Tristan & Yseult

Education Pack



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Tristan & Yseult in rehearsal
(l-r) Edward Rowe and Nigel Sudarkasa/ John Leader and Nandi Bhebhe/ Stephanie Hockley and Tom Fox
Photos: Steve Tanner

WELCOME

Welcome to the Education Pack for *Tristan & Yseult*.

The ancient Cornish tale of Tristan and Yseult is one of the great romances of medieval Europe. Although the story probably developed from earlier Celtic traditions in Cornwall, Wales, Ireland, and Brittany, the earliest surviving written accounts date from the late twelfth century, most notably the works of the Anglo-Norman poet Thomas of Britain and the French poet Béroul. Earlier references to Tristan-related figures appear in Welsh literature and folklore, while Cornwall's sixth-century Tristan Stone near Fowey has long been associated with the legend.

The tale recounts the tragic love between the Cornish knight Tristan and the Irish princess Yseult, who falls in love with him despite being promised to his uncle (or his father, in our telling), King Mark of Cornwall. The story of this love triangle achieved its greatest popularity during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when it was retold across Europe in French, Gaelic, Cornish, English and other languages. It became one of the most influential romances of the Middle Ages, helping to shape later Arthurian literature through its enduring themes of chivalry, love, and betrayal.

Adapted and directed by Emma Rice, this legendary story is brought to life with music, movement, mischief and theatrical magic.

First created in 2003 and produced by Kneehigh, *Tristan & Yseult* has been performed across the globe, from Cornwall's Minack Theatre to London's National Theatre. Now, almost a decade after its last stage production, this much-loved story returns.

We've crammed this pack full of stories, secrets and inspiration, so you can discover more about the legend, the production, Emma's theatrical world and the brilliant people who bring it to life.

Enjoy!



Nandi Bhebhe (Yseult) and John Leader (Tristan)
Photo: Steve Tanner



John Leader (Tristan)
Photo: Steve Tanner

A WELCOME FROM EMMA

I first made this production in 2003; a lifetime ago! I was young and shiny with only a couple of shows under my directorial belt. And gosh, I felt invincible. However, when this story landed in my lap, I wasn't sure.

Tristan & Yseult? I couldn't pronounce it, let alone understand it. I wasn't interested in medieval worlds of dragons, healers and knights. I struggled to find my way into this sprawling story but thought to myself, "Never mind. It will only perform for a few weeks in Cornwall, then we can all forget about it."

Perched on the clifftops, we got down to work; the work of cracking open this ancient story. We laughed, shared, wept, dreamt and danced on the buried bones of this lost tale until they gave way, splintering beneath the force of our truths. And there, glistening in the beautiful wreckage of our own broken hearts, we found a collective understanding. We pieced our experiences together to create a quilt, a mosaic, a collage that sang out with joy and pain. A love letter to how confusing, brutal and glorious it is to be human.

And now we have come full circle. I find myself 23 years later, surrounded by friends old and new, breathing fresh life into this precious world. And, reader, I am in sweet ecstasy. I love this show. I love it with all my ageing heart. What we made in that Cornish field so many years ago has taken on a life and a universality that touches and surprises each time we revisit it.

There is no one who doesn't recognise something in this story: what it is to love someone that you shouldn't, to betray someone you love, to be left and, most painful of all, to be unloved. Its beauty is agonising; its power, undeniable.



Photo: Richard Grassie

As I write, I realise that *Tristan & Yseult* has become my compass and my chart. Something magic happened to me in the making of this show that guides me to this day and brings me back to what truly matters. Love, loyalty, community, compassion, freedom and joy. It brings me back to my theatre roots; it brings me home.

Emma Rice, 2026

As you read this pack, consider:

- How the actors approach multi-roling (playing multiple characters)
- How research inspired decisions
- The different methods the actors use to prepare for their roles
- The importance of backstory to storytellers
- The different stages of creating a show
- How technical effects are woven in to tell the story
- The small choices that make a big impact on a show

SYNOPSIS

Act One

King Mark rules Cornwall with a fair hand using his head rather than his heart, aided by his lap-dog servant Frocin. But things start to rock his boat.

Firstly, the dreaded Morholt comes from Ireland and invades King Mark's country of Kernow. Secondly the enigmatic Tristan arrives, and together they defeat Morholt, though Tristan sustains injuries.

Initially baffled as to why Tristan would assist him, King Mark feels a strange and very strong connection to this stranger and is grateful for his assistance. To cement their bond, he sends Tristan on a quest to find and bring back Morholt's sister Yseult to be his wife.

Tristan dutifully sets out on the long voyage to Ireland, but the injuries sustained in the fight are threatening to kill him. He arrives, unconscious, at a foreign shore and is found lying on the sand by a beautiful woman - a healer. Yseult. She tends to his wounds and, when Tristan awakes, aids his recovery.

However, when Tristan reveals who he is and what his mission is, Yseult realises that not only has her brother been killed by the man she has fallen in love with, that man is also taking her as a prisoner, to marry a King she has never met.

Bound by duty, she accepts her fate and sets out to return to Cornwall with Tristan. Before she goes, she asks for a potion to help her when she meets King Mark.

But love potions are funny things. Wine? Love potion? It's all the same. On the voyage, Tristan & Yseult drink the potion and fall desperately, drunkenly, in love.



Nandi Bhebhe (Yseult) and John Leader (Tristan)
Photo: Steve Tanner

They arrive at King Mark's castle. Their fate is sealed. There is a wedding for King Mark and Yseult and LOTS of dancing.

Act Two

Yseult asks her maid, Brangian, to take her place on her wedding night to King Mark, because Yseult would be unable to prove her virginity. Brangian wonders bitterly if, on her own wedding night, a queen will take her place.

Tristan and Yseult's passionate affair carries on, but Yseult also comes to love King Mark at the same time. That is until Frocin discovers their secret and reports it to King Mark.

All hell breaks loose. King Mark is furious with Frocin for breaking the spell of his blissful ignorance. He is furious with Tristan and Yseult for their betrayal. But he can't kill them. He loves them too much. So he banishes them.

SYNOPSIS

Act Two (cont.)

Tristan & Yseult wander the forest. While they are asleep one night, King Mark comes across them and again, tries and fails to bring himself to kill them. Instead he leaves his knife as a symbol that he is angry and hurt, but loves them still.

When they wake up, Tristan & Yseult realise what pain they have caused and part company. However they do make a pact on parting: if you need me, I'll be there. Yseult returns to her duty and to a man she has truly come to love - King Mark, who welcomes her back with open arms.

Time passes...

Tristan has married a woman named Yseult of the White Hands who loves him deeply. He doesn't love her, but has married her because her name brings back memories of his beloved. On his deathbed he calls for Yseult. If she is coming, she told him, the ship will fly a white sail. If she is not, the sail will be black.

When Tristan asks "Are the sails black or white" his new wife, distraught after years of being unloved, deceives him into thinking that the sail is black, and that Yseult is not returning. He dies of grief, shortly before Yseult comes running for him. On seeing she is too late, she too dies of a broken heart.



Philippa Hogg (Love Spotter), Stephanie Hockley (Whitehands) and Pat Moran (Performing Musical Director)
Photo: Steve Tanner

CREDITS

Cast

Yseult
Nandi Bhebhe

Frocin
Matthew Churcher

Morholt & Brangian
Tom Fox

Love Spotter, Brute & Creature of the Forest
Jack Heydon

Whitehands
Stephanie Hockley

Tristan
John Leader

King Mark
Edward Rowe

Love Spotter, Brute & Creature of the Forest
Nigel Sudarkasa

Love Spotter & Musician
Stu Barker

Love Spotter & Musician
Harry Miller

Love Spotter & Performing Musical Director
Pat Moran

Love Spotter & Musician
Philippa Hogg



CREDITS

Creative Team

Adaptor and Director (and original choreography)
Emma Rice

Writers
Carl Grose & Anna Maria Murphy

Composer
Stu Barker

Set & Costume Design
Bill Mitchell, refreshed by Vicki Mortimer

Sound Designer
Simon Baker

Lighting Designer
Malcolm Rippeth

Choreographer & Intimacy Coordinator
Etta Murfitt

Music Supervisor
Ian Ross

Associate Directors
Simon Harvey & Laura Keefe

Associate Lighting Designer
Zoe Spurr

Associate Sound Designer
Charlie Simpson

Backstage Team

Company Manager on the book
Aime Neeme

Technical Stage Manager
Benji Mowbray

Assistant Technical Stage Manager
Merlyn Pip Salter-Ling

Head of Sound
Jimmy O'Shea

Deputy Sound
Harriet Hollinshed-Lee

Head of Wardrobe
Brooke Bowden

Technical Trainee
Alison Salter-Ling

Production Team

Producer
Poppy Keeling

Head of Production
Jay Jones

Associate Producers
Rhys Bugler & Sian Weeding

Production Manager
Cath Bates

Production Sound
Charlie Simpson

Lighting Programmer
Victoria Brennan

Production Electricians
Laurence Russell & Francis Johnstone

Costume Supervisor
Megan Sterry

Props Supervisor
Claire Auvache

Production Carpenter
Gabriel Bartlett

Flying Consultant
Alex Harvey - Ockham's Razor

CREDITS

Production Team (cont.)

Accent Coach
Simon Money

Production Photography
Steve Tanner

Lead Image Photography
Richard Grassie

Audio & Video supplied by
Stage Sound Services

Lighting supplied by
Encore Hire

Set Construction by
Bristol Old Vic Scenic

Dressmaker
Theresa Holt

Prop Makers
Saskia Tomlinson, Janet Caddick, Ruth Kogelmann & India Fisher

Gaelic Translator
Jer Lyons

Emma Rice Company

Created and led by Emma Rice, Emma Rice Company launched in 2018 and is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation. Based in the South West, we make groundbreaking work with exceptional artists, and tour across the world. Alongside our shows, we run a unique professional development programme, training a new and more diverse generation of theatre practitioners. We make work from our home The Lucky Chance, in Somerset, which is our creation space and a tiny theatre in which we welcome audiences of all shapes and sizes.

Kneehigh

Kneehigh was founded in Cornwall in 1980 by actor Mike Shepherd, who gathered a group of artists to make theatre for local communities. Designer and director Bill Mitchell joined in 1987 and became a defining force in its artistic life, helping to forge the company's bold visual language and adventurous relationship with landscape.

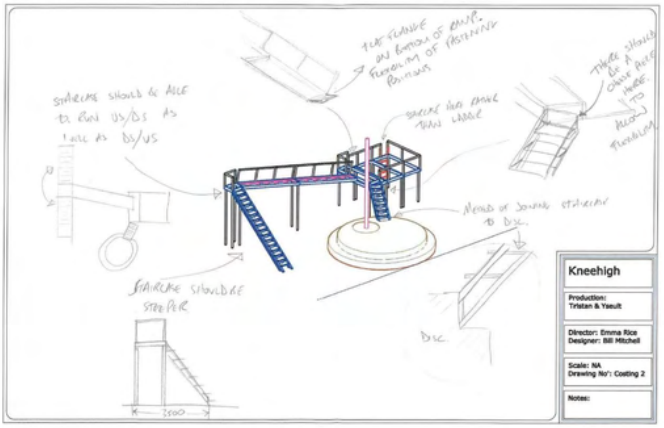
Emma Rice joined as an actor in the 1990s before becoming a director and then the company's Artistic Director. Under Emma, and alongside Mike and a remarkable family of artists, Kneehigh created productions including *Tristan & Yseult*, *A Matter of Life and Death*, *The Wild Bride* and *Brief Encounter*, building an international reputation for theatre that was joyful, anarchic, musical and deeply human. For more than 40 years, Kneehigh remained rooted in the place where it began while looking firmly outwards: made in Cornwall, with an international voice.



DESIGN

The design of Kneehigh's *Tristan & Yseult* was shaped by the close creative partnership between director Emma Rice and designer Bill Mitchell, whose shared artistic vision enabled an unusually integrated approach to storytelling.

Their longstanding working relationship meant that design and performance developed together rather than as separate elements. Bill died in 2017, and for this production, Vicki Mortimer, another designer who has worked with Emma extensively over the years, stepped in to honour

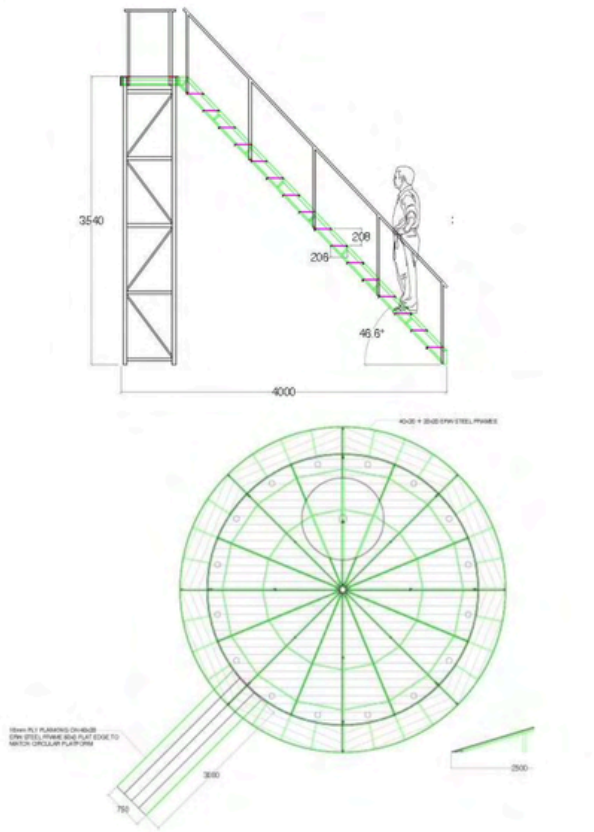


Set design drawing
Bill Mitchell

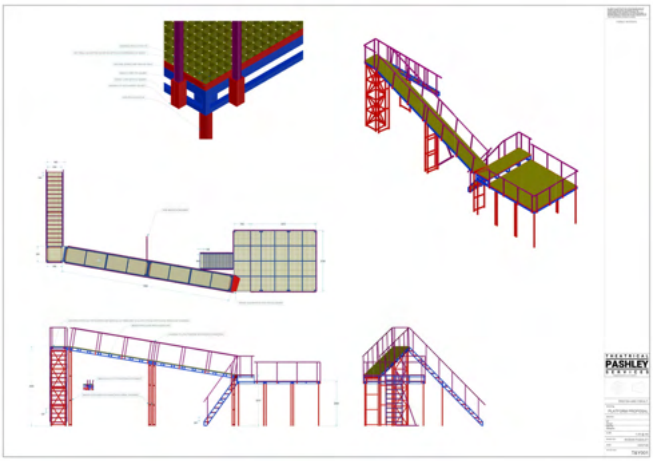
Bill's original designs as well as refresh them for a new cast and through a 2026 lens.

For Bill the starting point was always the world of the production. In *Tristan & Yseult*, Cornwall is presented as a maritime kingdom whose identity is defined by the sea. The story itself contains four significant sea voyages, journeys that either bring the lovers together or separate them, making themes of travel, distance, and fate central to the narrative. As a result, the visual language of the production was strongly influenced by nautical imagery. The set was built around a large circular wooden deck, suggesting both a ship and a performance arena. At its centre stands a tall mast, which became the defining feature of the design. Mitchell was particularly fond of simple, robust forms that were easily legible, especially in outdoor venues, where scenery needed to communicate clearly while still leaving space for the audience's imagination. The design offered enough visual clues to establish place and atmosphere without relying on excessive detail.

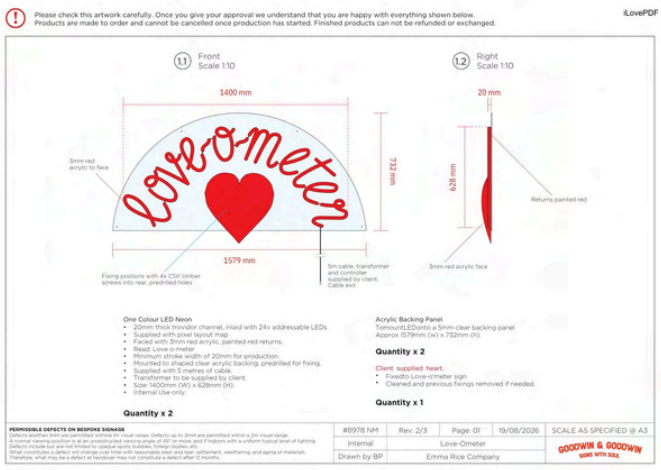
The mast provides enormous flexibility within the performance. Ropes, rigging, and crossbars can be transformed into sails, hammocks, lookout points, and climbing structures, allowing performers to interact physically with the set in dynamic ways. Like many of Bill's designs, the set functions almost as an adventure playground, enabling actors to climb, swing, spy from above, and enter or exit from unexpected directions. A circular trap within the deck can also be raised to form an additional platform, most memorably used by the character Whitehands. Bill's designs always sought to make the mechanics of performance work practically as well as visually, and the set's versatility allows it to support both storytelling and choreography.



Set design drawing
Bill Mitchell



Set drawing for the platform/walkway (2026)



Design drawing: Love-o-meter neon light (2026)





Tristan & Yseult set under construction (2026)

Bill Mitchell



William John Mitchell (2 December 1951 – 14 April 2017) was the artistic director of Kneehigh Theatre from 1995 until 2002 and created site-specific theatre company Wildworks in 2005.
Bill was born in Erith, Kent, and educated at Dartford Grammar School. He completed a foundation course at Medway School of Art and studied theatre design at Wimbledon School of Art.

He moved to Cornwall with his wife Sue Hill in 1988 and designed a number of Kneehigh's shows including *Tristan & Yseult*, *The Red Shoes* and *A Matter of Life and Death*.

In 2006, he was made an Honorary Fellow of Falmouth University.

Bill won the Best Director award at the Theatre Awards UK in 2011 for *The Passion*, a joint production between National Theatre Wales and Wildworks. In 2015, he worked with Lost Gardens of Heligan on a show called *100: The Day Our World Changed* to commemorate local people who died in WW1.

Bill was diagnosed with cancer in 2015 but continued to work up to his death on *Wolf's Child* which was performed at Trelowarren Estate in Cornwall in July 2017.

Bill's attic has been recreated at Krowji, Redruth, as an artists' resource space, in digital and physical form.

Costume design further reinforces the production's storytelling. Reflecting the play's themes of danger, violence, and power, several characters were inspired by the sharp, tailored style of 1960s mafia culture, with elegant Italian suits, sunglasses, and iconic dresses creating an atmosphere of sophistication and menace. In contrast, the chorus of Love Spotters are distinguished through the use of anoraks, balaclavas and oversized spectacles.



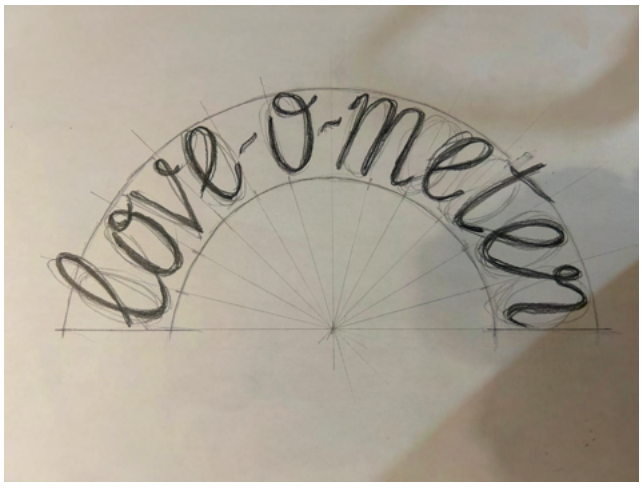
Jack Heydon (Love Spotter)
Photo: Steve Tanner

This not only establishes a strong visual contrast but also provides practical opportunities for actors to double up on roles through rapid costume changes. Vicki has paid close attention to fabric, colour, and texture as narrative tools. Semi-transparent red fabrics are used at key moments to conceal identities, suggest passion, and enhance dramatic effect, ensuring that costume becomes an active part of the storytelling rather than being merely decorative.

Through both set and costume design, Emma, Bill and Vicki created a theatrical world that is visually striking, practical, and deeply connected to the themes of the production. Their work on *Tristan & Yseult* demonstrates Bill's belief that design should not simply provide a backdrop for action but should actively shape the way a story is told, a philosophy that aligns perfectly with Emma Rice's collaborative and imaginative approach to theatre-making.


Matthew Churcher (Frocin)
Photo: Steve Tanner


Nandi Bhebhe (Yseult)
Photo: Steve Tanner



Design drawing for 'Love-o-meter' neon light
Vicki Mortimer

INTERVIEWS

Tristan & Yseult rehearsed for three weeks at Emma Rice Company's space in Frome, The Lucky Chance. Before the team headed to Theatre Royal Bath for technical rehearsals, we grabbed a few of the team for an interview.

Carl Grose - Writer



What was the brief when writing the piece?

The brief from Emma was twofold: to look at the original source material and try to find a story structure that was not only exciting, relevant, but also to our tastes. We ended up cutting out probably two-thirds of the original story, which happened to be the more fantastical medieval elements - such as dragons and lepers and things like that. Emma's vision was to think more modern, more Tarantino - which is where I got the idea of starting the story at the end with Tristan dying (a la Mr Orange in *Reservoir Dogs*). The second challenge was to write the voice of The Court of King Mark. I had the court, and Anna had 'love'. Anna's a brilliant poet, so I was initially relieved that I didn't get 'love' But having said that, by the end Anna and I were swapping roles and I found myself writing for Mistress Whitehands (the leader of the Unloved) and I think it's her material I'm most proud of.

A lot of the piece is poetry rather than prose - what do you think this adds? What was the reason for writing this way?

Yes, there is a lot of poetry in this. And lots of different styles. I think what it adds is a classical feel, a musicality of text, but it also, most importantly, elevates the language out of the domestic. I also tried to let the style of the poetry tell the story, too. Emma suggested that King Mark speak in iambic pentameter, which helped enormously. This separates King Mark, makes him grander and more aloof from the other characters, which I like - cus he's King of Cornwall. Other characters speak in a rough poetry, like Frocin for example. His is more in the rhythm of nursery rhymes or limericks. Stunted. Nasty. Childish. So the poetry is 'in character' too.

When commissioned to write, what is your process?

It's different for every commission, and very different when writing a play. But what usually happens on a Kneehigh show is the director will have an idea, and we'll look at the source material and talk about what's to be done with it. So for Tristan, Emma was adamant that it wasn't going to be 'medieval' and that I should work specifically with iambic for King Mark, for example. This is a great starting point because it's specific but broad enough to find your own thing. With this framework, I'd then go away and start writing. I spend 3-4 weeks writing, reading the original story over and over again, getting under the skin of it and attempting to find the 'voice' of the writing - which is another word for the tonal quality of the language. This takes quite a while. So I'll just write anything, keeping it very free. Then, after a couple of weeks, I'll look at what I've written. Most of which is rubbish. But then I start sifting through the stuff, to find something that feels right, and if I do, I do expand on that. I'll start to pull together very specific moments from the story - like, for example, King Mark welcoming us to the court, or Frocin catching Tristan and Yseult having an affair. Once I'm happy with these, and have built up a bundle of stuff, I hand them over to see what the director thinks. It's often slow to get going but once the back is broken on 'the voice' of the piece, things start to gather momentum. I'll then work up other moments, songs or scenes that the show requires.

How closely do you work with the Director and the rest of the company/creative team?

Very. Ideally, we've a rough script as we enter rehearsals. It then gets explored by the company. There's sometimes impro (the Lovespotters were developed less through writing and more through impro), which can be taken and crafted, and put into scenes with pre-written text or whatever. So the rehearsal period is a process of trying stuff, shaping material, crafting, cutting, re-writing depending on what Emma wants.

Jack Heydon - Actor



Who do you play in *Tristan & Yseult*?

I play a Love Spotter, a Brute and a Creature of the Forest. I also understudy Tristan and Frocin.

What research and preparation did you do before rehearsals began?

My preparation for this show was unlike shows I've prepared for before, due to the fact that I'm covering two roles in the show, so my preparation for this was quite different from the ensemble roles. I'll also be playing instruments in the show, as well as covering, so first I'll talk about my main ensemble roles, that I'll be doing day-to-day in the show.

We were sent a recording of the show from 2017, and I watched that recording three times over a period of a few weeks. I read the script on its own, alongside watching the performance a fair few times (probably five!). I also watched Emma Rice's version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to get the vibe of her general directing style. I have also seen two or three of her other shows. but I specifically wanted to watch her version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* so that I could see other ways that she has directed people falling madly in love, and how other people deal with love and rejection. This is a huge theme in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as well as *Tristan & Yseult*, so I thought that would be interesting and relevant.

Due to my main role being an ensemble role, I didn't want to do too many specific character preparations because I knew a lot of that would be found in the room. Also, due to the show being very active and me playing instruments in the show, I made sure that my accordion playing, my trumpet playing and my bones playing was up to scratch before rehearsals so that I was nicely warmed up. The show is very physically demanding so I was doing home workouts and stretches every day for about a month before the show, alongside my other prep!

"The show is very physically demanding so I was doing home workouts and stretches every day for about a month before the show, alongside my other prep!"

Due to my understudy responsibilities, I needed to get familiar with the characters of Tristan and Frocin. I didn't want to be too specific about this because John and Matt (who would be playing the roles) would be finding a lot of stuff in the room that I would want to take from. To make sure that I was familiar with the roles, I worked through the script asking myself for each character individually these five questions and making lists:

- What do I say about myself?
- What do I say about others?
- What do others say about me?
- Any questions my character has.
- Facts about my character.

This makes me go through the script at least five times for each character and actively analyse why and what the character is doing at each point in the play, which is a good starting point. I also made sure that the lines were learned for my

ensemble role and understudy roles before day one of rehearsals.

What acting and characterisation decisions did your research lead to?

Once I was familiar with Emma's style and familiar with the play as whole, it became quite obvious that my roles would mainly be in quite a Greek chorus and clown-like world. We decided in the room that the Love Spotters could be found from three simple words at their core, which were lonely, anxious and responsible. Once these words were established, finding the character was mainly done through play and improvisation in the room. My Love Spotter is called Jonathan; he works for Oxford City Council on the other end of the phone line for bin complaints, and he plays flugelhorn in the brass band. Even though these details seem silly and funny, which they are, it also allows the ensemble character to move from being a simple one dimensional person to being a real person that can interact with the play on lots of different levels.



Jack Heydon (Love Spotter)
Photo: Steve Tanner

How have you found working on the music in *Tristan and Yseult*?

Working on the music has been a very fluid and rewarding process. The original composer Stu Barker is also in the cast and in the band, and so is Pat Moran, our musical director. This means that there's a lot of ownership of the music in the room which has allowed creative decisions, changes and adaptations to be made quickly and easily whenever Emma, Stu or Pat has felt like they're needed. All of the musicians in the room are operating at quite a high level of musicality, so it means that everyone brings their own style and influence to each of the pieces of music. The show has been on lots of times before and it's had lots of different instruments in it, and every time there's a different instrument, the new sound is embraced and built upon so that each individual show can be its own, rather than trying to fit a new cast into a box of an old show. For example, I play rhythm bones, which is a pretty unusual instrument, and Ian Ross the music supervisor was very keen to get these into the show because they're a funny fit for a Love Spotter to play, so now there's a bones solo in one of the songs which has never been in the show before.

"Love is everywhere in the world and every single person has been a Love Spotter at some point in their lives"

How do you want the audience to see your characters and how do you want them to feel during the show?

I want the audience to see my Love Spotter as a normal person who is just somewhat desperate to understand how love is so abundant in the world but none of it has come their way. Love is everywhere in the world and every single person has been a Love Spotter at some point in their lives. At face value, this group of Love Spotters do seem clownish, sometimes silly and sometimes foolish, but I want the audience to see themselves in the Love Spotters because all it is is a group of people trying to make sense of the world.

Do you have a favourite moment in the show?

My favourite moment in the show is very near the end when Yseult pushes Whitehands out of the way to get to the dying Tristan. This is a moment that throughout the show Whitehands has led up to in quite a verbal way, and this moment just epitomises the whole of Whitehands' struggle in such a beautiful and physical way that no one can help just watching and feeling it deeply.

Nandi Bhebhe - Actor



What research and preparation did you do before rehearsals began?

I was lucky enough to have seen the show when it was last touring back in 2017, so that was a good place to start in terms of preparation. I could remember my visceral feelings about the show and how I reacted to its tone and sentiment.

I did some soft digging into the origins of the myth itself and looked back at older iterations of the story, but I mainly delved into the script as a guide. As I did this I took time to journal and pick out elements of who I felt Yseult was - something we also all do in the room together - her character, her nature and her predicament. The most important thing is to stay open to what is found in the rehearsal room, so that you never stay too fixed in your own vacuum, but remain responsive to the company as a whole.

What acting and characterisation decisions did your research lead to?

This retelling feels like it does a very alchemic thing of balancing high comedy with deep drama. It is heavily driven by the action, and the the text has such beauty and poetry to it, so it felt clear that being on top of that action, hitting all the story beats and maintaining clarity in the storytelling was key. I always enjoy working quite instinctively in the room, using my research as a bedrock to create and play. That way I can discover new things as the story forms in rehearsals. This was very much my process with Yseult.

How have you found working on the music for *Tristan & Yseult*?

It's been a joy working on the music for *Tristan and Yseult*. We've got Stu Barker (original composer), Ian Ross (musical supervisor) and Pat Moran (Musical Director) heading the music ship, who have all been part of previous productions, so it's very special to explore the music with them. There's a real variety of genres in this show, which is so enjoyable and carries the audience through the journey. The collaborative and collective nature of Emma Rice Company means that the work is really moulded around what different company members bring to it. This version involved some new song choices, new characters taking on musical moments, and new orchestrations which keep the production fresh and alive, and was so much fun to work on together.

How do you want the audience to see your characters and how do you want them to feel during the show?

I would love the audience to see Yseult as multidimensional, messy, heartfelt, and human. I hope audiences are able to connect and feel a bit of themselves in the world we create because amidst the clowning and the crisis is such true and tender human sensibility. Love and loss, laughter and despair, trying and failing and forgiveness.

Do you have a favourite moment in the show?

It's very hard for me to pick a favourite moment in the show; I think I have many! The Love Spotters moments and presence throughout are a joy! I think we really enjoyed seeing all of them come to life in rehearsal: big clown energy, and deep pathos too. In essence, they are the heart of the show.

I have never had an entrance quite like Yseult's, it's a real gift! Another particular favourite moment might be *Sweetheart Come*, the reckoning of Yseult and King Mark. It's such a raw and real moment, and so much is expressed through such a delicate scene.

Simon Baker - Sound Designer



What are your main responsibilities on *Tristan & Yseult*?

As the Sound Designer for the show, broadly you're responsible for everything the audience, the actors, the backstage team and the band hear.

We start by working out what loudspeakers we need for the audience, how we might mic up the band, and then how the band and cast can hear each other. We also have to work out what kind of mixing desk and other equipment we'll need to control everything.

Alongside the technical delivery of the show, the Sound Designer also works out what sound effects and other sound elements might help tell the story. Those all have to be created, edited and balanced, and we have to make sure they can be repeated accurately every night.

"As the Sound Designer for the show, broadly you're responsible for everything the audience, the actors, the backstage team and the band hear."

Have you done any research for the show?

The show has a very long history and has been through many different versions of its sound design. These days, our job is to work out what makes the show stay authentic to the original, while also asking what modern elements or technology we might introduce to help deliver it.

So, the research for this production is quite different from the research I might do for a completely new show.

What was your approach to creating the soundscapes and effects of the show?

Emma's work lives in a world of its own. It's anachronistic — the look and feel might sit somewhere around the mid-1970s, but the music can come from 20 or even 30 years either side of that. We tend not to get too hung up on a particular historical period unless we are deliberately using it as part of the storytelling. I've worked with Emma for many years, so we have a common language. I tend to watch rehearsals and work out which moments, accents or beats in the story would benefit from being marked with sound, the reveal of the locket, for example.

More generally, when I make a sound effect I often think about three things: what is the truthful or realistic version of the sound? What is the most extreme or close up version of it? And what might an abstract version sound like? Somewhere between those three versions, you usually discover the right effect for the moment.

What are the main influences behind the music in *Tristan & Yseult*?

The recorded music draws heavily on Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*. That was one of the starting points. Nick Cave is another influence because, well, it just works! Sometimes a piece of music lands perfectly in a show without there being a completely logical reason for it. It's simply about instinct and feeling.

How have you found returning to the show after nine years away from it?

It's strange what you remember exactly and what you have absolutely no memory of. I've done this show so many times, yet after nine years there are still things I had completely forgotten.

It's been great to revisit it. Every time we return to the show, you notice something that could be improved, developed or explored a little further.

Do you have a favourite moment in the show?

Obviously - Harp/Dulcimer, Dulcimer/Harp!

Music credits

One Day I'll Fly Away
Randy Crawford

Why Does It Always Rain On Me
Travis

Love Hurts
Nazareth

Tristan und Isolde Prelude
Richard Wagner

Taki Rari
Yma Sumac

O Fortuna
Carl Orff

Moro, Iasoo, al mio dulo
Carlo Gesualdo

Mambo No1
Yma Sumac

Running Up That Hill
Kate Bush

Without You/All By Myself/I Want to Know What Love Is
Nilsson/Eric Carmen/Foriegner

Where Is My Husband?
Raye

Tristan und Isolde Prelude
Richard Wagner

Sweetheart Come
Nick Cave

Tristan und Isolde - Liebestod
Richard Wagner



Nandi Bhebhe (Yseult) and Stu Barker (Composer)
Photo: Steve Tanner



Harry Miller, Tom Fox, Philippa Hogg, Edward Rowe, Nigel Sudarkasa and Jack Heydon
Photo: Steve Tanner

Stage Manager
Steph Curtis



Company Stage Manager for *Tristan & Yseult* from 2013 to 2017

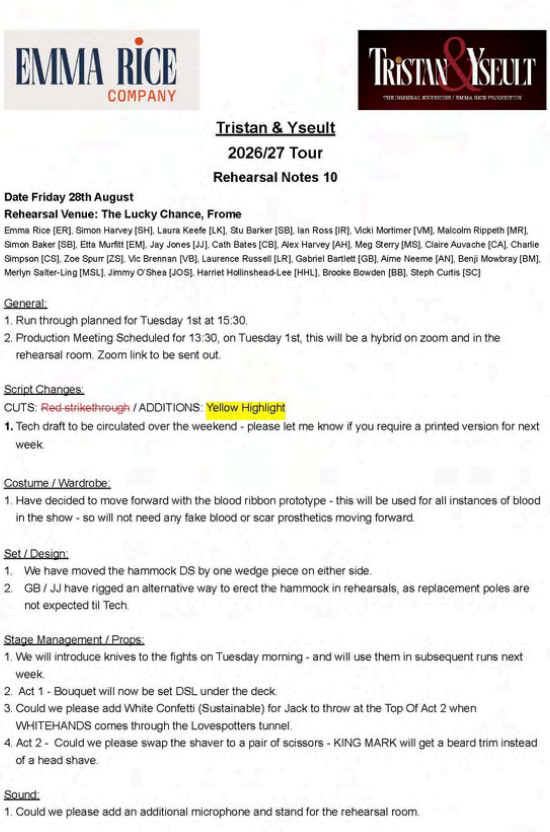
As Company Manager, I have responsibility for the wellbeing of the company, acting as the producers' representative and addressing any issues that arise. This responsibility extends throughout rehearsals, the technical rehearsal period and out on tour.

During rehearsals, as Stage Manager, my role is to facilitate the director, designers, production manager and the wider creative team in the process of creating a show and be the main point of communication from within the rehearsal room to help make sure ideas can be realised smoothly and efficiently.

For each rehearsal I send out a report which keeps all involved and informed in the creation of the show to assist the ideas and needs of the rehearsal room being realised. For example, as rehearsals progress, the director may request specific props or sound effects, or a certain piece of action or choreography may have an impact for the costume department. The daily rehearsal report means those members of the creative and technical teams who are unable to be in the room can still keep up to date with the how the show is developing in rehearsals.

Once a show is up and running, my role as Stage Manager is very much to act as the ongoing communication and organisation between the producers, the touring company and the creative team. With the Production Manager, I liaise with touring venues to plan the visit, inform them of the technical and practical requirements of the show, and maintain the artistic integrity of the show. And on a day-to-day basis, alongside the backstage show team, make sure that the production elements are ready and set for each performance.

What I enjoy most about the role is its variety; every day presents new challenges. I also love the chance to travel to different places while on tour. Working on *Tristan & Yseult* has been a particularly rewarding and enjoyable experience.



EMMA RICE COMPANY

TRISTAN & YSEULT

Tristan & Yseult
2026/27 Tour
Rehearsal Notes 10

Date Friday 28th August
Rehearsal Venue: The Lucky Chance, Frome

Emma Rice [ER], Simon Harvey [SH], Laura Keefe [LK], Stu Barker [SB], Ian Ross [IR], Vicki Mortimer [VM], Malcolm Rippeth [MR], Simon Baker [SB], Etta Murfitt [EM], Jay Jones [JJ], Cath Bates [CB], Alex Harvey [AH], Meg Sterry [MS], Claire Auvache [CA], Charlie Simpson [CS], Zoe Spurr [ZS], Vic Brennan [VB], Laurence Russell [LR], Gabriel Bartlett [GB], Aime Neeme [AN], Benji Mowbray [BM], Merlyn Salter-Ling [MSL], Jimmy O'Shea [JOS], Harriet Hollinshead-Lee [HHL], Brooke Bowden [BB], Steph Curtis [SC]

General:
1. Run through planned for Tuesday 1st at 15:30.
2. Production Meeting Scheduled for 13:30, on Tuesday 1st, this will be a hybrid on zoom and in the rehearsal room. Zoom link to be sent out.

Script Changes:
CUTS: ~~Red strikethrough~~ / ADDITIONS: Yellow Highlight
1. Tech draft to be circulated over the weekend - please let me know if you require a printed version for next week.

Costume / Wardrobe:
1. Have decided to move forward with the blood ribbon prototype - this will be used for all instances of blood in the show - so will not need any fake blood or scar prosthetics moving forward.

Set / Design:
1. We have moved the hammock DS by one wedge piece on either side.
2. GB / JJ have rigged an alternative way to erect the hammock in rehearsals, as replacement poles are not expected til Tech.

Stage Management / Props:
1. We will introduce knives to the fights on Tuesday morning - and will use them in subsequent runs next week.
2. Act 1 - Bouquet will now be set DSL under the deck.
3. Could we please add White Confetti (Sustainable) for Jack to throw at the Top Of Act 2 when WHITEHANDS comes through the Lovespotters tunnel.
4. Act 2 - Could we please swap the shaver to a pair of scissors - KING MARK will get a beard trim instead of a head shave.

Sound:
1. Could we please add an additional microphone and stand for the rehearsal room.

Steph Curtis toured with Kneehigh and Emma Rice for 20 years and is now Head of Organisation at Emma Rice Company. She supported the show's current Company Stage Manager Aime Neeme in the early stages of remounting the tour. The rehearsal notes reproduced above are Aime's.

AN INTERVIEW WITH EMMA RICE


Photo: Richard Grassie

Can you tell us a bit about how *Tristan & Yseult* first came about back in 2003?

In 2003 Kneehigh was a small company - but an amazing one! We were fearless and wild, making work with swagger and heart. We toured primarily in Cornwall and mostly outdoors, playing in pouring rain, driving wind and fierce sunshine. It was a magic time and the making of *Tristan & Yseult* sat smack bang in the middle of it. We had four weeks' rehearsal followed by a short run in the romantic ruins of Restormel Castle. In those days, almost nothing was prepared before we started work. We would create the work in an instinctive flurry - and the writing was the same. I would task the writers to write the text; iambic pentameter for King Mark and free verse for the more emotional characters. It was thrilling, funny, moving and swashbuckling – just like this extraordinary show! Perched on those Cornish clifftops, we laughed, shared, wept and danced on the buried bones of this lost tale. And by sharing our own experiences, we found a new world, a collective understanding. We pieced our dreams together to create a quilt, a mosaic, a collage that sang out with joy and pain. We made a love letter to how confusing, brutal and glorious it is to be human.

Why do you think audiences have resonated with this show again and again over the years?

We all love stories about falling in love; the loss of love, the celebration of love. *Tristan & Yseult* combines all these intoxicating situations but is glued together with something altogether more surprising. Told by the 'Unloved', this production has heartbreak running through it like a stick of rock. I think it is this unique lens that makes audiences melt. There isn't anyone in the theatre that hasn't felt some of the emotions explored in this medieval text. We all know what it is to be loved, but also how it feels to be unloved. It hits right at the core of being human.

One of the things I love most about *Tristan & Yseult* is its profound lack of judgment. This ancient text explores infidelity, infatuation, conquest and forgiveness – but never casts anyone as the villain. We watch our characters navigate their way through what it is to be human to the best of their ability; and that is something that resonates with all of us.

The show has lived multiple lives, and lots has changed since its first staging in 2003. What is the significance of reviving this show at this moment in time?

It's 23 years since we first created *Tristan & Yseult* and I find myself surrounded by friends old and new, breathing new life into this precious world. I love this show. I love it with all my heart. What we made in that Cornish field so many years ago has taken on a life and a universality that touches and surprises me each time we revisit it. *Tristan and Yseult* has become my compass and my chart. Something magic happened to me in the making of this show that guides me to this day and brings me back to what to what truly matters. Love, loyalty, community, compassion, freedom and joy. It brings me back to my theatre roots; it brings me home. And this new 'home' is populated by the most incredible performers. Young, fierce, unbelievably talented and brave, this new company brings new meaning to the show. It's the right time, the right place and crucially, the right people. Perfection!

Do you remember your first encounter with the Tristan story?

I actually inherited the project from the designer, Bill Mitchell – and I didn't want it! I'm not a woman who likes *Game of Thrones*, so I couldn't get my head around dragons, knights and medieval dwarves. This ancient text was riddled with oddness that I couldn't immediately see a way through.

But something amazing happened with the making of the show. We ditched the dragons and put on sharp suits and sunglasses. We swung on ropes, danced the Mambo and played Nick Cave. We went to the emotional and visceral heart of the tale and made it ours. This production poured out of us and once we felt the power of the world we were creating there was no looking back.

Tell us a bit about your rehearsal style, especially when you're rehearsing a show that's being revived.

I love to remake shows. With the amazing benefits of hindsight and time you can make profound and satisfying improvements. With *Tristan & Yseult* we've been able to put a bomb under the physicality, made the design more sustainable and even more theatrical (if that's possible), fine-tuned the script and added some authentic Cornish language…it's a fabulous discipline to be open to change (even if it sometimes feels painful). This show is a testament to how returning to work can be a truly creative and fabulous endeavour!

Is there anything returning fans of this Kneehigh/Emma Rice production should look out for?

The production has grown every time we've made it, filled and fleshed out with all the diverse humanity that have inhabited and loved it. The bones of it are the same though. The athletic, sexy, Cornish swagger is still there. Bigtime!

And for any newbies: what can they expect?

Expect one of the best nights in the theatre you have ever had! My work has always had a broad appeal and *Tristan & Yseult* has the broadest. It is beautiful, fun, true and stuffed with flavour, spice and meaning. Laced with comedy and tragedy, *Tristan & Yseult* is especially universal; warm in its humanity, wild with its physicality and beguiling with its musicality. It's accessible but never simple and I promise that audiences will never be bored! This show is for anybody who has a heart; adventurers, thrill seekers, music lovers, gigglers and hope believers. It is a rare treat. Expect to laugh and cry.

"What we made in that Cornish field so many years ago has taken on a life and a universality that touches and surprises me each time we revisit it. *Tristan & Yseult* has become my compass and my chart. Something magic happened to me in the making of this show that guides me to this day and brings me back to what to what truly matters. Love, loyalty, community, compassion, freedom and joy. It brings me back to my theatre roots; it brings me home."



Nandi Bhebhe (Yseult) and John Leader (Tristan)
Photo: Steve Tanner

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Website
https://www.emmaricecompany.co.uk

Kneehigh archive
https://thisiskneehigh.co.uk/item-categories/tristan-and-yseult

Facebook
EmmaRiceCompany

Instagram
emmaricecompany

Podcasts - Wise Children Podcast/ Tea & Biscuits
The original backstage pass into Emma Rice's universe. Subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon Music, Podbean, iHeartRadio, and more

Other digital content
https://www.emmaricecompany.co.uk/educationabout

Education pack credits

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