

Wise Children's Lock Down

Tea & Biscuits with Emma Rice and John Pfumojena

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 & Biscuits. Hello and welcome to wise children's Lockdown Tea & Biscuits. Today I'm talking to the wonderful the brilliant John Pfumojena. Welcome, John.

John Pfumojena:

Hey, Emma so lovely to be here.

Emma Rice:

It's really good to see you. So first of all, most important question, what is your virtual or real choice of biscuit today?

John Pfumojena:

Listen it will always have to be Digestives. Digestives, they go a long way.

Emma Rice:

So strong choice. Today, my virtual biscuit of choice is going to be those little ones you get free sometimes in a little cellophane wrapper called Lotus biscuits, and that is so sweet and so delicious. Caramel, that's my biscuit of choice today.

John Pfumojena:

I know you, you always tend to be, "Oh, what are these?" And then you start nibbling at them, and you're like, "Actually, I could take some home." And then...

Emma Rice:

It's like crack cocaine of the biscuit world. How is your lockdown going? Paint me a picture, tell me where you are.

John Pfumojena:

The picture is, like a good population of the people I sort of have been on lockdown my whole life. Not in a very sad way but in a sort of, I've always found my own personal space and my own isolation as one of the big motivators or the big inspirations for myself really.

Emma Rice:

So are you saying you're used to it? That it's not an alien state to you?

John Pfumojena:

It's not. What's been more exciting is watching how other people react to it.

Emma Rice:

Let's talk more about that, why are you saying you've been like it your whole life? Do you mean your personality or your circumstances?

John Pfumojena:

No, it's personality. I think that's what it is because, in as much as I really love going, out seeing friends, having a drink or coffee or whatever it is, there's always this, "Okay, I know, I'm going to do this but my reward is going back to my room." And being able to think, or being able to watch something, or even just being able to then write some music, or whatever it is, just it's that personal occupation.

Emma Rice:

And where are you geographically in the world at the moment?

John Pfumojena:

Geographically, I'm in the Northern hemisphere on an island, the United Kingdom in the city called London, in the Northeast of that city, in Walthamstow.

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Emma Rice:

Oh, I lived in Walthamstow when I was a student. I got mugged in Walthamstow.

John Pfumojena:

Did you? Well, you can't send that experience to the whole world because that was some time ago and it's not now.

Emma Rice:

What are you saying, John? What are you saying? That I wasn't?. It's a long time ago.

John Pfumojena:

Actually, what day is... This is-

Emma Rice:

I think it was 1985, I think or something ghastly like that. So yeah, that was a long time ago, and forgive me Walthamstow.

John Pfumojena:

You see, I wasn't even born yet. So I couldn't even...

Emma Rice:

Oh, you crushed me, you crushed me with your words. All right, get us started. Tell us about your first choice of music and why you've chosen it.

John Pfumojena:

The first choice is Refuge, is a song called Refuge. This is a song I composed and then collaborated with Mohamed Sarrar. Mohamed Sarrar is a very good and close friend of mine. He's Sudanese, and he lives in London now. We met on an R&D, a second R&D for a show called The Jungle written by Joe Robertson and Joe Murphy, which we've both worked on. And since that first R&D, we said, "We need to work together, we need to put some mbira, Zimbabwean mbira, and some vocals together, and just sing together. And so Good Chance Theater really kindly produced this album we did, which we recorded at Abbey Road Studios. It was mixed by... Yeah, it was really great. It was a great collaboration that we had to do with our stories. And Refuge talks about, there are lyrics in Shona that talk about how a lot of us leave home without saying, and we leave because we have to, and it's a story that a lot of people will recognize, and the hope of reaching to that place, that good utopia so to speak.

(singing)

Emma Rice:

It's absolutely stunning John.

John Pfumojena:

Thank you.

Emma Rice:

It's absolutely stunning. I love it. When did you record it?

John Pfumojena:

We recorded this actually this week in 2018.

Emma Rice:

Wow, it's absolutely stunning. What languages is that I'm listening to?

John Pfumojena:

I sing the introduction stuff which is in Shona, which is a Zimbabwean language, a Bantu Zimbabwean language. And then Mohamed Sarrar sings Sudanese Arabic which just transcends the song further.

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Emma Rice:

That makes me think because we had a conversation, so for those of you listening, John is going to be my Heathcliff. So we're talking quite a lot at the moment about Heathcliff and how we're going to develop this character. And there's a tiny sentence in Emily Bronte's book where she says that when he's found at Liverpool docks, he speaks in a foreign tongue and nobody understands what he's saying. So we were talking about you writing something in a different language, and tell me how many languages you speak. I thought it would be a simple question.

John Pfumojena:

English, Shona, some Ndebele, a little bit of Zulu, and a little bit of Sotho. And yeah, it's...

Emma Rice:

So it was like this, "Well, which language would you like?" It could be this, it could be that. And I had no idea, absolutely no idea. And the other thing, I don't know whether you remember you said this to me, but you said, "Oh, I'll have to work on translating something because English is so basic. I'm going to have to translate into a much more elaborate and detailed language."

John Pfumojena:

I'll tell you this. I know everyone whoever is listening, on the surface it might sound like an attack, but no it's not. If you speak to anyone, and this is experienced through Mohamed Sarrar who speaks Arabic, and another collaborator on the album who's Ammar Haj Ahmad who's Syrian and speaks Arabic, know that it's so difficult to translate things into English. Because there's a depth in our ancient languages that the English language cannot account for. Not necessarily English is basic, but it's like Shona for instance, Shona is a descriptive language. So anyone's name which is a Shona, like one of my sister's names is Tendai, it means be thankful or thank. And horizon, the word for horizon is not a word, in my language, it's a description, it basically says, it's [foreign language 00:13:09], that's horizon, that's the direction in which the sun comes from or rises from. So we don't have words that are stand-alone words which have to be described, but they are in themselves descriptions, so the whole language is descriptive.

Emma Rice:

How fantastic. But it made me laugh so much because we're so arrogant, aren't we in England? And we talk about Shakespeare being the greatest poet, and I loved you saying, "Well, I'm going to have to work at finding the depth in this."

John Pfumojena:

I think you will.

Emma Rice:

Just love it.

John Pfumojena:

To be frank, English is an amalgamation of five or more different languages anyway.

Emma Rice:

Fair point. Given that I've mentioned Shakespeare, let's talk about the time we met. Now, we actually met in quite difficult circumstances because you had been cast in a show at the Globe, which was going to be directed by Paul Hunter, dear friend of mine. And I'd talked to him about you, and I was very excited that you were going to come and work. And for various reasons that we shan't go into, that show did not happen. You did not play that part, Paul did not direct it, and I didn't produce it.

And I can remember feeling so bad about it that I thought, "Well, I'm going to have to make amends, and I'm going to have to give this guy a job." And in truth, John, I was going to give you a job whoever walked through the door because, I owed it to you as the Artistic Director of the club. What I didn't expect was for you to walk through the door with your shining, gentle, intense charisma, and

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the musicality, that blew my mind and knocked my socks off. You sang and you had your mbira with you, and I could not believe my luck. And the moment you walked in, you were my Sebastian, no one else could ever be my Sebastian.

John Pfumojena:

Thank you.

Emma Rice:

And the story unfolded from that moment, so what a blessing that was. As I say, I went in with a whole different set of expectations, and I came out with you, and what a huge richness you've brought to my life. But talk to me a bit about that, talk to me about the Globe and...

John Pfumojena:

Oh no. Thank you so much for saying that's really kind. But I came in and it was lovely because we got to talk. And for a few minutes I forgot I was auditioning because it was really great having this conversation with you, which is not something a lot of actors really find in auditions I have to say. And obviously, I'm 100% Zimbabwean I didn't grow up wholly in the United Kingdom, I didn't lose my heritage while I was in the UK because I grew up, no. At that time I had only been in the UK since the end of 2014, so it wasn't even that long. And all I had was my mbira and my Zimbabwean sound. And even to this day a lot of people will disagree with how I sounded or how I sound, but I think it was one of the pivotal moments for me which allowed me, as a Zimbabwean who plays mbira, to delve into this world of Shakespeare which is not Zimbabwean and share myself through that.

And you allowed that to happen with the cast, the cast was amazing because we had so much fun. And it really was, you called it the Summer of love and that's what it was. It was so much fun, it was... I didn't feel like I needed to live up to anything, and I think that's what's important, Emma, is... For me, a lot of British people will be like, "Oh, what?" They'll come with their scripts in hand and they'll mime along your speeches. But for me I felt like I'm doing this for the first time and this play's being done for the first time. And I think that's what it is, it needs to be given to the actors or the performers at that particular time, and not be weighed in with history in the way that it is now, if you understand what I mean.

Emma Rice:

I understand completely, and we were really present, and in fact, the whole two years we were really present. But it's interesting you talking about it being a second or third or fourth language for you because I find the way that you speak Shakespeare so clear and bright. And I think there's something because Shakespeare is the second language as well, I struggle to understand Shakespeare. But you, I always thought how extraordinary that somebody who's coming from a different cultural angle brought such clarity and precision to the work, I found it absolutely beautiful.

John Pfumojena:

That's kind of you to say. But to be honest, without taking too much time, actually, if anyone goes and YouTube's Zimbabweans, like from 1980s and before independence, what you'll find is that all their English has got so much clarity. And not because of great English, but because it comes from our language. So if I was to speak one of our accents, then everything would just be very accented. And because we've learned this language when the colonizers came to our country, we learnt everything and the emphasis was on everything and that's just how we spoke the language. You know what I mean?

Emma Rice:

But it really lends itself to verse really lends itself. Let's have some memories, I'm going to play the main theme from 12th Night. You're going to hear Carly Bawden and Marc Antolin singing, and then towards the end of the track, you're going to hear John Pfumojena voicing the grief that is at the heart of this amazing play.

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(singing)

I can't listen to it without feeling the emotion wave over me, I'm so proud. Composed by Ian Ross and you had the company of 12 Nights as well. Amazing.

John Pfumojena:

Yes, Fluff. I have to say to Fluff, the music is sublime, absolutely. And if fluff listens to this, it really has to be said it's some of the most-

Emma Rice:

Just blown the biggest secret, he tries to not let people know that's his nickname.

John Pfumojena:

Well, I'm sorry. That's it, it's done, it's over.

Emma Rice:

Ian Ross, you have been outed.

John Pfumojena:

It was so amazing. And the beautiful thing about 12th Night was that it gave a nod to what Zimbabwean traditional music is, in that each music piece has its specific rhythm, and each rhythm has its specific dance. So everything is intertwined, nothing exists without the other. So Fluff and Etta Murfitt absolutely brought this vision to what you Emma Rice had, and that made the string of love just happened on that stage.

Emma Rice:

The string of love, I love that. Talking about music, I realize that we've both mentioned, I've pronounced it wrong but the mbira which is your Zimbabwean instrument you play, but describe to people what that is and what it means to you.

John Pfumojena:

For everyone, it may be recognized as a thumb piano or kalimba. And that's metal chimes that you pluck with your fingers. And for Zimbabweans, it's an instrument that's been around for over 1,000 years, and it is believed to have been given as a vision to one of our ancestors to create from the trees and from iron ore, and the music is favored by the answers. And we have a lot of customs and rituals which allow the mbira playing to evoke the spirits of the ancestors through a spirit medium. And that's usually to come and advise families when called upon and to give guidance. But mbira music is so transcendent for me on a much deeper level than the normal person may appreciate music.

Emma Rice:

What's your next choice? And why?

John Pfumojena:

What is my next choice? My next choice is, did I write Chiwoniso?

Emma Rice:

Yes, you did.

John Pfumojena:

I did. Chiwoniso, Wandirasa, this is from her first album. She only ever had two albums and she's my mentor, and she's late. And the last concert we had together was a concept I created called Chi night Pfumojena. And chi is a really good pun because her name is Chiwoniso and mine is Pfumojena, and Chi night Pfumojena would mean in my language, what is it, Pfumojena? or what is it, John? But also Chi is her name. So Chi is, what is it? But Chi is also her name. So she was my mentor and this song Wandirasa, it's of course, got English lyrics, she changed scope of contemporary mbira. And also because traditionally women in Zimbabwe were not allowed to play the mbira, it was only for men.

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So she was one of the women along with Stella Chiweshe who's Zimbabwean and a legend in her own right. So I admire her, she taught me so much. But this is a really cheerful song and a love song, and this is, you'll love it.

(singing)

Emma Rice:

I do love it. Sound of sunshine, is beautiful.

John Pfumojena:

It's so lush, she was so lovely. Bless her, bless her soul.

Emma Rice:

So right at the beginning of lockdown, you sent me a text, and people are sending all sorts of things at the moment that are helpful or not. And you sent me a little memory, I don't know how you had it, but it was a little video from 12th Night which was in the second half, which is when Sebastian gets together with Olivia on the song True Love. And I just completely lost it in time, I hadn't thought about it for so long, and it was the most beautiful gift anybody sent me. I texted you straight back, where did you get this? This is just amazing. And it reminded me of the amazing romance of that production. I think we really touched on grief because I feel that's what runs through the veins of 12th Night, but also romance, there's hope, and there's surprise, and there's happenstance, and there was this song at the end. And you bringing it home as well, bringing home the audience at the Globe to hope.

John Pfumojena:

True love composed by Fluff, Ian Ross, and we worked a bit on it as well with Etta. But it was... I love playing alongside my co-star. And she...

Emma Rice:

Annette McLaughlin?

John Pfumojena:

Yes. She's incredible because, as a newcomer to Shakespeare, I was also just walking and treading on thin ice and seeking guidance, and she was everything I needed and more, and everything I didn't know I needed. And partly in that it was also just an appreciation for her that was exuding on stage. But you're so right, there was a love and grief that was on about the show that you can... If you watch it, whoever's listening, you can find the full production on the Globe player and this is for 12th Night, Emma Rice, 2017. And you see there's so much love and grief. But love, and celebration, and every character is seeking that comfort of love and joy, and I think we did it.

Emma Rice:

We did do it. We're going to play it and this was the moment where we unashamedly landed, so it was like a blockbuster moment when you took Olivia and kissed her and brought the house down with the sheer belief that there might be a happy ending.

(singing)

Oh, you can just hear we're both laughing as we listen to it, because you can hear the audience, can you? They're so with it, it's like scoring a goal when you kiss her at the end. It's literary like scoring a goal.

John Pfumojena:

Oh my gosh, I think it was just... If that was translated into sport that would be an England football moment, it would have to go down as one of those. Yeah, because everyone loves that, don't they? They love a good love story. And it's not wrong, we're not programmed to but we're created to be loving human beings, etc. I think.

Emma Rice:

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We are, we're simple creatures really, aren't we?

John Pfumojena:

Yeah.

Emma Rice:

We just want everything to be lovely, to be in love, and for it all to work out. Please, please let it all work out.

John Pfumojena:

It will.

Emma Rice:

Thank you, John, for having tea and biscuits with me. And can I take this opportunity to say what a pleasure it is to have you in my life? I cannot wait to make Wuthering Heights with you, you are Heathcliff, you're my Heathcliff. And we're going to have such an adventure when the key is turned and we're out of lockdown. And I just want to thank you for your intensity, your joy, your energy, your musicality, and your vibrant spirit of endurance.

John Pfumojena:

Thank you so much, Emma. You are a breath of fresh air without any doubt. And it's always lovely to get back into your vicinity of work and beautiful care and all, it's lovely. Thank you so much.

Emma Rice:

Play us out with your final choice. What is it? And why have you chosen it?

John Pfumojena:

It's Shosholoza which anyone in the world should recognize, if you don't, this is your first time and enjoy it. It's the basic structure of music in Southern Africa which is call and response and it comes from the work ethic out in the fields or whatever it is. We use music as a time passer and this is Shosholoza, it's South Africa, Southern Africa, Zimbabwe, it's everything and more.

(singing)

Emma Rice:

If you have a memory or connection you'd like to share on Tea & Biscuits, leave us a message on our phone line. 0117-3183846 that's 0117-3183846. 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