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Emma Rice in interview with Duška Radosavljević

Cornwall-based Kneehigh Theatre was founded nearly thirty years ago by the former teacher and actor Mike Shepherd. Originally conceived as a theatre-in-education company, it grew and performed in village halls and site-specific places (quarries, beaches, fields, etc). Kneehigh often worked with a core group of collaborators and had a strong connection with the Cornish community. Emma Rice originally joined Kneehigh Theatre as an actor. In 2001 she directed her first piece for the company – *The Red Shoes* – which became a significant success and won the Best Director Award in 2002 Barclays TMA Awards. This led to Rice taking over as the Artistic Director of Kneehigh Theatre and producing a string of box office hits – including *Pandora's Box* (2002), *The Bacchae* (2004), *The Wooden Frock* (2004) – as well as an increased audience following both nationally and internationally. Over the years, Kneehigh forged successful creative relationships with various regional theatres as well as the National Theatre with *Tristan and Yseult* in 2005 and *A Matter of Life and Death* in 2007, and most recently the RSC with *Cymbeline* in 2006 and *Don John* in 2008. The company's work is increasingly characterized by adaptations – particularly screen to stage adaptations – which culminated with the company's West End debut of *Brief Encounter* at the Haymarket Cinema in February 2008. Following a UK tour, this show has recently had a successful tour of the United States.

The interview below took place on 9 April 2009 at the Battersea Arts Centre, London, just before the opening of the London run of *Don John* at the same venue.

DR: How would you define Kneehigh as an ensemble company?

ER: I do not know whether it is possible to define an ensemble. There are lots of answers to it because it is very changeable. The very nature of an ensemble is that you are trying to stay together as a group, and the very nature

of life is that the only thing that is definite is change. So the only way that you can keep an ensemble together is with quite fluid thinking. And you do not get it right all the time either. There is a British phrase ‘familiarity breeds contempt’ – but familiarity also breeds a shared language, a shared understanding, a shorthand and a bravery – a fearlessness, so that on balance, the dividends can be so extraordinarily high. I am really passionate about it and certainly, as I get older, I am very, very passionate about people coming back as well.

As a younger director it was all: ‘are you going to stay?’ and ‘are you committed?’; and now I am much more thinking – ‘go away and come back, go away – and actually it’s a lifetime relationship’. More and more as an employer I also think – understanding that actors are human beings with very rich lives is one of the keys in keeping an ensemble together. And it is one of my criticisms of what I would call a ‘bought ensemble’ in that you just pay them, you contract them, but you also burn them out. At the end of two years of rehearsing–performing–rehearsing, you just want to get away; you never want to do it again. We work very, very hard at making sure that people do get time off and good hours, and it is not a very good business model – it is an art model. But we work very hard financially and administratively and creatively to say: ‘yeah we’re going to work really hard, long hours, we’re going to sing and work late into the night, but you will go home and you will see your family and you can come back fresh’.

I think Boal talked about the five main attributes of being a human being and I am very keen on accepting that as a director as well: they are human beings and they do need company, they do have sex, they do move – real basics. I think that the work is what is at the heart of it – the people have to want to come back, and I think we all believe in the work and I think we are very lucky. It was once said of Kneehigh that we are not only part of our community, but also a community in ourselves – and that is when an ensemble takes on a life of its own. Because if Kneehigh finished tomorrow we would still all meet up and we would still go to the christenings of each other’s children and the funerals of each other’s parents. Now, how we manage it and how we nurture it is another matter but it is a real thing and – I almost want to cry saying it – I think that is the most precious thing.

- DR:** Obviously Kneehigh has grown over the years. Would you say that there was a group of core members as well as associate members of the company?
- ER:** Yes, absolutely. Again, we have talked about labelling it in the past and it does not go anywhere because your core members might suddenly say – ‘that’s it, never going to see you again’, while of course, most people do come back. And associate members: somebody might come and it might be their first job, but they just get it and they are the beating heart of the company for however long it lasts. So absolutely there are core members and there are people that I would always try and cast and it is not just casting, there are people that I think about on a strategic level – I think I must keep those people involved and part of the company. So yes, there are core members, but I am also very careful of labels.
- DR:** When you bring new members of the company into the process, is there any particular training that they have to do?
- ER:** No, although we do talk about it. The process itself is our training, but I do think we should have more. We work in our barns and there is nowhere

else to eat and there is no mobile signal. So we really do end up spending a lot of time together because there is nothing else to do, and we eat together because there is nowhere else to eat, and the only warmth is a fire and it does work an immediate magic. That sort of immediate fear ‘will I be accepted and am I any good?’ – there is no room for it, it just vanishes very quickly. Everybody is accepted. One of my principles as a director is that I run a room that is free of fear, so I take the responsibility for ‘fearfulness’ very quickly.

DR: How do you achieve the ‘no fear’ philosophy in the rehearsal room?

ER: I cannot guarantee that I achieve it totally. My background is in acting so I feel I understand actors. I take responsibility. I tell them what to do a lot; we do not sit around. I run the first bit of the process quite tightly. There is no notion of anything being wrong. Sometimes people say to me ‘why are you letting that happen? It’s rubbish’. And I think: well, because it is all right, when there is something good it will drop away, but there is no point in judging too soon, so there is no judgment at the beginning of rehearsals. And also it is good discipline for me because that is when strange ideas happen, so it is quite good to keep very open. And then as we devise, I lead people quite carefully through the process. We wear costumes and we put lights on and I help people so it is not them saying ‘I have to be brilliant’. I have worked out quite a careful process. Which I know, if I was an actor, I would go – ‘OK, I’m not in control of what happens, somebody else is in control’, and then they have a space to be free.

DR: Is it possible to summarize the process?

ER: We always run, first thing in the morning. We always sing. And the music is a great leveller because everybody likes to sing and everybody is the same. Every day we do physical work, we touch each other, we sweat a lot and we pick each other up. We always play games, which is a skill that we lose very quickly. So we spend a lot of time playing games . . .

DR: Such as?

ER: ‘Keepy Uppy’ we play for hours – keeping up balls and trying to get them into the bin. Volleyball we can play for hours. ‘Blind Man’s Bluff’, ‘Grandmother’s Footsteps’, whatever – it is just keeping those mechanisms quite free.

The next thing that I would always do is start building the foundations of ‘why’. Now I have made an awful lot of decisions, and I know the world, and I know why I am doing it, but what I do next is try and get the ensemble to key into why they might do it and to begin to fill in the blanks. So on huge sheets of paper we do quite a lot of ‘what’s your first instinct about the story?’. I am not working with the script at all, so it would be a story. We will write down the themes. I will often say ‘what do you not like about it?’; and we will write down the problems – very quickly, no censorship at all. And I will say ‘what’s the colour’, ‘what’s the season’, ‘what are the key moments?’ and we are filling the room up with instinctive feelings about the story. That really forms the agenda. I leave that up in the rehearsal room for the whole process, because five weeks in when you are thinking ‘God, I can’t make that moment work’, you might look at the wall and go ‘Oh God, the moment before that was the moment everybody loves’ and it might give you a key as to how to adapt. The other thing I always get people to do is to draw pictures of the story to use different parts of their brain.

In terms of removing fearfulness, most actors – not necessarily my lot – but most actors would come to a rehearsal room thinking ‘what’s my part?’, ‘how many lines have I got’, ‘have I learnt them?’, ‘am I going to be brilliant?’. Those are the questions that an actor cannot help but think. In this process, nobody has read a script and all I am saying is ‘what’s it about?’, ‘why are you doing it?’, ‘why would *you* tell the story?’. And the answer might be as simple as ‘because I had my heart broken once’ or ‘because I am afraid of the dark’ or it might be ‘because the world has to know that care is the only way through it’. It might be an epic reason, it might be tiny. It does not matter. But it means that everybody in the room has a connection to the story.

The next level is characters. We all work on every character. We brainstorm what words might describe this character. From that I would choose a core set of words that I feel balance each other, and are playable and fun. Then I would lead the company in an improvisation for each character, and I would get them to move and talk and work on some of this key set of words that we have chosen and find some surprising things. And then eventually, at the very end, we leave that person to carry that and be that character.

DR: Do the company members know which characters they would play at this stage?

ER: Yes, they would know but that first bit of ground work is everybody, so you could look around and see what other people are doing. At the very end, we take out that person who will play that character, the rest of the company goes and watches, we dress up, we put some costume on this person and I basically talk to them, and we find out about this character: ‘do they dance’ or ‘do they sing’ or ‘how do they feel?’ and it is as much physical as it is words. And without fail, with my genius people, they will create wonders in that moment and it is a very magic moment of alchemy. I am absolutely part of that, I am not watching them, I am with them, I am in the space finding out who they are. For me as a director and an adapter, that is my agenda. What happens in that moment of chemistry is when I know the heart of the person playing the character, and that will guide how that character sits within the structure of that work.

Now I have got the themes and I have built all the characters up – that is when I start putting situations in and that is when the characters can start meeting. But if I have started that process well, things happen very quickly and very instinctively. So once you have done that, there is the point when you say ‘what happens when Iachimo comes and meets Imogen?’. And you say ‘you’ve got a bed and you’ve got five minutes and I’m going to put some music on’ – pshhh (*mimes chemical explosion*)!

I am not saying everything does, but more stuff works than does not work. You end up with a huge palette from which to start creating – again, if I have done my job well, people’s ideas will tend to be good ideas, and they will be within the world of the show and within the world of what we want to do.

DR: How long is the rehearsal process on average?

ER: I would say five weeks, it used to be four.

DR: And this final process of putting scenes together, how long does that usually take?

ER: I would start putting scenes together in week two. I would do a week of preparation, which in five weeks is a bit airy. But in that time we would

have learnt a lot of music so that by the time you start putting scenes together it is amazing how quickly a sort of a world emerges.

What I just described is the process where I work on the iceberg and the words are the sprinkle on top of the point. And I think that most theatre works the other way round – you work on the words and then you keep finding meaning. I would die a death working like that.

DR: When adapting films, do you watch the film as a company?

ER: It is me who chooses what we do. When I decide to do a story, I do not tend to go and read or watch it, I tend to work on what my cultural memory of it is, because that is my truth. So rather than going ‘hey what is it, I’m going to pull it apart’, I say ‘what do I remember about that film, what did it make me feel, what are my favourite bits?’. I do a lot of work from my memory and my emotional recall. Then I will of course watch and read it later, and there are whole bits that you have forgotten, whole bits where you look at them and you think ‘well, that’s rubbish’, and whole bits that are magic. But in any case, my foundation will be my memory. And I am sure that is one of the reasons why I want to do adaptations – I want to work with that emotional memory. I want to retell the stories, whether it is *Brief Encounter* that I saw when I was ill off school aged twelve or whether it is *The Red Shoes* that I must have been told as a child.

DR: With *Brief Encounter* there was the film and then there was the original play that played a part in this adaptation, but also Noel Coward’s songs. What were the routes of all these different texts into the final adaptation?

ER: There was no big agenda. I think I always try and think – ‘what is unusual?’, ‘how can I make this into a piece that is mine, not somebody else’s’. I am always trying to have ideas. Everybody knows the film so well. A friend of mine gave me some of Noel Coward’s poetry and I was very surprised at the seriousness of this poetry and then I thought ‘I’d really like to listen to him sing it’. Then I thought, ‘this is funny because all his work is about relationships’. But the spectrum is so different – so he is doing a really bawdy naughty number that talks to a bawdy woman like me ‘Alice is at it again’, at the same time he is writing a poem saying ‘I’m no good at love’: ‘The bitterness of the last good-bye will be the bitterness that wins’ . . . And I want to use them – it is gold dust, absolute gold dust.

And working alongside those discoveries of the breadth of his words and his work, was me thinking ‘I’m putting one of the most loved films ever on stage, I want it to be really honouring cinema and really honouring theatre.’ That is why I wanted the cinema screen but I also wanted the front cloths – the front cloths are one of the most ancient theatre traditions.

DR: And the play *Still Life* – did that play a part?

ER: *Still Life*’s brilliant because it does not move location – it is all set in the station. And it is five short scenes of the couple meeting up at different points of their affair. Most of it is in the film, but other characters are painted more vividly. It really gives you the groundwork for a chamber piece, which is great for an ensemble director. The film has been much more guided towards the two stars and the other people just support them. I did not have two stars to cast and I did not want to cast two stars. That is where *Still Life* worked, it was about six people. Two of them happened to be middle class people – but actually it was about six people. So that is where *Still Life* came into its own. I did the first rough adaptation very quickly, literally sticking bits of paper and looking at a different structure going through.

- DR: I wondered about whether previous pieces tend to inform subsequent pieces? Specifically I was thinking in relation to *A Matter of Life and Death* and Shakespeare appearing in it as a character, and whether that was maybe because Shakespeare was in the unconscious of the company as a result of the work on *Cymbeline*?
- ER: Without a doubt. Although there are probably other reasons for that. The film quotes Walter Raleigh, but it is not a very good poem, and nobody would know it. I really like the work to be accessible, we were trying to work out the cultural references that would translate and Shakespeare is the best-known poet. So at one point in that trial we did have Sir Walter Raleigh turning up, but basically it did not mean anything to anybody. Whereas Shakespeare turns up, and everybody in the country, every child will know who Shakespeare is. So *Cymbeline* went into the *Rapunzel* and both of them are very much about family and nature, and from that there is the poetry that went into *A Matter of Life and Death*, and *A Matter of Life and Death* and *Brief Encounter* are both film adaptations and me looking how to explore that – that is my 1940s romanticism period. *Don John* is a response to all that. I am very romantic but it is not all I am – I have as big a black heart as the next person and I suddenly thought I wanted to get dirty for a while. *Don John* is absolutely a response to a year of *Brief Encounter* and people not ‘doing it’ and me thinking ‘Come on! Let’s get our kit off for a while!’
- DR: How long in advance do you plan your repertoire? Do you know what will be your next few shows?
- ER: I always have too many ideas. I can produce two pieces of work a year but it should be one really. It takes such a lot of me to find it, understand it, deliver it. *Don John* is such a different show now than it was six months ago. It feels like it is finding its own skin so actually the life of the arc of the show is not a quick one. I think a year is about right for a major piece of work. We are hopefully opening the *Asylum* in 2010, and I hope to bring back *The Red Shoes* to open it with. We do not want to open a new venue with a new piece of work – I am not making any definite plans until I know what that does, because it will profoundly affect everything. But having said that, I have quite a long list of things I would like to do, so – you never know.
- DR: At one point you had three shows on the road and that must have affected the way you think about the company and the ensemble work itself. When you have to recast shows and put them out on the road and so on – what kinds of challenges does that have for you?
- ER: We are just beginning to realize that for all sorts of reasons, we have to do it more commercially. And I do not have an instinctive problem with that – I wish to create income and I wish to be popular – I am not elitist in any form. The more money that passes through the company the more opportunities there are, so I do not have a problem with the basic mechanics of business. But if you are led commercially it can destroy work and sometimes destroy people in the process. At the time when there were three shows on the road – we had already committed to *Rapunzel* being in New York, *Brief Encounter* was being run by a separate team in London, and then we got invited to Brazil and Colombia with *Cymbeline*. We are just not going to say no. And that is because when we tour abroad, they are

the best moments of our life. And again an ensemble – not just a group of individuals, but a community – lands in another community and tells stories, and parties, and all of our lives are better for it.

DR: How do you feel about using film on the stage?

ER: Sometimes it is brilliant. I am a storyteller – and in the end you can tell a story with a cup of coffee or a film or a dance or a piece of music, so film is one of the part of the armoury. It is very time consuming and it is completely inflexible. That is the thing I find difficult about film, that once it is there, it is there and you cannot change it. So if there is a flick of the eye that you do not like you have to watch it for the next six months. But it is a brilliant palette.

It can be addictive, because it is so stylish and because we all love film and you can make it – what I call ‘shiny’ – ‘shiny theatre’. And actually I am a great believer in theatre not being shiny and being a bit rough, so yes, it is quite good discipline to not immediately put a great big shiny image on the stage. Because ultimately – go and see film for that.

DR: You say you trained as an actor but you also trained with Gardzienice in Poland in the early 1990s. Would you say that that experience might have informed your way of working in some way?

ER: Yes, blissfully. I do feel that it has taken years but I do feel that I am me now; I no longer feel that I am trying to assimilate other brilliant people. I am sort of in my own skin as an artist now. Poland was simply the most influential thing that happened to me. It was really tough, really difficult. I am kind of over it now but I have had lots of issues about it as well. I do think it was punishing, I think it was controlling, I think it was authoritarian, I think it was full of fear and all of that gets results. They did lots of things, but the single thing they did to a British actress is to go ‘This fucking matters!’. ‘We will hide in the forest from the military to do this, we will stay up all night to do this, we will not piss about’ – I mean just the level of sacrifice that they make to make work, the level of seriousness, then the wonders that that creates. You cannot go back, once you have seen that. I have never really freelanced since, because I think once you have worked in the way that is completely dedicated, it is very hard to sit in a green room and read a paper, and say there is no work about – you can no longer be that person.

Kneehigh is a million miles from Poland, but the similarities are there – it is rural, it is isolated, it is completely dedicated, but I would say, I have developed and we have developed a way of working that is based on joy, not on pain. And ultimately I do not feel guilty or judgmental about that. Actually it is also to do with me saying I am British, it is not very exotic, I come from Nottingham, but it is who I am. I think I spent a lot of my twenties just wishing I was Eastern European, so I could be exotic. So there is also a level of saying ‘this is what I am, this is the culture I am in, but I am as passionate and we do care as much’.

DR: So did the music aspect of your creative process emerge from that experience perhaps?

ER: Yes, is the short answer to that. But I also played music a lot as a child. I played the French horn to Grade 8 and played in orchestras. My dad was a jazz musician. And Gardzienice obviously – they taught me how to sing in a different way, taught me how to own music in a way that I never had with

a classical training. So as a performer I felt cracked open by Gardzienice in a way that three years at Drama School had not touched me! And then you go out there and you feel like you have had your rib cage ripped apart and you sound different and you look different. I started sweating in Poland and have never stopped, I mean literally – things change. And I love that. I feel that I was sort of born out there in many ways. In the 1990s all of us got very obsessed with the Balkan singing. There was not a show in England that did not have the Bulgarian voices. But that has evolved. We now have our own band of musicians. My very close relationship is with Stu Barker. I think I have my own process of the way that music works. And I think it is much more informed by pop culture. Gardzienice is very much folk culture, which I am still very much interested in, but I am more interested in what the British folk culture is. Now, we did not sit around fires and sing songs, we listened to Bay City Rollers, but that is still folk culture. So that is really where *Don John* is my letter of love to my childhood. And it sounds like punk, it is punk, but it is still my folk culture, it is what I listened to with my mates in my bedroom.

DR: And what is Stu Barker's musical background? Would you say that he belongs to a particular genre?

ER: You would have to ask Stu that. When I first worked with Stu, he had dreadlocks and a dog on a piece of string. He is into the folk tradition so he plays the Uilleann pipes and the Hurdy-gurdy, but he has also done a lot of punk and was an anarchist in his youth. He is not a classically trained musician which most of my musicians are not. So the way that we score our work is the same way that we devise our work, which is that it happens through improvisation.

DR: They are part of the rehearsals as well?

ER: From day one. They work alongside.

DR: So a classic question – do the words come first or the music?

ER: Words, probably. Stu likes to write tunes to words. But we also work on themes early on. So long before rehearsals I will say – 'I want the theme of hell', 'I want the theme of desire', 'I want the theme of frustration'. We would start putting things together. And of course in rehearsals, what is then interesting is that maybe the theme that we wrote for hell becomes the theme for frustration. They might not sit where you think they were going to sit.

DR: The songs are very well integrated. One is not aware of the difference between the musician and the actor in Kneehigh shows. Sometimes, some of the singing – I am thinking primarily of the young singer in *Cymbeline* – was in fact coming across as fulfilling a dramaturgical function of the storytelling. Is that simply because they are part of the rehearsals? How does it work?

ER: Dom [Lawton], who is in *Don John* as well – is an exceptional talent. He is not an actor – he would be the first person to say that, but he is an artist and he is a storyteller, he is an amazing musician. That is interesting for me – how do I use a talent like that? So again, that is where the people come into informing the process as well. I do not sit down and say 'these three are going to do that', I think 'I want Dom and I want his voice, but how can I use that?'. And in fact he became the lost son [in *Cymbeline*]. That becomes very interesting because, at first we do not know who he is, but then there is this young man who is angry, who is calling from somewhere different – it gives me goose bumps – and meaning comes out of that.

Having Dom singing out the action, but from the outside, had dramaturgical weight. He is the child that got taken away from the family when he was two, and he is on the outside. In *Cymbeline* I love that little car which is – it is children trying to find their way back. And in many ways that is what *Cymbeline* was for me – a family finding itself, not in a sentimental way, but just saying ‘who am I?’. Knowing who you are and eventually finding your way back.

In *Don John*, again – nobody will get it but – I have Dom doing a similar job within this. He is narrating more, but I have got him as a paper boy, and I really wanted somebody quite innocent-looking in from the outskirts. In Britain there was a famous murder trial for a paper boy, Carl Bridgewater, who got murdered in 1978 in Stourbridge. Nobody has picked that up, but for me he is like the ghost of human horrors as well – to remember what human beings are capable of. Nobody ever needs to know that – but we do. When we look at Dom, we think he stands for every child or every person who is needlessly tortured in that way.

DR: So do the musicians get involved in the character formation?

ER: They come and go. I do not make anybody do what they do not want to do. I do not make musicians act if that is not what they want to do. But they will often watch and I will often get them to improvise.

DR: And is there a sense that maybe some of the songs that have been created for a particular project might survive and be used later on in subsequent projects?

ER: I do not think we ever have. People often say ‘Do you have a shelf of ideas’ and we have not. In the end ideas fall in because they are right for that show not because they exist in their own right.

DR: Does Stu work with other people as well?

ER: He does. He tells me he prefers working with Kneehigh. I am sure he does as I use music very strongly, as to my knowledge there are not that many theatre practices that have so much music. As a composer you tend to do scene changes which are more frustrating than what he is doing here, which is creating whole scores – which is fantastic.

DR: How do you deal with the notion of being faithful to the original?

ER: It comes back to the way that I answered before, which is why I work a lot with my emotional recall. And I have never done a single piece of work that I do not care passionately for. Therefore there is never any pastiche in my work, even if people sometimes say there is – there never is. And there is never any cynicism. The absolute heart of everything I do is being honoured. I only do *A Matter of Life and Death* because I think it is the most beautiful film of all time. I only do *Brief Encounter* because I think it charts that elemental human condition of ‘falling in love when I can’t do’ so beautifully. I do not think about it, because to not honour it is not part of the equation. And I would argue really, really strongly about that. The whole bloody argument whether film should go on stage, I just cannot be bothered with. I cannot be bothered with the question. But what I always say is that you can watch *Brief Encounter* the movie an hour and a half before you come and see the play, you can see the play, and then you can go and watch the film again and – nobody has touched it, nothing is altered, I have not touched anybody’s work. All I have done as a storyteller – which is what Shakespeare did, Brecht did – is taken an existing story and . . . and I am so not alone in that – that is what we have all done throughout the entire history: told stories.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

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