up and they're delighted that I'm doing a bit of gardening so there were two things to pick. There was some rainbow chard, very pretty, very tasty and there was some rhubarb so I made myself rhubarb crumble and then forgot about it and it turned into a biscuit so with a bit of effort you can cut them into biscuit shapes and mmm, they're delicious.

Emma:

What would other people say about them? What's the criticism of your rhubarb biscuits?

Mike:

Well, I think simply without, I presume that I'm not allowed to swear, but just implying in no uncertain terms that they're inedible. I like them though. They're still a bit chewy.

Emma:

Yeah. Well, good for you making a biscuit or a crumble, crumble biscuit.

Wise Children's Lockdown

Tea & Biscuits with Emma Rice & Mike Shepherd

Mike:

Exactly.

Emma:

So you've answered my second question which is where are you, but how's your lockdown going? How are you finding it?

Mike:

Well, it's two things at the same time. Like I say, it is a freaky paradise. I'm here. There are outer environs. Lindy Wright is here and Sarah Wright, puppet makers, puppeteers. Lindy is quite extraordinary as an [inaudible 00:02:43] and so things happen like I say. Oh, I wonder, I can't see people going back into auditoriums. I wonder if we should tell little, short Calvino stories by firelight. In the next minute Lindy shows me a picture that she's done of what, her imagination of what that might look like but she's broken twigs off a tree and then she's fashioned out of an old coffee tin, something to make charcoal and put it in a fire. So she's drawn it with charcoal that she's made so I'm in this kind of place of extraordinary creative endeavour.

Mike:

She picked up off the beach a cuttlefish and beautifully carved it yesterday so I kind of feel totally privileged and in some ways I think I'm kind of relieved of the day to day of everything that we have to do and the deadlines that we have to meet and I feel like an artist and an artistic director as well and I'm ... I feel very, very lucky but every time I go, oh my God this is brilliant, that is accompanied by such a troubled, troubled devastating thought for all those people all over the world that this is so horrendous. So, yeah it's not a simple enjoyment, I'm all right Jack. It's deeply perplexing.

Emma:

Oh, I second that. Well, I'm going to start with a bit of music. I was just saying to you, Mike, we've been through so many adventures for so many years. This is just going to be impossible to even touch on anything so I'm going to narrow down a little bit of the conversation of the day but I felt I couldn't start off Tea and Biscuits without me talking about the barns and what they meant to me and I mean, it's seared into my heart, soul and being, the first time that I got off the train that's in Ostel and came down to the barns and met you guys and it was terrifying and remote and strange but I knew, I just knew that this is where I should be and wanted to be and a bit of my soul has been there forever and so the first thing I want to play is in memory of the many parties and joyful times we've spent there and this epitomises some of those early years. Imagine a beer, imagine the Cornish Cliffs, imagine dancing because we have danced for decades and this is one of my big memories.

Mike:

Brilliant.

Wise Children's Lockdown

Tea & Biscuits with Emma Rice & Mike Shepherd

Music:

(singing)

Emma:

Oh, I still fizz with the joyful freedom and wildness of it all and the power of the friendships that we had and still have. What a gift is really what I want to say and I'm very jealous of you being there now, Mike.

Mike:

Well, thank you, and the place is infused with you and you made a massive difference to these barns as being a kind of healthy, ongoing, creative space rather than just something where [inaudible 00:09:50] would experiment with gun powder and make a mess and light fires endlessly and drink endlessly. It truly is a creative space and I keep your spirit going with it so I never let it particularly settle here. We actually invest time every year in just looking at it and my daughter, Ruth, really comes and helps and I say, right you've got a week. Give it a spruce up, paint some things, move things around a little bit. So yeah, it is a special place. It is kind of unique and it's not the easiest of spaces but that's all part of it. You create a company because you all get on with doing what needs to be done. It's lovely [crosstalk 00:10:45] social club as well.

Emma:

Oh, I know. Gosh we had some great times didn't we? Great times and feeling global as well. I really wanted to play that because we felt like such a global company and this moment when suddenly who knows when we'll be touring, when we'll be traveling, to think of all the adventures and how outward looking we were from this what could've felt like a tiny place, felt enormous in those days, enormous.

Mike:

That was one of the biggest things with me as well, was King Mark interested in [inaudible 00:11:19], outward, outward lies the way but that was always the thing for me and funnily enough Kneehigh's 40 years old this year so I feel that this bloody virus has marked it for us. I don't need to do anything but I kind of, yeah that word global. I always wanted to be a global system when what feels like comparatively recent history [inaudible 00:11:49] pleaded with the sort to become global citizens. I thought, oh this is the future and let's not talk about what's happened since but that remains very true to me so whether it, certainly Buena Vista and Cuba, et cetera, and there's always been a lot of pressure on Kneehigh to be this Cornish company. Well, we used to get, how does it affect the work, well it kind of does but it's not by going Oggy Oggy Oggy and waving a Cornish flag. I've always hated the kind of nationalistic sense of things and of course, I celebrate Cornwall as a fantastic place where all sorts of fantastic things can happen and certainly for Kneehigh I always associated it with a place where you could make things happen but we all must remember particularly now that we're part of a global community.

Emma:

Well, I agree and we were always asked how Cornwall influenced the work and it wasn't, it's to do with the outlook isn't it, and [inaudible 00:12:53]. I'm thinking about today talking to you is about change. It's

Wise Children's Lockdown

Tea & Biscuits with Emma Rice & Mike Shepherd

a changing climate. The views change and I feel that that's the strength of what you were talking about, the barns, the walls actually breathe in the barns and what you're discussing is to keep it creative you have to keep changing and I think it's one of the things you do amazingly as an artist and a person is understand the necessity of change and you ride it. You don't lament it, you don't get ahead of it or behind it. You really understand how necessary change is and I think that's one of the things that Cornwall taught me is to think big and to think flexibly and the landscape teaches you that as well.

Mike:

Yeah, definitely.

Emma:

Tell us about your first music choice and why. I'm so excited you chose this, by the way.

Mike:

Yeah, well it kind of links into what we're saying. That group of us round the fire that you came to on the Cornish cliffs at the barns, we kind of all made different choices from the business really. We didn't want to be in the middle of cities. We didn't want to obey the rules. It was kind of easier for me. It became fairly apparent, had an agent for a very short while and done a few auditions. It was fairly clear that I wasn't good enough for whatever reason and I still think I wouldn't be successful in any kind of audition. We work by our very nature outside us that broke the rules but at the same time we were fiercely ambitious. I can remember when we first ever went to London with Nicke Darke, The King of Prussia, in 1996 probably and we were at the Donmar Warehouse that was being run by Sam Mendes at the time and I can remember repeatedly being asked, "Oh, could you have ever envisaged that Kneehigh would ever ..." Yes, from those earliest days, yeah I wanted us to travel. I wanted us to travel the world. I wanted us to be recognised in the cities as well so that is a kind of contradiction in what I'm saying.

Mike:

I didn't want to just be huddled around that fire drinking all sorts of things I shouldn't be drinking with Giles King. I wanted to be recognised and the 40 year thing that I've mentioned. Most of my memories are to do with those incredible experiences we had whether it was in the Shebeens in Soweto or whether it was in Syria or with a friend of mine from the Tibet Foundation brought, in the '90s, 17 Tibetan monks that were fleeing the Chinese and we all lived together here at the barns. Those are some of my strongest memories and the red shoes, your red shoes [inaudible 00:16:00] and Sexy Starlight was written by Stu Barker and it was when we were at the National again and we were on that amazing [inaudible 00:16:11] stage and there were all sorts of perceived wisdoms about how to use it and I can remember you, not will-fully, but no we didn't use the revolt but you created the most brilliant revolt of your own by having a chorus of nurses that cycled on in a circle, diminishing circle and then got off, propped their bikes up and all lit a fag and your brilliant, there it is, there's the title. A matter of life and death, nurses, cigarettes. We used that backstage.

Mike:

Wise Children's Lockdown

Tea & Biscuits with Emma Rice & Mike Shepherd

We just opened the space up in all sorts of ways that we shouldn't do so Sexy Starlight was also the amazing Dom Lawton, also known as Dom Coyote, coming in as an apprentice and being thrown in the deep end and this boy, as he was at that time, had this stellar voice that was different from everyone else's. It wasn't, it certainly wasn't a musical theatre voice and you and Stu would work together so well, so creative with that song and Dom was just asked to sing and I can remember somebody else in the room from the National [crosstalk 00:17:24] lyrics and there weren't any lyrics but there was enormous emotion and it was simply the David Niven character being played by Tristan Sturrock, who had seen June from ground control that he'd fallen in love with as his plane was plummeting ablaze from the skies and then he sees her and he runs after her and it was the two of them coming together.

Mike:

And it was your bravery and your way of not taking any notice of the perceived wisdom, which of course makes work distinctive and it was such a beautiful, emotional moment that was filled with passion and also, if you listen really carefully you can hear the story of your grandfather who was a bell ringer who rang his bells over fallen comrades in the war and you can hear the bell ringing as well so it was a combination of making work that is passionate and personal and daring and demanding bravery. It wasn't about someone learning all the notes and the lyrics. Sorry, that's a long answer.

Emma:

It's a perfect answer.

Music:

(singing)

Emma:

I find it so emotional, Mike. I find it almost hard to listen to but for all the good reasons, all the good reasons.

Mike:

And it kind of encapsulates, certainly in those times, your direction for me where we didn't quite know what you were after but that was all part of the excitement of it all which ties into something that I've kind of realized laterally because I was a teacher and when I'm feeling very grand about myself I call myself an educationist but the one thing I've always believed and it's not about getting things right, it's about exploring and playing and those moments where your direction where we weren't just trying to get something right. We were playing with it and finding something and exploring something. That's made it also exciting and so different.

Emma:

It was so personal as well, wasn't it? We were so present.

Mike:

Yeah.

Wise Children's Lockdown

Tea & Biscuits with Emma Rice & Mike Shepherd

Emma:

I don't know, when I saw that you'd chosen that I thought at that time there was so much meaning around what we were doing and a purpose within the community. It was a thrilling time and thank you. Thank you for remembering my granddad and yeah, the title is very poignant to the moment isn't it, a matter of life and death.

Mike:

Yeah.

Emma:

Anyway, I'm going to move us on and the chapter I've decided to talk about today for lots of reasons is Cymbeline.

Mike:

Ah.

Emma:

I know. That's a surprise, isn't it? Of all the shows. I wanted to think about it because I was thinking about you in particular and one of the things, one of the many things that's exceptional about you is the way that you can take the smallest part or even a part that doesn't exist and create a character that is so intoxicating and glorious that they almost steal the show and Cymbeline was amazing because I cast you as Cymbeline, so the titular Shakespearean king and it was probably the part that you had the least interest in because I also cast you as Joan, which we invented as a character, a storytelling device. I thought to sort of answer some of the questions that Shakespeare hadn't solved, some of the poor writing in my opinion. So you played Joan who had been living in Majorca but you also played a homeless character called Potsy. Now this was not written.

Emma:

I didn't want Potsy in the play but Potsy created himself and I was so fond of him. He was the one who, when Imogene dressed up as a boy, she took Potsy's clothes and this was just going to be sort of an extra by the fire and he ended up dressed as a princess but he ended up in Imogene's princess clothes while she was in his homeless clothes but before you talk about it, which I'm interested to hear, one of the things about this show that really stays with me is that when we were in Colombia with it we met a young woman who was our translator and the show would have terrible reviews and we'll talk about that, quite a critical backlash from the Shakespearean community but in Colombia, this young woman burst into tears and she held our hands, you and me, and said, "The fact that one man, you Mike Shepherd, could play a tyrant king like Chavez and also play a warm, kind woman like Joan and also play somebody that would be on the streets gave her hope that people are capable of all things and people are capable of great horrors but also great goodness", and that decision, which so many people in England had found annoying in trite had such meaning in Colombia.

Emma:

Wise Children's Lockdown

Tea & Biscuits with Emma Rice & Mike Shepherd

And I felt that also really celebrated one of the things you do, which is that you dig under the skin of the things that are working around the outsides of stories and you illuminate from the side, you come in from the left and you surprise us but as a director and as a friend, that is, watching you build those surprise characters and find their way in is one of the great joys of my life, let alone my career. But talk to me a little bit about Cymbeline and those characters.

Mike:

Oh, well thanks for saying all of that. That is, yeah it's brilliant. I do feel slightly a charlatan because we've always made work and I've certainly believed in a chorus and one of the reasons I believe in a chorus is I can't bear the thought of part, you're there on a stage with an audience and you're responsible for charging that space and then you play your scene and then you go back to your dressing room and watch European football or whenever to wait for your next call. That would be hopeless for me. I'd just be-

Emma:

Well, you would never come back, would you?

Mike:

No, I'd be asleep. I would definitely be asleep.

Emma:

[crosstalk 00:27:37] you'd be cleaning a gutter or something, wouldn't you?

Mike:

Yeah, no I'd be fiddling around doing something but I certainly wouldn't be in the world of the play so I kind of have to, as an actor stay in the world of the play so that then puts me in a position where I am, if you like in minor, but I am a chorus, but all the time just thinking how can I contribute to this story. Yeah, I certainly don't analyse who Potsy might be and actually Potsy, if Alex Fan is listening in, Potsy's based a bit on him where he was always looking to see what somebody didn't want or he used to look for scraps as well and Alex, I hope you aren't listening in but I love you dearly and I'm not having a go but Potsy was yeah, based on this notion of a stray dog looking for snacks. Yeah, and Colombia was such a brilliant thing, kind of slightly strangely.

Mike:

I'm furloughing at the moment so I've been furloughing at the Kneehigh stores where I possess, I believe, what the world's most expensive shipping container which Paul Cruz sold me and coming from Cornish, it's what we call a Cornish gift, which is when you go, ew I don't want this anymore, you have it. It leaked and anyway I've had to have a new roof on it. I've clad it, I've insulated it to keep my various meagre possessions in there and I came across an hour and a half ago, the doll of Fanny Mikey, which I think is yours.

Wise Children's Lockdown

Tea & Biscuits with Emma Rice & Mike Shepherd

Emma:

Oh, well it's part of our shared history, isn't it?

Mike:

Yeah, well I shall keep it safe and give it back to you but Fanny Mikey was this incredible Argentinian Tango dancer, who was a refugee and arrived in Colombia and I can remember performing Cymbeline and we were at Birmingham Rep and the ICC Center had had a bomb scare and the show was canceled and then we did one show and then the next show was also canceled because it was heavy snow and in that one show this 70 something year old glamorous woman in high heels came afterwards and barely spoke any English and said, "I take you to the pub", and we went to the pub in Birmingham and she said, "I want you to open my festival", and I thought, oh yeah sure. That's not going to happen. Then, yeah, the very next March or April there we are in Teatro Colon in Bogota, which is still the most beautiful theatre I've ever been in, built in probably 1786 as an opera house where over a thousand people could see everything and the acoustic was just pure. You could hear a pin drop and I remember we opened Cymbeline and because she had spoken so passionately because in Colombia you don't necessarily do things on time.

Mike:

I think we were nearly two hours late starting the show but yeah, to be away from certainly all those bad reviews in the UK and that feeling about Shakespeare and just to let the story live was really eye-opening. When Belarius says, "It was I that stole your children", the audience gasped. My God, it was him, you know, and you didn't get that reaction at all in, certainly in England.

Emma:

I often think that that was, because I think about it because I often think when you look at what happened at the Globe, why didn't I see the writing on the wall when we did that version of Cymbeline at the RSC, but for me, that experience that I had in the auditorium of Cymbeline. I fell in love with Shakespeare in that moment because this ridiculous story in England or at Stratford of somebody who had lost their children and was reunited, that wasn't serious. In Colombia you were surrounded by people who all knew somebody that disappeared, who all knew somebody that was lost and women would be weeping when the boys were reunited with Cymbeline, weeping and I can remember thinking, wow this guy knew what he was doing and I'm humbled. I was humbled by Fanny Mikey. I was humbled by Colombia and I was humbled by the play. Let's listen to a little bit of the music.

Music:

(singing)

Emma:

The Cold Light of Day, written by Stu Barker with Dom Lawton on vocals again. I think about it more often than I should really, that experience because I feel that the meaning of doing my first Shakespeare and the way we did it keeps unfolding and one of the things that also links it to later is I don't know if you

Wise Children's Lockdown

Tea & Biscuits with Emma Rice & Mike Shepherd

remember but just before I took over the Globe or went in as artistic director, I went on the Today program and I was interviewed by John Humphrys and he was giving me a hard time, as he does everybody, and he was saying, "So, how are you going to modernise it? What do you mean you're going to simplify it?", and I hadn't prepared and I said, "Well, I think you can simplify the language", and he said, "Give me an example", and I thought, bloody hell and I said, "Well, for example, in Cymbeline, in fear no more the heat of the sun, there's a line which says, Golden lads and girls all must, as chimney-sweepers come to dust", and I said, "That's hard to understand because it was pre the industrial revolution and what are chimney-sweepers and why are they coming to dust and when you find out that they mean dandelions and if you put that it keeps the [inaudible 00:39:07], it keeps the poetry but it reveals the image."

Emma:

And I've since found out, I think they had more complaints about that than they've ever had and that was sort of the beginning of the end, was the outcry that you would swap the word chimney-sweepers for dandelions and what an insult that was. The ripples of how we approach Shakespeare, I feel like they lapsed against my shores for many, many years to come and as I say, my memories don't diminish what I feel about Shakespeare but made me think that was a tricky old world that I put my toe in. I've got a long metaphor, don't I?

Mike:

Completely, completely preposterous and I also remember Michael Billington saying about that song, at last to hear Shakespeare's language but he didn't appear to spot that only one verse was Shakespeare and then Carl Grose had written the other verse. I have to allow a small dog in a minute, who's demanding that I take her to the beach but it's not time. Do you remember as well, with fear no more the heat of the sun, we sang that in that beautiful domed salt mine where the salt miners had carved a perfect acoustic for people to sing in, as is the way of Colombian salt miners?

Emma:

Let's have a listen to fear no more the heat of the sun. Mike, do you also remember I read this at your dad's funeral?

Music:

(singing)

Emma:

Fear no more the heat of the sun, composed by Stu Barker, words by William Shakespeare and Carl Grose with Dom Lawton and Mandy Lawrence on vocals. C'mon take me away from Shakespeare, Mike. What's your next song choice and why?

Mike:

Wise Children's Lockdown

Tea & Biscuits with Emma Rice & Mike Shepherd

This is Kate Tempest, People's Faces. I've been to see Kate Tempest a few times I suppose over the last three years and I find it so powerful and I first heard this song actually in Victoria Park about a year ago. Let's not go into me, cover up my fury about the incompetence of the politics in this country but suffice it to say, I do feel like I've been fighting [inaudible 00:44:54] most of my life, Margaret Thatcher and onwards and I find some solace for my anger in her voice.

Music:

(singing)

Emma:

She's amazing. Brilliant choice. Brilliant choice.

Mike:

Yeah, it's, I mean something I've realised we talked earlier, the first question, we talked about freedom and it was always about freedom, really, Kneehigh and joy absolutely. It was always mildly amusing more than perplexing how theatre normally becomes so stressful. I'd think, oh surely you can enjoy yourself. Invent a character like Potsy. What's the point of doing it if there's not the joy but that is linked to freedom but the other thing at this stage, let's say of my professional development is I've kind of been thinking, shouldn't it be getting easier by now and I've talked to you about that as well. Isn't it time that I shouldn't have to keep fighting for everything? Keep fighting. It feels like a fight and then I realize of course I've got to keep fighting and that's all right and yeah, I hope that those future generations whether they're Kate Tempest or [inaudible 00:51:29], I hope they keep fighting too because we need to.

Emma:

Well, thank you for fighting. As I say, I've lived and worked with you for many years and there's times when I feel for you with the fight because you're a born fighter, not physically. Fighting for what is right and what is just and I think there's a cost for that with you but I thank you for it because too many of us stop fighting or give up the fight or think it's not worth it and I've never known you not think it's worth it. C'mon, what's your next record?

Mike:

I don't know how to pronounce this. I think she's maybe-

Emma:

That's why I thought I'd leave it to you. Go on.

Mike:

[inaudible 00:52:13] but she's just this brilliant, you know how things ... That's one of the marvels of social media, oh and one of the marvels of having a daughter. "Have a look at this, dad", but yeah she popped up somewhere and I go, "Oh, she's brilliant", and again, as this ... Kate Tempest. As this country

Wise Children's Lockdown

Tea & Biscuits with Emma Rice & Mike Shepherd

falls apart and even as Cornwall tries to go on about identity and it's a fractured place because well, of all sorts of reasons, the economy, the voting to leave the European union which has made so many brilliant things happen here, the large percentage of second homes, the loss of community, et cetera. There's quite often pressure on me, when are you going to be back to Village Halls or turn up and do some Cornish stories and there's a kind of quaintness about it and I'd like to do something funky. We've still got a van. I'd love to turn up with Krishna who's taken over a pub in [inaudible 00:53:26] and turned it into a really kind of cool bar. He's also providing, he's turned it into a bakery.

Mike:

He was up here yesterday with me and we were smoking mackerel so he's become a key worker because he's providing so much good food and what he doesn't know about sustainable and seasonal food isn't worth knowing so I'd love to turn up with him in a van and this brilliant Turkish woman and whether it's in [inaudible 00:53:59] or somewhere else in the world that we're still allowed to travel to, I'd love to spill out and listen to old dance and to listen to that singing and to taste that food. That sounds like a better option than crowding into some auditorium to watch something behind a proscenium.

Emma:

Amen.

Music:

(singing)

Emma:

Oh, Mike, you will always be the master of the good night out and that description just makes my, oh makes me start dribbling.

Mike:

Yeah, and add yourself [inaudible 00:59:21] and oh my God we could spread the love and the joy and the naughtiness. No, I wouldn't choose a sea shanty [inaudible 00:59:34]. I'd choose [inaudible 00:59:38].

Emma:

Sounds fabulous. Right. I'm going to draw this to an end although I think we should do it again because we've got so many projects to talk about but for today, the thing that jumped out of me is when you were talking about being in the space and you said that you always think how can I contribute and I think that sums you up really. That you have the biggest heart and spirit of generosity of anybody I've ever met so I want to thank you in these moments where we have a chance to reflect on all the amazing things that we've had the privilege to experience, to thank you for your generosity and your passion, your tenacity, your vision, your humour and your soul stabilising loyalty. Mike Shepherd, you're the leader of the pack. You embrace change. You are change and this song, you know, means a lot to me and it means a lot to you, as well. Thank you.

Wise Children's Lockdown

Tea & Biscuits with Emma Rice & Mike Shepherd

Emma:

Things Are Gonna Change, John Lee Hooker.

Music:

(singing)

Emma:

If you have a memory or connection you'd like to share on Tea and Biscuits, leave us a message on our phone line. 01173183846. That's 01173183846. Keep checking our social media for details of our next show. Tea and Biscuits is part of Wise Children's Lockdown. Thanks for hanging out with us. Bye.