

Wise Children's Lockdown

Tea & Biscuits with Emma Rice and Ian Ross

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 & Biscuits.

Emma:

Hello, and welcome to Wise Children's Lockdown Tea & Biscuits. Hello, Ian Ross.

Ian:

Hello, Emma Rice.

Emma:

It's really nice to see you. We've gone all hi-tech today. We're on Zoom as opposed to Skype but it's very nice to see you.

Ian:

And you too.,I spent a little bit of time setting up my background so I look pretty and, of course, it's just a recording, so pointless.

Emma:

But no, I'm enjoying it. You look lovely.

Ian:

Thank you very much.

Emma:

Tell me, what is your actual or virtual biscuit today?

Ian:

My virtual biscuit is a malted milk.

Emma:

Oh. I'm going to go for a Fox's Cream Crunch.

Ian:

Very good.

Emma:

I know, other brands are available, but it is the best.

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Ian:

I think it is. I find they have a lot of packaging, Fox's.

Emma:

Fair point, but it's virtual so I'm not going to get guilty about that today.

Ian:

Package-free [inaudible 00:01:31] crunch.

Emma:

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

Ian:

I'm sat in my living room which has also become my stepdaughter's classroom. I've been frying aubergines from [inaudible 00:01:45] and previous to that I was checking the garden. We've got all, planting vegetables, cooking lots of fresh food, trying to occupy ourselves with all the things we possibly can, which is good. We were just trying to work out some maths problems which I was unable to explain anyway.

Emma:

But that's [inaudible 00:02:10] across the country, isn't it, thinking, "I don't know how to do this."

Ian:

Or, even worse than that, you do know how to do that but you have absolutely no ability to convey that to the child, to explain it, which is very frustrating for everybody. So we've just decided to forget school for the day, and then we're going to eat moussaka and draw butterflies or something instead.

Emma:

Sounds very wise. Which part of the country are you in?

Ian:

Bristol.

Emma:

Lovely. Well, before we get down to business, I want to start with a bit of a throwback moment, which I hope you'll enjoy, and a bit of rock. Get your ears wrapped around this, Mr Ross.

MUSIC – IF MUSIC BE THE FOOD OF LOVE – FROM AMSND

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Emma:

Oh my God, isn't it amazing to listen to that again?

Ian:

It's extraordinary. We're going to watch it this week I think.

Emma:

Oh brilliant. This has been such a really joyful excuse to go back over the archive and remember things that I've forgotten, so that is from Twelfth Night that we made at The Globe and that was Josh Lacy singing If Music be the Food of Love, with the company of Twelfth Night.

Emma:

It's amazing to hear that again, it was rocking and you actually had a flute solo.

Ian:

Imagine. It was a [inaudible 00:05:34] thing, but a similar thing.

Emma:

But all the gorgeousness of seventies prog rock, I love it and I love remembering that production. But we're going to talk about that later because Twelfth Night comes towards the end of our story doesn't it?

Ian:

Yes it does, and also I've chosen a record which links in with it too.

Emma:

Oh I know, so we'll come to that in a minute but can we go back, I want to do a little bit of reminiscing with you about the first time we met. But you know what I don't know is how old were you?

Ian:

So how long ago was that? I must have been 28.

Emma:

Gosh, you sounded like a baby. I remember it as if it was yesterday meeting you because it was such a joyful meeting. But tell me the previous 28 years that had brought you to that moment. What had been your musical background?

Ian:

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Well I always played, since I was nine or ten, I was learning piano, picking up guitars. Two of my cousins were really into music so we had bass and drums and guitars lying around everywhere and keyboards. Growing up in rural Somerset, surprisingly there was quite an active band scene there, and my cousin's friends who were based in Pitney in Somerset, lots of punk bands, ska influences and village halls, youth centers making videos, running about the country side being naughty, trying to find your own version of rock and roll in Somerset which was mostly cider-based.

Emma:

Nothing's changed?

Ian:

Nothing's changed, no and I feel like that really started. I had this interest in this academia of music but also just surrounded by punk rock with some slightly older kids and from there I was in a band called Marshal Peanut and we got some sort stranger [inaudible 00:07:40], took us around the country quite a lot. We made an album which none of us were pleased about and eventually it burnt in flames but managed to see loads of the country, got a real taste of rock and roll and also living in Glastonbury, we had all the opportunities to go and play at the festival every year. So I was in there from when I was 14 playing and that lasted for years and years. Going back and also venturing out into all the other festivals in lots of different band. Went to university, I did a degree in musical instrument technology. Played with bands up there again, friends from Devon. The Action Heroes who later became the Rumble Stretch, which was just amazing again, getting into the London music scene a bit, making a few records.

Ian:

Then moved back West because London was terrifying and lived in Bath. Joined with a band called The Zen Hussies and a band called Baby Head. Baby Head were originally a bunch of guys from Glastonbury who I'd known from back in the old days and just toured extensively with them for the next five or six years, all around the country. Went to New York, Europe, festival after festival after festival and the Zen Hussies as well. We did lots of work, did loads of session stuff with horns and trombone and just seeking the rock and rolls dream.

Emma:

[inaudible 00:09:11] I knew there were all those bands, I've certainly never heard of Marshal Peanut, that's a first.

Ian:

Yeah, well maybe one day I'll some of it with you. Yeah, it is interesting to listen back to because it's so boring living in the county at times that we just plowed everything into that expression of ourselves and yeah.

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Emma:

My memory is you were plucked out of Baby Head to come and meet me to play in my production of Brief Encounter.

Ian:

Exactly.

Emma:

And Brief Encounter was composed by Stu Barker, my dear friend and colleague, but Stu also comes from a punk rock background, doesn't he? In a band.

Ian:

Yeah.

Emma:

Working with the Oral Tradition. So we were never ever looking for traditional theater musicians to work with and he said, oh Emma I've got this band Baby Head, I think they might be good. So in you walked and I mean what can I say, you know I've always said it, auditions are a little bit like speed dating but this beautiful, young, tall young man came in and you played the most fantastic audition, absolutely beautiful but I've talked about it many times to you but you've got an amazing gift which is being in the present, and for a theater director but also as a person, is what I love most, is that you didn't push that audition and try and show off and you didn't sit back and pretend you didn't know what was going on. You just sat in this room with me, you didn't even whether you wanted to do the job, didn't know whether you wanted to make theater and it was a really magic meeting. I can remember thinking he's really special, and here we are, 12 years later?

Ian:

Yeah.

Emma:

You are bloody special Mr. Ross. Bloody special.

Ian:

Well Bless you, yeah. Well my memory of that is pure terror actually. I was so scared going up to London to do because it was in, I forget the theater but it was-

Emma:

Wyndham's wasn't it?

Ian:

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Wyndham's.

Emma:

The Wyndham's Theatre on Charring Cross Road. So it was all red and plush and sort of old school, wasn't it in a bar I think?

Ian:

Yeah, you and Stu Barker, and I have to say I'd listen to, there was bits of it, it's funny looking at the trailers from that time of Brief Encounter because it feels like technology has moved on so much, even since then but these scrappy little, lovely things I could find online of your and Stu's work and immediately I had a sense that it was the right fit. Yeah, it was really exciting so I think my experience of that audition was that, although I didn't know whether I wanted it, I did know I was right for it if you know what I mean.

Emma:

What a nice [inaudible 00:12:02].

Ian:

The lead man, yeah.

Emma:

A Brief Encounter is a show that changed a lot of peoples lives. Almost all of us that touched it were changed and touched and this created a network of friendships and love affairs and broken hearts that lasts till this day, and here you've chosen this but this is for all of us who've ever worked on Brief Encounter.

MUSIC _ Rachmaninov – Piano Concerto

Emma:

It never fails to stir the heart, does it?

Ian:

All the feels.

Emma:

Right, I'm going to move us on a bit now because you've played for too many shows for us to mention but I've got a particular memory which is you came into The Red Shoes as a musician which was the show I created for, he's laughing already. I can see him, you can't. He's already laughing. Came into The Red Shoes which was a show I had created for [Nehome 00:15:14] originally, again composed by Stu Barker, had just a sound track, and we brought it back, we decided that we would make the music live and you and Stu Barker were the musicians.

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Emma:

Now I'd made all the actors wear vest and underpants and shave their heads and wear clogs, and the musicians, from some unfathomable reason, were in nice black suits and clogs, and I can remember we got to America, hadn't we. We were in St Anne's Warehouse in America and I said, well, we're not going to have suits on anymore, I'm going to put you two in your vest and pants, and I consider that I'm a very good person at reading the room but I did not read the room because you went out and you appeared in your vest and pants. I burst into absolute fits of hysterics and said "Walk across the front. Let me look at you.", and you had an absolute flash of anger which I now am familiar with. You said "F you!".

Ian:

I did.

Emma:

You didn't say that, you said it properly but I'm being careful but we laugh about that, don't we? Because it was a raw moment of pure aggression from you, but I had crossed the line. I was humiliating you, and it wasn't okay. How do you remember that moment?

Ian:

Well, okay. I remember it very well and I sort of regret it in some ways but also we've talked about it so much, and did it break open, something between us, an understanding. I found the whole thing so exciting, you imagine being in New York and opening a show, something that was quite defining for as well and it felt important, and it was such an extraordinary endeavour for everybody there and just a physical endeavour. Opening in, not Broadway but going off Broadway and suddenly being told to put your best underpants or something that I'd never had to deal with.

Emma:

Of course, listening to me describe your background. I'm used to working with actors who are used to daring themselves to reveal more and that isn't something that had been part of your life until that point so I did learn something, but also I'm very used to a man with a certain amount of rage and I respect it. So we remember that as a defining moment in our friendship. What's your next record and why have you chosen it?

Ian:

He Hit Me (And It Felt Like A Kiss) by The Crystals, which you used in Don John which was the second show I'd done, and I was thinking about why I'd made these choices. I started thinking about our work as much as anything else because there are so many defining moments in my life that happened since I started making

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theatre, the real juicy stuff. Obviously I feel like I really started growing when I started making theatre in the things that it's taught me, and my life changed in many ways during that [inaudible 00:18:24], and when you do a show and you listen to things on repeat, the profundity of it becomes magnified in so many different ways, and this extraordinary piece of music which we listened to every night, it just sunk in that deep and I played it to my wife yesterday and she actually couldn't listen to it. She was really upset by it, she felt it was for whatever reasons, everybody will make up their own mind. For me, a time when I was grappling with my own relationships and things and the themes and of the show and everything we were living with every day, this spells out so much of the complexity of love and that's it. I just think it's amazing and I think it's disturbing.

Music – He Hit Me – The Crystals

Emma:

Oh my goodness, what a phenomenal piece of music.

Ian:

Yeah, absolutely.

Emma:

Thank you for choosing it because people often ask me what's my favourite show and it's an impossible question. You have to say the usual, they're like your children but I almost always say Don John because I think it was the most unrecognized. It never had a second tour, it was so ambitious and so ahead of it's time. It was 12 years before Me Too and I feel like we were absolutely on the nose with it with all the themes, and that song sums it up. It was really edgy, really truthful, really dark and something I'm eternally proud of.

Ian:

Yeah, I feel privileged to be a part of it. I think it was the shipping containers, that it was the undoing of it.

Emma:

Because they were so heavy?

Ian:

They were so heavy, yeah and a nightmare to tour but I had an amazing time doing that and learnt such a great deal, and sure a load of the world as well. That's the thing I'm thinking about a lot now being trapped inside is how in my blood it is to step out the door and jump on a bus or jump on the train or a plane or just be out.

Emma:

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We're touring animals, aren't we?

Ian:

We really are, yeah. Traveling.

Emma:

Pent up, thank you for remembering Don John. What a show. I don't think it was just the shipping containers, I think it was ahead of its time, I genuinely do.

Ian:

Yeah.

Emma:

Anyway, let's move on to composing. To my shame, I let Ian sit in the band for how many shows?

Ian:

10, 11?

Emma:

Oh my goodness, and because he's so brilliant, I'm putting you in the third person now because it will be too much to say you, but because he's so brilliant, I just thought he's the most amazing musician. I don't want to work without him, his fantastic, but you did start whispering in my ear right? You know I would like to write, you know I would love a chance to write and I left it too long however, when at Kneehigh we made The Flying Lovers of Vitebsk, about Marc Chagall and Bella Chagall, I gave you the chance that you'd actually been waiting for a long time and were long overdue is which to compose the score and it was a magic time. Talk about that transition from musician, or be it a devising musician going to composer.

Ian:

Gosh, I actually feel like it was well timed. I'd wanted it a lot previous to that but I think I was ready when it came and I just had so many ideas. I was excited about presenting my own truths if that doesn't sound too pretentious. When playing other people's music for shows or in bands or whatever, the aim, at least personally, is to always being a good chunk of yourself to it and that's what I thrive off of ever since I've started making music. I just love that point where you feel so invested in what it is you're displaying, what noises that you're making because you're saying this is me. I don't know whether it's just my ego that I enjoy sharing that so much but when it comes to putting together a show and thinking about some of these life, thinking about all the things they've been through and then layering in a complex palette of what sound, what harmony, what rhythm, what arrangement of notes represents that for me and then the discovery that other people also feel the same way. Your

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interpretation of love can be recognized by somebody else, just gives me a great sense of the humanity of music. If I'm not sounding too pretentious.

Emma:

You're not, you're sounding fantastic and it's true, and in fact I'm not going to play anything from Flying Lovers because Mark Antolin chose a section for his tea and biscuits. So if you're listening to this, cross reference back to Mark Antolin's tea and biscuits.

Ian:

[inaudible 00:26:02]

Emma:

I loved it and I thought it was also an incredibly emotional ob you did, again you'd been going through some stuff in your life at the time and you absolutely brought it into the room in a way that was present. You weren't bringing any agenda with it, you just brought that humanity and heart into the room, but you also pulled in the Eastern European references and all the classical references. So I look back on it and think what an amazing technical pudding it was of your own voice, the Gikofsky voice and the Russian-Jewish voice and I'm so proud of it and I think it was an astonishing piece of work and an explosion. Mike Shepard always talks about the invulnerability of you, he talks about young football players when they can't imagine not being able to score so they just score, and I feel that that was your, as a composer, you had an invulnerability about your ability to make music. I don't mean an invulnerability about yourself, in fact you were very vulnerable but you were just striking goals into the back of the net and it was a joy to behold, and it was like watching set loose and once you've let the genie out the bottle, he's not going back.

Ian:

Well that's true. I would like to add to that, I feel like so much of what I've learnt is from working with Kneehigh and working with you. Actually, I was watching the Imagination Burning documentary this morning on YouTube, I don't know if you've seen that.

Emma:

No.

Ian:

With Dudley, what's his name. Anyway, it got all those memories burning and part of that collision of things I feel like it's a very ricey tray is if you think about that Rachmaninoff in Brief Encounter and all the things it was set against, Noël Coward songs and Stu Barkers amazing choral stuff and the folk influence, a ukulele banjo and everybody playing at completely varying different levels of ability and yet the

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whole thing somehow works. That's the really exciting thing that I learnt, I think, from you that is story-telling doesn't rely on virtuosity. It's nice to see people showing off really well but actually the thing that joins it all is that ability to connect with somebody else.

Ian:

And I feel like that's what was really burning in me with flying lovers was like actually, there's no pressure to be good in inverted commas or clever, you just to have touch people and how exciting is that?

Emma:

I think that's the word, I think it's not having to be clever, you don't have to impress, you need to just express and it's magic. I'm going to go on, and play another one of yours again. This is a bit of throwback, it's because we've been seeing what we've got but here's one of Mr Ross's compositions setting Shakespeare to music from Twelfth Night.

MUSIC – OST From Twelfth Night at The Globe

Emma:

You heard the voice of Gateau Chocolat there and the company from Twelfth Night. Let's take about the globe, and what's really funny before we do is it was such an emotional, intense, political time for me, is I really have forgotten large chunks of it. So doing this exercise has been really surprising for me and also wonderful. I feel that bringing all of our experience from Kneehigh and devising into that space and our storytelling skills that you're talking about just worked, and I think that was really why I've and to black a lot of it because it didn't work and I suppose our till-the-day-I-die, I won't quite understand how something so successful was such a failure. I don't need to dig over it again but it's a real pleasure to go and listen to these and hear Shakespeare set to music as detailed and global as that, just thrilling.

Ian:

Fun, it was so much fun. I think that space and the people that were on board and that were on board, underlined, and being on London, being on the river. Also, Twelfth night I went to Columbia to get married as well, that year, that summer so, just listening to all of those influences which was clearly South America coming through via my wife.

Emma:

Yes, it was all there, wasn't it.

Ian:

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It was all there and it's just so cool, it's such a privilege to be able to inject those life experiences into your work, and I think for the record, I look at the globe now and I look at situations in our country and in the world politically, how things are misrepresented and how people are doing one thing and yet it's named the exact opposite and it felt like that sort of injustice is what happened at the globe. I just couldn't believe it, having lived through it and work there with all the feels of the place and the audiences and how it was cracked open, it was so magical.

Emma:

I do get it but it's my head that gets it, like I say when I think back, the heart was fully intact for the whole adventure and so was the audience and so were the teams but on that level, it's almost easy to walk away from because we never compromised. We only ever made the work we cared about and believed in with great spirit. You listen to that and I was already out of the door for Twelfth Night and I can remember thinking I can do Twelfth Night, I wasn't sure. I thought I can do it because it's all about loss and grief and I will be able to channel some of that which we did, but we also channeled all the loves.

Ian:

Yeah, how magically those pictures of the rainbow flags coming out and videos coming over WhatsApp of the cast warming up and it just felt like it was important for a great percentage of people involved throughout the process, right to the end of the show and I hold it in very high regard.

Emma:

Right, I'm going to move us on to Wise Children. So you came with me to Wise Children and you are, what's your title at Wise Children?

Ian:

I'm the director of music.

Emma:

That sounds very fancy, is it very fancy?

Ian:

It is very fancy.

Emma:

I'd never seen such fanciness.

Ian:

No, I could talk about it but just wouldn't understand. For me, it's just lovely to be a nod of recognition, to be connected to it, to be connected to the company. But it does

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mean this week we did The School for Wise Children on Zoom and we're trying to develop that side of the company which I really enjoy. I love working with people and talking about devising and exciting people into the idea of being capable actually. I think that's really exciting. Also, all the projects come through me so I get a chance to have crack at things that pop up. Withering Heights, for instance, is the next one. I just get to make decisions, it's cool.

Emma:

Well it felt time to formalize what has been happening for a really long, so it's great to have you on the team, and you also composed Wise Children, The Show. So we're going to play one of my favorite bits of music, again Shakespeare set to Mr Ian Ross's sounds.

Music – The Willow Song from Wise Children.

Emma:

That's the Willow Song from Othello set to music by Ian and sung by The Wise Children Company, I love that.

Ian:

All right.

Emma:

And I love that sequence from Wise Children, which I fell sort of summed up a little bit of what we were at Don John, but in a slightly more entertaining way which is that section which was taking scene from wise children, setting it against a scene from Othello with a newly composed folk piece of music that actually explored domestic violence and all its complexities. It was amazing standalone three minutes worth of theater that was really moving, really challenging, very funny and very moving at the end.

Ian:

Yeah, right the top of the shows.

Emma:

I know, yeah just in case anybody was in any doubt about what kind of show it was. We're going to go to your final piece of music, which I've seen what your choice is so do talk about it but before you do, I've known you since you met your wife, [Kikka 00:39:54] and it's been a real privilege to watch you fall in love and marry Kikka and get her to this country and what a huge slog that was. More than a slog, be with your

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loved one's, you've harder than anything and I just salute you for going on that journey and emotionally and practically and just saying when I saw this, I thought this is a bit of Kikka coming through everything, and I'm really pleased that you're in lockdown with her and Sarah and the happy ending has happened that you deserve.

Ian:

Thanks.

Emma:

Tell me about this song.

Ian:

Well, I'm going to find the lyrics because we use this for just a frame to learn some dance for Twelfth Night and I really wanted to get it and it wasn't right to have it in the show but a rough translation is I fell, stop me I walked, I climbed, I was against the current and also I got lost. I flocked, I found, I lived it and I learnt. The stronger you hit me, the deeper is the beat. Still dancing and writing my letters, still singing with the open doors, crossing all these lands and not have to travel so much to find the answer, and don't worry if you don't approve when they criticize you, just say only me, is me, is me, is me.

Ian:

And there's a lot more lyrics as well but, wow. It just resonate because I was learning Spanish at the time as well to impress my then girlfriend into marrying me and it helped I have to say. So listening to music was really useful in trying to get your head around the language, and she was a big fan of this band, so she introduced me to them and it's just a cracking spirited piece of music which I love so much.

Emma:

Here we go.

Music

Emma:

That's put a spring in my step!

Ian:

Yes.

Emma:

Do you remember Katie dressed as a tiny cabin boy.

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Ian:

Yeah.

Emma:

Well listen, I've loved having tea and biscuits with you and I wanted to play out on one of your more recent compositions and the reason I wanted to play out on this one is that we've started writing music together, me writing lyrics, you writing the music and that's been a real surprise for me. I struggle with calling myself a writer even though I do, and you're one of the first people I dared share my poetry with and you've always been so supportive and responded so brilliantly, and I really value writing partnership.

Ian:

Me too, it's great.

Emma:

Go on.

Ian:

I was just going to say in terms of developing one's skills and aspirations within that, I've always enjoyed taking lyrics and trying to make sense of them musically, so they still carry that meaning and I'm fascinated with how lyrics and prose are different. You can read a sentence in prose and that makes a certain sense and a lyric can make absolutely no sense on the page, there's no reference to you that can make no sense until it has music. I find that so fun to play with and so when you've gone "Here's a bunch of lyrics, can any of that possibly be music?", it's the best game for me and I feel like once for you, being able to listen to somebodies version of that thrown back and then to respond has just helped you grow in confidence and that's very exciting because I think what you write is brilliant and it always, specially lyrically, it really goes straight to the heart, straight to the point.

Emma:

Well, thank you very much for sharing tea and biscuits with me my dear friend and thank you for all the emotion, the hearts, the honesty and the ambition that you've brought to our relationship, professional and personal.

Ian:

Oh wow.

Emma:

We're going to play out on Hush Now Sally from Malory Towers Thanks again.

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Music – Hush Now Sally – Malory Towers.

Emma:

If you have a memory or connection you'd like to share on Tea & Biscuits, leave us a message on our phone line 01173 183846, that's 01173 183846. Keep checking our social media for details of our next show. Tea & Biscuits is part of Wise Children's lockdown. Thanks for hanging out with us, bye.