

Wise Children's Tea & Biscuits

Emma Rice & Lez Brotherston

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 & Biscuits, and today I am taking with designer extraordinaire, Lez Brotherston.

Lez:

Hello Emma. Look at you.

Emma:

Don't take a drink of gin at exactly the moment that you're supposed to be speaking.

Lez:

It's a cup of tea, for all the listeners. You can see it's not.

Emma:

It's G and T, isn't it?

Lez:

It's five o'clock. We're in lockdown. What's a boy to do?

Emma:

Good question. But first, the most important question is what is your literal or virtual biscuit of choice?

Lez:

Well, I'm always partial to a bit of a cheap biscuits. You can forget these great big cookies, soft dough malarkey things. Very fond of a Custard Cream or if I'm feeling a bit perky, maybe a... What are they called? A Party Ring.

Emma:

A Party Ring? I haven't seen a Party Ring... What's the difference between a Party Ring and a Jammy Dodger?

Lez:

A Party Ring is a very hard baked biscuit with a bit of icing on the top and a Jammy Dodger is a sandwich and cream and jam with a hole in the middle.

Emma:

Approximately.

Lez:

I know my biscuits. You don't get this big without knowing what a biscuit is.

Emma:

And tell me, how's your lockdown going? Where are you? Paint me a picture.

Lez:

I'm at home in Chichester. I'm lucky, I'm really lucky. I live in a barn in Chichester and I've got a big garden, and I've got two virtual family friends staying with me so I'm not alone. I have got a really nice place to be. It's really easy to isolate but dear God, I'm missing theater. I'm missing being able to think and make and create and do stuff, and I just can't wait to get back.

Emma:

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Me too. Me too.

Lez:

Wouldn't it be great?

Emma:

Right. Let's reminisce a bit because you and I met on the marvelous but ill-fated project The Umbrellas of Cherbourg.

Lez:

One of my favorite shows ever. It really was.

Emma:

We all loved it with all our hearts and still do to this day.

Lez:

I just think the problem was... It wasn't so much that it was a bad show because it was a great show, it was a brilliant show. It was just getting people to want to come and see a show they didn't know.

Emma:

Do you think it was as simple as that?

Lez:

I think it really was. I think once we got people in there they loved it. It was just they went, "Umbrellas of Cherbourg? What is it? We don't know," and it sort of somehow... We knew quite early on it wasn't going to catch the imagination of an audience who wanted to come and see it. I wonder if it would, with the work that you've done and that we've all done, whether it might have a better chance now, but at the time it was a little bit of an anomaly, wasn't it? Nobody knew what it was so very few people wanted to invest in coming to see it.

Emma:

I always wondered whether it was just because, it went to the West End and didn't last very long at all, whether it was in the wrong place, given that it was a sung-through jazz opera, that it might have done better in an opera house if we'd branded it slightly differently.

Lez:

Yeah. I think you're right, or if it had been down at the Rand House or somewhere where it could have been a little bit of a gem that was found. That might have been interesting.

Emma:

[crosstalk 00:03:56].

Lez:

But I think you're right. [inaudible 00:03:58]. It was not what anybody was expecting but it was a show with such heart.

Emma:

Oh, we loved it so much and I want to take you back to... So we'd only just met. We'd been put together by the producer, Danial Sparrow, and Lez and I met and we liked each other, and I'd watched your work for many years with New Adventures and was quite starstruck to meet you but we got on pretty well, didn't we? But it's always quite formal, those first meetings, and it was decided... They're really hard but we both tried to look serious and impressive, two things that neither of us are, are we?

Lez:

Neither. And you're trying really hard to impress and you're going, "Will you be impressed by this? I'm not sure. Would I be? I don't think I would."

Emma:

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But we decided that we would go on a field trip to Cherbourg, just the two of us, having not really spent any time together before, and our friendship was formed on that trip, wasn't it?

Lez:

It was. It was. I'm not quite sure what I was expecting. I imagined Cherbourg would be something glamorous and lovely and wonderful and romantic, and parts of it were... A little tiny street of it was but as Meow said in the thing, "Cherbourg, how can I describe it to you? Well, it's whole, really? Isn't it?" It really is.

Emma:

We couldn't find a decent restaurant. We'd seen the tiny, tiny fragment that was lovely, we'd seen that in 15 minutes, hadn't we?

Lez:

We had, and we had another day and a half to go. I seem to remember you and I running down the street because we saw some sailors shouting, "Bonjour Matelot," thinking it was hysterical and them looking at us like we were mad people.

Emma:

But the one thing we had is, for those of you who don't know The Umbrellas of Cherbourg, it's an amazing film composed by Michel Legrand and there's a song in it, I don't even know what it's called, I Will Wait For You or Will You Wait For Me, and it's the most fantastic tune ever but in truth it's almost the only tune in the musical or the opera.

Lez:

It is.

Emma:

And you had it in your head and you kept singing it to me, and singing it over and over again until I wanted to kill you. We were like brother and sister at that point and I would say, "If you sing that to me one more time I will have to throw you overboard or kill you," and then it got to the point that you'd wound me up so much like a sibling that you would tap it out on my arm, just the rhythm of it, and it would send me over the edge. You were so annoying and so funny at the same time.

Emma:

So in honor of The Umbrellas of Cherbourg, let's listen to a little bit of that tune which we listened to for months (singing).

Lez:

We're laughing now but it's heart breaking in the show, isn't it?

Emma:

It's really heartbreaking. It's really heartbreaking. I still love it completely. Can I say Simon's delighted because he just played that on a real, genuine vintage seven inch single that he's got of that. So our friendship was formed on that show and I do remember that we decided that if we won an Olivier Award, which can I say that at this moment we both knew was not going to happen, Simon's giggling in the background, that we would have Bonjour Matelot tattooed onto our bottoms.

Lez:

We did. We promised that. And do you know what? One day we should do it. I think it would be funny.

Emma:

When we're 70 let's do it, but at the moment our bottoms are clean, aren't they? So we carried on as friends and as colleagues and it was a very happy time when I managed to get you down to work with Knee High, and you came down and worked on 946 with us.

Lez:

I did.

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Emma:

I wasn't concerned but there was a bit of concern because you're such a high falutin top designer that you might find working in a field with a portaloo a bit of a challenge, but it worked brilliantly, didn't it? I think you should tell us a bit about Henry and Knee High.

Lez:

I had a ball and I've got a dog called Henry. The dog is both a blessing and a curse in that I now have to arrange any jobs I do around whether I'm allowed to have Henry or whether I'm not allowed to have Henry, and luckily with Knee High and with The Barns and with The Lost Gardens of Heligan I was allowed to have Henry. And it was quite nice because Henry sort of became the company dog.

Emma:

He did.

Lez:

Very often you'd find people like Katie or you'd find somebody else curled up having a cuddle with Henry on a bunk somewhere, and it was quite nice to have that domestic kind of life going on at The Barns which are quite magical. They're really quite a fun place to be, and I didn't think they would... It's quite funny that when I turned up I was put in the posh shed, remember? I was put in the shed with a balcony.

Emma:

The Chalet. It's the Chalet.

Lez:

But I was terrified because I'd never really stepped in a field before and I know some of the other people who were there were doing things like miming mad hatchet men outside my window because I said, "What do I do when I need to get up in the night for wee?" And they said, "You have to get up, go over that thing, climb over the fence, go along..." I was thinking, "Oh God, this is just a nightmare," but it was so much fun. It was a whole new way of working for me which I really appreciated and I really learned to love.

Emma:

And I loved having you there. I loved how funny you were, that's why we liked to tease you with the mad ax men coming to get you. But like you said, having a company dog made it... It's the perfect place to do it. My favorite memory of Henry was when we were doing 946. It was this beautiful set like a big exploding shed with two levels. Top level where the band played which had two tiny ladders going up to it, and we were all getting ready for tech and very busy, and somebody looked around and Henry had managed to go up the ladder and was on the top deck. But being quite a large and, can I say dim, dog, he is a little bit dim, isn't he? In a really lovely way, couldn't get down.

Lez:

He is dim. I was up there. Bless him, he'd followed me up because I'd gone up there to look at what it was like to be on the top level, and you all sat in the auditorium and watched this dog climb a vertical ladder. And then when he got up 20 feet up in the air, then all went, "Well, how's he going to get down?" Because he can't go face down. So we had to go and get the cherry picker from across the field and it had to drive into the thing and cherry pick Henry off the top of the set and bring him down to the ground. I remember standing there holding on to his collar, thinking, "You've all just stood and watched him do this."

Emma:

I've never owned a dog. I didn't know that dogs could go up stairs but not down stairs. I didn't know that was a thing.

Lez:

It was a vertical ladder. All points to him for being able to get up a vertical ladder.

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Emma:

Well, I agree. Tell us more about your first choice of music and why you chose it.

Lez:

Well, when you asked me to do this I was quite interested to think about what music I'd choose, and what I wanted to choose was music that linked us and why. And I remember on The Umbrellas of Cherbourg it was the first time we'd worked with Meow Meow. The whole idea of Meow Meow, the way you presented it to me terrified me because you told me there was this performer who had an alter ego and we would know if she was her alter ego which is Meow Meow if she turned up to rehearsal wearing the wig.

Lez:

But if she wasn't wearing the wig she was Melissa the actress and so I was in a state of nervous excitement and thinking, "Oh God, how do I deal with this and what can I do?" And then I worked with her and learned to love her, and then went to see her to her cabaret. We became friends and it was all lovely. Now forgive me, this is a long story. So cut back to when I was 17 or 18 and I was in an all boys' grammar school in Liverpool.

Lez:

In the sixth form the boys' school and the girls' school amalgamated and being a gay man, all my friends were women. They were girls apart from one boy who was in every class I was in and he was the basketball player, he was the coolest kid in school, he had a band, and for about three years we became best friends, really really good and close friends. He went off to art school in Liverpool, I went to art school in London and then he became... His name was Colin Vearncombe and his band was a band called Black, and in the 80s he had about two or three big hits and one of them was this song that we're going to play.

Lez:

Cut to a few years ago and Colin, who has been making records ever since, tragically got killed in a car crash in Ireland, and shortly after that I went to see Meow Meow in a show of hers called Mermaid, and the very, very first song that she sings is Colin's song. And to hear Colin's words and Colin's music come out of a very, very close and loved friend who I was in love with, who I adored, who I wanted to be, and hearing those words come out of Meow's mouth who was another friend I adored was really, really poignant (singing).

Emma:

The amazing sounds of our friend Meow Meow with Wonderful Life. What a brilliant choice.

Lez:

Brilliant. Wonderful. She takes an 80s pop song and turns it into a piece of musical theater. It's amazing.

Emma:

Thank you for choosing that.

Lez:

It's lovely. It's weird the way these things happen, isn't it? I knew Colin when he wrote the music, when he did it, and then 30 years later there's a colleague singing it. It's amazing.

Emma:

It's one of the things that I've found amazing about this lockdown and these conversations, is what a web we are, these human beings that have met each other and influenced each other, and how we come in and out of each other's lives. But nobody's alone, are they?

Lez:

No.

Emma:

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None of this distancing, it doesn't exist for us. There's no distance. There's just connections and just the way that we all influence and change each other as we go past. It's so precious.

Lez:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). It is.

Emma:

So we went on. I went to The Globe.

Lez:

You did.

Emma:

I did. It's as if I go from disaster to disaster, isn't it?

Lez:

No, no, no, no. No, it wasn't a disaster. I think we did two shows together at The Globe and I had a ball. The Globe was nowhere I ever wanted to work. I have to say I've been offered shows at The Globe before you took over and I turned them down. I didn't want to work in what I perceived as... At the time I thought it was a bit of a museum piece, it was a bit of heritage theater and I didn't want to do it.

Lez:

And then you took over the globe and you did your amazing Midsummer Night's Dream and I suddenly saw how somebody could use that space and own that space and really play that space, and you understood it better than any other director I've seen work in that space. You really did.

Emma:

Thank you. As you know, I loved it. For all of the drama I loved it. And we loved it, didn't we? You did something really interesting in our production of Twelfth Night which I think really cracked the space. You did two walkways out into the mosh pit and it meant that my two twins could come out as if... It was as if the standing audience was the sea and people could almost go out over diving boards to stand over this sea of people, and you almost imagined that they could dive onto them.

Emma:

And I thought that was so clever because you managed to propel the actors right into the heart of the action but without building something really heavy. You also did an amazing bit of engineering which was a bridge that went up and down. Would you like to talk about how interested I am in structural engineering?

Lez:

Not at all, really. I decided early on that this piece of engineering would have its limitations because it was just a bridge that could be a bridge that you could stand on or it could fall down and it could be a staircase that you could walk on, and I really, really thought you needed to understand how this could be used and the limits of what it could do.

Lez:

And so we called a meeting with you and me and the production manager and the people who were going to build it and the engineers, and we sat down in order to talk to you about what could happen, and I think your attention span lasted less than 10 and a half seconds as you were distracted by a brightly colored handbag. And I could see you as we tried to tell you what this thing could do and what it couldn't do, your interest absolutely went out of the window which, again, made me howl with laughter.

Lez:

And when we have had moments when the absurdity of what we do, and it's mad what we do, make me tease you and make you tease me and we just sit there howling at each other, and the fact you can make me weep with laughter is probably one of the reasons why we're still mates.

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Emma:

I know, I'm sorry. I do find it hard to get excited.

Lez:

But your attention lasted for a few seconds. Literally you sat there and you had your school mistress look on, and you went, "Yes, okay, tell me about the bridge. Ooh, look, a handbag."

Emma:

I can't help it. A bit of me thinks, "Oh, just make me a bridge and I'll use it," but anyway, forgive me.

Lez:

I know. I do and I love you for it.

Emma:

And I'm very happy I still make you laugh even though I'm so annoying. But I loved that show. I absolutely loved Twelfth Night and we're going to enjoy a little piece of it in a minute, but first of all tell me about your second choice and why you've chosen it.

Lez:

Ooh, my second choice. Well actually, it was going to be third choice but I'll tell you about it now. One of the things I really enjoy, one of the things that makes me want to work with people is when they do make me laugh. You make me laugh, Matthew Bourne makes me laugh, Etta Murphy makes me laugh. The list of people that makes me laugh is long and I've been really, really lucky in that I've been doing a lot of theater and I've been doing a lot of other stuff as well, and for a while I used to do comedy.

Lez:

I used to do comedy and at one point for about 10 years I did the two shows for French & Saunders. I designed their live shows for them and for me it's like I'd died and gone to comedy heaven. I literally was invited by Dawn to design Dawn and Jen's show and I went to their house, or I went to Jennifer's house in Richmond where she lived then, and went into a room very, very nervous, and I met French and Saunders and we were going to do the show together, and I rather naively said, "Is there a script?" As Dawn glares at Jennifer going, "Not yet," and Jennifer disappears to the SlimFast cans in the corner and the OK! Magazines. And then Dawn said, "But what will happen is," and then she started doing it, and then Jennifer started answering her, and I suddenly realized that my comedy heroes were in a room with just me and they were doing their show for me, just for me.

Lez:

Cut to when we then did the show. Dawn and Jen, they've had this tape and it was a terrible old cassette tape which they played at every venue they ever played at from the early days right through to the last days. And I did more shows with them, I did one show with them that was their farewell tour, and it was always the tape that the audience came in to listen to. And on this tape there was the politically incorrect and hysterically funny Kinky Boots by Patrick Macnee and Honor Blackman, and every time I hear that song I'm back standing at the back of an auditorium waiting for French and Saunders to come on and make me wet myself with laughter (singing).

Emma:

Lovely lanky thigh boots, there's a lyric.

Lez:

It gets worse. The lyrics are so politically incorrect but it just puts me in the... Music does this all the time, doesn't it? It puts you in the moment. I remember where I was. I was at the back of [inaudible 00:28:52] or I was in tour in Manchester with them or I was in Australia with them. Wherever I was, and they dragged me around the world with them, bless them. They didn't need me but it was just a treat. One of my favorite memories was on their farewell show at Drury Lane, I was in the wing watching the farewell performance of French & Saunders on stage absolutely in the wrong place in

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Dawn's eye line, which she never lets me forget, as she's trying to, rather tearfully, say goodbye to this relationship and it was just the most wonderful thing to be involved in. I was really lucky.

Emma:

I'm very jealous. They're my heroes.

Lez:

Well, they love you.

Emma:

It's a big old love fest. So we've carried on. We then went on, we made a show for the Wanamaker Playhouse, Romantics Anonymous.

Lez:

Oh, we did.

Emma:

Oh my goodness, that was magic.

Lez:

It was magic.

Emma:

I'd already been ousted, shall we say, by that point for my use of sound and lighting in The Globe, and what was the main element of the set you designed?

Lez:

Neon.

Emma:

Yes.

Lez:

Lights. The whole point was that we were in a dark space and it was not a candlelit show, was it?

Emma:

No.

Lez:

It was not a story that could be told in candlelit and so we came up with signs that lit up that told us where we were and where we were going to go, but it was such a joy to work on and it was such a poignant thing to work on given that it had not been a happy time and we were all angry on your behalf, or I was exceptionally angry on your behalf because you're my mate and I can say what I want to about you but no one else can attack you or I'll kill them. And we were making this really heartfelt and beautiful little jewel of a show in what felt like quite a hostile environment, but it was made despite all that and it was a piece of love which was great.

Emma:

And also it was. We managed to defy the narrative and really find all the joy and all the pleasure, but we also, I feel, used everything that we'd learned from those Umbrellas of Cherbourg days. It was another French show but we were older, better, we knew each other better. I feel that lots of things came into place with this show that maybe weren't there years earlier and it was so special.

Emma:

It created so much joy but I think your design was so clever because whilst I'm teasing you about putting neon into the space, putting neon next to candlelight was so special and really, I thought, did what I will forever be proud of which is putting the modern world next to the old world which I thought was truly what original practice meant to me, and it was absolutely stunning as a show. It took your breath away and it was what I wanted. I wanted to leave with love and beauty, and you really helped me do that.

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Lez:

[inaudible 00:32:12].

Emma:

Your last choice is a song from the show. Tell me why you chose this one.

Lez:

Do you know what? In theater, I've talked about I love to laugh but equally I'm a real baby. I'll cry at the drop of a hat. If a scene change goes well or a costume quick change goes well it can set me off blubbing. What I love watching is well crafted things, and it's quite cynical but there is this thing about an 11 o'clock number in a show which is the point in the drama when you're getting towards the end of a show and characters emote straight to the audience. This was, I think, a perfectly crafted 11 o'clock number that every night would make me cry (singing).

Emma:

If She Loved Me sung by Marc Antolin, music by Michael Kooman and lyrics by Chris Dimond. Beautiful.

Lez:

It's a lovely song.

Emma:

Oh, it's so beautiful, isn't it? And so restrained.

Lez:

It's a really simple melody and it really does what you want a number to do at that moment in the show, and it absolutely gives us the character and gives us the emotional moment.

Emma:

We've had another adventure since then. We've done Malory Towers.

Lez:

We have.

Emma:

I know.

Lez:

What's happened?

Simon:

[inaudible 00:36:06].

Emma:

Just so I could see Lez's face.

Simon:

Oh, I see.

Emma:

You've got a big sound thing in front of your face and I wanted to see you. There you are. He's back. He's back. So yeah, we did Malory Towers. We've had so many ridiculous... That's when our profession is ludicrous, isn't it? We've gone from 1960s girls losing their virginity through to 1940s girls who will hold onto theirs forever. But we had such a laugh, didn't we, on Malory Towers?

Lez:

we did.

Emma:

And again, I think your humor came through, and the fact that you're so good at humor but always with truth and with kindness, and you also did what I always want you to do because you're so

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bloody cool, is I really didn't want Malory Towers to feel like a nostalgic night out where it was like an old fashioned world that we yearned for. I wanted it to feel modern and like it had something new to say, and I said to you, "I want you to embrace technology and do something unusual," and you really did. You delivered a set that nobody would have expected that was really smart, but tell me about those decisions and how you came to them.

Lez:

Well, it was easy. You came to me and you said you thought it should be a white room, and we talked about Simon doing projections or people doing projections and coming with material to project onto it, and then we talked about where it might happen, and finally it was going to happen in The Passenger Shed in Bristol. And when I walked into the place and we were looking at it together we noticed that it did sort of feel a little bit boarding school-y, and we knew what the limitations of the set had to be.

Lez:

It had to be a standalone set in the middle of the room, it couldn't really be a copy of the proscenium theater thing, so I came up with something that just mimicked the shape of The Passenger Shed and tried to make it as 3D as possible but flat enough for Simon to come up with his brilliant projections so that when we projected onto it they wouldn't distort.

Lez:

It was an easy design. The script was very clear, you were very clear about what you wanted to achieve. Simon's input into projections was there, we knew what we wanted it to do, and then of course that glorious cast got involved and those characters... Because bless them, they only had school uniforms really to work with in the 90s so I was giving them nothing in terms of character to work with, but those brilliant performers getting together with Fran and everybody just making it happen in front of us, it was a delight.

Emma:

Oh, it really was. It was a little bit like our Knee High days because we built the auditorium as well, didn't we? And Henry was there.

Lez:

Henry was there.

Emma:

It was the heat wave.

Lez:

And it was, and we were baking in a tin shed in a heat wave. And also I had real problems because the seagulls decided they hated me and Henry and would dive bomb us every day walking in. They would try and kill us and then they would crap on us trying to get in the front door and no one believed me.

Emma:

And that was so true. I did.

Lez:

I'd come in going, "The seagulls are trying to kill me."

Emma:

It's the bald head. I'm really sorry, they don't like bald heads. I told you to wear a hat because then it would put them off. But you were walking in with your arms out because somebody had told you that if your arms were out they would be more scared of you.

Lez:

I think they just lied to make me look silly but those seagulls were trying to kill me. They really wanted me dead.

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Emma:

And they did. That is true, I can't even argue with that. It was really personal and really specific. They weren't dive bombing anybody else, just you.

Lez:

And I couldn't get in. If I went in the back way the seagulls on the back would get me, if I went the front way the seagulls on the front would get me. There was no escape. It was just a mad dash to get in through the front door.

Emma:

Well listen, before I play you out can I say thank you very much for having tea and biscuits with me?

Lez:

Anytime.

Emma:

And it's lovely to see you, firstly.

Lez:

It's nice to see you too.

Emma:

But thank you. Can I just take a moment to thank you for the amazing qualities and joys you've brought to my life? Your passion, your amazing vision, your generosity, your extravagance, your fierce loyalty, and yes, it is fierce and a little bit frightening at times, but thankfully you've always been on my side, and your brilliant friendship. I treasure you so highly, Lez Brotherston.

Lez:

That's kind. I'm thrilled that you've included me in your theatrical journey because it's taught me a whole other side of what I can do.

Emma:

I'm going to play you out, dear friend, with an archive recording of the curtain call for Twelfth Night, which is We Are Family.

Lez:

Wow.

Emma:

And what I love about it is feeling the energy from the company. It's the opposite of shiny, it's so rough, it's so full of love and life, and you can hear the audience cheering but also that's what I feel about you. We are family (singing).

Emma:

If you have a memory or connection you'd like to share on Tea & Biscuits, leave us a message on our phone line, 01173183846. That's 01173183846. Keep checking our social media for details of our next show.

Emma:

Tea & Biscuits is part of Wise Children's Lockdown. Thanks for hanging out with us. Bye.

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