

1 Introduction: Feminisms, Feeling and Love

This is a love story but not as you know it.

Should an academic study be framed in this way? Love seems an unlikely bedfellow for critical thinking. In this Element, I think about Emma Rice's work, a body of theatre-making spanning three decades, as feminist acts of love.

It is the summer of 2022 and the latest series of *Love Island* has just ended. On this 'vote-em-off' reality TV show singletons frolic together in the sun, hoping to find 'the one'. The romantic love story is a mainstay of culture, from popular entertainment to opera, a pervasive obsession spearing the heart of the humanist dream. Looking outside of the bourgeoisie couple and the nuclear family love takes other forms (vocational, friendship, kinship, public, queer, non-human, sensual, spiritual, and erotic). Here, I work with love as a force for feminist activism.

I first started to explore Emma's work in 2008, looking at feminist theatre-making practices in the United Kingdom (Peck, 2021). In developing my thinking, I draw on three in-depth interviews with Emma, interviews with seven collaborators, fieldwork (a total of fourteen days rehearsal observation, including two productions, two research and development processes and a summer school), archival material, live and digital productions, journalistic reviews and feminist scholarship.¹ My research methodology is a tripartite exchange between myself as researcher, Emma, and the practitioners (in particular actors) with whom she works. Wherever possible I give space to the practitioners' voices.

I trouble academic tradition as my own feminist act. Rather than refer to the main protagonist by her surname, which, to my mind, un-genders, depersonalises and reaffirms hierarchies – all antithetical to my intentions – she is Emma throughout. My preference calls attention to what and how this convention performs. Why have we come to decide that using a surname bestows authority or critical distance? My approach to writing about the work of a live practitioner is relational, a generous passing between, my own act of love, critical *and* loving. Emma wouldn't refer to me as Peck. I do, however, maintain academic convention with other sources.

At the time of writing, between 1999 and 2022, Emma has made thirty-one productions, the majority exploring love – romantic, familial, friendship, non-human, and artistic.² These love stories, told from a female perspective, don't

¹ This fieldwork took place between June and October 2022. Three one hour interviews with Emma took place over three weeks in June/July 2022 via Zoom. Individual interviews with collaborators were mainly face to face.

² Her body of work is listed in the Appendix, where I highlight and cross-reference productions that have received close analysis in this Element. For access to Emma's work, see Wise Children at www.wisechildrendigital.com/, Shakespeare's Globe <https://player.shakespearesglobe.com/> and the National Theatre archive www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/about-us/archive/.

shy away from vicissitudes – pain is intertwined with pleasure, joy with despair – in an emotional scramble for freedom, hope and the possibility of happiness. Her storytelling is dominated by adaptations: myths, folk tales and legends, such as *The Red Shoes* (2002), *The Bacchae* (2005), *Tristan and Yseult* (2006) and *The Wild Bride* (2011); popular novels, such as Angela Carter's *Wise Children* (2018), Enid Blyton's *Mallory Towers* (2019) and Charlotte Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (2021); and iconic films/television, such as *Brief Encounter* (2009), *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (2012), *Steptoe and Son* (2012) and *Bagdad Café* (2021). Alongside these adaptations are productions of Shakespeare, freely adapted such as *Cymbeline* (2007), or close-to-the-text, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2016) and *Twelfth Night* (2017); operatic productions, such as *Orpheus in the Underworld* with English National Opera (2019) and new writing, such as Tanika Gupta's *The Empress* with the Royal Shakespeare Company (2013). The extent to which a work emerges through an ensemble devising process starts with the original text, or Emma's own adaptation will depend on the nature and scale of the production. Inherent in the process of adaptation is potential political affect. When audiences come to see a stage adaptation of a story they have already encountered, whether intimately familiar or remotely aware of the original, they bring preconceptions. Through the iteration Emma invites us to view the story we thought we knew in a different way, from a different perspective or with an unexpected turn of events. For example, in her adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, it is the invented chorus of the personified Yorkshire Moor (not Nelly Dean) that narrates and comments on the epic love story; in *Don John*, an adaptation of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, the story is told from the perspective of John's female victims who enact their revenge; in Emma's adaptation of Hans Christian Anderson's *The Red Shoes*, the central protagonist, Lydia, rather than embrace forgiveness and welcome death as just punishment for her transgression, fights off the supposedly benevolent angel, refusing death, to go 'her own way' (Babbage, 2018, pp. 96–7). Emma's adapting practice subverts popular stories, making space to rethink preconceptions and to question value systems.

Her work is complicated by her gendered position, which splits opinions and causes controversy. She has been variously described by critics as 'the most relentlessly inventive British theatre director of the twenty-first century' (Cavendish, 2018) and the 'conundrum of British theatre' (Simpson, 2022). Whilst she has been lauded with awards – in 2019 winning the Outstanding Contribution to British Theatre at the UK Theatre Awards, and in 2022 chosen by Sky Arts as one of the fifty most influential British artists of all time – it is curious that her important feminist body of work has not been recognised in

scholarship.³ And yet, she is one of a handful of women in this century to forge a lifetime career in UK theatre: building a company, advancing regional touring and launching a school to develop young talent. To my mind, Emma's determined commitment to nurturing a theatre family sits within a constellation of radical practitioners such as Annabel Arden, co-founder of Complicité, Anne Jellicoe (1927–) and her development of the community play, Annie Castledine (1939–2016) and Joan Littlewood (1914–2002), described as 'The Mother of Modern Theatre' (BBC News, 2002).

Emma's gender has performed itself very publicly. In 2007, the then artistic director of The National Theatre, Nicolas Hytner, defended her and other women theatre directors from the misogynistic bias of British theatre critics (*The Guardian*, 2007). The debate drew attention to the gendered hierarchies of the industry and the ways that women's freedom as artists was more critically held to account. In 2016, Emma became the first female artistic director of one of the most iconic theatre spaces in the world, Shakespeare's Globe, a reconstruction of an Elizabethan playhouse on the South Bank in London. The tenure, which should have been for five years, was cut short after two successful seasons due to irreconcilable differences with the executive board who 'took exception to her experimental style' (Singh, 2017). Again, this public ousting drew attention to the ways that Emma and her work were positioned in the cultural industry, where certain belittling discriminations worked against her: her gender, being seen to be a female auteur, making popular theatre, messing with the classics, presenting herself as anti-intellectual, making work that is local *and* global, commercial *and* experimental, work that unapologetically evokes emotion (sentimentality, empathy, pain and pleasure) through love stories – a potent cocktail which I position as feminist activism. In Section 2, I map her theatre journey and its feminisms in relation to reductive contextual binaries (the individual *or* the group, text *or* performance, the radical *or* the popular). These binaries cut to the heart of tensions in the UK theatre industry and in the academy.

Returning to the title of this Element, what do I mean by feminist acts of love? What are the critical lenses that underpin my thinking about feminisms, feeling, and love?

1.1 Feminisms

Feminism is a slippery term that can easily become a contested category rather than a way of being in the world. In relation *with* Emma's work, I turn to the posthuman feminism of Rosi Braidotti. Braidotti locates her project firmly in

³ Duška Radosavljević's scholarship on Kneehigh has had the largest impact and is referenced throughout.

the present moment and what feminism can do in the here-and-now to seek a more nuanced position, with an emphasis on redefining humanism. This recognises the blurring of the social, radical and liberal feminist movements, eclipsed by new concerns.⁴ Feminism for the twenty-first century is not only a struggle for equality of all marginal communities, including people of colour, Black, indigenous peoples and LGBTQ+, but also looks beyond human to imagine other ways of becoming human and being in the world, embodied and embedded, ‘a heterogeneous assemblage’ (Braidotti, 2022, p. 125). Braidotti seeks to mobilise feminism’s radical politics into action.

Posthuman feminism has developed from new materialisms that foreground processes of becoming and relationality – the sexuate nature of being and nature/culture *besideness* (the mutual reliance on human and non-human). Realising the need for a posthuman convergence is a necessary response to seismic shifts in cultural, social and planetary conditions – structural injustice, unequal distribution of wealth, environmental crisis and technological developments. This builds on ecofeminism, LGBTQ+ and critical race theories and feminist technoscience. For Braidotti, a posthuman feminist agenda has the potential to shape an affirmative relational ethics for change, which, like Jill Dolan’s utopian theatre, constructs horizons for hope, decolonial and antiracist, where “‘We’-who-are-not-one-and-the-same-but-are-in-*this*-together’ (Braidotti, 2022, p.8). Braidotti’s code word for this is ‘transversality’, which works from an ethics of affirmation as transformative feminist practice (Braidotti, 2022, p. 103). I enjoy thinking through this aspect of Emma’s practice throughout this Element.

Her work’s hybrid style, defying easy categorisation but with a distinct theatrical language, ignites transversal potential. It has been described as folk theatre, poor theatre and total theatre with a punk aesthetic, characterised by exuberant theatricality. Quentin Letts writes: ‘That is the appeal of an Emma Rice show: the whole thing is so dolloped with theatrical bombast, so suffused with warmth, it finally melts you into submission’ (2018). Whilst total theatre recognises multi-disciplined storytelling, harnessing the whole apparatus of theatricality and stagecraft – acting, song, dance, text, set, costume, lights, sound, puppets, digital – it falls short as a definition for Emma’s work as it doesn’t attend to its politics, its transversal effect on an audience. Emma herself resists these definitions, describing its theatrical style as ‘patchwork’ or ‘tapes-try’ (Rice, 2022a). I’m interested in digging into the feminist potential of this

⁴ I lean here on Elaine Aston’s *Restaging Feminisms*, which maps the evolution of radical, socialist and liberal feminisms in UK theatre (Aston, 2020). Radical feminism sees the patriarchy as the main obstacle; socialist feminism foregrounds class politics; liberal feminism, ‘a strategy’ rather than a movement, pursues women’s advancement through existing systems (2020, p. 7).

metaphor. In Section 3, I seek out the transversal, through fieldwork observation and interviews, to position her work as theatre of assemblage, shaping a feminist politics through its form, process of construction and affect.

In posthuman feminism, where relational transversality is at the heart of the project, we come into being in relation *with*. So, posthuman feminism foregrounds relational ethics and cross-species interdependence – a middle ground, or imminence – working with a decolonial, multispecies, feminist ecology (Braidotti, 2022, p. 100). Whilst feminist technoscience calls for a critical ‘de-naturalisation’ of the body, ecofeminism and feminist materialism propose ‘strategic re-naturalisation’ (Braidotti, 2022, pp.107-39). At this time of cultural, social and ecological crisis, the body necessarily experiences a ‘double pull towards re-materialisation and de-materialisation’ in relation to ‘human and non-human entities’ (Braidotti, 2022, p. 111). These strands operate *beside* each other to converge, recognising that cells and genomes are, nodding to Karen Barad (2003), in constant diffraction, to regenerate and re-naturalise the artificial, ‘Naturalising queerness, queering nature’ (Braidotti, 2022, p. 176). I see this position reflected in the representation of gender in Emma’s works. In Section 4, I examine her exploration of femaleness, drawing on interviews and key productions: *The Wild Bride* and *Don John*. In Section 5, through the analyses of *The Bacchae*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Wise Children*, I consider queering strategies as political activism where ‘Difference is recast as trans individual complexity, or the principle of not one’ (Braidotti, 2022, p. 177).

1.2 Feelings

An ‘Emma Rice show’ is unapologetically emotional. It does things to your body; you get goosebumps, the hairs on your arms stand on end, a surge of adrenaline stimulating miniscule muscles that pull at the hair roots. Her ability to affect bodies with the extremes of emotion through theatrical storytelling defines her work, which has led me to work with theoretical frameworks of affect *in relationship with* feminism throughout this Element.

Whilst she doesn’t explicitly refer to affect theory, Braidotti does identify carnal empiricism – the idea that knowledge is a felt sense, experienced through and passed between bodies – as the methodology for posthuman feminism (2022, p. 107). Throughout the Element I position Emma’s work as theatre of affect, focussing on the ways it produces feelings – particularly feelings of happiness, empathy and sentimentality through love.

To amplify considerations of affect at this introductory stage, it is useful to note how Melissa Gregory and Gregory Seigworth, in *The Affect Theatre*

Reader, overview the multiple variations of affect theory and its refusal to be pinned down (2010). Affect, they observe, has an assortment of ‘philosophical/psychological/physiological underpinnings, critical vocabularies, and ontological pathways, and, thus, can be (and has been) turned toward all manner of political/pragmatic/performative ends’ (Braidotti, 2022, p. 4). For my purposes, I am drawn to approaches that pay attention to affect’s in-between spaces as potentially transformative: its capacity to act and be acted upon, underpinned by the Deleuzian concern with immanence (2005) and Spinoza’s relational ethics (1996). This can be discerned in feminist work that looks beyond fixed categories to the sticky and blurred spaces of imminence, between limitations of gender (Elizabeth Grosz 1994; Moira Gatens 1996; Rosi Braidotti, 2022) or human and non-human (Karen Barad, 2003; Jane Bennet, 2010; Donna Haraway, 2016). These ribbons of critical feminist affect are threaded throughout sections, highlighting the feeling strategies operating in the in-between spaces of Emma’s work.

In *Theatre and Feeling*, Erin Hurley identifies three key feeling strategies – affect, emotion and mood – to interrogate the ways in which feelings come to matter in systems of cultural value. Affects are biological reactions, triggered through our nervous systems, producing felt bodily changes – for example sweating, heart beating faster, breathing changing and goosebumps. According to Hurley, as automatic responses, affects indicate our base ‘animal nature’. Emotion is the perception of those physiological affects, involving judgement or discernment, more complex and socially inscribed, such as shame or love (2010, p. 16). Emotion, as a cultural/social construction acts as ‘a bridge between body and mind, between sensation and evaluation, and indeed between individual and group. . . . Emotion is conventionalised or codified affect, fitted into meanings in an intersubjective context’ (Hurley, 2010, p. 19). Mood is a disposition or ambient, background state. It creates rhythms and resonance that initiate particular feelings. Each category of feeling operates as ‘feeling technologies’ and moves us, shifting how we experience and make sense of the world. Hurley problematises the way that popular culture, which offers ‘feeling-labour’, falls into dichotomies and hierarchies of value: high culture above low culture, thought above feeling, reason above emotion, serious above comedy, education above entertainment, mind above body, human above animal, male above female, White above Black. I point to these systems of control in Section 2. The transformational promise of affect lies in its processual nature – it’s ‘what-if-ness’? And, as such, this makes affect a vital material in theatre. Consequently, the ways that Emma’s work produces feeling is central to its feminist activism – activism that I suggest is founded on love.

1.3 Love



Figure 1 Emma Rice and Don Jamieson in *The Birthday Party* (1992) dir. Nikki Svéd (renamed *The Flying Lovers of Vitebsk* in 2016)

Photo courtesy of Leah Gordon

Emma talks a lot about love. She doesn't shy away from using the word to explain her work, her practice, her life choices. This image, taken early in her career, captures her performing a heartrending love story with her then husband. Her personal life has been inextricably entwined with her practice. She reflects, 'I have always been very good at falling in love. Love pours out of me quite messily, passionately and unstopably. But this "talent" has also got me in deep trouble. Love is grown up, difficult and damaging stuff. It is about your responsibility for another human being, as well as your responsibility to your own bursting soul' (Rice, 2022). In this Element I suggest that, for Emma, love is *the* life force of life and art.

This is not limited to romantic love. Theatre and theatre-making have their foundations in constructs of love. Theatre people explain why they do what they do with a variation of the theme of love; amateur in French translates as 'lover'; Antonin Artaud's claims 'the actor is an athlete of the heart' (Hurley, 2010, p. 5). In theatre, acts of love, or 'feeling-labour', can be seen as social work, as audiences come to rethink how to be in the world together through shared feeling (Hurley, 2010, p. 4).

I come to an understanding of love through the scholarship of bell hooks. Her love trilogy charts her journey to position love as personal creed and political activism. The essential drive towards love as the ultimate solution is bound by its failure. hooks' definition of love is drawn from M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Travelled* (1978), where he defines love as 'the will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth' (hooks, 2000, p. 5). For hooks, this looks beyond romantic love:

[W]hen we see love as the will to nurture one's own or another's spiritual growth, revealed through acts of care, respect, knowing, and assuming responsibility, the foundation of all love in our life is the same. There is no special love exclusively reserved for romantic partners. Genuine love is the foundation of our engagement with ourselves, with family, with friends, with partners, with everyone we choose to love. (hooks, 2000, p. 136)

hooks' work sits within Black feminist love politics. For Jenifer Nash, this activism looks beyond identity and intersectionality towards a practice that can transcend limitations of selfhood. She overviews the development of second-wave Black feminist love politics from the South (Alice Walker, 1983; Audre Lorde, 1984; June Jordan, 2003) as being bound up with self-love as a practice of freedom, noting Walker's 1983 definition of womanism and love as an investment in difference: '[L]ove is central to the very definition of the womanist subject who feels love for other women, for humanity, for the spiritual world, for celebration, and, most important, for herself' (Nash, 2011, p. 5). Vital to this self-love is a concern to inhabit and work with the positivity of difference. As Audre Lorde puts it, 'the future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference' (Lorde, 1984, p. 123). As Nash explains, this approach is radical in its 'investment in love as self-worth' (Nash, 2011, p. 12). When love starts as a practice of self-worth it can form the basis for different political communities in the future – a worldmaking utopia built on an ethics of care and held together, not by sameness, but by communal affect and a shared vision.

I recognise that, as a white woman, Emma's practice and conception of love is built on different and particular foundations. And I am mindful that, as Sara Ahmed cautions, acting 'out of love' can shut people out at the same time as it performs an act of openness (Ahmed, 2003). However, I suggest that, in her ideology and practice, Emma's work is infused with the ethics of Black feminist love politics. Considerations of love work *beside* feeling and feminisms, weaving their way throughout the sections that follow. In Section 6, I contextualise Emma's work as love activism, offering an emergent strategy for theatre at this cultural moment.

2 Feminist Underpinnings: Beside Thinking

Are you going to see Wuthering Heights?
 Wuthering Heights? That's Kneehigh isn't it?
 No it's Wise Children.
 Yes, but that's Emma Rice isn't it? . . . It's the same thing. Not really my taste.

The inferences of my exchange with a university colleague got me thinking about the way that Emma's work is positioned or culturally branded.⁵ What does this say about mechanisms of control in the industry and in the academy? The work presents conundrums: its populism, patchwork aesthetic, irreverent approach to adaptation, unabashed emotionalism, determinedly utopian hopefulness. But, when we see these aspects as fertile and productive, fuelled with an affirmative politics, we make space to acknowledge its radical potential.

In this section, I overview Emma's career in relation to three binaries allied with her practice: individual/group, text/performance and radical/popular. Working with Eve Sedgwick's 'beside thinking' helps to reconfigure these tensions to move beyond an *either/or* position to *and/with* ways of thinking that redistribute and re-imagine power (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 8). When we consider Emma's trajectory from a gendered perspective, contextualising key influences and critical incidents, its inherent feminism reveals itself. Framing her story in this way reminds us of the *besideness* of the personal and political.

2.1 Individual *and* Group

By creating a company, you are clearly stating that you are no longer an individual. You are opening your arms and shouting 'Come in! I want and need you by my side' I need others to make the work greater than the sum of its parts. But this invitation doesn't mean there are no conditions and it doesn't mean there's no hierarchy. There are both. What it does mean is that the company is bigger than one person. As a leader you've got nowhere to go if you say 'What I say goes'. What happens when you make a mistake? What happens when you want to change your mind? Yes, when everything is going well it would be an ego boost if my company was called 'Emma Rice's Company' but life and work don't always go well. It takes humility and generosity to understand and embrace that.

(Rice, 2022)

Emma's positioning in the UK theatre landscape is inextricably entwined in the tension between the individual and the group. By this I mean the ways in which she manages and builds an ensemble/company and how her individual agency

⁵ When I use the term 'brand' I am oriented towards cultural branding in terms of class communities, as opposed to commercialisation. Catherine Trenchfield offers a fascinating account of the globalised and commercial branding of Kneehigh in *The Global and Local Appeal of Kneehigh Theatre Company* (Cambridge Scholars: 2022).

as an artist is positioned in relation to that. It feels important to give space to this as I frame Emma's work as a democratic project that strives to redefine humanism, where individualism, as symptomatic of advanced capitalism, is re-imagined (Braidotti, 2022). Returning to the opening exchange, and reiterated in her comment, her identity and (to an extent) agency as an artist is conflated with the group's. Research has shown how women are less likely to 'brand' their practice than men, which, I suggest, underpins a feminist position orientated to collaboration (Peck, 2021, p. 134).

Throughout her career Emma has been committed to working with companies. She was born in 1967 in Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire. Her father, a personnel lecturer, and her mother, a social worker, took her to theatre from an early age. In the 1980s, following an underwhelming experience at secondary school, she completed a BTEC Theatre course at Claringdon Further Education College in Nottingham, led by her lifelong mentor Marielaine Church. BTEC courses (vocational alternatives to A Levels) were first launched in the 1980s, enabling students who sought a less academic and more practical, skills-based education.⁶ One could surmise that Emma's sense of herself as anti-intellectual is rooted in this formative education. The experience at Claringdon was foundational for her ideology, process and aesthetics of theatre-making. From a drama hut on the edge of the campus, the student group made a different performance each week, swapping production roles – text, acting, sound, lighting, directing, design.

This multi-disciplined ensemble practice reflected the flattened hierarchy of the women's theatre groups at the time. In the 1980s, identity politics exploded under a Thatcherite government, and whilst the feminist cause, which at the time was built on the common interests of women, was floundering, groups competed for funding (Aston, 2020, p. 4). Feminist scholarship, such as Michelene Wandor's *Carry on Understudies* (1986), pointed to the inequalities for women in British theatre. Women-only theatre companies (Siren, The Woman's Theatre Group, Clean Break) were challenging the male-constructed hierarchies of theatre-making as collectives, with non-hierarchical, democratic ensemble structures (Wandor, 1986).

This way of making theatre was not reflected in the traditional conservatoire actor training Emma experienced at Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London where she trained as an actor. In the 1980s and 1990s, drama schools had yet to be affiliated with universities and so followed narrow curriculums where female students were comparatively disadvantaged in a number of ways: there were less places offered to them and their training was stymied by a dearth

⁶ At sixteen/seventeen years old, UK students choosing to remain in full-time education take A Levels (Advanced Level Qualifications), or more vocational BTECs (Business and Technology Education Council). These courses last for two years.