

Wise Children's Lockdown

Tea & Biscuits with Emma Rice and Nandi Bhebhe

Emma Rice:

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.

Emma Rice:

Hello and welcome to Wise Children's Lockdown Tea and Biscuits. Today I'm talking with my friend and colleague Nandi Bhebhe

Nandi:

Hey, hello.

Emma Rice:

Hi Nandi.

Nandi:

Hi.

Emma Rice:

So before we get down to business, what is your, either virtual or real biscuit of choice today?

Nandi:

Oh, my virtual biscuit of choice is a fruit, shortbread. You know those little, can't remember the name of them. I haven't got one now, I'm just imagining it. That's what I would have had if I'd got biscuits on my shop run. There's like fruit, short biscuits that kind of have a sort of scalloped edge.

Emma Rice:

Oh I know. It took me a while to catch up with your unusual biscuit. But I do know. I've decided today to go with those literal Lotus biscuits in packets that you get in hair dressers. Like caramel, delicious, free things.

Nandi:

Oh gosh yeah, they're great.

Emma Rice:

Yeah. That's what I've decided to go with today.

Nandi:

[Type here]

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Yeah.

Emma Rice:

How's lockdown going? Paint me a picture. Tell me where you are.

Nandi:

At present I'm here in London, East London. I've got lots of windows in my room. I can see a tree and a blue sky, so it's all right actually. I mean in it's natural waves. Sometimes it's like, "Oh, this is quite calm." Sometimes it's like, "Oh it's just completely mad." But it's all good. Eating a lot. [inaudible 00:02:04] a lot.

Emma Rice:

There's something calming about the fact that everybody's in the same position.

Nandi:

Yeah, I agree.

Emma Rice:

None of us can feel sorry for ourselves, which, as actors and theatre makers we often can, because often it's not your choice, is it, to not be working. But that's what I feel, is that there's no self pity at the moment, which is quite liberating.

Nandi:

Yeah, I feel you. And actually, kind of, the amount of times I'm sure people all over the, in lots of different fields, but especially ours, when things get busy it's like, "Oh I just love it." A week completely after, a month completely after, here we are. So you might as well just sit into it somehow and yeah, there is something quite bringing together that we're all sharing this moment-

Emma Rice:

Yeah, right.

Nandi:

... together.

Emma Rice:

Well, before we get onto any other business, what's your first record choice and why?

Nandi:

My first record choice is sung by The Commodores-

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Emma Rice:

Yes!

Nandi:

... called Night Shift.

Emma Rice:

Yes!

Nandi:

And I chose, I thought of this, I just thought, just think of a few songs that came to mind head in thinking about our tea time. And this one I chose because it really reminds me of my mum particularly and my family. Growing up she had lots of, we always had a little record player. And there's always been music in my house. And then there's a select, there's a few select records that my mum had in our living room, and this was one of them. And just that kind of [inaudible 00:03:34]. When my mum talks about The Commodores she is definitely swooning at the band. So this song always reminds me of her. And also, she was a nurse, so the whole thing of the night shifts just always makes me think of her working the night shifts. And then it's also a really banging tune.

Emma Rice:

Oh, it's really banging. What a lovely story. Here it is.

Music – Night Shift Commodore's

Emma Rice:

(singing)

Emma Rice:

That's getting a big thumbs up from me and Simon Baker in the studio.

Nandi:

Excellent news. It just also made me think of the... My mum was a nurse, she's retired now, but wasn't able to join the frontline at this present moment, but there were a lot of people working overtime at the moment

Emma Rice:

There sure are.

Nandi:

[Type here]

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Yeah, it felt apt in that way as well.

Emma Rice:

Oh, it's beautiful. So, we go back a few years now, because I've been reminiscing. So we met, I think, in 2015.

Nandi:

Yeah, we did.

Emma Rice:

So I'm right. And you were recommended to me by my friend Sarah Wright because she'd been working on the show at the Young Vic, "A Season in the Congo," directed-

Nandi:

Yeah.

Emma Rice:

... by her brother Joe Wright.

Nandi:

Yes.

Emma Rice:

And I was looking for somebody to do my production of 9-4-6, the Michael Morpurgo book. And she said, "I think you're really going to like this woman." And I can remember going to see that show, and you shining out from it, and then meeting you, and well, just falling in love. You meet somebody and you go, "Wow, she's amazing." And my opinion of you hasn't changed from the moment. In fact it has. I don't know why I say that, because you're the gift that keeps giving. I just think that, as a performer and a person, you just, the layers of you shine through, and you're just a delight to work with.

Nandi:

Oh, Emma, thank you. God that means a lot and more than mutual. I will never forget coming to meet you at the Southbank. And I thought, and I remember asking my agent, "Do you I need prepare anything?" They were like, "No, no. Just go and meet them." So I thought, "Okay." And then I met you and then... Yeah, it's just like it's somewhere in the Southbank. And then you were-

Emma Rice:

We were in a booth weren't we?

[Type here]

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Nandi:

Yeah. [crosstalk 00:09:57]

Emma Rice:

In really uncomfortable seats.

Nandi:

Yeah, opposite each other. And you were like, "Do you want a drink?" And I was sort of like, "Maybe I should get a herbal tea." And you were like, "I'm going to have a wine, do you want a wine?" And I thought, "This is going to be fine." [inaudible 00:10:12], and I was ever so grateful and yeah.

Emma Rice:

Oh, well that was the beginning of a fantastic friendship and journey. It makes me, when I hear that other people audition over and over again, I think, because I'd seen you on stage, so I knew that you could perform. And somebody I love and respect had told me you were a top bird. So then I think really, all that's left is to have a glass of wine and see if we get on.

Nandi:

Yeah.

Emma Rice:

Auditioning, so what, because sometimes all you know is that somebody is good at auditioning, which is no use to you in life, really.

Nandi:

Yeah. I always feel you get a feeling from people, don't you, and it's hard to get that feeling in those audition situations. Some people are really good at them, some people are bad at them. I definitely can never tell in auditions spaces, but I, it was an amazing amount of trust that you gave me, so I-

Emma Rice:

Well, I tell you what, there's a magic. One of my memories, I remember it very clearly, but, you are of a dance background, aren't you, which I'll talk about in a minute. So you're a trained dancer, and then done puppetry, and obviously taken to it very immediately, which is why Sarah had recommended you.

Nandi:

Wow.

Emma Rice:

[Type here]

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And it was almost at the end. So I was looking for a puppeteer, and a mover, and an actor. And then at the very end I said, "Oh, it doesn't matter, it's not a deal breaker, but do you sing?" And you said, "Yeah, I can hold a tune." If ever there was an understatement, Nandi Bhebhe! If ever there was an understatement, it's that. When I said, "Yeah, come on, she's great. And if she's not a great singer she can be in the chorus, that is fine." I mean, what a voice you've got.

Nandi:

I will never forget, actually. I mean, that whole time in Comoros really, really special to me and to be there with you, be there with everybody, it was a real moment in my life and in my friendships, and in my creative life as well. Again, it's also the amount of trust and open space that you created. But I remember there was that one rehearsal, and [Ade 00:12:26] was, I think he was away on that day, and then we were singing Swing Low and nobody knew the words. So we just started singing it, but there's sort of, for me, situations that kind of-

Emma Rice:

Yeah.

Nandi:

... open things up or having the space for like, that's okay to just open up. And it taught me a lot, working in that way, being open to things and-

Emma Rice:

Well it kind-

Nandi:

...sharing.

Emma Rice:

... of works. If you surround yourself with great people and then give them the space to surprise you. It works. And I remember that moment, we were stood outside of The Barns, because it was a Kneehigh show in the sunshine, in a circle, and you just took it. And I can remember the whole company, just our jaws hitting the ground, and going, "Wow! Look at this!" So I'm going to follow this with a recording of you singing live in 9-4-6. We think this was in Berkeley, California. A Nina Simone song, I Wish I Knew How it Feels to be Free.

Music – Live Performance – I Wish I Knew How It Felt To Be Free

Emma Rice:

Oh!

[Type here]

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Nandi:

So weird to listen to yourself.

Emma Rice:

Why, you sound incredible. And I love the fact it's live, you can feel the energy, can't you?

Nandi:

Yeah, oh, those were good times. Those were good, good times.

Emma Rice:

It's really special to me, that recording, and that song is really special to me. I've used it several times on and off. But I feel that it's really close to my heart. And it was the play out music of The Red Shoes, which was the one, only the second piece of theatre I made. But in many ways it was the first, because-

Nandi:

Yeah.

Emma Rice:

... I think it was the first one that I really invested my whole self into.

Nandi:

Yeah.

Emma Rice:

And I've really felt that it was an expression of such a personal need for freedom as well. And it was at a-

Nandi:

Yeah.

Emma Rice:

... time in my life where I found it, I had to fight for my freedom a little bit. My freedom to be an artist, and my freedom to make my own choices.

Nandi:

Yeah.

Emma Rice:

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So that song has, I felt, lived with me for many, many years, and then hearing it in your voice there, it's just such a wonderful chain of humanity that joins up.

Nandi:

Aww.

Emma Rice:

It's beautiful.

Nandi:

Oh, yeah, thanks. Yeah, I feel similarly actually with that tune, and many a Nina tune, or the tunes that she's covered as well.

Emma Rice:

So your second choice is also a Nina Simone. Tell me about this one and why.

Nandi:

Yeah! Nina feels really close to my heart for lots of reasons and from young I had a good friend who really introduced me to a lot of her, he was a really amazing pianist, and he introduced me to a lot of her songs. And then of course, Nina singing that with our show, just amazing. And then it feels like she followed me around. I always feel like I come back to her. And I've just finished reading her autobiography, which I really recommend.

Nandi:

It's really amazing, and I'm just inspired by her and who she is, and her belief in herself, and the fight in her, and just this really truthful music but with all this, yeah, incredible ability. Yeah, she kind of feels very close to me. And then this singing [inaudible 00:18:28], finding myself singing her tunes, or her versions of, in shows. This song I sang in a project I did in the winter with a company called [Anu 00:18:37].

Nandi:

And similarly with the kind of lyrics of I Wish I Knew How it Feels to be Free, the lyrics in this song are this idea of imagining a new world coming, a new future coming, even in the midst of things being tricky, there's something possible that's just around the bend. And it's like in the little sort of chorus, but it talks about it coming in love, and coming in joy and that feels, has felt applicable in lots of parts of my life, that I've just tried to trust the hard times in the [inaudible 00:19:16] of the good, new world that's coming.

Nandi:

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And it feels like that's necessary to think about now as well. We got to imagine those possibilities. We got to imagine that new world. And she's just so good at making those things feel real, yeah.

Music – Nina Simone

Emma Rice:

You're melting me. So, moving on. 9-4-6 was a huge journey for all of us, wasn't it? We took that round the world and it's amazing, those times feel so distant now, but we took it everywhere, didn't we? Just touring creatures. But then I went to the Globe and you came with me. And you did *Midsummer Night's Dream* with me, and you also did *Twelfth Night*. So you were part of my gang through that whole amazing chapter. Tell me a little bit about your experience at the Globe.

Nandi:

Oh wow, gosh. Yeah, what a ride. It was so exciting, and so galvanizing, and it just felt, I don't know, it felt like we all, that's where we were all meant to be at that time, making that work, in that space. Especially in that first summer. It was, yeah, a really powerful and exciting moment. The Globe is such a special building, or that relationship with the audience, and the work, is something I will never forget. It felt exceptionally magical and yeah, learned so much and grew so much in that work, and in that, those interactions. Yeah, it was very special.

Emma Rice:

I've got so many memories of, certainly of *Midsummer Night's Dream* because it was alchemic, wasn't it, when our show hit the audience. And it-

Nandi:

Yeah.

Emma Rice:

... was so, I don't think I knew it, but it was so transgressive because it was quite naughty at the beginning, wasn't it, about Shakespeare and the rules. But it also had a gay relationship, it had a gay kiss, which-

Nandi:

Yeah.

Emma Rice:

... was cheered to the heavens, didn't it? We used to get-

Nandi:

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Yeah.

Emma Rice:

... huge cheer. But the end, the thing I remember most about you is, you were playing Snug, is that right? Have I got the right "S?"

Nandi:

Starveling.

Emma Rice:

Starveling, sorry, there you go. That was my, anyway. The one that is the man in the moon, which is supposed to be carrying a lantern and a stick. And [crosstalk 00:26:41] decided that Nandi would look really funny in an astronaut's outfit. And various people kept saying... And you did look really funny. And the thing about the mechanicals is they're kind of not that funny in the rehearsals. It's a real slog, isn't it?

Nandi:

Yeah. Real "hold your nerve" moments.

Emma Rice:

It's going to be all right, you know, it's going to be all right. Even though none of us quite know it. But anyway, I got it in my head that an astronaut's outfit would be funny, and then we got into text. And it did look funny, and people kept saying, "But that's the man on the moon not in the moon." And people kept saying it, and nagging at me whether it quite, the joke worked with the text.

Nandi:

Yeah.

Emma Rice:

And I kept saying, "It will be all right, it will be all right. It looks funny, and it gives a really strong look." And then they were going in my ears. And then, I think it was our neighbour on the first preview, I said to you, "Nandi, just say, "Why is everybody so obsessed with the text.""

Nandi:

Yeah.

Emma Rice:

So we put it into the show, didn't we? [Sue 00:27:40] had been playing Theseus-

Nandi:

[Type here]

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Yeah.

Emma Rice:

... said something like, "It should be the man in the moon, not the man on the moon." And you said, "Why is everybody so obsessed with text?"

Nandi:

Yeah.

Emma Rice:

And it brought the house down every night. And almost every reviewer mentioned it.

Nandi:

Yeah, it's true. [inaudible 00:27:59] line there. [crosstalk 00:28:01]

Emma Rice:

And I felt it was me shining through, and you, because you are not a performer that's obsessed with text. You speak in so many different languages, of which the voice is only one. And anyway, it just made me like that love that I feel we created between us. A defining moment of my tenure at the Globe. And it was-

Nandi:

Yes.

Emma Rice:

... a little throw away remark.

Nandi:

Very [inaudible 00:28:23] very, very funny, yeah. There's so many ways to communicate something, and-

Emma Rice:

Yeah.

Nandi:

... you should be [inaudible 00:28:30], yeah.

Emma Rice:

So here's a bit of throwback. Here's a bit of live footage. We think this is from the open dress at the Globe. Here you go.

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Music – Curtain Call/Jig from Midsummer Nights Dream – The Globe

Nandi:

Oh! That was great to remember. Oh gosh, yeah.

Emma Rice:

Aww. So that was Nandi Bhebhe's First Fairy and Meow Meow playing Titania. Amazing memories, aren't they? Tell me about your next record, which I have never heard of, and why you've chosen it.

Nandi:

Yeah, so this tune is... A friend of mine, when I was doing this show called "Fela!" So this is going years back, nearly eight, nine years ago. Which also, that is really close to my heart, and that show was all about Fela Kuti, it was all about music and [inaudible 00:31:30] so there were lots of really wonderful people from that show as well that I'm still friends with. But this particular song, the guitarist that was a good friend of mine called [Ricardo 00:31:40], and he, we were doing one night of sharing songs, and he played me this song by this Brazilian singer called Elis Regina.

Nandi:

It just never left me. You know, sometimes these songs stay with you. I only actually just today was looking at what the words actually mean, but the feeling in it, the sound in it, I've always just thought was really beautiful. And when I was talking with him, he was talking about this style of music that's got a bitter sweetness, and you feel that in a lot of Brazilian music and lots of music around the world, but this bitter sweetness of life, well the songs that have this sort of sweet sadness or that kind of feeling around it.

Nandi:

But this song always [inaudible 00:32:28] for me, and as I've been doing my daily walks, this is one of the tunes I always end up listening to, and it really reminds me of those amazing nights of sharing songs, or when someone tells you about something that they really love. It's a really beautiful thing to watch somebody share something that they really love.

Nandi:

(singing)

Emma Rice:

Aww, that's brought some lightness.

Nandi:

[Type here]

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Yeah.

Emma Rice:

That's lovely.

Nandi:

Like a cool breeze. I think that there's a few different recordings, and at the end of this one, in the recordings, she laughs mid recording, but they kept it in, which I was really, enjoyed a bit of humanness in, yeah?

Emma Rice:

Yeah. Oh you have to let the humanness-

Nandi:

Exactly.

Emma Rice:

...bubble through, don't you? Otherwise it's too shiny, is what I say. I don't like it too shiny.

Nandi:

Me neither, babes, me neither. None of that.

Emma Rice:

Well, Nandi, it's been fantastic having tea and biscuits with you. And I want to take a rare chance to just say thank you for being such an amazing friend and colleague. And I'm really excited. Who knows when we'll be back, but you're going to be working on "Wuthering Heights" with me.

Nandi:

Yeah, I can't wait.

Emma Rice:

It's really keeping me going, that me and such a fantastic company will tell a new story. And we will share it with audiences at some point in the future.

Nandi:

Yeah.

Emma Rice:

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And just to say what an amazing woman you are. I was thinking about it. As you know, our dear friend Mike [Shepard 00:37:30] often talks about theatre as if it's football. And he always-

Nandi:

Yeah.

Emma Rice:

... says that, "To make a good company, you need to have some really great midfielders and a couple of strikers." And I feel that you're both. You're a rare performer, that's the kindest, most generous, most empathetic company member. But oh my god, if you have the ball, it goes in the back of the net every time: physically, emotionally, musically. So, thank you. You're bloody talented, and you're bloody amazing.

Nandi:

Oh my god! Thank you so very much. I love you so very dearly.

Emma Rice:

Aww.

Nandi:

You know that.

Emma Rice:

I can't wait for this to lift and we can give each other a proper hug.

Nandi:

Oh yeah!

Emma Rice:

In the meantime I'm going to send you another memory hug. This made me cry when I heard it earlier today. This is again from 9-4-6. And this is the song we sang in the interval. We just brought it in gently with the lights still up, and it's Swing Low Sweet Chariot.

Nandi:

Oh no!

Emma Rice:

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Coming forth to carry me home. [crosstalk 00:38:25] And you'll hear first the voice of [inaudible 00:38:30], and then you'll hear Nandi coming in, and then you'll hear the audience join. And, in many ways we are home at the moment, but we're not home, because we're not with the people that we love.

Nandi:

Yeah.

Emma Rice:

I'm going to sing us out with Swing Low, and join in if anybody's listening to this. And thank you Nandi, you are my home.

Music – Swing Low – Sweet Chariot

Emma Rice:

If you have a memory or connection you'd like to share on Tea and Biscuits, leave us a message on our phone line. 0-1-1-7-3-1-8-3-8-4-6. That's 0-1-1-7-3-1-8-3-8-4-6. 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.