



**KNEEHIGH THEATRE: Based in Cornwall, UK**  
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# KNEEHIGH THEATRE

Based in Cornwall, UK – [www.kneehightheatre.co.uk](http://www.kneehightheatre.co.uk)

Photos by Steve Tanner

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*“Kneehigh now finds itself celebrated as one of Britain’s most innovative theatre companies. For 25 years the company has created vigorous, popular and challenging theatre for audiences throughout the UK and beyond. Using a multi-talented team of performers, directors, designers, sculptors, administrators, engineers, musicians and writers, Kneehigh perform with the joyful anarchy that audiences have come to expect from this groundbreaking theatre company.”*

*From Kneehigh website – home page*

**By Emma Rice – Artistic Director,  
Kneehigh Theatre**

**To start...**

There is no formula to the way we make theatre. However, it always starts with the story. No, it starts before then. It starts with an itch, a need, an instinct.

Each story starts with an itch. Each one is raw, relevant and personal. Stories have an ability to present themselves, to emerge as if from nowhere. But they never are from nowhere. This is the seminal moment of instinct. This is when your subconscious stakes its claim and intervenes in your carefully ordered life. I sit up when a story taps me on the shoulder. I respect co-incident. I listen to impulse. One of my most hated questions when making theatre is ‘Why?’. ‘Because’, I want to answer, ‘Because...’.

For me, making theatre is an excavation of feelings long since buried, a journey of understanding. Bruno Bettelheim in ‘The Uses of Enchantment’ his book about children’s relationship to fiction, states that ‘our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives’. He argues that by revealing the true content of folktales, children can use them to cope with their baffling and confusing emotions. My fascination with certain stories is fuelled by my own subconscious. ‘The Red Shoes’ charts the pain of loss, obsession and addiction, ‘The Wooden Frock’, follows

the slow and faltering healing process, ‘Tristan & Yseult’ is a poem to love and its madness and ‘The Bacchae’ a terrifying glimpse at the beast in us all. These are not children’s themes but I often approach them in a childlike way. In my experience, our basic needs and desires are the same – to be communicated with, to be delighted, to be surprised, to be scared. We want to be part of something and we want to feel. We want to find meaning in our lives.

The event of live theatre is a rare chance to deliver all these needs. We can have a collective experience, unique to the group of people assembled in the theatre. I don’t want the fourth wall constantly and fearfully placed between the actors and their audience, I want the actors to speak to their accomplices, to look at them, to respond to them. I want a celebration, a collective gasp of amazement. I want the world to transform in front of the audience’s eyes and demand that they join in with the game. Theatre is nothing without the engagement of the audience’s creativity. Theatre takes us right back to Bruno Bettelheim and his belief in the therapeutic and cathartic nature of stories. We tell them because we need them.

**To continue...**

Months before rehearsals begin, I start work with the creative team. Bill Mitchell (designer) and I gaze at books and films, sketch and begin to form a concept; an environment in which the

story can live, in which the actors can play. This physical world holds meaning and narrative, it is as much a story telling tool as the written word. Stu Barker (musical director and composer) and I exchange music we have heard, that inspires us or just feels right. We talk of themes and feelings. From these conversations he creates a musical palette of melodies and sound-scapes. With the writer or writers, we talk and dream. We map out the structure and the overall shape of the piece. They go away and write collections of poems or lyrics or ideas. Each writer works in a different way but what none of them do is to write a script or a scene in isolation.

It is this fertile palette of words, music and design that we bring to the rehearsal room. As I said, Kneehigh is a team. The shared imagination is greater than any individuals so we begin the rehearsal process by returning to the story. We tell it to each other, scribble thoughts on huge pieces of paper, relate it to our own experience. We create characters, always looking to serve and subvert the story. Actors like Mike Shepherd and Craig Johnson delight with their deft improvisation, breathing life and naughtiness into the bones of the story, performers like Bec Applebee and Eva Magyar use their painfully eloquent bodies to create physical poetry and story, Giles King and Tristan Sturrock tickle and disarm with their tragic clowns. Stu’s music is used to help create the world, to guide and inform improvisation and release feeling. Lighting is used from day one, the design is developed with ideas coming from the devising team. The writers are in rehearsal. They watch and inspire, feeding in their poetry, their lyrics. They respond to improvisation and craft scenes and characters alongside the actors. Layer upon layer

the world is created, the story released.

We lay the foundations, then we forget them. If you stay true to the fundamental relationship between yourself, your team and the subject matter, the piece will take on a life of its own. Armed with instinct, play and our building blocks of music, text and design, Kneehigh do fearless battle. One of our most used phrases in the process is 'hold your nerve'. There is no room for neurosis or doubt, these will only undermine the process, hold your nerve, stay open and delight in the privilege of making theatre.

**To end...?**

Each writer, Anna Maria Murphy, Carl Grose and Tom Morris bring their own beautiful and distinctive voice to the work. But remember, these texts represent just one layer of the worlds that Kneehigh creates. As you read, close your eyes from time to time. Let a tune drift back from your childhood or recall a painting that made your heart pound. Remember falling in love or losing control, leaving a loved one or laughing 'til you cried. Now the work lives. Now there is a connection. Now there is meaning.

**By Mike Shepherd, Founder Member and King Mark in *Tristan & Yseult***

I returned home to Cornwall over 25 years ago to make theatre. It was a place where you could make things happen. Kneehigh started as a company making work for children and their families, but we soon found ourselves creating challenging, accessible and anarchic theatre for a diverse local and national audience. We are based in a collection of barns on the south Cornish coast, they are at the top of a hill where the road ends and a vast horizon stretches far beyond Dodman Point. By their very nature the barns let the weather in and out again. A large multi-fuel burner needs to be stoked and fed for rehearsals; there is no mobile phone reception and nowhere to pop out for a cappuccino or a snack. Kneehigh builds a team for each project. The

isolation of the barns, and the need to cook and keep warm provides a real and natural focus for our flights of imagination. This is not a conceit; it is a radical choice that informs all aspects of our work. Although much of our work is now co-produced with larger theatres, we always try to start the creative process at these barns, to be inspired by our environment and where we work. *Tristan & Yseult* started its life as an outdoor show, playing in epic but intimate spaces: Restormel Castle, The Minack, The Eden Project and Rufford Abbey. These elemental and charged spaces add a physical and vocal robustness to our performance style, which becomes further distilled when we work 'indoors'. Kneehigh are an ever-changing ensemble, a kind of strange family, many of whom come from, or have chosen to live in, Cornwall: the extreme South West tip of the British Isles – outsiders, left-handers – engaging with the world with a sense of community and identity. As King Mark says in *Tristan & Yseult*, "We don't look inland there's not much point. No, outward, outward lies the way! Inland there's little to write home about and much less to say!". The company changes for each project, there are those who have worked together for a long time and those who have just arrived. We look to surprise each other, to take leaps in the dark but there is no given formula for making the work. If we were to have a manifesto it might include words like generosity, passion, bravery, humility, ambition, instinct and irreverence. These words have become the secret principles that guide our work. Kneehigh is 25 years old this year. I could never have planned this; I certainly could never have foreseen it. There has been no great plan. Kneehigh has survived because it has actively evolved. We have committed to our home, our craft, to each other and to change. It's a privilege to still be part of that journey.

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*Cymbeline*

*"It made me want to gurgle with delight... It embraces you so warmly it feels like you have been physically hugged. I loved it with a passion"*

The Guardian

## KNEEHIGH PLAYS IN PRINT

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### 1. TRISTAN AND YSEULT; THE BACCHAE; THE WOODEN FROCK; THE RED SHOES

#### Tristan and Yseult

Authors Carl Grose, Anna Maria Murphy, Emma Rice and Kneehigh Theatre

#### **Forward by Emma Rice**

“As Cornwall’s oldest and greatest story it was asking to be told; Kneehigh, the obvious answer. But I was not sure. I didn’t want to make the show about romantic love, about the chosen ones – leave that to Hollywood. How could I take a story we all know so well and make it sing, chime with my own life? But I didn’t really know this story. As I began work, I realised that this ancient myth spoke straight to the dark heart of my own twenty-first century experience. This was not for Hollywood and happily ever after, this was for grown-ups: for those of us who know that love is a trap as well as a liberator; that the pain of choosing one person over another tears the soul and never quite heals.

As the story unfolded, I realised there was not one person in the audience who didn’t profoundly recognise something in the situation – to love someone that you shouldn’t, to betray someone you love, to be betrayed, to be left and, most painful, to be unloved. Suddenly this was not an epic tale of grand romantic love held at arms’ length from our own experience, but a tender unravelling of love in all its beautiful and painful forms. The chorus took us through the piece, a band of ‘love spotters’: the unloved.

These are the people who look in on life, who are not chosen to play the starring role – these are at the heart of this production, because if we have all known love, we have also known the opposite.

And so *Tristan and Yseult* is my letter to love. It speaks of longing and giving, abandon and obsession, loss and despair. It intoxicates as I have been intoxicated, and hurts as I have hurt. It tells how there is always a price, always a loser and always hope. It thanks love, it hates love and it

celebrates love.

When first devising the piece, I began by literally casting the writers. I asked Carl, with his technical and verbal genius, to write for the court: King Mark and Frocin. I asked him to write in iambic pentameter as a reference to the great epic courts in literature. Anna I asked to look at the heart-broken – Brangian, Tristan and Yseult – with her direct and emotional voice lending itself to the tender poetry of the desperate. As the piece emerged, we began to place the text alongside the action and music, working into the themes and characters. But as with all good devising processes the magic lies where the boundaries blur, where technician becomes lover and poet becomes aggressor.

We are left with a script rich in detail, simple in its telling and true to the heart of the ancient myth.”

#### The Bacchae

Authors Carl Grose, Anna Maria Murphy, Emma Rice and Kneehigh Theatre

#### **Forward by Carl Grose**

“There’s a reason why we still tell the stories that Euripides and his Greek playwriting pals wrote all those years ago. When this show was in rehearsal, you couldn’t move for revivals of Greek Tragedies (and still can’t). In working with Emma, Anna and the company on creating a new version of *The Bacchae*, I discovered what that reason was.

As ever, Emma approached the source material in her own personal and iconoclastic way. She wanted a tutu-clad, all male chorus playing the women of Thebes, and big Music Hall sing-along numbers for the audience to join in with. She staunchly disregarded the classical conventions Euripides had set up – characters were expanded, journeys threaded through with greater complexity, and there was even the invention of a few new faces (enter Pamela, P.A to King Pentheus). Gone was the archaic translation. In place, a combination of rap and poetry, haikus and Hungarian god-speak.

The challenge was to rewrite the story with a modern, entertaining and accessible voice whilst at the same

time retaining the dramatic weight and meaning of each scene. Sounds easy? It wasn’t. Why? Because Euripides is The Dude. He knew how to write some kick-ass drama. As Anna and I started to break open and crawl beneath the skin of this play, we began to see the enormity of the challenge we’d set ourselves.

I wasn’t prepared for the psychological depths inherent in his characters or the resonance we discovered along the way. Images and ideas that Euripides had written into his play roughly two and a half thousand years ago were front-page news at the time we wrote this. Be it Guantanamo Bay’s prisoner abuse or the Beslan School Massacre, we were forced to question belief and examine what lengths humanity went to to justify those beliefs through unspeakable acts. The themes of the play were televised nightly... Everything seemed to swing back to the shadow of the religious and political fundamentalism looming large in the Middle East and the American Right. And for me, this is what our version of *The Bacchae* was about.

Euripides understood humanity all too well and he did such a fine and fierce job that (scarily and sadly) the resonance of this play echoes clearly to this day. He wrote what was happening in his political and religious atmosphere at the time and created theatre that reflected that world. With his help, so did we”.

#### The Wooden Frock

Authors Tom Morris, Emma Rice and Kneehigh Theatre

#### **Forward by Tom Morris**

“I’d seen *The Red Shoes* and been swept off my feet by the emotional force of Kneehigh’s theatrical storytelling. Here was theatre that was performed with the simplicity and directness of a child’s poem yet could rend your heart with the eloquence of grand opera. I loved it.

I put the meagre resources of Battersea Arts Centre (BAC) on the table and invited the company to create a new show from an Italian folktale. We read hundreds before Emma Rice told Bill Mitchell, Mike Shepherd and me that her favourite was the story of a girl who escaped from her family in a wooden dress, and that she’d read it on the first day.

Emma (whose directorial approach is to urge her collaborators to meet

*“Some of the most beautiful moments I’ve ever seen at the National.”*

The Guardian



*Mike Shepherd in Rapunzel*

impossible challenges in the knowledge that she will be there to clear up the mess if it goes wrong) then asked me to write the words. Within weeks I found myself at the heart of the theatre making process quite unlike anything I had experienced. Perhaps this was the secret to the unique Kneehigh style.

We began in Goran Haven in Cornwall. The devising team (four actors, a designer, a composer, a lighting designer, Emma and myself) told the story to each other while Emma and Bill evolved a vision for the world in which our play would take place. Act One centred on a comfortable, happy, eccentric family in a land where it never stopped raining; for Act Two, we imagined a bleak, dry, stunted place where just about everything had lost the will to live. We then identified the key characters, brainstormed their defining characteristics (shyness, honesty, cunning, open-heartedness, emotional myopia etc) and Emma sent us to a costume store to dress each character in turn. Before a word was written Mike Shepherd was wearing a wimple and neat Moroccan slippers and answering to the name of 'Nursery'. Challenged by Emma to 'go about his business' he picked up a can of poison and began inspecting the barn

and the story were cooked up together by the group. As the people of the play emerged, I wrote words for the scenes they were improvising. Some stuck, some didn't and gradually the dialogue for a first draft of the play took shape.

In parallel with this process, Emma would issue ludicrous challenges to all members of the team. 'I think we all agree that we will need a song to end this scene,' she would say, eyeing composer Stu Barker and me. 'Can you write something by lunchtime? Don't worry if it's rubbish.'

Alongside the rubbish (including a call-and-answer jig with the lyric 'Come in Come out Come In Come Out Come In Come Out of the Rain!') we wrote all the songs in the script through this comically abrupt procedure.

As a writer, I was treated in just the same way that Emma treats the actors, or indeed all members of the company. I was asked to produce material, which (under her direction) was then woven into scenes and finally a play. By then, of course, I was enjoying the more conventional chores of rewriting, shaping and editing the show during its rehearsals and previews. But that first workshop – that room full of strange and gifted people cajoled by Emma Rice to explode with ideas and possibilities – produced the

for woodworm.  
In this way,  
the characters

most inspiring atmosphere I've ever had the pleasure to work in."

### **The Red Shoes**

Authors Anna Maria Murphy, Emma Rice and Kneehigh Theatre

#### ***Forward by Anna Maria Murphy***

"To write for Kneehigh is an adventure.

To be asked to write a poem that may inspire a vision, a dance, an idea, is a dream commission for me.

This is what I was asked to do for *The Red Shoes*.

One dance was not enough for our heroine, *The Girl*, and one poem was not enough for me. As I wrote they danced their way out onto the page.

We've all seen things we wish we'd never seen and this was to be our starting point; a chorus of characters who had seen horrors they wish they hadn't. For me, it was the memory of stories my grandfather told from the trenches and my father of the landings at Dunkirk.

The mud.

The dirt.

The blood.

Everything in this company's work tells the story: the actors, the set, the music, the costume, the props. A living script grows with Emma and the actors, through devising, improvisation and the poems. Each plays an equal part.

I say living, as it's always changing and we all own it."



*Tristan Sturrock and Eva Magyar in Tristan and Yseult*

## 2. RAPUNZEL

By Annie Siddons

### Forward by Annie Siddons

“On a blue-black, icy winter’s night in 2003, in an isolated house in the Mendip Hills, I began to read the story of Rapunzel to my daughters. It was a bland retelling which I didn’t think captured the horror, the passion or the intrigue of the story as I remembered it. But the image of Rapunzel’s hair falling down like a curtain of light stayed with me and I began to wonder if I could work the story into a play.

Dismayed by the current fad of Barbification of fairytales, and the hegemony of Disney, I turned to the master of saltiness and earthiness, Italo Calvino, for his fantastic versions of hundreds of folk tales, including many variants on the Rapunzel tale. I then went back further still, to Basile, the bawdy irreverent first collector of folk tales in Italian. I read hundreds of variants – wildly different in detail but united by the herby name of the heroine, her va-va-vroom, her cunning, and some sort of incarceration in a tower. I wanted my Rapunzel to have the wit, the sass, the spirit of these Basile and Calvino heroines. I wanted her journey to have real growth and suffering. I wanted her to actively choose the prince, not just go with him because he happened to hop into her tower. And I wanted her to be flesh and blood, not some odourless, laminated dollybird.

I’d seen Kneehigh’s *The Red Shoes* at the Lyric Hammersmith and had thought – that’s it, that’s who I have to work with – but didn’t expect anything to happen when I sent the first draft to Emma Rice in 2004. I’m amazed to be working with Kneehigh at BAC and in awe of their process and the direction in which they have helped me take the play.”

## 3. NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS

By Tom Morris and Emma Rice

Adapted from the novel by Angela Carter

*This adaptation of Nights at the Circus was first performed in January 2006 at the Lyric Hammersmith, produced by Lyric Hammersmith and Bristol Old Vic in association with Kneehigh Theatre.*

## 4. CYMBELINE

Adapted by Emma Rice

Written by Carl Grose

*Produced in association with the Royal Shakespeare Company as part of the 2006 Complete Works...*

### Forward by Emma Rice

#### FAMILIES AND FOES

“I had never seen or read *Cymbeline* before I agreed to produce it. I said yes because Kneehigh is cavalier by nature, because I am strangely fascinated by fate and also because it felt like a challenge. I liked the fact that it is so rarely performed, I liked the fact that I had no preconceptions, I liked that it is known as a ‘problem’ play and no one seems to know what it is. “Is it a comedy or a tragedy?” I ask. “A history or a pastoral?” “Mmmm” comes the response, “perhaps a little of all these things”.

A play that breaks the rules, that doesn’t seem to care what it is. Perfect Kneehigh material!

Then I read it. Or should I say, tried to read it. The language is tough, dense and archaic. My modern, sluggish brain struggled with the complexity of the plot and the long descriptions of emotion. No one talks about how hard Shakespeare can be, what an alien form his work has become. I plough on. Slowly, the fog lifts, the stories emerge and blow me! There is nothing archaic or alien about it. It is a glorious mix of contradictions! It is edgy and touching, ridiculous and heart breaking, a soap opera and an epic. High comedy sits next to tragedy, magical realism nestles in beside political intrigue and nature clashes against the urban. It is indeed, all things.

But for me, *Cymbeline* is a fairy tale. It is about where we come from, who we are and how we find our way home. It is about family, but not a sentimental notion of family, no. This story tackles stepfamilies and dead parents, abduction and surrogate care. This is about families, as we know them, damaged, secretive, surprising and frustrating. *Cymbeline*, the King and father, is lost at the start. He is in the fog. His first wife is dead and his two boys snatched as babies. His surviving daughter Imogen is a mystery to his tired soul. He is in stasis, where nothing can grow and nothing can regenerate. He is *Sleeping Beauty* waiting for an awakening.

Outside the palace is a whole world

of otherness. A world where the lost boys learn to hunt and sing, where a foster father provides more love and affection than the biological father could even dream of. Here is a world where life is hard and threatening, where being an outsider means feeling you never belong. They are tested like so many princes in storybooks, learning through hardship to be independent, fair, fearless and compassionate - essential virtues for would-be leaders.

And then there is Imogen: heroine, daughter and woman. She sets out into the woods like Goldilocks, Gretel and Little Red Riding Hood before her. She is looking for her man but of course finds much more, her brothers, her origins, herself. She is vivid colour to *Cymbeline*’s monochrome; she is the irresistible force of change.

This remarkable story charts a long day in which demons are faced, truths revealed and threats fought. Imogen and Posthumus have their young love tested, evil is vanquished, the lost boys are returned as men to the comfort of their childhood beds and *Cymbeline* awakens and becomes a victor, a King and most importantly, a dad.

I now love this story. I love that it has revealed itself to me slowly in delicious, technicoloured layers of meaning and delight. It is like a patchwork of fears, dreams and memories. I want this production to celebrate the child in all of us. I want it to remind us of night terrors and knitted blankets; first love and dressing up; hot chocolate on a rainy Sunday; late night chats with beloved siblings; being thrown in the air by your dad; being carried in from the car after a long drive; getting lost on Westward Ho! beach and smelling your Mum’s never-used perfume. It should remind us of the dawning realisation of immortality, of grief and hope in equal intense measures. So, here’s to belonging. Here’s to fighting for who you are and who you might become. Here’s to getting lost and being found, to dads and mums and families in all their wondrous, cracked, comforting glory!”

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