

Tea & Biscuits

With Emma Rice and Vicki Mortimer

Emma:

Hello. I'm 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 and Biscuits.

Hello and welcome to Wise Children's Lockdown Tea and Biscuits. And today I'm talking to my old, old, old friend and colleague, Vicki Mortimer. Hi Vic.

Vicki:

So old.

Emma:

I know. So old. But, because I've been thinking about this, it's been 30 years.

Vicki:

Oh, I feel so proud of that. I love that. That's made me all go a bit funny.

Emma:

It's amazing, isn't it?

Vicki:

It is amazing. It's such a joy.

Emma:

It's absolutely amazing. It's all such a blur, going back, but I think we met in 1990, on Arden of Faversham, at the Old Red Lion in London, directed by Katie Mitchell.

Vicki:

I think you may be right about that. That was in the Polish days.

Emma:

It was the Polish days.

Vicki:

Of mud floors, and covering pubs in earth.

Emma:

Oh and it was so, so dark.

Vicki:

So dark. In fact, probably lit entirely by candles, wasn't it?

Emma:

Yes, there was candle light, lots of me wailing in a strange, eastern European way. Yeah, lots of candles. And I just remember it being so dark. None of us could see each other, let alone the audience seeing us.

Vicki:

And so hot.

Emma:

And so hot. So, for those of you don't know, Vicki is the most amazing designer, and we met on our fringe days in our early, early 20s, and worked a lot with Katie Mitchell, which is a sort of less, not much talked about link in the world, that I did many shows with Katie, and you've continued to work with Katie for decades. And that was the first one. And you, I remember it so clearly, because you painted almost medieval faces around the Old Red Lion, and then scrubbed them out as if they'd been desecrated along the way, but it was such a work of fine art, in this sort of ridiculous environment that probably sat 30 people. It's just unbelievable, isn't it?

Vicki:

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Yeah, I mean I think there was a level of crafted investment that was a really good training ground almost, because it was all what we could manage ourselves. It was sort of executed with will, and whatever bare skills we had at that stage. And because Katie was such a kind of engine, particularly in those early days, she was contradictable. So her energy led the way. She had a kind of monastic zeal. And it meant that, actually the positive of that, was it felt like everything was possible. And that we just put in the time, and the effort to make it happen. And I think the bespoke nature of creating those spaces was it was a really good training, and a really good pleasure, actually. And working to what abilities I had, which were barely exercised natal skills. I look back on it now, I just think we were living in a bubble, such a funny bubble. But the fringe culture was really strong then.

Emma:

Oh, it was really strong. The fringe culture, and we really did work for nothing, and we really did work for the work's sake.

Vicki:

Yeah.

Emma:

And, yeah, there was a ferocity, a burning intensity. As you say, Katie had it in spades but so did we, actually. We sort of found each other through the eastern European link. So Katie had been over to Gardzienice Theatre Association in Poland, and worked with [inaudible 00:04:31] Stanislavski, and was completely inspired by that. And whilst we never crossed in Poland, I had trained over there and performed with them. So that was how, when back in England, we found each other. But they worked as if their lives depended on it, and Katie took that on in spades, and so did I. And she was the, when I began to find my place, and there was you as well. But like you say it's sort of a blur isn't it? And no money, not a whiff of money.

Vicki:

Definitely no money. I mean, this is kind of relevant to the current situation, and what life looks like for young, particularly young people, coming out of the coronavirus economic lockdown. If I think back to what we... How we were able to work like that was essentially because the benefit system supported our early years.

Emma:

Yes.

Vicki:

I was on Rent Rebate, and income support throughout that entire, probably for the first, at least, five years of my working life, which meant that I could live the work. I wasn't doing a bar job, I wasn't working in a shop to support myself, I was able to really plow into starting my working life. And I just didn't earn a penny for about the first five years. It was always the so called profit share system. Of course there was never a profit. And I think it was an incredibly privileged time, in that sense, to be starting work. We could afford to be, what you might call, idealistic. To find a sense of meaning and purpose in what we do.

Emma:

And to build our craft. But we were incredibly lucky, and incredibly privileged. But it still makes me rage, because we've paid back that investment tenfold, a hundredfold, through taxes quite rightly. So I think if you flip it, we were invested in by the state, and we've paid it back. And actually, as you say, if I was a young person now, I don't think I'd have got through those first five years.

Vicki:

No. We'd be doing something different. Yeah, definitely.

Emma:

Hairdresser.

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Vicki:

Yeah. Oh, now you're talking.

Emma:

That what I've always wanted to do. It's always my... If I'm not going to be a director, what would I do? Let's have some music. What's your first choice? And explain why.

Vicki:

Okay, so my first choice is a track by Toots and the Maytals. So I grew up in Bristol, which in the late '70s, was really a reggae city. And so it was sort of the beginnings of me understanding the wild joy of discovering music that really makes a connection, and makes you want to sing at the top of your voice, and dance a lot. And there used to be this most brilliant club in Bristol called The Dugout. Has anybody ever talked to you about The Dugout?

Emma:

No.

Vicki:

So it was on Park Row in Bristol, and it was in a... Because Bristol's really hilly. So you could go in at street level, but actually the club was more or less all underground, because it connected to Park Street round the back. So it's like three layers of unbelievably dark, sweaty, stinky... Of course then cigarette smoke filled parts of the club, and it was so illicit. It was like a kind of speakeasy feel. It was sort of viscerally exciting to go into as a young teenager, where, probably, you weren't even meant to be there anyway. But they played a lot of reggae at The Dugout, and it just woke me up to the possibilities of that body connection to pleasure. It was like meeting sex, you know? And because it was such, the kind of Afro Caribbean community, such a big part of Bristol, it then led on to going to the St. Paul's Festival, as it was then, and just enjoying that mash up of strange cultures, just rubbing along. And Bristol's still got quite an unreconstructed, slightly '70s, feel about it. It still feels a little bit like a hippie town. It's got that potential to be open, at the same time as having, obviously, a very vexed history with its 19th century slave industry past. But the positive of that was just thinking this whole culture of reggae, and scar was just brilliant.

(singing)

Emma:

So I can reveal to you that that was played on original vinyl, because it's one of Simon's most prized records as well.

Vicki:

Yay.

Emma:

He nearly cheered when he saw that you'd chosen that.

Vicki:

That really pleases me. There is something about, there's that lovely call and response feeling at the beginning. And so, it's like, tantalizing. When's it going to start? When's it going to start? And then the beat starts, and then you get that brilliant section, which just used to get me roaring, where it says, "Give it to me one time. Uh. Give it to me two times. Uh, uh." And it just, it still fills me with real delight. It's brilliant. It's such a hot weather song as well. So even in the middle of winter, you turn it on, and you feel like you're out [crosstalk 00:13:26]

Emma:

Sunshine is there.

Vicki:

Yeah. Simple. Gorgeous.

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Emma:

So I'm going to take us back into our eastern European past for a short while, because we have graduated, in Katie's wake, from the fringe to the mainstream, and while holding onto a train.

Vicki:

I know what you're going to talk about now.

Emma:

We did *A Woman Killed With Kindness*, at the RSC, but we also went on, and did *The Mysteries*, which was the last time the three of us worked together as a team. And I, by that point, stopped performing with Katie, but very much against my will. I still felt that I needed, and was owed a leading role, but never got one. But by this point, I was very much in the creative team alongside you. And was choreographing, using all the skills that I found in Poland, and my natural desire to make up dance steps. But it was a real turning point in my life, that production for me, because I think it was when I realized that I needed more of a creative voice in the space. And Katie's such an auteur, that she's amazing to work with, but at some point I thought, "Actually, there's not room in this relationship for two of us." And I think she once said one of the most sweet, and insulting things anybody's ever said to me, because she once said, "I can always trust you to come up with the wrong idea, but it will lead me to the right idea."

Vicki:

She's horrendous.

Emma:

But I do look back and think how extraordinary that two women, that are almost exact opposites, did spend these formative years together. And you witnessed all that, and have continued to work with both of us. So I just wondered what your thoughts are after all this time, 30 years.

Vicki:

So, I mean, in a way, what she said to you expresses exactly what you've just said, which is that there's this sense of two ends of the possibilities, and you're at one, and she's at the other. And of course you're right, that you needed to find that right moment, where what you were getting by being in the room, wasn't enough to keep you in the room. So your sense of timing, I think, was probably really acute. But I suppose you could say that there's this almost sort of Apollo and Dionysus relationship. Where traditionally there's this sort of cerebral Apollonian thing that goes on, and then it's equal twin is the Dionysiac life connection. And I think it's not that Katie doesn't have that in her own way, but I think she was really... I think she knew she needed your direct access to the life force to give a sort of authentic weight, in a way, to what her brain was generating on the upper level of things, if you see what I mean.

I mean, that sounds really simplistic, but there's something in it, I think. I think Katie, she's got this incredible brain, and real tenacity. Her stamina is unbelievable, her mental stamina is unbelievable. But I think there is a sense that she knows she needs to enlist this other energy to really make a connection for an audience. And I think that early time, where she spent that time in Poland with the Gardzienice lot, I think the reason why it was so profound, that meeting for her, is it had a level of connection between rigorous practice, and an authenticity that I think she felt was really lacking in British theater work at that time. And I think authenticity is something that you, Emma Rice, cannot avoid having. It's just that you're not built to be inauthentic in any part of you. What you are is what you are, and I think she would have recognized that. And of course, part of her intellect might have been a bit nervous about the power of that. And probably tried to keep it in the proportion that she could manage within her work space. But I think that must have been the draw, because I think, yeah, you're no fake.

Emma:

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Oh, well, thank you. And neither is she. You know, I look back, and it's been, I think, it was such formative years, and her fierce intellect, and belief in herself have inspired me to this day. And her vision and the need to do it. So, in honor of those early years for all of us. I'm going to play a little bit of the Bulgarian Voice. This is the Bulgarian State Radio And Television Female Vocal Choir. And when this landed in England, in the early 1990s, we'd never heard anything like it. I can remember my skin fizzing, my eyes fizzing, my ears fizzing. And I felt changed by it, and changed by something so other, and so passionate, and so female as well so let's hear them.

(singing)

What a sound.

Vicki:

Yeah, it's the scale as well, isn't it? That feeling that you're... It's like a great whoosh across an enormous landscape, that. It's a calling. Feels like there's a kind of reaching, a call. It's amazingly powerful. I haven't listened to that since then, I don't think.

Emma:

Well, I've just dug it out. It's worth another listen. It's amazing. So before we move on from those early days, because of course our friendship was built then, but I don't really remember how it started. Which is interesting, because as a performer, you don't tend to hang out with designers too much, but we were all so young, and of course you do form friendships by those shared experiences. And certainly, within a few years, every time I went to London I stayed with you. Your flat became my London home. When you had Elsie, Elsie was like my step daughter in many ways, and continues to be. And you were such a massive part of my life.

But I was thinking about when that friendship was formed. And I was just remembering the time, which again, we were working at the RSC with Katie, and we were staying in a shared house together. I mean, God knows how we didn't kill each other. I've got so many funny memories of it. But we were doing *A Woman Killed With Kindness*, and you decided that each actor would have a hand embroidered badge, which would be their coat of arms, which the actor would design with you, and then embroider themselves, which would mean they'd have a real input into their costume. And of course the actors didn't do it.

Vicki:

No, they didn't.

Emma:

It just didn't happen.

Vicki:

I think possibly not even one.

Emma:

I think that might be true. So we ended up like a weird cottage industry in Stratford. And I think Katie was probably so busy doing her research, she didn't really do it. So you were making these exquisite little badges, and I was doing them, and my embroidery was getting bigger and bigger, so I could do them faster and more sloppily. And I think you had to say, "They're just not good enough." I think I was on like baby stitches by the end [inaudible 00:23:51]

Vicki:

Oh my god it's such a brilliant, brilliant memory that, because we were living in one of those weird... Really felt like you were in somebody else's house, in the sort of, if it's possible to be even more suburban than central Stratford, we were in a more suburban bit of Stratford. And it was a sort of 1930's house, full of somebody else's belongings, and so we were like these squatters almost. So Katie was absolutely driven, and I'm sure she will forgive me for saying, practically humor free, for the entire experience, and she just was so determined. And she was at that stage, because it was so

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early on, actors really have no idea what to expect working with her. And so they arrived in a room where she was asking things of them that Royal Shakespeare Company directors just didn't want them to do normally. And so she was having to front her process every day. And I think it must have been extremely demanding for her, but it meant that she was a humorless housemate. I remember you and I sitting downstairs, and Katie was up in her room, snorting, and giggling like terrible, bad children. And sitting on the sofa with these wretched badges to do our cross stitches.

Emma:

Doing our embroidery. And I also remember, in that house, that Katie had somehow come into contact with Steve Martin in America. And I was like, "Wow, that's amazing you've met Steve Martin." She said, "I don't know who he is." And I can remember finding Roxanne, and trying to show Katie Mitchell Roxanne on video, and her just stoney faced, thinking, "What is this? What am I watching?" And I think it was around that time-

Vicki:

[inaudible 00:25:58]

Emma:

I know. Just again, the two polar opposites, with the see-saw of me and Katie, me loving Steve Martin. And then I can also remember, because it was the time of when we were watching videos to pass the time, watching that film about Ed Wood, the B movie director, and I can remember at the time thinking, "This is like me and Katie." I just everything was brilliant. I thought, "I am Ed Wood, a B movie." Because he would do these terrible fights with a plastic octopus, and go, and people would say, "Do you want to retake that?" And he'd go, "No, it's brilliant." So secretly, it's my own secret thing, is that I'm Ed Wood, to Katie's Real Deal. What's your second song choice, Vic? And why?

Vicki:

Okay. It's Aretha Franklin, and it's Respect. And one of the things that sort of carried me through those early working times was the female connection. It's difficult to really take on board now how male dominated our industry was when we started out. I don't know about you, when I think about how long I've been working I feel impossibly historic anyway. But the reality was when we first entered the theater world, more or less, all of the power base was in male hands. It was very unusual to meet women who had any traction in decision making in theater, but either creatively, or administratively actually.

There were obviously outstanding women that were in positions of making a difference. But there was something, I don't know about you, but I feel quite lucky in a way to have grown up in a part of the feminist movement where, as I left school and university, I assumed that it was just onward progress from here, and that there would be no retraction. That women's opportunities would just get better. And so, when it became clear, during the Thatcher years, and then moving forward into a much more problematic gender political era, it was such a blow. And I felt incredibly lucky that, in a way, I had exited my educational life with those almost unquestioning expectation that it would all be all right, and that I would have a place.

And that these incredible women had prepared the ground. You know, the feminists that prepared the ground in the '70s, and early '80s, that I would just be running on that track. And then when I started to see the complexity of that, and actually how immovable an awful lot of those traditional expectations were, voices like Aretha, and that whole soul movement, that movement for change, the political music making, it became incredibly important to me as a soundtrack into my first 10 years, maybe, of working. And so people like Etta James, and Aretha, Motown female vocalists, there was something about... You know, a lot of the biographical stuff about those women is still very much tangled up with their relationship to men, and how their careers were managed by men, and so on. But actually out of it comes this fierce female sense of potency, and challenge. And I

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think Respect is such a brilliant track for that. And again, it makes you feel the power of that connection. It's just joyous.

(singing)

Emma:

Oh, I just wish we were now, where did you say? In The Dugout. I want to be in The Dugout having a dance to that, with a big delicious beer in my hand. I want to go forward a little bit, and our paths went apart, didn't they? So I ended up down in Cornwall, working for Kneehigh. You were building your career, your amazing career in London. But as I say, your flat in Stockwell, was the meeting ground. So our relationship continued throughout all those years. And having a little moment to reflect, it's amazing we held on by a thread didn't we? And whilst we were never able to work with each other all the time. You came, and you designed the costumes for Nights at the Circus, the Kneehigh show in the early 2000s, and also A Matter Of Life And Death, the first time that I went to the national. And with those two projects, you designed the costumes and Bill Mitchell, my wonderful designer, late designer at Kneehigh did the sets, but why did you say yes to those projects? Because it certainly wasn't for the budget, was it? Didn't you give me your feedback to Nights At The Circus. Have I imagined that?

Vicki:

I think I did. I can't remember why. I've never been very good with money then.

Emma:

Well, that's true.

Vicki:

I mean, it's only in this immediate crisis that I've even started to really think about money and think, "Oh Christ, I could probably do some of that money now." That I was so careless about in the past. I think, I mean, Nights at the Circus was the first time I came down to the barns, to Kneehigh barns, and that such an extraordinary... I just remember getting the train down, and being picked up, and taken off to this wild bit of cliff. I mean, the why is, it is, I suppose about, I'm interested in what I do as a... It's a collaboration primarily. And how collaborations create processes that give an integrated identity. So you get process, and what the audience sees, becoming one and the same thing. So, there's something about the ethos of Kneehigh that, when you asked me to come down and do that, that felt like... It's somewhere in the area of authenticity again. It's about making a really genuine, and honest contract with an audience.

And that starts inside that rehearsal process. And I think if I think back to the Nights at the Circus process, it was really about me taking almost quite a... I wanted that challenge. I wanted to not be inside quite the dry, making environments that I've found myself in, where there was a very clear structure. I would design the thing, with the director, and then the actors would arrive at some point, and you'd put the two things together. And I felt that was a really beneficial danger to me going into a making environment where the actors were so much part of the process. It required a lot of courage to... I felt it was really good for me to make myself vulnerable, and expose my process as I felt it then, whereas actually now, I see it as this... Thinking back to work we've made more recently, together, that business of performers, and team, as it were. A creative team, working so much as co collaborators, feels really just amazing, fertile, genuine, act of creation now.

But back then I think it was, I had found myself in quite a conventional theater making environment where I could be a bit shy, in a way, because there was the privilege of the separate process at the beginning, which, so you could make things happen in private, and then when you thought it was really ready, you shared it with other people. Whereas, there was something about being literally undressed. I mean being really like got your knickers on in the Kneehigh making process that I was really drawn to, because I didn't want to be just stuck in that shy place.

Emma:

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And that's really interesting that's such a natural urge, isn't it? To only share something when it's ready. And that really taps into that bit that we've all got, which is the fear of not being good enough. So you fiercely protect yourself until you can say, "This is the best I can give." And yeah my process, and the barns, smashes that out of the water, because there's no fun in that. There's no surprise in that. You want to trust each other enough to say, "This isn't ready. This might be a bad idea. This might be a good idea."

But I also remember, I remember very clearly, the first time you came down to the barns, because you've really informed my process with your intellect, and your amazing artist's mind, because I, at that time, was creating characters in quite a clown based way. So I would be taking the responsibility away from the actor. And there was one part of an exercise, when I would dress them up, but they would be dressed up by the other actors. And I used to love this. I'd put together a kit in the room, and then random, you wouldn't let anybody prepare it, the other actors would dress up their fellow performer. And then we'd improvise. Pure clowning, pure thrill of chance, and just a way of exploring.

And you watched me do this once, and you said, "I'm going to add some things into this." And you curated the costumes. You didn't control them, you curated them. And I feel that at that moment, you gave me the idea that I could curate the area, the oxygen, the space of surprise, but it didn't have to be random. So I think you actually really pushed my process away from totally random, into something where you were beginning to shepherd the process into something. And you started feeding in your design ideas by stealth, a random curation. And that, I've held on to that forever. And I think, in fact, speaking about it we should do it again, Let's do it on Wuthering Heights. Think about how we can create a room which is already curated, but all the space for surprise.

Vicki:

Yeah, I feel really proud of that, if that's true. I mean I think what that achieves, what your process of bravery achieves, is a real sort of lifeline connection between an inception of a project, and what arrives in the live space with the audience. That the... What that's word? It's the holy grail. It's what we're all looking for, is how you make a performance remain live, even though decisions have been made, necessarily, that the editorial process has refined, and really... Refined and defined what are the necessary rules for production. But you want the life force to be absolutely still available, and I think that's what your process achieves in a way that I've never really seen with the same prickly neck thing in anybody else's work.

I think it is a real... Amongst my collaborations that... It's like access to the audience's nerve centers somehow. And I think you're, actually while we're listening to music, I think your use of music is really like that. You have an incredible instinct for what music hits a moment. So, I have such strong memories of being in theaters watching shows you've made that I haven't been involved in, and a piece of music starts. And it's literally the one, like my little fuzzy hairs are standing up, because it's so right for the moment, and the associations are so true. How did I get onto that?

Anyway...

Emma:

Thank you.

Vicki:

Yeah. It's remarkable.

Emma:

I'm going to play you a bit of music now, which will take you back to the first show that you designed wholly for me at Kneehigh, Don John, which we created at the RSC. Still remains one of the pieces I am most proud of. It was ahead of its time, so ambitious, so [crosstalk 00:42:20]

Vicki:

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I'd love to see that show now. Yeah.

Emma:

Oh, me too. Well, right there, I'm saying those words. It was a pre Me Too piece. And this is the opening number, written by Stu Barker, Don Lorton on vocals. And it was inspired by the opera, Don Giovanni, so it had the same structure, and in many ways, in my head, this is the overture that you would have had if you'd done the Mozart. And it was in the 1970s, and we were in an empty church, and it was as if God had left the building, and the vicar had no congregation. And it still makes the hairs, my fuzzy hairs, stick up when I listen to this.

(singing)

On a Night Like This from Don John, lyrics by Anna Maria Murphy, and you can hear Mary Woodvine there on vocals as well. Talk to me about that show.

Vicki:

So evocative. Oh my god, it's so evocative of that show, I was just thinking about... It was incredible bunch of performers wasn't it?

Emma:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Vicki:

There's something, there's that line about the street light flickering, and it really makes me remember we used the festoons, and this fizzing electricity that used to erupt through the show, and this appalling sadness and desolation. But also this incredible vein of the survivors anger that drove the women's story through, and actually Gísli's courage in performing that role in the way that he did. It was a man with no soul. It was so fantastic to see that story told in a way that didn't disempower the women, but genuinely told about the women's predicament. Patty, and the choices that that character made to make her way through, and get out of the situation alive was so vibrant. It was magical, that show.

Emma:

And one of the things that I remember about the process, which was complete accident again, was some Gísli Örn Gardarsson, who was playing my Don John, who is, was, and always will be a superstar. He was not available for the last, there's about 10 days towards the end of rehearsals, or a week, I can't really remember. But I'd agreed, that he was filming, that he wouldn't be there. So we devised the show with him. And then there was a period of rehearsals where he left. And the whole ensemble rehearsed this show without him, and it was like there was a hole where Don John, Don Giovanni, Casanova, that womanizing archetype, was missing. And it felt like we made this really... It was amazing. We kind of got used to it almost being a space that he inhabited rather than a body. So the company became incredibly strong, and the story became incredibly strong around the space, and then Gísli stepped back into it, and of course he just doesn't care. He's the most charismatic, happy go lucky person, but he stepped back into this space with this power around him. And that was one of those wonderful chances of process, where the women were so powerful, and yet... But they were powerful in expressing their rage, and their predicament, rather than pretending the world was anything other.

It was a really astonishing piece. And your design, Vic. I mean, we still talk about it, it has been mentioned on other Tea and Biscuits. It was the heaviest set ever designed in British touring theater. Steph Curtis, our stage manager, when I did her Tea and Biscuits, said that when we scrapped one of those shipping containers, it was heavier than a shipping container.

Vicki:

Because of course we couldn't just have a shipping container, could we? We had to have a Royal Shakespeare Company shipping container or three. Oh my god. But I mean, it was really interesting,

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you talking about the sort of godlessness, that God has left the building. I felt the whole show had this incredible connection to feelings of abandonment. Such a strong desire for connection, for true connection between characters, and yet trying to establish itself within this appallingly abandoned community. The setting at that time in the '70s, where people were just cut adrift. There was no sense of a safety net. It was such a perfect marriage, and of course that's why, honestly, I would love to see that production again now, because it feels so, so relevant. And love as a metaphor for a sense of connected security, you know? A sense of how to really meet people and be together. Oh, it was, yeah, amazing, and then...

Emma:

And so ambitious. So, we so over pumped Kneehigh. Everything, and the RSC, but that's what we're on the planet to do Vic Mortimer. What's your next song choice, and why?

Vicki:

Oh well, yeah this is Solomon Burke. It's called None Of Us Are Free. And it's a sort of a protest song. So it's a call to recognize our shared human... Oh, yeah, what we need, all of us, and that nobody should be left behind. And I think the reason why I chose it is because it feels really good for now. I keep going on about now but now's weird, you can't not talk about it. But it also feels somehow connected to, certainly, the work we've made together, and I think how your work communicates, which is everybody's bloody welcome. It doesn't matter whether you agree or disagree. The fact is this is what's on offer, and it's really generous. And we can take it all, because the contract is so honest. And even if it's not to somebody's taste that's okay. Fine if you don't like it. It still itself, and completely, humanly, energetically available. And it's... Oh, yeah. Solomon Burke feels like he could be in one of your shows.

Emma:

That's a thought.

(singing)

And that segues fantastically into Wise Children. The first project for my new company, Wise Children, after the Globe, which you designed for me. There was never going to be another designer for this. You'd already done the costumes on Nights at the Circus with me. But, Angela Carter, we knew it, it's in our bones, it's in our blood, it's in our DNA together, and it needed a female voice. A female voice of strength, of rage, of creativity. That's got all The scars of this crazy life that we choose. And that's you and me. And you launched Wise Children, standing next to me, which is something I can't imagine any other way, but I will forever be grateful for.

Vicki:

It was such a brilliant project. I don't know what I would have done if I wasn't the designer on that project. It was such the perfect moment. And you and I have been working on Little Match Girl at the Globe, right around the time when the shit was really hitting at the Globe. And you were trying to rehearse at the same time is trying to manage the fallout from all of the political goings on there. And that was such a... Wow, that was an experience to witness that on the sidelines. I had no idea. You and I hadn't done anything together at the Globe up until that point, so I hadn't really got a grasp. I didn't know anything about the Globe. And then being in the middle of the making process, and seeing you weathering that with your incredible honesty.

And so somehow you know the whole of Ole Shuteye vibe. I can't believe you managed to make such a beautiful show, Little Match Girl, even while all of that was happening in your lunch break. So somehow the roots to Wise Children, and why it felt so right. It was like a certain gathering of conviction around Wise Children. It was such a perfect choice. And like you say, that celebration of why theater is such a great thing. Even with all of it's inherent cost, and tragedy, and silliness along the way. It was a vindicating project that I thought had it's shadow self somewhere in the Match Girl

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moment. And so, yeah, it was it was vindication, somehow. Not of you, and how you make shows, but just over it as a form-

Emma:

Of theater.

Vicki:

... and what it gives. Theater is a thing, why it's there.

Emma:

How interesting. It's amazing to hear you talk about that Little Match Girl time, because a lot of that time is a blur for me. But actually, you say you don't know how I managed to make a show at that time, but actually theater is my sanity. Theater is my safe place, it's my happy place. And it's not safe because I know what's going to happen. It's safe because there will be joy, there will be surprise, there will be laughter. There is a story. And that's how I managed to do it. And that is exactly the bridge that goes to Wise Children, because that's what Angela Carter was celebrating. Which is this messy, crazy, debilitating life choice, is also pure sanity for some of us. It's where we know who we are. And we know who our family of choice is.

Vicki:

I think that's really key. The family of choice, that you recognize each other, whether you're working together or not, there's a sense of knowing what your DNA, shared DNA is. I think your thing about identity as well as so interesting on Wise Children, that management [inaudible 01:02:10] It was light as a feather. And it essentially, it just said, "I'm going to position these people in these parts, and go with it." Because actually what bubbles up from underneath those casting decisions feels so true to the form of the novel. That you can have Gareth as one of the twins, and you can carry on that complexity and overlapping through all the other roles. And that in itself is an expression of the dynamism, and flexibility of the theatrical making process, that just translated absolutely directly. And just solved all of those problems about identity in one go. And it was absolutely celebratory from that very core decision. And then there was, you know, we could just touch in all that dusty beauty of deteriorating things that we put around it all.

Emma:

Oh, it was dustily gorgeous. I feel the way you're talking about that, the casting, which is something that's developed over my career. Sometimes by mistake, sometimes out of not having enough money to have a big cast. And more and more out of understanding what it does. But for me, it becomes more and more of a metaphor, which is we are all capable of anything in life. We are capable of being amazing people, and dreadful people. And I feel that by casting in a way that you say, "We are capable of anything", that actually that's where theater, and the amazing gap between the audience, and the stage, where you say, "Go with me. We're going to do this with truth and passion. And we're going to surprise you, but go with me." And a theater audience will. They'll say, "Okay, we've come out of our houses, we've paid for our ticket. We'll go." And that's where you get that amazing chemistry, where anything is possible, which becomes a political belief, which is, "Let's see if we can be the best that we can be as much as possible."

Vicki:

I think what's really interesting about that is, I would definitely say that generosity is one of my top words if I was going to describe you, and what you make. But I think the companion word might be forgiveness, which is that with that generosity, and as you say the sort of fallibility of the 360 character, implicit in that is our agreement, as an audience, to forgive the transgressions, forgive the mistakes, forgive the fuck ups, and see the mirror. See that by forgiving the characters, and seeing them as faulty, human, gorgeousness, we're also able to come away at the end of the performance and feel that forgiveness is somehow in ourselves as well. There's an instinctive compassion in that,

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that I think is such a brilliant outcome if you can get an audience to come away, and be in a world where compassion is more available. Wouldn't that be bloody brilliant?

Emma:

I'm feeling moved to do a cross stitch of it. Forgiveness and generosity. Some strange around it [crosstalk 01:05:33]

Vicki:

I feel so grateful that there is... That idealism is available. That actually, I think it's idealism which has got some accumulated proof behind it. I think people coming out of Wise Children, you could feel it in the auditorium that there was this real rich joy. And people were touched but they were also provoked and surprised that it's such a range of all, really three dimensional, experiencing that show. Emma:

So before we say goodbye, we're working on Wuthering Heights, and the lockdown has been a bit of a gift to us, hasn't it? Because we've suddenly got much clearer diaries. And normally we would meet between, maybe three times in a design process. And there would be train journeys to usually your studio, and we'd work intensively. And because that hasn't been possible we've been working... We did a fortnight of doing two hours a day. And I found that, again, you've changed the process. Who knows what will come out of this with, but I found the time that we spent with each other, talking about the script, talking about the story has been really enriching. And it feels like we've taken out some of the heat of our lives. And in a slightly cooler world, found such depth, and such discoveries, and I've loved that. I've loved just the time we've spent together, albeit online.

Vicki:

Yeah, me too. I mean think it's a rare, that's been a rare gift, for sure. I mean, I think there's an excitement to be had thinking about the way that we've made work in the past, where it's an act of improvisation in the moments that you do have together, where you have to rely on instinct to create the right connections. And that in itself, of course, has a reward. But there's something about having had that time, simply to dive into the story. And in a way, find a way of describing our responses and ideas. We haven't had much of a range, and so narrowing the range has meant that the time has been the thing that's made up for narrowing the range of expression with each other.

So it's meant that we, I think we'll go into whatever the next phase of making the pieces, with such a sense of what our potential vocabulary is for the storytelling. I mean, amazingly we've come up with a pretty secure storyboard for the whole thing, and certainly a very distilled environment for it. Talking as you were earlier, about curating for what the actors come into, that act of curating feels in a really lovely balanced state between a containing idea, that just will hold things, and the possibility of what might erupt out of it.

Emma:

[crosstalk 01:09:02]

Vicki:

I mean, it's so interesting, doing that Zoom reading of the script, and being able to play the environment in my mind alongside that. That was really delightful.

Emma:

And it's been a really successful process, but before anybody jumps on the fact that people no longer need to meet in the arts, and we can all work... Our 30 years of friendship, and professional experience, it gave us all of the... Sort of, the fertilizer was there, wasn't it? We just sprinkled seeds in a different way. But it's been really, it's been the primary color of my lockdown so far, is-

Vicki:

I agree

Emma:

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... that, with the experience, and the process.

Vicki:

And I think, as you say, without that ballast of friendship and experience together, I don't think we would have got as far as we have. I think we would have noticed the absences much more, because there's no doubt that I miss being in the room with you. But I think what I would carry on into the next project that we do together would be, how do we enlist that time in a process that also has our physical time together? Because it's almost... What it reminds me of, those two hour sessions every day, it's almost like living in the same village, just where you could pop in for a couple of hours. And that would be ideal, I think, for me, is finding a form of a creative village next time we do a process like this. And that's about being clever about time, and how maybe you do drop in some consistency in terms of this sort of contact, but also, let's live together for a couple of days-

Emma:

Yes, oh god.

Vicki:

... and just fall into those accidental conversations as you're chopping the onions.

Emma:

I was going to say, I'm missing some of the basic sharings of food and drink, and if we could pepper that in as well, it would be bloody perfect.

Vicki:

Yeah. Yeah. There's such a lovely natural energy to that, for sure.

Emma:

So, dear Vic, thank you for sharing Tea and Biscuits with me today. Can I take this moment to thank you for your calm, your creativity, your exquisite and unshakable taste. Your mystery, your surprise, your shining intellect, your steadfast friendship, and the decades of inspiration that you've given me. Thank you.

Vicki:

Oh Emma, so lovely. Thank you very much.

Emma:

I'm going to play out with a little blast from Wise Children, sung by the amazing Dinah Washington, Is You Is Or Is You Ain't My Baby. You is, Vicki Mortimer. You is.

(singing)

If you have a memory or connection you'd like to share on Tea and Biscuits, leave us a message on our phone line, 0117 318 3846. That's 0117 318 3846. 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.