

WISE CHILDREN'S LOCKDOWN

TEA & BISCUITS WITH EMMA RICE — ETTA MURFIT

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.

Emma:

Hello and welcome to Wise Children's Lockdown Tea and Biscuits. Today I'm talking to my dear, dear friend, Etta Murfitt. Welcome.

Etta:

Hello.

Emma:

Hello, hi Etta. First question is, what virtual biscuit are you eating today?

Etta:

A chocolate hobnob.

Emma:

Excellent. I today, have gone for a virtual fig roll.

Etta:

Very nice. I do like a fig roll though, as well.

Emma:

I do, they're an unloved biscuit, but I think they're underrated.

Etta:

True, there's a company manager called, Ian Wheatstone who always puts those fig biscuits on the tea table, and nobody ever eats them, and I always do.

Emma:

You would be just bringing up the rear, and sort of punching out the fig rolls.

Etta:

Yeah.

Emma:

So how's your lockdown going?

Etta:

It's going okay, I'm really busy. More busy than I usually am. I'm spending so much time on Zoom chats that it seems endless and forever. I'm doing okay, there's times when I just go, "Oh my God,

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this is actually happening." Then I have a little bit of a freaking out moment, and then I'm fine again. I'm fine, you know? Everybody's just getting on with it, aren't they?

Emma:

Yeah, it is true, it hits you in waves, doesn't it? The reality of this situation. Where are you? Paint me a picture of where you are.

Etta:

I'm actually staying with my partner, Paul, at the moment. My daughter Isabelle is in my house in Turnpike Lane. That's because my friend Isabelle's mom died recently, and I went to see her in hospital, and without realizing, we'd been told that she didn't have the Coronavirus and in actual fact, she did.

Emma:

Oh gosh.

Etta:

So I had to do a bit of self-isolating. Then the lockdown happened, and then I just thought, I better stay here. So, that's where I am, I'm in Southeast London, I'm looking into a very beautiful little garden, and I can hear the birds tweeting away. It's very nice.

Emma:

I hear tweeting as well, it's gorgeous, Gorgeous. Well this is just a chance to chat with you really, and say hello but also to do a little bit of reminiscing, because I'm doing quite a lot of that at the moment. So knowing that we're doing that today, I was thinking about the first time we met. Me and Etta met on a show called The Umbrellas of Cherbourg. Which was a show that, the simple story is, it didn't do very well. It opened in the West End, and was closed within a few weeks, but it was one of the most beautiful pieces of work I've ever made, and we all loved it. To this day we all love it.

Etta:

We did.

Emma:

The company really keep in touch. It was really special to me, because I met Lez Brotherston for the first time, who designed it, and Etta Murfitt, who choreographed it. Both of them must talk about new adventures a lot, but straight away had come from new adventures. I felt really privileged to work with them. They've both become lifelong friends, and particularly you, Etta. I have to admit, I had a bit of a crush on you when we first met, because it's really rare... It's true though isn't it? Isn't it rare when you get to a certain age to make really good friends.

Etta:

Yes.

Emma:

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It's rare that spend enough time with people, or everybody's busy. I just felt that we met at a time in our lives, when we were both working at a really high level, and you're just the coolest bird in the world, and you really make me laugh. You've become a really treasured friend, so Umbrella's of Cherbourg has got all of that shot through it as well.

Etta:

Yeah, well same back at you. I really loved working on that show, and I remember emailing you after I'd seen a run through of the workshop of Umbrellas of Cherbourg saying, "I'd really like to work with you at some point." Then you emailed me back, and I was so shocked. You said, "Yeah, well do you want to choreograph it?" I was like, "Oh my God. Yeah." It was so magical, and wonderful, and the mix of people was so special. I really cherish that show in my heart massively. We had a laugh, didn't we? We laughed a lot.

Emma:

We laughed so much. It was an amazing cast. We had Meow Meow, who was astonishing, Cynthia Erivo whose not Oscar winning, amazing.

Etta:

A star.

Emma:

I know, an absolute star. Brilliant Carly Bawden, Dominic Marsh, Andrew Durand, what company, Jo Riding. We just were friends forever now. What I loved about working with you was you're so easy in the room. There's no pushed status. Everybody knows you're in charge, but you've got a really similar way of running a room to me, you allow the actors to be really creative with their input, but you're a natural storyteller, so everything that you do sort of is keyed into the story. Most precious to me is you're really funny. You choreograph in a really funny way. For that reason, the first bit of music that I've chosen for you, I'm not even going to tell you what it is, but this is reminding me of the first time we met, the first time we worked together, and how bloody funny your choreography can be.

Emma Plays – Michel Legrand's Di-Gue-Ding-Ding

Emma:

Oh my God that's such a cool bit of music, that is Di-gue-ding-ding by Michel Legrand.

Etta:

I loved that bit of music, and I love my best memory of doing that dance is Dominic Marsh doing sort of the step that runs all the way through it, and he was so hysterical doing that bit of dancing, I loved it. Him and Andrew at the end, coming on for their bow, both doing that step together, it just sticks in my memory. I love that dance, and then when Liza Minnelli came to the show, and then we did that thing with her, and Meow Meow taught her the steps. I mean, come on. It's amazing. Everything about that bit of music is so quintessentially sort of set in the 60s isn't it? It's just got such that feel, I love it. I love it.

Emma:

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I know. French, jazz, 1960s, bloody marvelous. Anyway, I want to talk a bit about you. I asked you to bring in some music. So talk about the first bit of music that you brought in and why.

Etta:

Well, the first bit of music I brought in is, a section of The Nutcracker ballet. In the traditional ballet it's called something like, Nutcracker Marie Depart for the Forest, or something like that, but in the Matthew Bourne's version of The Nutcracker it's a wonderful love duet between Clara and the Nutcracker who was a doll who's turned into a man. It's one of the first love duets that I ever did as a performer, as a dancer.

Etta:

Every time I hear that music, it takes me right back to falling in love with whoever my nutcracker was that evening. I literally would fall in love every night. It didn't matter which one it was, because I had several, but every night that music would start and he would come through this big opening at the back of the stage, and I would immediately fall in love with him. It is such a beautiful bit of music and the way it grows is so wonderful. It takes me back to the first time I did a principle role, it's the first time I was the main storyteller in a show, and it just fills me with joy every time I hear it.

Music – The Nutcracker

Emma:

So what the people listening to this won't know is that I can see you Etta. And she's just danced her whole way through that track. Which is really perfect, because what I wanted to talk to you next... because when I met you as a choreographer, I had no idea what kind of performer you are. You're an astonishing performer.

Etta:

So are you.

Emma:

I've never known anybody to be able to channel emotion through the body like you do. So I wanted to move onto the first time that we worked together as performer and director, which is when you went into a show that you choreographed, The Wild Bride.

Etta:

Oh, loved that show.

Emma:

I wonder if we'll talk about a show that we go, "I hated that one." We have done one of those, but that's another story.

Etta:

Oh yeah, true.

Emma:

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Wild Bride, so it's another show that's really close to my heart. It was a knee high how based on a fairytale, a folktale called, The Handless Maiden. Etta choreographed it, it was very much of the folk tradition, very musical, very physical. You went into it as the... there's one leading woman in it, a girl who goes from girlhood through to womanhood. Played by three different actors, and Etta played the final iteration of the woman, the mature woman, the woman that owns her life, and owns her own skin. It was absolutely stunning to watch you perform in one of my pieces and feel the emotion going through you. I know it's all compliments, but it's true, Etta, it's true. What was it like having choreographed something going into it?

Etta:

Well daunting initially, because having seen it, and worked on it, and seen those amazing performers do it, it was very daunting. Also, it was a different style of performing to what I'd been doing for a really, really long time. So doing dance theater, a lot of the time you're telling the story in a really big way. I think you have to be quite... of course you have to be truthful when you're doing dance theater but you have to be more truthful when you're doing your work I think, and I found it daunting mainly because the performers were so extraordinary and I sort of doubted myself, probably, initially.

Etta:

I absolutely loved doing that show and being given the opportunity. For you to give me that opportunity to actually perform in that show was the best thing ever for me. It launched me in a different way. I learned something about myself, I knew a different style of performing and still story tell, but do it in a different way. I'm really thankful for you, allowing me to do that, because I absolutely loved it. I've done lots of brilliant things, but I think it was one of the best things I've done. As well as all the other shows that we've worked on.

Emma:

It was a really special one. I can remember watching, because it was the first time I'd seen your process as a performer. Of course, you knew the work intimately, because you'd made it with me. But I can remember being really bowled over by your rigor, because you'd never spoken on stage before, had you?

Etta:

No.

Emma:

So it was the first time you used your voice, and that was where I did notice your vulnerability, because I think you'd never used that muscle. You worked so hard at that. Worked technically on the vocals, but also on your own relationship to your voice. I was so impressed with that. I just saw the work ethic that I think a lot of you dancers have, but you certainly had. It was really special to watch. I'm going to do a name check, because you were performing with Patrycja Kujawska, and Audrey Brisson, and took over the role that was created originally by Éva Magyar. You took it and made it into your own. So let's have a memory from Wild Bride.

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Music – Devil and the Deep Blue Sea from The Wild Bride

Emma:

Oh the cast, the original cast of Wild Bride, Stuart McLoughlin on vocals. Wow, wonderful.

Etta:

Yeah. That show is... I love it. It's always going to be right in my heart. If you said we were going to do that again, I'd be, "Yes, yes, yes."

Emma:

Well don't give me ideas. I'd be yes as well. Come on. Tell us about your second piece of music and why you chose it.

Etta:

It's from a film called Fahrenheit 451, it's from a book written by Ray Bradbury, and the music is composed by Bernard Herrmann. That was actually 1966, that was the year I was born. The reason I chose it, is because at the moment, we're supposed to be with new adventures, on the road with Red Shoes, and a lot of the music within Red Shoes is Bernard Herrmann music. We used this particular bit of music, and it's the prelude from Fahrenheit 451, and it is absolutely magical and mysterious, and it's so inviting in terms of story telling. As soon as you start listening to it, it could take you down any path. I remember when I first heard it, it just opened up a whole world of creativity for me when we started working on the ballet within the Red Shoes ballet. So that's why I chose it, because we should be on the road with it, now really, and we're not, and it is a brilliant bit of music.

Emma:

As you know, The Red Shoes is close to my heart, and I'm also a fan girl of Matthew Bond's new adventures, because I love the word that he creates, and you create with him so much. The combination, I have to say, I think The Red Shoes is... your Red Shoes is so special to me, because the film's so close to my heart, but it's the most sumptuous, emotional, vivid, heartbreaking experience. It's exquisite from beginning to end. So I'm going to enjoy this one as well.

Music – Bernard Herman Theme from Fahrenheit 451

Emma:

Gosh, it's so evocative, isn't it?

Etta:

It is, it's just so wonderful, and it just sort of you could go anywhere, couldn't you?

Emma:

I danced my way through that one, as well. That's calling on my desire to do free movement at all times. Right, I'm going to speed us forward to another Kneehigh show, Tristan and Isolde.

Etta:

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Yes. Oh my gosh.

Emma:

Memory lane, isn't it? So Tristan and Isolde I made so many years ago. I want to say 2004, who knows. It's had many iterations and every one has revealed layers of this amazing story to me. Every new person that's come into the group has brought something new with them. You came in and were Isolde for me. Again, you're brilliant, but vocally, I mean, again looking at that, not only did you speak brilliantly, you did an Irish accent, didn't you?

Etta:

Oh my God yeah. I remember in rehearsal, when you said, "Oh, why don't you try it with an Irish accent." My stomach fell through the floor at that point, and I went, "Oh my God, right, okay." I gave it a good go, didn't I? I gave it a good go.

Emma:

You gave it a brilliant go, absolutely amazing. Again, the role was originally created by Éva Magyar, and with her in mind, but we'll say my aesthetic, there were very few words. There's poetry and then big movement sequences. Again, your emotional porosity just shown through in that show. Porous is the word, I feel that you could see the love just flowing between you and Tristan and you and King Mark, it always comes with a fragility and a delicacy and a warmth from you. I think there's a warmth that radiates from you as a performer. I loved your Isolde. I'm going to give you a memory of one of the most important scenes I've ever sort of created, which has no words in it, which is the moment when after having the biggest affair of all time with Tristan, King Mark comes back and he and Isolde are reconciled not as petulant young lovers, but as damaged grown ups who find the ability to forgive each other and manage to walk away and re-build, and heal in some way.

Music – Nick Cave – Sweetheart Come

Emma:

That breaks my heart.

Etta:

Yeah.

Emma:

And the memory of you and Mike, Mike Shepard playing the scene lives somewhere in my soul always.

Etta:

Yeah. For me, that bit was one of the most amazing... that's one of the most amazing things I've ever performed. That moment in the show, I mean, I loved performing all of it, but that particular moment was always, I was so in it every single time I did it. It was quite something, and I'm crying now.

Emma:

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It really brings it back, doesn't it? All the emotional memories, it's astonishing. I love that myth. Why that story has run through for so many years, this ancient, ancient story is so forgiving, it's so un-Christian, it allows its characters to love more than one person and to stumble, and to make amends and to find their way back. There's something about the complexity of that moment, and how it was played, and how it was played with no words shakes you to the core.

Etta:

Yeah, you're extraordinary, Emma. You really are. Trying to find a way of telling a story. That particular moment in Tristan and Isolde, I think and that music that runs through it, and the resolution of it is so perfect. You're a genius you are, a genius.

Emma:

Go on.

Etta:

I can't tell you how I used to really love... I loved you in that show as well. I mean, come on.

Emma:

Can we do that again?

Etta:

Yeah.

Emma:

[crosstalk 00:33:09] We're going to have so many shows we want to do, aren't we? Oh God. Let alone the new ones we're dreaming of. So that was another role that you stepped into.

Etta:

Yeah.

Emma:

Let's talk about the role you created. Let's talk about Nora Chance. So, before I hand it over to you, so Wise Children was the first show that I did for my new company Wise Children, been wanting to do it for years, and it suddenly landed at this moment, and I had no doubt that you were my Nora Chance, because I feel that you are Nora Chance, talk to me about her.

Etta:

Well Nora Chance is that sort of wonderful character who performing and showbiz is her life, and she's a proper old Londoner and she's got a twin sister, Dora, and they just live this difficult, tragic really, but amazing life. They lived on stage, and they loved it. You're right, she is a little bit like me. I love performing, I love theater, I love that life, I love feel really tired. I like feeling that I'm on my last leg. I love all of that, I love all the sort of dirty side of theater and performing. I think that's why I just love Wise Children and being able to perform in that show, and again, another challenge. You always give me challenges, don't you? That was such a massive challenge for me. So many words and performing with Gareth Snook as well, who's my sister, who is extraordinary and such a generous

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performer as well to work with. Being teamed with him was just brilliant, but again, quite daunting. It was all quite daunting, because everybody in that show is brilliant as well.

Emma:

I know what I'm doing, you were such a brilliant set of twins, because you didn't tread on each other's toes in your strengths. So Gareth is such a wordsmith isn't he, and a crowds man. You're so emotional, which really worked with Nora, because of her sadness's and also her love of the art. She's more romantic, wasn't she? The two of you fizzed next to each other so perfectly.

Etta:

Yeah, I really enjoyed every night. I have to say, that was the anticipation of getting on there, and doing my first little tun do and

Emma:

That's what I look for, poise and authenticity as well, which I [crosstalk 00:36:01] but he did not bring an authentic tondu, did he?

Etta:

No.

Emma:

No. Everything else, you're a hooper, really bloody, classy hooper. That's where you're my Nora.

Etta:

You were very good as well, don't forget.

Emma:

So that's the strange sort of footnote to this, is that I ended up stepping into the role that Etta created, and my turn do was not authentic either, I can tell you.

Etta:

I think you were bloody good when I saw you. I thought it was amazing. It was amazing to watch the show, because that was one of the first times I'd never seen a show, because I was in it, and that doesn't tend to happen to me anymore. Suddenly I was watching a show that I'd been in, and I absolutely loved it. There were so many things that I weren't even aware of when I watched it. It is so brilliant, and it's going to be on the telly.

Emma:

I know. It was announced today, wasn't it? Unbelievably. You taught me that, that's something from the dance tradition. Because you always have people covering roles, because it's so hard to dance big roles. You have no sort of strange agenda or status agenda when more than one person plays a part. I've really learned that from you. That actually swapping actors into parts is a real opportunity. It's an opportunity for something new to be brought to the role, for both performers to see. So you being able to watch me, when you go back in as Nora, which I truly believe and hope you will, that will have really informed you.

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Etta:

No, it did, it was really good actually. I've still got them in my head, some of the things you did.

Emma:

I think in the old days I used to dread cast changes. I used to sort of hold on really tight and think, "I can't bare to make a show again without these people." But now I really understand that if you do it with care, and with enough time to make sure that person's got room to input and inform the show, it just grows. It just means more people put their love into it.

Etta:

Yeah, exactly, it's great, love it. Love that.

Emma:

On that note, I'm going to say thank you, Etta for having tea and biscuits with me.

Etta:

Oh, I've really enjoyed it.

Emma:

I've missed you.

Etta:

I miss you too, it's ridiculous.

Emma:

Thank you for being the most amazing collaborator, I love working with you as an actor, and as a choreographer. I love it when you're in the auditorium with me, and we're taking a show. It's like having your best mate next to you. So I look forward to having you beside me and in front of me, always. You're the best.

Etta:

Me too, thanks.

Emma:

I'm going to play out on the final song of Wise Children, because we're two girls that like fun, aren't we?

Etta:

Oh yeah, we are. Also, this just also reminds me of when I was like, I don't know, a teenager, this song as well. It takes me right back there and it takes me right to the end of Wise Children as well, and how wonderful that was. I was usually crying at that point, that's why.

Emma:

Come on, let's play it. Yay!

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Music – Girls Just Wanna Have Fun

Emma:

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.