Kneehigh’s Retellings

Kneehigh Theatre have been telling stories since 1980, and from the very beginning a large proportion of those stories have been adaptations, or what joint artistic director Emma Rice would prefer to call ‘retellings’.

I don’t know why I use the word adaptation, I much prefer retelling, I feel that’s what we do; we retell stories. And so using the word ‘adaptation’ is already making it more reverent than I feel. In truth, I don’t really feel irreverent, I just think it is my turn. I am already looking forward to someone else telling it next and three cheers for whoever does!…” They are retellings and I don’t believe anybody owns a story. (Emma Rice, author interview, 2014)

In a comprehensive history of Cornish theatre, Alan Kent has charted the development of the company in three distinct phases that loosely follow changes of company members and subsequent shifts in the company’s interests and theatrical styles. Interestingly, each of these three phases – children’s theatre and development of site-specific work; collaborations with playwright Nick Darke on Cornish themed work; and Emma Rice’s artistic directorship – have included adaptations or what she would prefer to call re-tellings. Kent attributes Kneehigh’s commitment to retelling stories to the importance of ‘fairy tales, folk tales, myths and legends’ in defining Cornish identity (Kent, 2010, p.749). The period I am focusing on in this chapter is that identified as the third phase by Kent, in which Rice, and founder member Mike Shepherd, have jointly led the company to increasing critical acclaim, with co-productions at Britain’s National Theatre and major regional theatres, far-reaching international tours and the creation of their own nomadic performance venue, The Asylum. The original interview material that underpins this chapter is all from this phase, dating from 2004-2014, prior to Emma Rice’s tenure at the Globe beginning in 2016. During this period the company have been particularly prolific, producing a number of adaptations, gaining recognition as one of Britain’s leading devising companies, and publishing a number of co-authored/collaboratively created play texts.

During the phase of work that I am concerned with in this chapter – from 1999 to 2011– the company published an anthology of four, devised adaptations, *The Kneehigh Anthology Volume One*, with accompanying forewords offering ‘insight into Kneehigh’s approach to making theatre, revealing how a script can emerge from a collaborative devising process’ (Kneehigh Theatre, 2005, p.209). In programme notes and press material for shows during this time, both Rice and Shepherd have aligned their work with a folkloric, oral tradition of reshaping stories and making them relevant for new generations. This folkloric tradition has an intrinsic multivocality that marries perfectly well with devising, as practiced by Kneehigh as a collaborative process of shared authorship that includes, but is not limited to: director, writers, performers, designers, composers and musicians tasked with exploring their own personal relationship to the material and their collective consciousness of it within contemporary culture. Furthermore, placing the work within this context of oral storytelling leads us away from the branch of adaptation studies concerned with origin, ownership and fidelity, towards a much broader conceptualisation of source texts as cultural memories owned by no-one and everyone, that have pluralistic resonances for individuals and within interpretive communities. At the heart of Kneehigh’s approach to adaptation is a desire to explore the mutability of stories, revealing and reinvigorating their relevance within contemporary culture, through exploration of their personal resonance.

When I decide to do a story, I don’t tend to go and read or watch it, I tend to work on what my cultural memory of it is, because that’s my truth…my foundation will be my memory. And I’m sure that’s one of the reasons why I do adaptations – I want to work with that emotional memory. (Rice in Radosavljevic, 2013b, p.103)

Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Adaptation*, a leading text in the move away from a bias towards ‘fidelity’, is therefore a useful text for unpacking Kneehigh’s processes of adaptation. Hutcheon’s emphasis on adaptations as entirely new pieces of work, and her attempts to analyse the changes that take place across mediums and genres, and through ‘different personal artistic filters’ are relevant to Kneehigh’s approach (Hutcheon, 2006, p.84).

Interviewing Rice and writer Carl Grose in 2014, has revealed the extent to which the company’s creative process changes for different projects. In describing the creative practices involved in making a Kneehigh retelling, Rice spoke of a spectrum with wholly, group devised work at one end and written adaptation – as a solo, pre-rehearsal activity – at the other. Her conceptualisation of this spectrum seemed to relate to the extent that the company had co-authored the performance text in the rehearsal room, and also the extent to which the adaptation could be said to be either loosely based on a story without any particular ‘original’ source text or much more tightly scripted from one or more immediately recognisable versions. However, Rice and Grose’s attempts to plot the company’s shows along this spectrum proved difficult as none seemed to fit particularly neatly into such categorisation.

Liz Tomlin has carefully argued in *Acts and Apparitions*, that the drive to fit new works into a binary system, which includes devised theatre against text-based theatre, seems bound up with the particular agendas of producers, funders and critics rather than theatre makers or audiences (Tomlin, 2013, 9-10). I might add a further binary regarding adaptation here, with adaptations that seek to replicate a singly authored ‘original’ in a new medium against looser ‘retellings’ that present audiences with new works of fiction, significantly re-authored by their makers. I would argue that Rice’s notion of a spectrum is the consequence of those same agendas identified by Tomlin. Categorising their works in this way is no doubt useful to Kneehigh in signalling some of the differences between shows to programmers and co-producing venues, such as the level of fidelity to a source text, or the likelihood of a finished script before rehearsals start. However this detracts from the complexity of the company’s adapting and devising methodologies. Placing works at either end of this spectrum reinforces simplistic notions of a singular, original source text and also the restrictive binary of devised theatre against text-based theatre, both of which are actually challenged and complicated by Kneehigh’s work and Rice’s desire to be a ‘reteller’ rather than an adapter. As Radosavljevic states in *Theatre-Making*, devising, and in relation to Kneehigh we should add adapting, ‘increasingly requires to be seen as a ubiquitous creative methodology rather than a genre of (non-text-based) performance’ (Radosavljevic, 2013a, p.68).

Interviewing Rice during the 2004 run of *The Bacchae* at the West Yorkshire Playhouse, highlighted the company’s resistance at that time to categorising their work and Rice talked of trying ‘desperately not to define what we do’, whilst at the same time having to explain the collaborative authoring processes of their shows in order to be able to publish play texts of their adaptations (Rice, author interview, 2004). The desire to publish these texts has pushed the company to articulate their views on devising and adapting a little more clearly, and has led Rice to this term retelling as a way of signally the company’s alliance to an oral storytelling tradition in which intertextuality, narrative mutability and shared cultural ownership of stories is prioritised over single authorship and fixed originals. Rice’s conceptualisation of herself and Kneehigh as retellers rather than adapters seems to be a more accurate and revealing articulation of their practice than the notion of a devised-adapted spectrum. By calling themselves retellers the company are asserting their long held desire to ‘keep affirming the group not the individual’ in all of their working methods (Rice, author interview, 2004). As retellers, Kneehigh put their source texts through the ‘artistic filters’ of a director-led collaborative practice in which performers, writers, musicians and designers engage in tightly structured and yet playful exploration and creation of performance material. Devised adaptation as practiced by Kneehigh is a complex, collaborative process of recreating myths, fairy tales, classic texts and films as popular, accessible and often both celebratory and subversive theatrical experiences. This chapter is a study of Kneehigh’s creative processes alongside analysis of several of the works that they have generated since 1999, all of which might be termed devised adaptation, providing we remember that this does not signify a singular, fixed practice, but rather a pluralistic, personalised and ever emergent set of approaches to retelling known tales.

**Retelling in the context of Adaptation Studies**

In order to analyse their process and performance work, it is useful to examine Kneehigh’s general approach to retelling stories in relation to adaptation studies. Like researchers in the field of contemporary performance, scholars of adaptation have shifted their focus away from attempts to categorise works into a fixed genre, towards developing greater understanding of the creative processes involved in adaptation, in terms of both production and reception.[[1]](#endnote-1) Similarly, as definitions of devising have been usefully expanded to account for a diversity of practice, the focus of adaptation studies has been expanded beyond the bounds of ‘fidelity criticism, a paradigm that measures the success of an adaptation by its level of fidelity to the ‘original’ text’ (Lefebvre, 2013, p.2). As Rice has indicated, Kneehigh’s interest in retelling stories is not driven by a desire to replicate an assumed ‘original’. Their process begins with exploration of personally inflected retellings and a keen interest is taken in how stories might change to reflect differing perspectives and differing contexts. ‘Fidelity criticism’ would, therefore, be an inappropriate theoretical framework for the study of their processes and productions. Radosavljevic’s critique of press reviews for Kneehigh’s version of Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* (2006), supports this assertion and reveals that ‘various types of bias about adaptation and even staging a classic play still exist’ amongst theatre critics and audiences, which will no doubt prove interesting given Rice’s appointment as Artistic Director of Shakespeare’s Globe in 2016 (Radosavljevic, 2013a, p.68).

In *Making a Performance: Devising Histories and Contemporary Practice*, 2007,Govan et al also refer to a tendency amongst conservative critics to judge adaptations as ‘poor copies’ of their source texts, but argue strongly that expecting any devising company to even attempt to authentically recreate an ‘original’ is entirely futile.

How can devised performance possibly adapt fiction to create an authentic replica? Or indeed should it? The format of the original, as a piece of narrative, and the copy, as a dramatic form, dictates that there will be a number of differences. The characteristics of these two modes mean that it is impossible for a stage version of a piece of fiction to be faithful, or authentic. (Govan et al, 2007, p.94)

Ignoring fidelity discourses, Kneehigh approached their adaptation of *Cymbeline* in their usual idiosyncratic manner, by finding their own personal connections to the material and using those to make an accessible and relevant retelling for a contemporary audience. For Rice, as director, this meant focussing on its foreboding fairy tale atmosphere, and ‘families as we know them, damaged, secretive, surprising and frustrating’ (Rice, in Kneehigh Theatre, 2007, p.5). For writer, Grose, the attraction was its *Pulp Fiction*-like ‘violence and weird humour’ with its ‘three bizarre narratives that all kind of collide at the end’ (Grose, author interview, 2014).[[2]](#endnote-2) This description exemplifies Hutcheon’s theory of adaptation, in which source materials are ‘filtered’ through the adapters’ personal ‘intertexts’.

The creative transposition of an adapted work’s story and its heterocosm is subject not only to genre and medium demands… but also to the temperament and talent of the adapter – and his or her individual intertexts through which are filtered the materials being adapted. (Hutcheon, 2006, p.84)

Two seminal Kneehigh productions - *Tristan and Yseult* (2003) and Noel Coward’s *Brief Encounter* (2005) – exemplify this idea of ‘cultural memory’ as a source text particularly well. The creative process for these adaptations was quite different, and yet there are some strong similarities between the resulting productions in terms of the relationships created with the audience, and the use of performance space to add layers of meaning and enhance the audience’s awareness of intertextuality at play.

The company’s retelling of the epic Cornish myth, *Tristan and Yseult* was based rather freely upon a children’s version of the myth and company members’ varied knowledge of other versions. The performers improvised a chorus of love spotters, in anoraks and colourful balaclavas, to retell the myth from the perspective of the ‘unloved’ in a Tarantino-inspired world of sharp suits and violent passions. Aside from the love spotters’ improvisations, the story was brought to life through fragments of text written in isolation by Carl Grose and Anna Maria Murphy, music composed by Stu Barker and Bill Mitchell’s set designs. *Tristan and Yseult* was originally an outdoor production at Restormel Castle in Cornwall and Rufford Abbey in Nottinghamshire (2003), and these stunning settings were incorporated into the action, blurring the stage-audience boundaries and enhancing the epic and romantic nature of the myth. When the production was revived as an indoor show for national and international touring (2005) the company replicated this to some extent by making use of auditorium space as ‘the club of the unloved’. This creation of a club setting playfully involved the audience in the action and allowed for explicitly intertextual visual referents, such as the vinyl sleeve for Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*.

By way of contrast, the script for *Brief Encounter* had to be fixed in advance, and was based much more closely on two textual sources: Coward’s screenplay and his earlier stage play *Still Lives*. Rice explained however, that whilst she ‘wouldn’t call it [*Brief Encounter*] a devised show’ she would still call it a ‘devising company’ (Rice, author interview, 2014).

Even creating something as outwardly traditional as *Brief Encounter* you try and have actors that are going to bring something new into the space, something surprising, and understand the language of devising. (Rice, author interview, 2014)

Whilst a script, adapted in advance from the two written sources, was in place for the rehearsal process, Kneehigh’s version also engaged fully with the status of the film as a British classic. The performance drew heavily on memories of the film and also on a shared nostalgia for the cinematic experience of the 1930s and 1940s. In performance Kneehigh’s *Brief Encounter* utilised London’s Haymarket Cinema to create an evocative, cinematic and self-referential retelling realised through simultaneous use of stage, screen and auditorium space that enhanced the audience’s sense of the piece as a shared cultural memory.[[3]](#endnote-3)

By focusing on a collective cultural consciousness, Rice sees Kneehigh as following in the footsteps of all storytellers, including Shakespeare and Brecht, in taking known stories and reshaping them for new audiences. The company’s approach to storytelling is also popularist, with Shepherd and Rice sharing a strong aversion to any sense of elitism in the arts. The choices of source text therefore, often relate directly to popular culture, such as Kneehigh’s adaptations of well-known fairy tales and films. Retellings of well-known fairy tales have included *Cry Wolf*, based on *Little Red Riding Hood* (2003), *Rapunzel* (2006), *Hansel and Gretel* (2009), and a Cinderella story, *Midnight’s Pumpkin* (2012). Fairy tales suit the company’s performance style because of the direct nature of the storytelling that translates well into direct address to the audience; the scope for physical comedy, music, song, tricks and stage magic; and for their thematic exploration of the ‘inner landscapes’ of human experience.[[4]](#endnote-4) Retellings of well-known films include *Brief Encounter* and also Powell and Pressburger’s quintessentially British, wartime classic *A Matter of Life and Death* (2007). These retellings assume a certain amount of recognition from the audience and playful intertextual references are made in each, not only to the meaning or particular style of original versions, which in the case of fairy tales are often explicitly subverted and reversed, but also to the genre and historical context that the originals are embedded in. To borrow Hutcheon’s terms, Kneehigh’s retelling of popular works create ‘the doubled pleasure of the palimpsest: more than one text is experienced – and knowingly so’ as the audience enjoy the playfulness of ‘repetition’ and of ‘difference’ between versions (Hutcheon, 2006, p.116).

However, as Hutcheon’s also asserts, ‘for an adaptation to be successful in its own right, it must be so for knowing and unknowing audiences’ and this presents a greater challenge when a source text is likely to be well known by some, but completely unknown to others, as in the case of less canonical myths and fairy tales and classic texts (Hutcheon, 2006, p.121). With regards to fairy tales, the extent to which the audience know a particular tale may not be that significant a factor, as the tropes of the genre are so engrained within our cultural consciousness that the audience can still enjoy a sense of intertextual play. As Julie Sanders argues in *Adaptation and Appropriation*, fairy tales ‘participate in a very active way in a shared community of knowledge, and have therefore proved particularly rich sources for adaptation’ (Sanders, 2006, p.45). Indeed Rice demonstrates this point herself when she says that ‘I didn’t know the story of *The Red Shoes*, but I knew what it meant somehow, as it’s in our cultural psyche’ (Rice, author interview, 2014). Whether or not audience members were familiar with Hans Christian Andersen’s version or Powell and Pressburger’s film, they could still recognise the subversive nature of Kneehigh’s retelling in which cross gender casting and cross-dressing highlighted social constructs and challenged aspects of Christian morality.

Where Kneehigh have tackled weighty classics, Rice believes that the company’s task has been to ‘reveal’ the meaning of the sources as clearly as possible and to attempt to emphasise human themes, such as love, family, loss (Rice, author interview, 2014).

I think I am by nature populist, I don’t always get the classics. I often find them impossible to understand and I don’t enjoy things being so difficult that you can’t 'get in', that you can’t enjoy… I don’t think that’s dumbing down, I think its saying there’s all sorts of richness that we can absolutely celebrate and explore, but that there is no elite club, everybody is in *this* club. Everybody has to be able to enjoy this night [a given performance night] on some level. (Rice, author interview, 2014)

This does not mean, however, that Kneehigh’s adaptations of classic texts are not challenging and do not offer interesting and sometimes provocative critiques of contemporary society. Their version of Euripides’ *The Bacchae* (2004) is an excellent example of a retelling that was both accessible and challenging, as audiences were invited to celebrate light hearted bacchic revelry – through audience participation including drinking wine with Dionysus and singing comic songs with ‘his women’ – that turned sharply to unsettling chaos and then brutal violence at the end of the play. This dramatic change of register was at the centre of theatre critic’s responses, for example Lyn Gardner remarked that Rice ‘lulls us into a false sense of security... when it reaches its malignant climax you are quite taken by surprise. After the furious storm comes the terrifying silence’ (Gardner, 2004).

Rice’s approach to the piece was to view the subject of femininity through the lens of a cross-gender chorus, all male performers with bare chests and tutus exploring why a grandmother, a teenager and a menopausal woman might be tempted to leave society and seek excitement on the wild mountain. This chorus led the audience through the complex narrative of the Greek tragedy, at one point in the style of a school lesson on the blackboard. Reflecting on the production Rice described how the company had devised this scene in response to their own attempts to unravel the complex narrative.

My job is to reveal, not to conceal. And in something like *The Bacchae* that was so simple that structure… we all sat down and we couldn’t understand it, so we sat in that room [at the Barns] with the blackboard and said ‘let’s get this straight. Who’s who? Who was Zeus?’ And we literally did it on the board, and there’s me thinking well if we had to do this, how can I expect anybody who comes into the theatre to understand it? (Rice, author interview, 2014)

This exemplifies Kneehigh’s approach to retelling as a process of revealing and simplifying that should not be dismissed as ‘dumbing down’, because the result is accessible, non-elitist and popular theatre that can be moving and thought-provoking. This example also reveals the suitability of devising methodologies as valuable collaborative processes for unlocking and reimagining source texts.

**Devising Retellings through Three Stages of Development**

Through my research I have come to think of Kneehigh’s adaptation process as loosely divided into three key stages. (1) The director develops his/her concept for the show in collaboration with core members of the company and/or co-producers, and exploration of the chosen source materials begins. This may or may not include the writing of either fragments of text, or a more substantial script (2) An ensemble of core members, cast and crew embark on two weeks of intensive, creative work at the barns (3) What we might consider to be a more standard rehearsal period ensues, often at a co-producing venue, and the structure of the piece is fixed ready for performance. This third stage might also be said to encompass the run of the show itself, where the audience are invited into the process of retelling through pre-performance activity in and around venues, through direct address and participation during the performance, and indeed through that ‘pleasure of the palimpsest’ that characterises the reception of an adaptation (Hutcheon, 2006, p.116).

The artists involved in each stage of development, and the manner of their involvement, can vary from one production to the next, as Kneehigh operate on a core and pool structure: ‘common to many British theatre companies where there is a small permanent core, usually made up of founder members, almost always including an artistic director. Individual projects may bring together a larger number of participants and these will normally be people to whom the company returns again and again’ (Mermikides and Smart, 2010, p.16). At present, Kneehigh’s artistic directors, Rice and Shepherd, head the company and very much lead the devising process; both are performers, and when not directing, Shepherd still performs in most Kneehigh productions. The contribution of other writers and performers that might be said to make up the company’s ‘pool’ should not be underestimated however, as many have a longstanding affiliation to the company and clearly share a vocabulary of practice.

In Kneehigh’s published play texts credit is always attributed to the contribution of the whole company in creating the work, and Shepherd founded the company upon principles of collaboration and community. In describing their collaborative practices, Kneehigh often draw on conceptions of space; the space of their rehearsal Barns as ‘elemental’ and ‘inspiring’; the space of Cornwall as ‘outside’ of London and as ‘a place where you can make things happen’; and the creative space of rehearsal where the company comes together to devise. On their website, Kneehigh define themselves in the following way:

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 barely any mobile phone reception and nowhere to pop out for a quick cappuccino. 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. This creative space is at the heart of how we create and conceive our work. (Kneehigh Theatre, 2014)

Kent also describes Kneehigh as an artistic community, and visiting the Kneehigh barns at Goran Haven, where the creation of all their shows begins, makes it immediately apparent that Kent’s description is not an idealised version of a vague company ethos, but rather relates directly to the practical way in which Kneehigh still approach making performance:

[Shepherd] developed a belief in an assembly of actors who lived, worked and ate together in a communal way, making energised creative space. Pieces of theatre would develop organically and through ‘communion’ in the art of theatre... underlying the organic development are research, experiment and an emphasis on crafting work. (Kent, 2010, p.746)

Research clearly dominates the first stage of the creative process that I have identified, with the director working in a fairly isolated way on the germination of an idea for a show. Kneehigh Theatre’s work is strongly director led, either by Shepherd or Rice, whose sensibilities drive the shape and aesthetics of their productions. In the first phase of the process much of the work is carried out individually by the director and through discussion with other company members who might begin to work on writing text, composing music or designing for the piece. As Rice describes her chosen source texts as ‘cultural memories’ her preference is to conceptualise the piece from her own memory of the text or film she is going to adapt, or, in the case of some myths (*Tristan and Yseult*) or classic texts (Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* and Euripides’ *Bacchae*), to work from a children’s version (Rice, author interview, 2014). Rice admits to doing very little research and stresses that working too cerebrally, with multiple versions or academic articles, carries a danger of making her ‘feel stupid or invalidated’ and distancing her from her instinctual attraction to a particular story (Rice, author interview, 2014). Rice does concede however, that other members of the company balance her emotional and instinctive approach. Grose for example likes to undertake a lot of research, always working directly with the source text, and taking confidence from knowing as much about it as he can. Within this first phase it is usual for these different kinds of research to go on independently, as an initial concept for the retelling begins to be formulated.

Rice has spoken candidly in interviews about her approach to directing as quite authoritative in terms of creatively authoring the show (in distinction to the play text) and taking responsibility for making final decisions. Rice believes that through strong leadership she is able to create ‘an environment in which people have good ideas’ and actually feel freed up within the process to be creative, thoughtful and playful (Rice, author interview, 2014).

At its heart, the word devising is of great importance at the very seed of the show. So you’re telling the actors ‘this is not something I’m going to tell you to do’, so you say ‘we’re going to devise it’. Even if it is a script, it’s a useful word to say this is not set, this is not decided. (Rice, author interview, 2014)

Having participated in two devising workshops run by Shepherd, I can say that he shares this aim with Rice and his approach is intended to free actors up to take creative risks and to offer ideas with a sense of ‘generosity’, ‘lightness’ and ‘mischief’ (Shepherd, 2010). Govan et al suggest that the creative play and improvisation used in early devising companies to author work, is now a prevalent methodology in the rehearsal room of director led and scripted productions (Govan et al, 2007, p. 39); and in *Devising in Process*, 2010, Mermikides and Smart highlight a sense of creative play as one of the shared characteristics of many contemporary devising processes.

What we mean by ‘play’ is both the willingness to improvise around ideas and the degree of strategic flexibility purposefully left within the process, with many companies delaying fixing their pieces until a very late stage. (Mermikides and Smart, 2010, p.24)

Their definition relates well to Kneehigh’s use of devising within what I have identified above as the second phase of their creative process. It is during this second phase that the director opens the act of reimagining and retelling out to more participants, through devising methodologies. Some might simply call this period the start of rehearsals, but this would not necessarily signify the important focus placed on building an ensemble, and on the kinds of exploration of source materials that we might be more used to associating with R&D (research and development) periods. Who exactly is involved, and what exactly takes place during this period, is of course variable and project specific. However, there are certainly common elements that reveal the journey of a given source text through what Hutcheon would describe as the director’s ‘personal artistic filters’; then the personal emotional memories and shared cultural consciousness of the cast and crew; before finally, the wider interpretive community of the audience (Hutcheon, 2006, p.84). As Rice describes it:

The next thing that I would always do is start building the foundations of ‘why’. Now I’ve made an awful lot of decisions, and I know the world, I know why I’m 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. (Rice, in Radosavljevic, 2013b, p.101)

By outlining specific exercises that the company use in this phase to explore their source texts, we are able to see how their aim – to retell stories in a non-elitist, relevant, often celebratory and sometimes challenging way – influences and is manifest in their creative practice. Attending a two-day devising workshop with Shepherd, at Beintheworkfest in Berlin (2010), I was able to experience a condensed version of this second phase of the process, where the focus is jointly on building an ensemble and inspiring creative ideas; opening up the source text via interpretive and representational activities. The workshop was based on Gabrielle Garcia Marquez’s short story, “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings,” which is a story that Shepherd has returned to several times. He and Bill Mitchell devised an outdoor production called *Windfall* in 1993, before returning to the story as part of the 3 Islands project between Cornwall, Malta and Cyprus in 2003; and Shepherd directed a production of it in association with Little Angel Theatre in 2011, written by Anna Maria Murphy with puppets by Sarah Wright. With Little Angel Theatre, four puppeteers retold the story through a whole community of puppets living in a grey-washed, rain-soaked, crab-invested fishing village. In this retelling, the fate of the village – visited by a suspected angel, overrun with miracle seekers and tourists, and at the mercy of dubious religious leaders and bankers – resonated with the changing landscape of many British coastal towns courting tourism and development. Whilst our workshop and the subsequent puppet version with Little Angel were not linked, participating in the workshop and then later watching the production has brought into clearer focus the relationship between developmental stages of devising and finished performance.

Unlike at the barns, we were not sharing accommodation, cooking together or running along the Cornish cliff tops in the mornings, but essentially the progression of work that we undertook mirrors Rice and Shepherd’s description of beginning work at the barns, with care taken to unite the participants as an ensemble. The atmosphere of the workshop was light hearted, gleeful even; we sang a lot and we played a lot of games, not just initially, but throughout the two days, in order to become comfortable with each other, to keep ‘charging the space’ and to ‘re-energise’ ourselves. However, storytelling always remained our primary focus and many of the games revolved around what Shepherd calls ‘storying’ (Shepherd, 2010). Shepherd described ‘storying’ as ‘exercising our storytelling muscles’ and he tasked us to create stories from the contents of our bags, from sculptures, from simply positioning actors on a marked-out stage. We then applied many storytelling techniques to Marquez’s text, engaging in what Kneehigh actress Joanna Holden has described, in relation to *Hansel and Gretel* (2009), as ‘finding ways you want to tell the story – whether it’s through puppetry, whether it’s through music, whether it’s through movement, whether it’s through you as a performer’ (Holden, in Radosavljevic, 2013b, p.110).

Some key elements of Kneehigh’s approach to adaptation emerged, such as a preference for instinctive, immediate responses. These responses were placed very simply under headings such as: Themes/Characters/Design. These were explored through quick imaginative tasks, such as drawing striking images from the story. Finally, they were condensed into bullet points of action from which we created little picture books. The materials that were generated soon supplanted the text itself and, displayed around the rehearsal room, these became our points of reference. Several of the ideas that emerged from these storytelling exercises pointed towards the retelling that Shepherd went on to create with Little Angel. Such as the nosey neighbour as narrator, the mother’s entrepreneurial desires as a significant turning point in the action, and the strong sense of a community caught up in consumerist greed that only serves to reveal people’s fickleness and teach them about the ambiguity of capitalist and religious figures of authority. My experience of the workshop thus exemplified how Kneehigh’s approach ensures that the finished production is inflected with the interpretations and interests of the cast as they emerge during the collaborative play of this second phase of the creative process.

However, had a version of the story been fully created from this workshop, it would certainly have differed a great deal to Little Angel’s puppet play in form, aesthetic and thematic character, because Kneehigh’s devising exercises focus not only on retelling the story, but also on exploring the cast’s personal connections to it through their collective artistic skills. A lot of time is devoted to finding that shared sense of ‘why’ and following that ‘why’ off in interesting tangents. For example, one of the workshop participants related the story to aspects of his childhood in communist Poland. He felt that his desire for consumerist goods and his longing for the consumer choice of the West, was reflected somewhat in the villagers’ dreams and aspirations. Shepherd asked the participant to retell his story in Polish with another performer improvising an on-the-spot translation. Then, because we were an international group with quite varied levels of performance experience, we repeated the exercise in other languages and in an invented ‘gobbledegook’ – this exercise was one of several that helped to relieve the pressure of improvising dialogue and suggested ways in which we might find our own unique playing style. All of the storytelling exercises – creating and costuming characters, bringing those characters to life, and devising scenes complete with puppets, lights and music – whilst never really at odds with Marquez’s story, were characterised by our own interpretations, our own strengths as performers and our natural characteristics. It was very clear how Kneehigh’s approach to exploring source material could evoke personal responses that, once shared and explored, give performers a strong sense of investment in the material.

Rice describes the material generated at this stage of a show’s formation as a ‘fertile palette of words, music and design’ (Kneehigh Theatre, 2014). Writer Anna Maria Murphy, speaking specifically of *The Red Shoes*, supports this description.

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 [in the case of *The Red Shoes*] and the actors, through devising, improvisation and the poems. Each plays an equal part. I say it is living, as it’s always changing and we all own it. (Murphy in Kneehigh Theatre, 2005, p.179)

The inclusion of writers within devising processes is extremely common, and as Mermikides and Smart point out, has its precedent in many of the devising collectives of the 1970s (see Mermikides and Smart, 2010, p.12). Rice has spoken of casting the writers for a project in the same way that she would cast the performers, and claims to work with them in a very similar way, by setting them tasks. These tasks might include observing and writing up scenes devised by performers or generating fragments of text inspired by the source material. Grose describes his experiences of writing text for Kneehigh as quite varied. Within one production he explains that

Some of it [the script] is written by me pre-rehearsals, some of it is improvised, the actors come up with stuff, and some of it is improvised and then I write it. (Grose, author interview, 2014)

When writing text and lyrics for the fairy tale adaptation *The Wild Bride* (2011) Grose wrote a lot of material independently in advance, which was then given to Rice to ‘cut and paste it and put it together and use what she wanted, and she would say look ‘this bit is all gonna be image, this is all gonna be dance, so we don’t need that’ (Grose, author interview, 2014). *The Wild Bride’s* central character – represented by three actresses – did not speak, therefore much of the action was devised through physical theatre and dance; the fact that Grose is accustomed to working with Kneehigh as a deviser/performer as well as writer, meant that Rice could create the adaptation and final script using his text quite freely. This supports Mermikides and Smart’s assertion that

The simple presence of the playwright in rehearsal opens up a dialogue which can offer different perspectives and opportunities to explore ideas physically, visually and interactively before the script is finalised. (Mermikides and Smart, 2010, p.22)

Tom Morris, writer for several Kneehigh adaptations, gives a detailed description of this process as he experienced it with *The Wooden Frock* (2003), which was based on the short story “Wooden Maria” from Italo Calvino’s *Italian Folktales*.

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 [Mitchell, founder member and designer] evolved a vision for the world in which our play would take place… Before a word was written Mike Shepherd was wearing a wimple and neat Moroccan slippers and answering to the name of ‘Nursey”. In this way, the characters 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. (Morris, in Kneehigh Theatre, 2005, p.124)

Kneehigh’s core and regular company members share a working vocabulary and practice, which Grose calls ‘a kind of shorthand’ that inspires confidence and a sense of freedom within the process (Grose, author interview, 2014). The director of each Kneehigh show leads the creative process from the front, but relationships between all of the roles are rich and productive, and the input of each collaborator is valued as they approach the task of retelling a story from a shared consciousness of it. As Rice says

Kneehigh is a team. The shared imagination is greater than any individual’s, so we begin the rehearsal process by returning to the story. We tell it to each other, scribble thoughts on huge pieces of paper and relate it to our own experience. We create characters, always looking to serve and subvert the story. (Rice, in Kneehigh Theatre, 2005, p.13)

Devising and adapting are intrinsically linked within Kneehigh’s creative processes, as methods for interpreting, revealing and sharing a story, regardless of whether they have (1) a vague *or* specific source text(s), and (2) fragments of dialogue, lyrics and poetry *or* closer to a full script to work with. Both their devising and adapting strategies are very securely founded on the principle that, whilst individual artists might own their creations or versions, nobody in fact *owns* a story. Studying Kneehigh reaffirms the value of stories as mutable and transferable across history, contexts and media. Kneehigh’s retellings remind us that for some the joy of adaptation is in the pleasure of acknowledgement, recognition and comparison of intextualities, but for others, retellings offer the pleasures of discovering a story that was not or only vaguely known, and of having something revealed and made relevant that was assumed to be archaic or too difficult to be understood and enjoyed; Kneehigh’s retellings attempt to reach and satisfy both of these audiences.

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1. For a concise overview of this shift see Lefebvre, Benjamin, ed. *Textual Transformations in Children’s Literature: Adaptations, Translations, Reconsiderations*. New York and London, Routledge, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For further discussion of Kneehigh’s *Cymbeline*, see Radosavlijevic, Duska. *Theatre-Making: Interplay between text and performance in the twentieth century.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For detailed analysis of Kneehigh’s *Brief Encounter*, see Georgi, C. “Kneehigh Theatre's *Brief Encounter*: ‘Live on Stage-Not the Film’”. Raw, L. and Tutan, D. *The Adaptation of History: Essays on Ways of Telling the Past.* Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co Inc, 2012. pp. 66-78. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Rice often aligns Kneehigh’s view of fairy tales to Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Uses of Enchantment* (1978), which offers a reading of fairy tales as psychological aids, particularly to children, in coming to understand the social world. For detailed analysis of *Cry Wolf* see Lilley, Heather. “Everyone in the Room has a Connection to the Story”, *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance.* 5.2, 2012. pp149-166. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)