

Wise Children's Lockdown

Tea & Biscuits with Emma Rice & Steph Curtis

Emma:

Hello. I am Emma Rice, the Artistic Director of Wise Children, and you're listening to Wise Children's Lockdown.

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 & Biscuits.

Hello, and welcome to Wise Children's Lockdown: Tea & Biscuits, and today I am talking to my friend, my ex-stage manager and my current general manager, Steph Curtis. Hello, Steph.

Steph:

Hello, Emma Rice. How are you?

Emma:

Very, very well. Lovely to be looking at you.

Steph:

And lovely to be looking at you. I actually brushed my hair for you.

Emma:

Well, I appreciate it. I [crosstalk 00:00:58] brushed my hair for you.

Steph:

I appreciate that this is [crosstalk 00:00:59] and no one else will see it, but I thought there was a degree of standards I had to meet before anyone...

Emma:

I think that's very wise. I've been growing out my quiff into a sort of strange bob, which is now turning into an unkempt helmet.

Steph:

I'll tell you what, I think it looks marvelous.

Emma:

Oh, well thank you. A gray helmet.

Steph:

I nearly said that, but it wasn't the time and we were in a meeting yesterday morning.

Emma:

Well, first of all, [crosstalk 00:01:28] that we talk quite often, which we'll get into later. But first of all, what is your virtual or real choice of biscuit today?

Steph:

Okay, and I even put it on a plate for you, which I wouldn't ordinarily do particularly because it's actually in its own wrapper, but I have a penguin in a red wrapper, which ordinarily I wouldn't eat, but there's all sorts of things coming back from the supermarket in lockdown that we wouldn't normally have. [crosstalk 00:01:55].

Emma:

It's a retro-tastic treat.

Steph:

My 1990s lunchbox.

Emma:

Well, Simon Baker has matched. We have actually had a snap moment, where Simon is also eating a penguin at this moment, so it's obviously the biscuit du jour.

Steph:

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Yeah.

Emma:

And how is your lockdown going? Describe where are you, and what's it feeling like?

Steph:

So I am in Bristol. It's actually all right from my little micro world within this house. Yeah, it's all right. And actually, oddly, I've been in isolation since I finished my previous job at Kneehigh, since my leaving day was the last time I went out apart from exercise. So I had my leaving day, and the next day, we drove back to Bristol and that was straight into isolation because Findley became unwell and then lockdown happened. Basically, it feels quite tidy and went from a whole career of touring to immediately the exact opposite.

Emma:

Being cooped up.

Steph:

So actually, it's quite nice to be at home for once. Yeah. We're here so rarely for proper chunks of time, that that's actually been quite nice. And then, Findley, who is now three has been on tour for almost his entire life and he couldn't be happier that he isn't being hoofed around the country.

Emma:

And he has got both of you there to play with, so he must be [crosstalk 00:03:27].

Steph:

Or around the world, and we're both here. Yeah. So he is absolutely delighted, so that's nice. So actually, we're very thankful for us. Yeah, it's all good. And thankfully, we had a loft built last year, which I tell you is coming into its own because we would have killed each other by now if I didn't have a separate space to work in, so that's been a bit of a blessing, but yeah. No, okay. We're doing all right.

Emma:

Tell us what your first choice of music is, and why?

Steph:

So all of you will be unsurprised to learn, Emma, that all of my... There is a bit of a through-line to my tracks and they all tie, sort of link up in a nice organized, neat arrangement and scenario. My first track is... And I'll tell you for why I picked this. A. Because it links up with lots of things along my journey, since I've known you. But very much in the first week that I ever worked for you and with Kneehigh on Brief Encounter and in rehearsals, and I remember I started rehearsals the second week and I arrived at the Kneehigh barns and [inaudible 00:04:40] it's all amazing and I could see all of that, but I have never been so freaked out and there was no mobile phone reception.

I remember also I had no communication and I was a bit like I have absolutely no idea what's happening. And then, with my one minute where I managed to get reception, there was answer phone message from my brother saying, "I bought you tickets to see Prince on Saturday night, so get on a train on Friday," and I hopped out there to go see Prince but I always think a really a marvelous memory, but also a real marker for the beginning of my Emma Rice journey and life. Anyway, so it could have been any of them actually, but this is Let's Go Crazy by Prince.

(singing)

Emma:

Prince. Steph, talk to me about Prince.

Steph:

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Okay. So Prince has been quite present throughout from I'd say my early teens and reoccurs in many different forms, and I was just thinking about my Lycra-wearing dancing days that you often see most of my anecdotes refer to. But yeah, there [crosstalk 00:10:33].

Emma:

And just to interrupt now, Steph was a keen dancer in her teenage years and often tells a Lycra-based story which has me in absolutely hysterics. That's probably a whole separate program, isn't it? The Bury St. Edmunds Lycra cult, but carry on.

Steph:

Yeah, and me and my brother, and mainly, my brother who is one of the most excellent people. He was a huge Prince fan, so I got into Prince from that. But I am also certain that Prince came to watch Brief Encounter when we were in Minneapolis.

Emma:

What?

Steph:

Well, I know, and I meant for years... Well, maybe not for years, that's a slight exaggeration. But for ages afterwards, I meant to write to Paisley Park and ask if it was indeed Prince, but I'm certain that [crosstalk 00:11:25].

Emma:

We need to wind back because, A. This is the first time I'm hearing of it. And second, what is your evidence for the fact that Prince saw one of our shows?

Steph:

Well, maybe [inaudible 00:11:37] So the crew at The Guthrie in Minneapolis, where we were with Brief Encounter, were often saying it wasn't unusual to be at a party at Paisley Park and Prince is very renowned for turning up in places in disguise or fancy dress. But I really remember, we had done a show of Brief Encounter and the band did their post-show set in the bar in the foyer, and I was out there and selling my CDs and this person went past, sort of exactly the right stature with this almost bandana, dressed in a weird sort of sarong type affair and just glided through the audience and left, not saying anything. But yeah, I've always been certain that that was Prince. Just looked exactly like it could have been.

Emma:

A sarong and a bandana, and the correct stature, that was Prince? [crosstalk 00:12:37] Prince. [crosstalk 00:12:37].

Steph:

Well, there was a sort of small magical being that just sort of drifted through.

Emma:

Oh my goodness. Well, I'm a bit starstruck by that. I'm [crosstalk 00:12:46].

Steph:

Well, yeah, maybe not. Maybe it [crosstalk 00:12:47].

Emma:

No, it doesn't matter, does it? That's the marvelous thing about storytelling is ultimately, whether it happened or not, is now immaterial. It did in my mind.

Steph:

It did happen, yeah.

Emma:

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I'm going to take our listeners back because I don't feel that I have really introduced how we know each other and who you are and what we do. So I met Steph Curtis, what year would it have been, Steph?

Steph:

2007.

Emma:

2007 for the very first rehearsal process of Brief Encounter for my DSM and DSM stands for deputy stage manager, which is the person who sits in rehearsals from day one, all week too in this case, and notates everything. Notates what's happening in the room, and make sure that all the rest of the team, the lighting designer, the sound designer, the designer knows what's happening in rehearsal. And then, when you perform the show, this person calls it, says lights now, sound now.

I always think that the DSM is the most... Well, it's probably the most intimate relationship that a director has in the room because you are the only person that's watching everything and collecting everything out of my mind and the process and the room with me. So actors have got their own narrative, and creatives come and go, but the deputy stage manager and the director sit at the front of that room and hold everything. So we met in 2007, and I loved you from the minute I met you.

You're such an amazing spirit, and person to have in the room and friend. So brilliant at your job. But also, the balance of our personalities could not be better. You mentioned earlier that your songs were arranged in a neat fashion, and I would like to return to that word, "neat", because you like a bit of order, don't you Steph?

Steph:

Oh, I do. Yeah.

Emma:

Tell me.

Steph:

Well, I like... Well, exactly that. I need... The word "perpendicular" springs to mind because I just like everything to be in straight lines and neat, and tidy, and tie up in every area.

Emma:

Which is so good because I am absolutely chaotic at my core. Now, I am quite functional. I am functioning chaos, but I find it incredibly hard to hold on to the perpendicular. So I'm like if you drew a line of Steph going straight, I'm like a dog going on a run around you. But I feel that together, you absolutely make my life so much better and so much more enjoyable.

Another example of that is Steph was the creator of the Emma Rice wallchart, which I think is used in quite a few more rehearsal rooms now. But Steph used to make me big charts, really big that could be written on with big markers, so I could see it with my terrible eyesight, saying exactly what was happening on every day with any lunch meetings, any phone meetings, any doctors' appointments, when actors weren't available, and this would be beautifully written up, stuck on the wall. It used to give me a sense of control that I did know what was going to happen, and you also, at one point before we play a bit of music, you embroidered me one. So I actually have an embroidered wallchart made by your own fair hand.

Steph:

Sometimes I do wonder though that if I was slightly less persnickety about [inaudible 00:16:26] and presentation, I probably would gain about six years of my life back.

Emma:

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And OCD. That is not untrue, what you just said. That is not untrue. But anyway, we will get on to that, but you've moved on since Findley. I feel that a few things have relaxed and you're gaining some time back, aren't you?

Steph:

Yeah.

Emma:

Which is the opposite. Most people will say they have run out of time when they have children, but I feel like [crosstalk 00:16:52].

Steph:

Oh, no. Yeah. No, it's put some real boundaries in, having a child, which I think has been really good for me.

Emma:

Let's play another bit of music. So this is for both of us. Both of us had this on our list for this conversation, which is So Good At Love from Brief Encounter because how many years did you tour Brief Encounter, on and off?

Steph:

Well, I was thinking this. On and off, I think it was between 2007 and 2014, '15, I think. But yeah, it's certainly the show I've done the most of. I think I've done between 800 and 900 shows of this on five different tours, I think?

Emma:

Amazing, and it's been a really extraordinary show, but this is the moment when the bubble of repression bursts and we can all celebrate what it is to be in love.

(singing)

So Good At Love from Kneehigh's production of Brief Encounter with the amazing Stu McLoughlin on vocals, Noel Coward's lyrics with a tiny tweak from me and Stu Barker's music. That show has just run through our lives, hasn't it?

Steph:

Yeah. Yeah, and I've... This makes it sound like I've tired of other shows, which isn't true. But just because of the how many Brief Encounters I've done and for how many years it kept coming back, but I've always, always loved it and always will love it. Because I think collecting some of the song requests, I would have had [inaudible 00:21:01] there as well, but I believe that that's already been snapped up. But yeah, I think that's...

Emma:

That is amazing, and I think so many people have gone through that show and added their humanity to it. So we've watched all sorts of love affairs and [crosstalk 00:21:17] friendship love affairs as well. I feel like there's a whole [crosstalk 00:21:21].

Steph:

That's where I met James, of course.

Emma:

Of course, your own love affair.

Steph:

My own, yeah. And then, Findley, so you know.

Emma:

Brief Encounter babies all over the place. It's been an amazing show.

Steph:

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And it was a really... Importantly for me, it was the first show that took me abroad so much. That was incredible. I've been lucky enough to travel a bit before joining Kneehigh, but that was the first show that really took me to New York and San Francisco, and Australia, and big long stints on tour and just some of the most enjoyable career highlights, but also times of my life as well with that show.

Emma:

Well, touring, it's a terrible job and an amazing job, isn't it? I think you're one of the best touring people I know. You always get the most out of... When some people get quite blue, don't they, being away from home and just sort of count away the hours. I always think there's pictures of you climbing a mountain or sleeping in the outback somewhere or something. You just grasp every opportunity.

Steph:

It was quite helpful through many of those years that I didn't have a home.

Emma:

Just in a tent [crosstalk 00:22:38].

Steph:

Yeah.

Emma:

Well, listen, I'm going to talk about another show which actually never toured as much as the others, which is Don John.

Steph:

Oh, yes. Yes.

Emma:

I've been [crosstalk 00:22:54] this a lot. Partly because I found the soundtrack and it was so bloody good. I'm really enjoying remembering some of the amazing music from it. But also, because it was so ambitious, wasn't it? We burst the banks of Kneehigh in almost every direction. We had a dance company working on it, a massive band, an enormous set. But I have a memory, which is that we sort of broke the stage management team. Talk to me about that.

Steph:

Yeah. Yeah. I'd say that's pretty, pretty accurate. It's really funny actually. I did a job interview not that long ago. So given that Don John was 10 years ago?

Emma:

Easily, yeah.

Steph:

11 years ago. I did a job interview with someone not that long ago and I said, "What do you know of Kneehigh?" And then, there was a bit of a rant about Don John for a decade on that is still upsetting people, the scale of the show and rocking up at these venues. But yeah, it was just huge. It was four shipping containers, but they weren't actually real shipping containers. They were heavier than real shipping containers. They were bespoke [crosstalk 00:24:08] It was... Yeah, double-clad.

And then, I remember... This is sort of going off-piece a little bit, but I remember scrapping that set and we thought four shipping containers, we'll get loads of money for that. That's going to be a real treat and I took it to a scrap merchant or they came and collected it, and I think we got £60? And I think I went back to the barns, and I think you and Mike were there and just, "Oh, should we just buy fish and chips with it, or something?" It really came down to absolutely nothing and this set that had killed everyone. But also, really, really enjoyable. But yeah, it was just huge. It was so ambitious. It was just massive in every way, but it was also one of the most joyous companies ever to work with, and there were loads of us.

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Do you remember? We went to South Carolina, and there was 35 of us or something. We were all just on the beach [crosstalk 00:25:16].

Emma:

Wasn't there a party once where everybody dressed up in everybody else's clothes, and the police came round?

Steph:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, exactly that.

Emma:

[inaudible 00:25:24].

Steph:

Yeah. We were sweeping, and then the police turned up. Yeah, and she had to deal with them on her own, while we were all [crosstalk 00:25:32].

Emma:

Whilst cross-dressing in different rooms.

Steph:

Yeah. Yeah.

Emma:

Let's have a bit of a throwback. This is Thirsty from Don John with Mary Woodvine singing and music. Lyrics by Anna Murphy, music by Stu Barker.

(singing)

Such a cool show. So we met with you being a DSM, and then you came to Kneehigh full-time and you also became a company manager, which is doing the broader looking after a company. But you also helped look after all of Kneehigh's assets with me and Mike, so you were looking after the stores, the sets, but also the barns. So I wanted to talk a little bit about the barns because you and I have spent so many happy hours sorting out the barns, which is where actually our personalities meet a bit because I love a chuck-out, don't I? You like to organize, and I love to declutter.

Steph:

Yeah.

Emma:

And Mike would always be part of that as well. Mike always likes to clear a gutter or knock down a shed, or chop wood. But the three of us would have probably twice a year would go and do two days, where we would blast our beloved barns and give order to the chaos of decades.

Steph:

I did it again, not a huge chuck-out, I have to say. But before I left, I couldn't leave Kneehigh without completely reorganizing the barns. That's what I spent my last week there doing actually, and it was really, really joyous to...

Emma:

Excellent. Has everything been filed in Dewey decimal system?

Steph:

Everything is labeled. Everything is labeled too [inaudible 00:30:38] Yeah.

Emma:

I love it, but this will make you laugh because it has made us laugh so much at the time. But on one famous clear-up, we were just working away and we weren't chatting much. But one of the things is just you know what it's like when you're clearing your house out, we were trying to find space and we had been putting duvets and these big bedding in these big metal boxes. I was about my work

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downstairs, sorting out towels or something, and I saw Steph and it was a big... Imagine this box, which is sort of waist-height, coffin-size, let's say, and it was filled right to the top with bedding. And Steph was trying to work out how much space there was in it, so pushed her hands down but tipped her weight in it because it was duvets. There was no substance, and you fell into the box. [crosstalk 00:31:30] no words passed between us, but I think we laughed for about an hour.

Steph:

Yeah, we did. I really often think about that.

Emma:

[crosstalk 00:31:41] headfirst into a metal coffin.

Steph:

I really often think about that because it is one of the most I've laughed in my life.

Emma:

It was the best. It was such a perfect bit of Mr. Bean comedy. So thank you [crosstalk 00:31:50].

Steph:

Do you know what? Do you know what I group with that as a story that... I suppose it was me, but it was very much we were there together. But do you know, we went to Berkeley Rep for the first time with *The Wild Bride* and it was the first day we were there, and Berkeley Rep is amazing, isn't it? They were super set up and everything was just done really well, and they had all the tech desks and everything was really fancy and all wonderful. we didn't know anyone.

We had only just gone there for the first time that day, and we stopped for a tea break or something and I remember Andy Graham handed me a cup of Starbucks coffee and I took a swig and we were all stood around the tech desks, chatting. And Andy handed it to me and I took a swig, and I swallowed the wooden stirring stick and there was just this tiny bit I managed to grab and then I pulled it out. We had never met anyone and then he started laughing, and then my gag reflex kicked in and I just sprayed the entire tech department and all the equipment with coffee out of my insides. That was...

Emma:

I do remember that because we both [crosstalk 00:33:12] so uncool, don't we? So between us, we've got it covered.

Steph:

And we didn't know anyone, and so it just all felt so horrendously awkward, but [inaudible 00:33:22]. Yeah, that was another funny moment.

Emma:

Let's have another throwback to a bit of our touring, *Wild Bride*. I thought you'd enjoy this.

(singing)

Wild Bride with Audrey Brisson on vocals. I chose that one because it's the very end of the show, *Wild Bride*, which was an epic tale of a young woman who had her hands chopped off because of the Devil. It's all very metaphorical and this is the moment in the show when her hands start growing back. And I suppose, not that I think your hands have been chopped off in any way, but knowing you for such a long time, I've really enjoyed watching your life go from being this touring person to finding James and having this relationship, and having a baby and watching your life really open up without anything diminishing. You're still the most amazing professional and company member and friend, but also feeling your life opening out. So I thought that was a little gift, I feel like [crosstalk 00:36:40].

Steph:

Thank you very much.

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Emma:

Watching things unfurling is really, really beautiful.

Steph:

That just reminded me of something else that is brilliant. Do you remember on... Just thinking about hands [inaudible 00:36:54] Oxford Playhouse and you had said to me, "Her dresses are getting a bit faded, do you mind dying them back to black?" And I read the instructions and it said wear gloves, and I was like, "I'm literally going to swirl it for 10 seconds, it will be fine." And then for a week, it looked like I was wearing black gloves.

Emma:

It was completely opaque, wasn't it?

Steph:

Yeah.

Emma:

Oh, dear. Right. Tell me about your next song choice, and why? There is another neat link going on here.

Steph:

There is. So this is my final one, isn't it? Yeah.

Emma:

Yeah.

Steph:

And this is because... Well, it sort of neatly ties back in a loop back to Prince, which I really associate with the beginning of my Kneehigh adventure. And then, obviously, my song choice is NOTHING Compares To You by Sinéad O'Connor, but it was written by Prince, so that sort of all neatly ties back, which is very pleasing to someone like me. And then also, this was playing as the very final play-out song on my last show that I did in January of this year with Kneehigh. So it was a real moment for me and it seemed really nice that that's what it was, and I got a bit weepy but in a really nice... It was like an absolutely magnificent 13 years of my life and so this was sort of like the end of it, the end of the shows. I sat in the auditorium and just sort of had a little weep to this song, but in a nice way. Nothing but good vibes and happiness.

(Singing)

Emma:

Oh, what a beautiful choice. So you were talking about leaving Kneehigh, which you did only few weeks ago, and you've come to Wise Children, which I feel absolutely amazing about and a little bit guilty about, but I didn't poach you. Not only have we worked together for so long and I really wanted you in this next chapter, but also as a time in your life when touring isn't really an option anymore. It's time for you to be home with Findley a little bit. So when the role of general manager came up at Wise Children and you applied, I could not have been happier. And then, I had a terrible fear that what if you weren't the best candidate? What if somebody else came in who was better? What would I do? But thankfully, that didn't happen and you smashed it and you've come and joined the Wise Children family, which is just an extension of the Kneehigh family, so nothing ends.

Steph:

No, exactly, and it all feels so good. It all feels so right, and it was absolutely the time for Findley... We sort of dragged him around for three years, but he can articulate now that he's like, "I want to be at home," and that's fair enough. He's had a lovely time. I don't think we've ever put him through any touring that hasn't been a nice experience for him. But you know, he is getting older and he goes to

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nursery now and he'll start school next year. Yeah, it's just the right time to have a bit more of a structured life, I suppose.

So it was all the right time. And then, obviously, nothing makes me happier than working for you, Emma Rice, so that as well. And yeah, it all just felt so right and yeah.

Emma:

But being a general manager is just going to expand your ability for organization and neatness into the whole of Wise Children, and I could not be happier. It's going to be like a massive wallchart of my life, so [crosstalk 00:45:14].

Steph:

Yeah. You say that. You'll walk into the office and it will just be everything, like absolutely every object will be labeled and you'll have a slight curse at me under your breath.

Emma:

No. No, no. It's what I need in my life. So I'm going to go for my last choice, which is all about the friendship really because we've enjoyed some magnificent parties over the years and you're a great person to party with. All the first nights, all the last nights, all the middle-of-tour parties, when everybody is feeling low. And you and I, we're often surrounded. You are now with one, James, we're surrounded by quite high-quality musicians who have got very fancy taste in music. You and I enjoy a good party record, don't we?

Steph:

I tell you what, I struggled with that a little bit with my song choices with this because I could go seriously low-brow with songs that really make me happy and really enjoy a boogie to.

Emma:

Absolutely, me too. Cheesy.

Steph:

On that, when we were making Ubu! with Kneehigh and there was sort of a bit of a shout out for people to submit song suggestions for Ubu!, like big anthems and stuff. And initially, I was a bit embarrassed about mine and it was actually a competition and you won a print if your song got in the show. I think I was one of only two people that their songs got into the show, and I decided not to be embarrassed and just own it. But then, it got in and that was Britney Spears, Toxic, you see.

Emma:

Classic, classic choice.

Steph:

Which there is nothing cool about it, is there? But it is what it is.

Emma:

It is so enjoyable though. A dirty pleasure.

Steph:

[crosstalk 00:46:59] songs that makes me... Yeah, a dirty pleasure. Yeah [crosstalk 00:47:00].

Emma:

Which is my final [crosstalk 00:47:02], which you know what I am going to say, which is we were out [inaudible 00:47:05] one night and decided [crosstalk 00:47:07] kabobs, which we did. I think it must have been a Sunday because there were no off-licenses. So we broke into the Kneehigh offices, where there's always wine for board meetings or something, but there wasn't and we found a bottle of wine which had gaffer tape over the top of it and we drank it that night with our kebabs. And when we...

Steph:

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On the floor, do you remember? We just sat on the floor.

Emma:

On the floor, yeah. It was fantastic. And then, we found out the next day that that bottle of wine had been opened with gaffer tape over the neck for about a year. It was just vinegar, but we had a great night.

Steph:

We did.

Emma:

Steph Curtis, can I take this moment to say thank you for your joyful organization, your professionalism, your positivity, your care, your fun, and your amazing friendship? You've been by my side for over a decade, and I am so thrilled to have watched you grow. You have watched me grow, and that we're still walking alongside each other. This is for us because we'll always be young at heart.

(Singing)

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.

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

(singing)