

Wise Children



**An introduction to the work of Emma
Rice and Wise Children for students
and teachers**

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Introduction & purpose

If you are a Drama teacher or educator, or if you are a student of Drama, this workbook about the theatre company Wise Children has been written for you. It will help you to understand their work, and to create your own theatre through using some of their approaches.

Drama teachers must teach students how to make, shape and perform live theatre. It can be a complex and sometimes daunting process. Drama students must learn to have ideas that have value, how to form theatre that communicates with impact, how to navigate the sometimes-messy tangle of collaborating with actors and others in rehearsal, how to perform original theatre with confidence and skill, and how to be brave and experimental even if there is a requirement to meet narrow assessment criteria in the process.

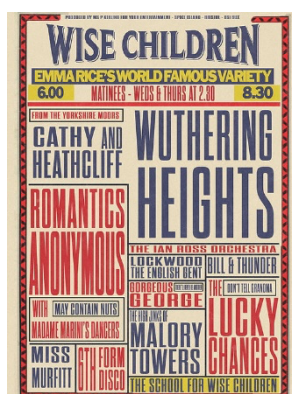
Emma Rice, Artistic Director of Wise Children says about the process of creating theatre, 'Nothing needs to be hard'. Her work is focused on collaborative and joyful practices with the aim of keeping things simple without dumbing them down. But what does this mean for teachers and students in the classroom? How can the work of Emma Rice and Wise Children help us when thinking about how to meet the challenge of making theatre to create and perform stories that matter?

We have been working with Emma Rice and Wise Children to develop this workbook for Drama teachers and students as an introduction to Emma's work, and more specifically, the creative processes of Wise Children. There will be useful information that you can draw upon for research purposes or to support written tasks, however, the real focus is to provide you with tools that can be used practically in your classrooms to support you in creating theatre based on stories, ensemble, conventions, and techniques that are recurring features in the work of Wise Children.

There are four videos that accompany this workbook in which Emma Rice shares her approaches to her work and insights into the ways in which she collaborates with actors and other creatives in Wise Children. The videos can be used in conjunction with this workbook.

Throughout, there is a range of information about Wise Children, followed by examples of how you might explore some of the approaches that they use in rehearsals, to adapt stories, and to bring ideas to life on stage.

Exploring how Wise Children create contemporary theatre will provide you with some tools to help you create and perform stories that matter to you.



Who is Emma Rice?

Emma Rice was born in August 1967 in Oxfordshire to a mother who was a social worker and a father who was a lecturer. She grew up in Nottinghamshire and she describes herself as a classic second child, stating, 'Second children work out how to get into the spotlight' (Guardian, 2018).

Emma studied English and stage design at Harrington College and then went on to study acting at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

After graduating, Emma worked with Theatre Alibi in Exeter who create theatre for children. She also worked in Poland with Gardzienice Theatre Association who create theatre that is collaborative and community focused; this is also where Emma experienced theatre practices from Eastern Europe. She joined Kneehigh in 1994 as a performer, later becoming the co-artistic director. Kneehigh, based in Cornwall, focus on the retelling of classic stories and tales through an eclectic approach to theatre making and an emphasis on the visual elements of productions. It was here that Emma was encouraged to try her hand at directing.

Emma became artistic director of Shakespeare's Globe in 2016 but stepped down in 2018 and went on to set up her own theatre company Wise Children.

Emma cites her key influences as being Complicité, Pina Bausch, and Joan Littlewood.

Task: Within the class / group, set a short research and presentation task in small groups, each taking one of Emma Rice's key influences mentioned above. As part of the presentation, it is important to make explicit links between Complicité, Pina Bausch, and Joan Littlewood and the work of Wise Children so that the impact of the influences are thought about.

Emma is the recipient of accolades including 'Outstanding Contribution to British Theatre' from the UK Theatre Awards in 2019 and being named in the Sky Arts top 50 most influential British Artists in 2022.

As with all theatre practitioners, there are certain elements that make the work of Emma Rice and Wise Children distinct, but, perhaps paradoxically, it is the wide range of conventions and styles that she uses that makes her work so interesting to watch and to write about. Emma talks about her changing style and aesthetic as being like a 'patchwork' (see video resource: Wise Children Company: Style of Work. 07:36).

This eclectic mix of video animation, puppetry, dance, deliberate theatricality, and more are the vehicles through which Emma guides her ensemble of cast and creatives at Wise Children to tell stories through touring productions.

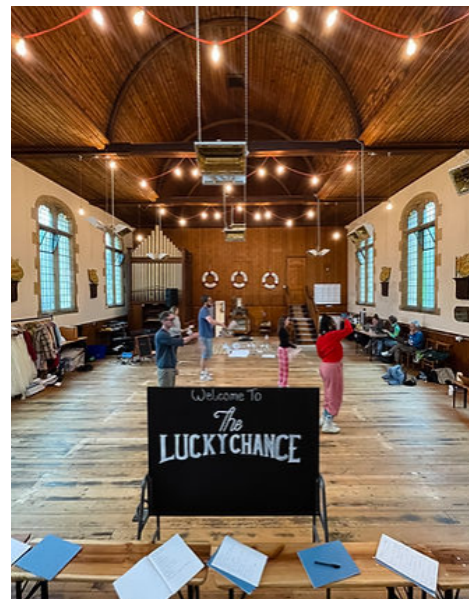


Emma Rice and musicians from Wise Children in rehearsal for Wuthering Heights, 2021.

Who are Wise Children?

Wise Children are a touring theatre company based in Somerset, UK. Their Artistic Director is Emma Rice who was previously Artistic Director of Kneehigh and Shakespeare's Globe.

Despite being a mainly touring company, Wise Children acquired a permanent base in 2022 when they took over a 100-year-old Methodist church in Frome. The space is called 'The Lucky Chance' and the venue for the company's workshops and rehearsals prior to touring. They have also presented short runs of performances at The Lucky Chance.



The Lucky Chance mid-renovation and then in use by the company

Touring is key to the work of Wise Children, both nationally and internationally. This enables the company to share their work with a range of communities. Wise Children are committed to touring, despite some of the challenges with this type of work, namely the expense and often complex logistical issues of moving a full-scale production to different theatres and spaces. However, touring is at the heart of what Wise Children do, which can best be expressed by Emma (see video resource: Who are Wise Children? 00:12).

Wise Children are an ensemble theatre company, who often use the same actors across a range of their productions. For example, the actor Gareth Snook played Dora in *Wise Children*, and Mercier in *Romantics Anonymous*. Katy Owen played Grandma Chance in *Wise Children*, Isabella Linton in *Wuthering Heights*, and Mother Superior in *Blue Beard*. As Artistic Director, Emma takes an interesting approach to casting, placing an importance of the personalities and energy of individual actors over the character's gender, and particular social or cultural

background. This means that Wise Children productions are highly inclusive and representative, making their work more accessible to the communities they tour to.

Wise Children is also made up of a wider group of permanent creatives which include Ian Ross, Wise Children's Director of Music, Vicki Mortimer, set and costume designer, and choreographer Etta Murfitt. Emma rice talks about working with the ensemble in a video resource that accompanies this workbook, (see video resource: Who are Wise Children? 01:50).

Wise Children are committed to the development of creatives of the future and have established 'The School for Wise Children.' This school is (which is for students 18+) is a free training programme for actors, creatives, and theatre makers. It includes taster workshops, which are run with partner theatres across the UK, followed by one week and then three-week courses in performing and technical theatre in disciplines as diverse as set design, composing, producing, and starting a theatre company. All of this leads to a role in a School for Wise Children Show where students are guided through the process by mentors.

Wise Children have become an Arts Mark Partner and through this they offer free training for Drama Teachers, working with a range of schools and other education partners.

Below is information about the key productions that Wise Children have done at the point of publishing this workbook. To keep up to date with their latest productions and other work, you can subscribe for updates on their website www.wisechildren.co.uk.

Wise Children Productions:

Wise Children - 2018

Wise Children was the first production by Emma Rice after she created Wise Children the company. *Wise Children*, based on a book by Angela Carter, has two central characters, the Chance Twins, who guide the audience through the history of their family and their involvement in the theatre through the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The play explores themes of family, legitimacy, and identity with a sprinkling of Music Hall and Shakespeare. The production has a theatrical aesthetic through establishing the space as theatre dressing rooms and interiors of various theatres from London to Brighton. It makes use of puppets which is a motif often seen in Wise Children's work, song and dance numbers, and an ensemble cast which is central to, not only the production, but the creative process of Wise Children.



Malory Towers – 2019

This production was based on a series of books by the children's author Enid Blyton about a girl's boarding school in Cornwall. There are six books in total in which Blyton writes a coming-of-age story. We see a group of strong and individual school friends who have numerous adventures during which they develop into young women who are kind, fair, and courageous. The production used technology throughout as a way of making it more relevant to a modern audience. This was mainly characterised by animated videos which were projected behind the actors. As well as the use of technology which has become a key convention of Wise Children's work, you can also see other recurring stylistic elements: cabaret, nostalgic use of music, deliberate theatricality, and a physical and visual style.



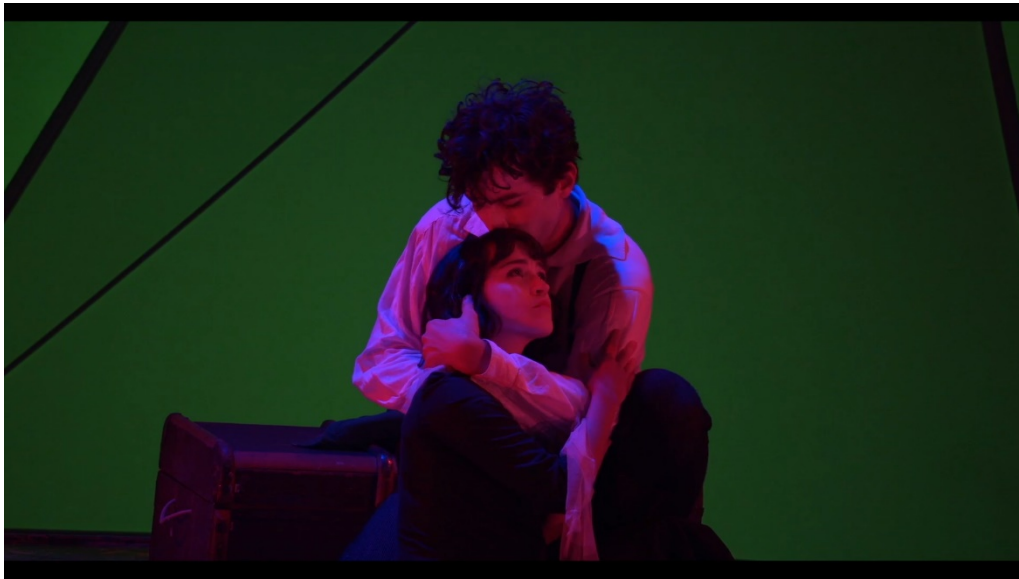
Romantics Anonymous – 2020

The live production of *Romantics Anonymous* was due to open in America after its opening in Bristol, but was paused due to the Covid 19 pandemic. A decision was made to live stream it from the Bristol Old Vic, which resulted in more than 20,000 people seeing the show. Based on a 2010 film, the productions' central character is the socially anxious Angélique, a gifted chocolatier; she takes a job at a failing chocolate factory owned by Jean-René and a love story unfolds. Told with live music, song, dance, and an ensemble cast.



The Flying Lovers of Vitebsk - 2020

The Flying Lovers of Vitebsk tells the real-life story of the artists Marc Chagall and his writer wife, Bella. The show charts the story of the two lovers as they live through some of the most important historical events of the 20th Century, including the Russian Revolution, pogroms, and the Second World War. The production captures the essence of Marc's paintings of the pair, which often depicted them flying above the town of Vitebsk. The production uses live music and songs drawing on the social and historical context of the time, dance, and narration.



Bagdad Cafe – 2021

This production was based on a 1987 film of the same name, and it premiered at The Old Vic from where it was live streamed just after the Covid 19 pandemic. In the film, Bagdad Café is a diner and motel in the small town, of Bagdad, California, along the famous Route 66 in the Mojave Desert, however, the setting in the theatre production is slightly more ambiguous. The story centres on two women: Brenda, who owns the café, and Jasmine, both of whom have left their husbands and who build a friendship. The diner is filled with an eclectic cast of characters and the show builds on the themes of friendship and community. It is an ensemble production which relies heavily on music, utilises puppetry and dance; and even repurposes the caravan that was the central part of the set in *Wise Children*.



Wuthering Heights - 2021

Using an ensemble-style Greek chorus to represent the Yorkshire moor alongside song, dance and video animation, *Wuthering Heights* is an adaptation of the Emily Brontë novel of the same name. Like *Wise Children*, the central characters (in this case of Cathy and Heathcliff) are represented by puppets when they are children, and then actors take over as they grow up. There is lots of music, some of which is influenced by punk and heavy metal played by a live band. Conventions convey a sense of deliberate theatricality, for example, the chorus making the sounds of the wind, and cast members holding branches to represent trees. Running through the contemporary retelling of the classic novel is a sense of the here and now; Emma was influenced by news of undocumented migrants living in the Calais jungle, and in the novel, Heathcliff is found alone as an undocumented minor at Liverpool docks.



What are the key themes in Wise Children productions?

Emma Rice talks about the key themes that reoccur in Wise Children's productions **film** **three** **timestamp** and how they are explored.

The key themes can be summarised here:

Love – this key theme that runs throughout Wise Children's work. Examples include:



Romantics Anonymous explored love between two people who do not find expressing love particularly easy. The stormy relationship between Cathy and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* is one of the most famous in literature, and *The Flying Lovers of Vitebsk* explores a real-life love story through some of the major events of the 20th century.

Femininity and being bad – exploring the relationship between being female and bad behaviour. Examples include:



Cathy in *Wuthering Heights* is wilful, passionate, and is a free spirit. However, she is also temperamental and can be unkind. In *Wise Children*'s production, there was a scene in which Cathy sings a punk rock style song complete with wind machine. Similarly, in *Wise Children*, Dora and Nora as showgirls are living outside the societal norms expected of the time.

Identity – what it means to be on the outside and to not fit in. This is also evident in the diverse and inclusive approach to casting. Examples include:



The Chance Twins, Dora and Nora in *Wise Children* were played by both male and female actors in the production. These characters are always questioning their place and identity due to their illegitimacy. In *Bagdad Cafe*, the two central characters identities shift as they make a connection with each other, bound by their need to move on from their pasts.

Nature – the wild and epic aspects of nature are often explored. Examples include:



In Wuthering Heights, the central character is the Yorkshire moor which is played by an ensemble cast of characters. In Malory Towers, the landscape of Cornwall is communicated using video animation which was woven throughout the production.

What are the key theatrical conventions and techniques often used in Wise Children productions?

Below are some of the key conventions and techniques often employed by Wise Children in their productions. You might want to develop your research by looking at the resources on the Wise Children website, particularly the podcasts in which you can listen to Emma Rice and the creatives of Wise Children talking about their theatre making approaches, some of which are captured in the diagram below.

Task: From the clips of productions you can see on the [Wise Children](#) website, look for the key conventions and techniques mentioned below. Make notes about how they are used and why – what is the dramatic impact in terms of how the story is being communicated? **Challenge:** Are there any other techniques and conventions you see that have not been mentioned below?



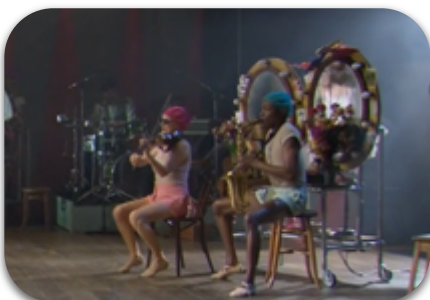
Puppetry



Ensemble & Chorus



Animated video



Live music & song



Dance & Movement



Deliberate theatricality

How are the stories in Wise Childrens' productions adapted?

Wise Children adapt existing stories, often from short stories and novels, some of which have been previously adapted into television programmes and films. When you listen to the fourth video that accompanies this workbook, you will hear Emma Rice talking about how all the stories she has adapted are ones that have meaning to her personally. Interestingly, unlike some practitioners such as Brecht, she does not choose stories that aim to teach the audience a particular lesson. She uses stories that are exciting, have meaning, and lend themselves to adaptation through movement, music, puppetry, and ensemble. It is Emma who selects the story and adapts it for a production; after that, the development is very much collaborative, with all cast members and creatives contributing to the final show.

Emma talks about her approaches to adapting stories in one of the video resources that accompany this workbook, (see video resource: Wise Children Company: Adapting).

Task: In a small group, take a story you all know well and that you love, let's say Little Red Riding Hood – choose something simple for this task as it's a practice to get you into the process.

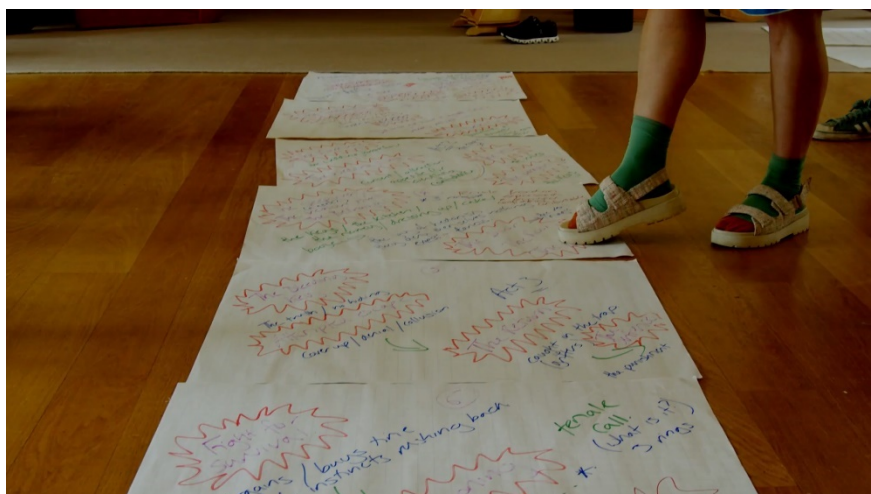
Firstly, answer these questions:

1. Why do you love this story?
2. What is it about this story that makes you want to tell it? This is the most important question in the process so make sure you are clear about the answer.
3. What are the best bits of the story? Leave out any bits you don't like.

Challenge - Where in Little Red Riding Hood can you see the themes of love, femininity and being bad, identity, and nature?

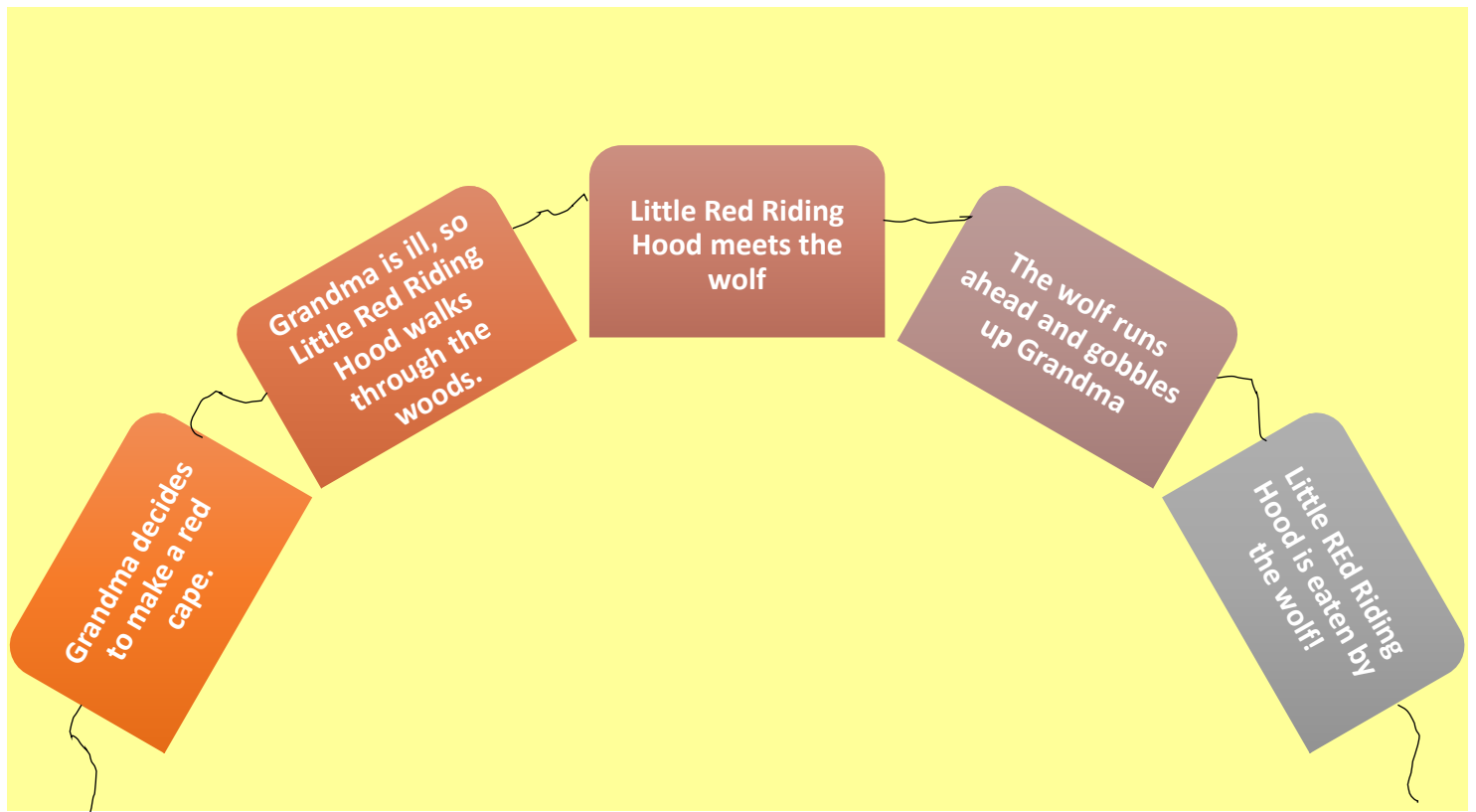
4. Then think and talk about this bigger question – how might you tell the story? Have big ideas – worry about how you might make them happen later.
5. Think about what you don't know in the story, for example, where is Little Red Riding Hood's father? Why does Little Red Riding Hood's Mother and Grandfather live so far away from each other? And so on.
6. Who might be the chorus in the story? The woods? The people from Little Red Riding Hood's village?

Task: Capture all your ideas by getting some large pieces of paper and a bunch of pens (the more colours the better!). Label one sheet 'Themes', one 'Story', and then have one for each character. Capture your ideas in any way that you like, visuals, diagrams, lists, quotes and so on. Make sure that you put them up on the wall for everyone to see. Every creative you are working with can add ideas to these pieces of paper; talk about those ideas, collaborate, and have fun in your thinking.



In the video resource 'Wise Children Company: Adapting', Emma talks about the concept of 'threading the beads' in the early stages of adapting a story. This is a way of thinking about how to pick out the bits of the story you like most and you really want to tell.

In the diagram below, we have picked out what we think are the best bits of Little Red Riding Hood from a version of the story we read by Charles Perrault – you may not agree with our ideas but that's totally fine! You may want to use a diagram like this if it helps to structure your thinking, but, if you do, make sure you put it up on the wall along with all your other ideas.



As you can see from the version we worked with, Little Red Riding Hood is eaten, but there are lots of gaps in the story and no idea yet about how we might tell it. Thinking about what we've learnt about the themes Wise Children use, as well as the dramatic techniques and conventions, we could start filling in the gaps with the following ideas:

At the start, Little Red Riding Hood is a little girl represented by a puppet. We need to see Grandma making and giving the red cloak to her.

The woods need to be intimidating and ever moving, so this can be shown via a projected animation in black and white of moving trees.

Use an ensemble chorus of actors who will represent the villagers. They will reflect the emotions through movement and link the story together.

If you are in a school or college with limited resources, a video animation may not be possible, BUT, if you like the idea of using something like this, you will need to be creative about how you do it. For example, are there copyright free videos of trees you could project? Could you create the trees with found objects such as brooms, bits of material etc? The possibilities are endless.

Once you have some basic ideas together, you can move on to the next stage of the adapting process which is, as a group of creatives, working together to fill in *all* the gaps.

Task: Once you have the best bits of the story worked out, start working in rehearsal to consider how those bits might be brought to life. This will help you to think about how the story might be strung together. Consider these prompts to help you:

- 1. How might you use music and song to tell the story?**
- 2. Which parts might be told by the chorus?**
- 3. Do you want to change the time and place? For example, it could be set in a fictional version of a wood or forest near you in the modern day.**
- 4. How might you develop the characters? For example, Little Red Riding Hood might be more of a rebellious character than in the original, she might deliberately wander off because she's been told not to. Perhaps she doesn't fit into the traditional idea of a good girl in a fairytale.**

What kinds of stories might you consider for adaptation?

All of us know stories and tell stories. Whether you are adapting a story by yourself for rehearsal and exploration with others, or whether you are adapting a story collaboratively, what is important is that you select a story that matters.

The list below is far from comprehensive, but it may offer you a starting point for thinking about which story you want to tell through theatre and where you might get that story from.

Traditional Folk and Fairytales, and legends	Grimms Fairy Tales – Brothers Grimm Old Nurse’s Stocking Basket – Eleanor Farjeon Fairy Tales from Brazil – Elsie Spicer Eels
Modern Folk and Fairytales	The Bloody Chamber – Angela Carter (for older students only) Beasts of Prey – Ayana Gray Between the Woods and the Water – Simone Snaithe The Lost Bookshop – Evie Woods
Local Tales	Do some research to see if there are any local myths, legends, and stories from around where you live. Your local library or local museum if you have one, are good resources.
Tales for Children	The Sleeper and the Spindle - Neil Gaiman The Owl Service – Alan Garner A Wrinkle in Time – Madeleine L’Engle
Classic Movies	Casablanca - 1942 It Happened One Night – 1934 Now Voyager – 1942
Novels	Jane Eyre – Charlotte Brontë Rebecca – Daphne Du Maurier Around the World in Eighty Days – Jules Verne
Stories from around the world	Gilgamesh Little Peaching

	Anansi
Poems and Ballads	The Hill We Climb – Amanda Gorman Idylls of the King - Alfred Lord Tennyson Charlotte O’Neil’s Song – Fiona Farrell
Picture books	The Matchbox Diary – Paul Fleischman What We’ll Build – Oliver Jeffers The Arrival – Shaun Tan
Songs	She’s Leaving Home – The Beatles Father and Son – Cat Stevens The House that Built Me – Miranda Lambert

Task: Students, in groups, should create a mind map of all the stories they know well which can be from a range of stories as in the diagram above, songs, novels, films etc. They should then select one and summarise the essence of the story and why it is important to them (this does not need to be the story they go on to adapt for a piece of theatre). They can consider these three questions:

1. What is the key theme of the story?
2. What is the story communicating?
3. Why is the story important?

As a whole group, create a table or mind map with everyone’s ideas of stories they love, you may well inspire each other.

Then, follow the same structure as the exemplar task based on Little Red Riding Hood. Once you are ready to start ‘threading your beads’, you can also begin to build in some of the rehearsal techniques below which are designed to reflect Wise Children’s approaches to ensemble, movement, and song, all with energy, fun, and some healthy naughtiness!

How might you practically explore how Wise Children work together in rehearsal?

ENSEMBLE

In terms of the theatre, ensemble is taken to mean a group of performers who work as a whole rather than prioritising the individual. This can be seen in a literal sense in the way Wise Children work as they take an ensemble approach to making theatre where all creatives have equal input into the process. This can also be applied to the use of chorus in productions such as *Wuthering Heights* and *Wise Children*.

Here are some exercises to get you going:

Keepy-uppy – get a ball and ensure that all members of the ensemble are spread equally in the space. One person launches the ball into the air. The aim is to keep the ball in the air for as long as possible with each person only allowed to touch the ball once before passing. Be aware of each other in the space and remember that this isn't a competition; the team must work together to achieve the aim. Adaptations to this game are to allow the ball to bounce between hits or use different body parts such as elbows and knees.

Catch and Clap – the ensemble should be spread around the space but with an equal distance between them. One person starts with the ball and throws it to a person near to them, that person passes it on and so on until there is a clear and steady rhythm. The next step is to add a clap in between each throw with everybody clapping at the same time; the rhythm with go throw, clap, throw, clap etc. For an extra challenge, add more balls.

Do What I Do - the ensemble is in a circle in a neutral position. One person volunteers or is chosen to lead. The purpose of this exercise is that the person leading is going to move (keeping the circle intact) and the rest of the ensemble must do the same movements *at the same time*. The person leading should count in the start of the exercise 3,2,1 so that everyone knows when to start copying, and they should say 'stop' to signal the end. The person can either do slow and controlled movements, fast and exaggerated ones, or a mixture of the two. After practice, it's amazing how adept an ensemble can become at this until it's not clear who the leader is at all.

Knights, Horses, and Dancers – each member of the ensemble must start in their own space in the room. Once given a clear signal, they must walk around the space in a neutral manner and avoid eye, physical, or vocal contact with anyone in the room. However, each member must use their special awareness and peripheral vision to ensure that no part of the space is left empty and that they do not form patterns by following each other around. One member of the ensemble is selected to call out either 'Knights', 'Horses', or 'Dancers'. If 'Knights' is

called, each member of the ensemble should pair up, one of them lies on the floor as a vanquished knight, whilst the other stands over them with an imaginary sword aloft. If 'Horses' is called, each member of the ensemble should pair up, one of them becomes a horse neighing happily away, whilst the other gets onto their back (piggyback). If this is not possible, e.g., someone has a bad back, make up something else like feed the horse some hay – no one will mind! If 'Dancers' is called, pair up, go into groups or be by yourself, it doesn't matter just dance in the best and most silly way you know how. Go back to walking around the space in between each one - traditionally, this game is played as a competition with the last pairs to get together being out, but that's no fun. Everyone stays in and enjoys the silliness.

Human Orchestra – this exercise has many variations you can play with, but here is the basic version to get you going. All members of the ensemble start in a circle in a neutral position. One person volunteers or is selected to begin. Using just their body parts, they must start a rhythm, for example, clapping, stamping feet, clicking fingers etc. Moving around the circle clockwise, each actor adds to the rhythm using their bodies. Once the last person joins in, the person who started the rhythm must keep going but then add in an element of voice, a whoop, a whistle, a song lyric, whatever. Again, once everyone has done this, the lead person then adds a dance move, and again it moves around the circle building as it goes. Once everyone has a rhythm, a sound, and a move, break the circle up and start moving around the space. The lead person can conduct the orchestra by getting the ensemble to go louder, quieter, pause and start again. Whatever it takes to start feeling like a full-scale carnival!

VOICE

If actors are involved in a production that makes use of dialogue and song, the use of voice is crucial to communicating character, subtext, and emotion through a range of skills including articulation, pause and modulation. Wise Children not only rely on dialogue, but they often sing as well.

Here are some vocal exercises you can experiment with as part of the rehearsal process. REMEMBER – you must take care of your voice, so ensure that you use vocal warm up exercises such as jaw loosening exercises, lip trills and so on.

What a to do! – this rhyme comes from an old comic opera and is great for practising articulation and projection. Practice saying it as a call and response with one person saying a line and the others in the ensemble responding with the same line. Then try it in a round in cannon. Feel free to add rhythm and movement too.

What a to-do to die today, at a minute or two to two;
a thing distinctly hard to say, but harder still to do.
We'll beat a tattoo, at twenty to two
a rat-tat-tat- tat-tat-tat- tat-tat-tattoo
and the dragon will come when he hears the drum
at a minute or two to two today, at a minute or two to two!

Song Lyrics - divide the ensemble into groups and into their own space in the room. Two big groups are fine. One person decides on a theme, such as 'girls names', each team then gets two minutes think of all the one-line song lyrics they know with a girls' name mentioned, for example 'My, my, my Delilah', 'Sweet Caroline dah dah dun!'. The idea then is to take it in turns for each group to sing the lyric to everyone else until all lyrics have been exhausted – no repeats allowed. Once this has been done, someone else can add a new theme such as 'colours'.

Sing the Story - let's say that your production is of Little Red Riding Hood, an exemplar used earlier in this workbook. In pairs, select four lines of dialogue and sing them in different styles, opera, rock ballad etc.

Zinga Zinga Zoo - a classic vocal warm up song which is a bit silly and easy to remember. Check out the videos of people singing it so that you can get the basic tune. Sing it together as an ensemble, change the pace, tone and volume. You can also try singing it as various characters in your piece of theatre – see what happens when the Big Bad Wolf sings Zinga Zing Zoo!

Boom Chicka Boom! – this is a great one for experimenting with a range of vocal skills including adding pauses, messing with the pace, adding effects such as whispering and repeating. There is a leader who says a line first with the others in the ensemble repeating:

Leader: Say Boom Chicka Boom

Ensemble: Say Boom Chicka Boom

Leader: Say Boom Chicka Boom

Ensemble: Say Boom Chicka Boom

Leader: Say Boom Chicka Rocka Chicka Rocka Chicka Boom

Ensemble: Say Boom Chicka Rocka Chicka Rocka Chicka Boom

Leader: Ah ha!

Ensemble: Ah ha!

Leader: Ee hee!

Ensemble: Eh hee!

Leader: One more time

Echo: One more time

Leader: Whisper / faster / slower / louder

Ensemble: Whisper / faster / slower / louder

Repeat in a whisper or faster or slower or louder...

MOVEMENT

The idea of movement in theatre can mean a range of different things. It can be the way actors transition between scenes, the way they use body language and gesture to communicate characters, or it can have more abstract meaning such as the use of physical theatre or choral action to communicate time, place, or atmosphere. *Wise Children* rely heavily on movement, both using choral action (see the use of chorus in *Wise Children* and *Wuthering Heights*) and in their use of dance, seen in most productions.

Here are a few movement exercises you can experiment with in rehearsal and which you can adapt to fit whichever story you are choosing to tell:

Flock of Birds - this works best if there is an odd number of ensemble members in the group, but if there isn't, don't worry! One person stands at the front and the others stand behind them in a triangle, just like a flock of migrating birds. The leader begins a set of controlled and improvised movements that the other actors must follow at the same time. The leader must fall back to the back of the flock and one person from the front moves forward to take over. For extra challenges, each leader can take it in turns to be different characters from your story so they must move as them: this is a great way to get a shared sense of how different characters might move on stage (character development is a shared activity with *Wise Children*). If you are using music in your piece, use the songs and music for the leader to respond to whatever movements they feel fit the tempo and emotion.

Estate Agents - Depending on the size of your ensemble, this exercise works best in slightly larger groups. It is a part movement, part improvisation task which relies on the members of the ensemble being responsive and spontaneous. One member of the ensemble is the estate agent, they are the only ones who are allowed to talk. They must present a property that is up for sale to the audience. The rest of the group must physically create the rooms and objects as the estate agents describe them. For example,

Estate agent: Welcome to this mid-19th century property which is full of original features. As we enter the main entrance hall, we can see the many original portraits of the original family to have owned this property all those years ago...

Ensemble rush into the space and become the various portraits...

Estate agent: Yes, they were a funny looking bunch. Now as we enter the main part of the house, to our left is the library...

Ensemble change to become physical books...

Estate agent: By the fireplace...

Two members of the ensemble quickly become a fire place...

Estate agent: There is a statute of Lord Willingham who was awarded a gallantry medal in the great war...

Etc.

Food Shopping - Sit your entire ensemble in one end of your rehearsal space. Put on some 'Muzak' to play in the background to set the slightly ridiculous atmosphere. This exercise focuses on characterisation and movement, but an extra challenge could be to add a small amount of dialogue if you think this is suitable. Select one character from your piece of theatre to work at the checkout and set them up with a table and chair. This could be the Big Bad Wolf or one of the chorus who is a villager. Touching each of the characters on the shoulder, this is their signal to enter the food store or supermarket. They must decide on whether they are using a basket or trolley, what are they shopping for, if and how they interact with others in the shop and so on. What is important is that they focus on the quality of their movement, is their character one who moves slowly or quickly, what physical quirks might they have, what gestures do they use and so on.

Clown Furniture - this exercise is inspired by an idea from the work of actors at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. It utilises some of the ideas around communicating with movement with just enough silliness needed to make it appropriate for a Wise Children workshop or rehearsal activity.

Firstly, select three random objects that you can see in your classroom or rehearsal space. They need to be objects that are easily moveable, such as a hat, a chair, and a didgeridoo.

Place the three objects in the centre of the space – you will need to remember their position. One member of the ensemble leaves the space for 30 seconds. In that time, you need to agree between you new positions for the three objects. Quickly put them back into their original positions and sit in a group on the floor. The person who was outside comes back into the space and sees that objects in the position they were in when they left. Their job is to move each of the objects into the new position chosen by the rest of the group when they were out of the room. The only way they will know if the new position of the objects is right or wrong is by how enthusiastic and exaggerated the facial expressions and thumbs up or thumbs down of the rest of the group are in response to where they are moving the objects.

I can't stand... - If you know the story you are telling, select scenes or moments, either as a whole group or in pairs etc. As your characters, run through your scene as normal just remaining aware of your character's movements, particularly with regards to which body part your character tends to lead with, for example, if you are playing Little Red Riding Hood, you may skip on your tip toes when you are happy, or if you are Grandmother you may lead with your hand using outwards and welcoming gestures. Re-run the scene, but this time imagine that your character cannot stand the corresponding leading body part of any other character.

For example, if Grandmother leads with her hands, she cannot bear the hands of any other characters so how will she act if Little Red Riding Hood tries to hug her? Once other characters begin to work out the body part you hate, how might this play out in the movement of the scene, for example, what if, in his attempt to charm Grandma, the Big Bad Wolf tries to hold her hand?

Conclusion

Wise Children is an exciting and innovative theatre company led by Emma Rice, and we hope that this workbook has offered you some insights into their creative process and productions.

Explore the video resources that accompany this workbook as a way into the work of Wise Children so that you can experiment with your own storytelling, try what works through puppetry, dance, song and more. Have fun trying out some of the techniques and exercises as you create stories that matter!

READING LIST:

Guardian (2018). Emma Rice: I don't know how I came to be so controversial.

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/jul/01/emma-rice-controversial-shakespeares-globe-wise-children>

Peck, L. (2023). *Emma Rice's Feminist Acts of Love*. Cambridge Elements: Women Theatre Makers. Cambridge University Press.

Wise Children (2023) <https://www.wisechildrendigital.com/>

APPENDIX 1: Transcript of interview with Emma Rice – Artistic Director

Who are Wise Children?

I'm Emma Rice and I am the Artistic Director of Wise Children which is my company. I started Wise Children in 2018 and it's a company that is dedicated to producing the work I want to make, in the way that I want to make it, with the people I want to make it with, and in the place I like to make it.

We make work that is emotional and hopeful, and is based on storytelling techniques, and I love things to have movement, and music, and puppetry and joy, and I never ever ever want my audience to be bored.

Wise Children is a touring company which is actually getting rarer at the moment, and the reason I love touring is partly practical. So, shows normally either are in one place at one time and they happen very quickly, or they're incredibly commercially successful and they last forever like Hamilton. Now my work is a bit more unusual than that and it has a long life where lots of people will enjoy it and that means that taking the work to those people makes practical sense. But it's also personal and emotional because I love touring, I love going to different communities, I love going to different theatres, I love seeing the show develop when it goes to different places. So touring is absolutely in our bones, and it inspires and really makes the work unique.

The other thing that we are is an ensemble. So, I often work with the same people, that's on stage and off. We're a team of people that have known each other a long time and we dig into that work, and it makes us braver, and naughtier and more fearless. What we try and do is take this sense of community and ensemble and take it across the country and across the world and meet like minded people. So it's a real band of friends, a band of adventurers, and we travel together inspiring each other and the work.

What are the key features of Wise Children's work?

The first thing I hate is work being boring, the second thing I hate is work being too fancy pants, too clever to understand. I hate that, you should be able to understand everything that happens in the theatre, and this does not mean that it's simple or that it's dumbed down. It means that at every stage you say to the audience, "This is what's happening, you can understand it", then you add to it, and you make a big, delicious cake. But you always need to know what's there at the beginning, the flour, the butter, the sugar, until you make something that really is delicious and amazing.

We also make some other cakes at the company, we also run a school, because teaching and passing on some of these techniques is at the heart of what we do.

We run the School for Wise Children which is for adult performers 18 up, and creatives. We run all sorts of courses, writing, performing, producing, lighting, sound design – we do all sorts of things. We're looking for people that might not fit in other parts of the industry, that might

not want to go to drama school, that might be a bit what I call 'left-handed', might look at the world from a slightly different angle, and those people fit really well at Wise Children.

At the heart of everything I do is story, it's all I care about, I'm a storyteller and I happen to choose theatre to tell the stories I care about. I don't care how they're told, as long as they're told brilliantly and dynamically. Which is why I like to get a really unusual room full of people with all sorts of different skills. I love actor musicians, I love actor puppeteers, I love people that play the squeeze box or can use a glove puppet. I love it all. I always ask people to do a trick for me, I love juggling, I love silliness. Then, when you get the best group of people in a room, with a fabulous story and you know why you're telling that story, then it doesn't matter whether it's a juggling routine that tells it, or some projection or an amazing scene, that's really where the magic happens.

APPENDIX 2: Transcript of interview with Emma Rice – Artistic Director

The background to Wise Children

I wanted to be an actor and I got into drama school. I went to the Guildhall School of Music and Drama when I was 18, and in truth I don't really remember it! I'm not supposed to say that, but I had a very nice time, I'm sure I learnt loads of skills, but I didn't really find myself and I don't really think that they found me if that makes sense? And then I was unemployed for quite some time, because I wasn't a very good actor, but I got a job in Exeter with a company called Theatre Alibi. Theatre Alibi told stories in primary schools, and it changed my life. Telling stories is a really different discipline to acting because you're not pretending to be somebody else. You're saying, this is me and I'm now going to transform in front of your eyes, which is a real key to the way that I make work, and telling stories to children is brilliant because they tell you if you're boring, they tell you when you're not funny, they tell you if you are funny, and they tell you if you're too loud, or too quiet – they're brilliant, and they'll tell you if their kittens' ill! Anyway, I loved it, it's where I learnt my craft as a storyteller which is probably the most single precious gift I've ever had.

I then went on to a company called Kneehigh which were an amazing company of maverick clowns in Cornwall who made work at the top the cliffs. They took quite a serious young woman and made her silly, and I took quite a silly company and made them serious. And magic happened. I stayed there for twenty-five years; they are still my best friends. If you cut me in two there would be a little bit of Kneehigh running through me. They taught me everything I knew and allowed me to direct, and when I say allowed, they actually encouraged me. It was Kneehigh that said, we think you're a director and gave me that opportunity. So, I was incredibly lucky to be touched by that generosity.

I then went on to become the artistic director of Shakespeare's Globe which was a very short chapter but did teach me that I'm good at running a company, and that running a company gives you control over your artistic process which matters to me greatly. Which is when I made Wise Children.

I've taken all that knowledge from primary schools in Devon, to the clifftops in Cornwall to city-centre London, I don't know if you call it that but that's what I'm going to call it, to where we are now, Wise Children in Frome.

Defining productions

The big landmark production that I have to talk about first is The Red Shoes. I like to pretend that this was my first attempt at directing, actually it wasn't, it was my second, but that doesn't matter. I was really young, and it was one of the first things I'd directed, and it exploded out of me. It was a story that I didn't know that I wanted to tell. I call it 'the itch', it's like something taps you on the shoulder, and this story, The Red Shoes, tapped me on the shoulder and it was about me, it was about my relationship to my art, it was about my relationship to myself, and I was bursting with ideas. My company trained in Cornish clog dancing, and lindy hop, I made

them all wear vest and pants throughout the show, and I made them all shave their hair off which they did! I had transvestite storyteller who revealed himself at the end with all his pain and complexity. It messed with gender, it messed with dance forms, with storytelling forms, it had almost no words in it, certainly no dialogue just verse. It was amazing. It was more me than me. It was greater than the sum of its parts. It toured for many, many, many years.

My next landmark production is Tristan and Yseult. This was rare this production because I didn't choose the story, I inherited it from my dear friend and mentor Bill Mitchell. It was a story I wasn't interested in; it was about dragons and medieval people and knights in shining armour, and I thought, ew, this is the last thing I want to do. I did a week's work which was terrible, wasted work I call it, and then in week two I said, "What about everybody puts on a balaclava, and gets some binoculars and goes not bird spotting but love spotting". And then this amazing world appeared, it was medieval no more, we set it in the modern day, and it wasn't really about the special people, it wasn't about Tristan and Yseult, it wasn't about these glamorous people, it was about the people watching them, the chorus who were unloved who were just looking for love. It was moving, it made every audience cry every night, it made me cry over and over again, and has again toured the world.

My final landmark production is Wuthering Heights, which I started to make just before lockdown and ended up making it just after. It's probably the most ambitious piece of work I've ever made. Huge, fantastically diverse cast, big chorus sequences, huge passionate story. I wanted my Cathy and Heathcliff to be like punk rockers, I felt that these two people wanted to smash the world down, and I had a big punk rock song in the middle that Cathy sang, and mic dropped at the end of it. It was so exciting, and it was so true to Emily Bronte, but it'd completely catapulted it into a theatrical world than I'm really proud of, and again, it's taken us around the world.

Influences

My influences have largely the people that I've had the privilege of working with. Theatre Alibi, Kneehigh Theatre, Gardzienice Theatre Association in Poland. But in terms of other people, Complicité, Simon McBurney. I can remember seeing early Complicité when I was a student, and they were so funny, and so unusual and I just wanted to be part of that gang. In fact, it was one of my dreams to work with Complicité, and I got an audition once, but I didn't get it. Pina Bausch, she's a German choreographer, look her up, she's amazing! The work is phenomenal, but she also did what I'm trying to do; she had her own company in Wuppertal in Germany and created community and meaning throughout all her work.

Joan Littlewood ran the Theatre Workshop a long time ago, again she worked with amazing actors including Barbara Windsor. She created a venue called the Fun Palace, who doesn't love a woman who does that?

Style of work

It's quite hard describing my style or aesthetic, because I feel it changes all the time, it changes like I change. I like different things, but sometimes I describe it as being a bit like a patchwork quilt, which I love because it's part of female folk craft which is something I think I do and am.

But I see each patch as being something different, whether it's a prop, or a puppet, or an actor, or a little riff of music and I just piece them together in the way that makes sense to me, in a way that I feel tells the story, or moves me or delights me or makes me laugh. There's no magic to this, that's what I do, I get amazing people together and make something beautiful out of them in a way that surprises me. When I go into the room at the beginning of rehearsals, I do not know what my patchwork quilt is going to look like, I've got all the patches, and I know I love them all, I just don't know what order they're going to go in, and that's why it's hard to describe; but that's why I love every show with a passion.

APPENDIX 3: Transcript of interview with Emma Rice – Artistic Director

Themes

I've got several recurring themes in all my work, the biggest one is love. I'm addicted to it, I love it, I'm very good at it, possibly too good at it. But that means I've had quite a lot of experience with it; and whether it's *Tristan and Yseult*, or *Brief Encounter*, or *Romantics Anonymous*, I feel that all of those stories come together exploring that heady feeling of falling in love and also all the trouble it can get you into.

Femininity and being bad

This leads you to another theme that I revisit which is being bad. I think I was brought up a girl, I was brought up to be a good girl, and I've been sometimes successful and also sometimes unsuccessful in being bad, and I've been very interested in exploring that feminine, female relationship to bad behaviour. So that might be *The Bacchae* for example which was an extreme version of that. And, *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine is a very, very badly behaved woman – I'm fascinated by that.

Identity

I think I explore identity and what it's like to feel like you're on the outside, or that you don't fit; and that expresses itself in lots of ways, through gender, through casting, through race, and I like to use that to cut through all my work really because I think that a lot of us who want to make theatre are trying to find our place, and to find our people, and I love to explore that in the fabric of everything I make.

Nature

And then I think the last thing is nature. Which is funny because I grew up in a city, but I think there's something epic about nature and folk lawric which I like. So, you might look at my shows like *The Wild Bride* for example, or *Wuthering Heights* where I actually had a chorus of people playing the moor. Sometimes I want to blow the walls of the theatre and feel like the winds' come in and that we can be wild creatures again; wolves running through the forest not just human beings dressed in clothes and I love that.

APPENDIX 4: Transcript of interview with Emma Rice – Artistic Director

The process of adapting – threading the beads

My world is quite a messy place, and I'm really uncertain all the time about what I think, what I should think, what I feel - and I think my work reflects that. I do not want to teach anybody a lesson because I don't know the answers myself. I choose stories that matter, stories that resonate with me, and those are often the stories that are examining something that I'm confused about or struggling with, and I try and tell them with a whole heart, with a whole mind, with this beautiful team of people. And I hope that they will resonate with my audience, and that we might all come up with different answers, or they might provoke responses that are different in each of us. But I hope that I'm trying to tap into something quite universal that isn't trying to teach a lesson, I have no interest in that.

When I'm adapting a story, I try and keep it really simple, in fact, to keep everything simple. Nothing needs to be hard and if it's hard, why? There must be a problem. So, I keep it simple; I think, why do I love this story, why do I need to tell this story, and then how am I going to tell it?

Now, this biggest question is, you have to know the answer to why do I need to tell it. That is going to give you your energy from the minute you start writing or adapting, or rehearsing, to the minute you display this work, so always know the answer why.

The next thing I do is, what are the best bits? I think, what do I love about this story? And then you know that you're never going to do a show without that. In *Wuthering Heights*, one of the best bits is when Cathy's out wandering the moors looking for Heathcliff, you're not going to not do that. I see it like a string of beads, so you have your best bits, and you lay them out where you want them, and then you think about how you can join them together. The brilliant thing about keeping it simple, is I've just described to you, editing, you don't need to think about the bits you don't like, never think about them again, just cut them, don't return to them. Somebody once said to me, there's not a piece of theatre ever made that wouldn't benefit from twenty minutes being taken off it, and it's true. Anything you don't love, cut. Simple as that.

I will think about themes, so I've got my beads together. I word on big sheets of paper, and I try and draw the shape of my story. I like to know the beginning, I like to know the middle, I like to know the end. And when I say know, I mean actually visualise how it's going to be. I knew that I wanted the end of *Wuthering Heights* for petals to fall from the sky, for it to be really, really romantic, and I wanted greenery to be growing on this barren landscape. Have those big ideas, it doesn't matter whether you can deliver them, know that in your storytelling world, that's what you've got. And then fill in the gaps. That's a lovely bit about adapting, is that you think well I know this, and I know that, and I *really* know that, but what's that? Now I call that 'the thrill of surprise', the bits you don't know, they're not problems, they're opportunities, and actually I often leave gaps and take them into rehearsals because that's where my team of creatives and actors will give me the answers.

I run a collaborative space, or an ensemble, or just a room in which we're all equals. I don't care where a good idea comes from, it can come from the stage manager, or the lighting designer, or the understudy or the leading role. I don't care. I like to think that everybody knows that they can contribute to the work.

Collaboration

First thing we do every day is we play a game, and we play ball. The reason I play ball is because it's kind of a metaphor for the show, you have to work as a team to keep this thing in the air, or to shoot a goal with this thing. Sometimes you can't do it, sometimes everybody's all over the place, all the emotions are wild; doesn't matter, you can pull it in a little bit, and you have to have keep looking after the ball. The next thing we do is we warm up our bodies, we get sweaty, and we dance. Some people can dance really well, some people can't dance at all, it does not matter, everybody has a go, it gets you out of your mind. By the time we start singing, some people can sing, some people can't, you've kind of forgotten what you're frightened of. You've forgotten what you're anxious about, you've forgotten what character you're playing in the show, you've forgotten to learn your lines if you had any, and you're just a sweaty lovely mess of people that have played, sung, and danced together. And this is when, as a director, I can start my work.

We talk about the show, we all talk about the meaning of what we're doing and why we do it. I have big sheets of paper, we all talk about the themes, we all talk about the problems, we all talk about the exciting things. We write them in coloured pens and put them up on the wall. It's like a manifesto, when you're lost in week five, you can look on the wall and remember a brilliant bit that somebody's talked about. We all talk about everybody's characters, so people don't work in isolation. The whole company discuss every character. And what this means is, when I go to direct, it's like magic, everybody directs it for me. People understand what we're doing and why, they've learnt some dance steps so they're beginning to understand the physical way that we might tell the story. We've talked about the set with the set designer so they're beginning to go, oh I see how that might go. Of course, I've got ideas, and of course I suggest them and feed them in, but other people have ideas as well and it's amazing if you allow a room the power to add their humanity and their creativity to mine, the magic happens. And work is easy, I'm going to say it one more time, it's easy, let it be easy and if it's a problem, walk away, do something that you enjoy, come back to it later.