

The Global and Local Appeal of Kneehigh Theatre Company

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Brand Kneehigh

By

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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2022

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-8660-X
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-8660-4

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my former PhD supervisor Dr Libby Worth and the Drama and Theatre department at Royal Holloway University. Thank you to Dr Emma Cox and Dr Kate Dorney, who recommended I publish my research. I would also like to thank Sarah C. Jane at Falmouth University for providing access to the Kneehigh Archive. Thanks, should also be given to Kneehigh Theatre Company, for supplying materials during the early days of my research, and to former company members who participated in interviews. Thank you to my colleagues at Kingston College (South Thames College Group) and West Thames College.

Finally, I would also like to offer a heartfelt thanks to my family (particularly my mom, dad, and brother) and friends who have supported me on this journey, some of which have attended numerous road trips to Cornwall.

This book is dedicated to Kneehigh Theatre and to those who have been part of their theatrical landscape.

FOREWORD

This book explores Kneehigh Theatre Company's notions of 'Brand Kneehigh' in relation to theories of globalisation. It will define Kneehigh's theatrical brand, showing Cornish cultural identity as a core component while also working with international influences through cultural exchange. By looking at the history of this company, analysis of key productions will discuss the qualities attributed to 'Brand Kneehigh' and consider the 'local' and 'global' nature of their work. This research will contribute towards developing a knowledge base about Kneehigh spanning decades, offering a detailed (and durational) study of a theatre company. The selection of productions for examination reveals the changes and reinventions Kneehigh has undergone to incorporate shifting interests and socio/economic engagements. The book will explore Kneehigh's ambitions to establish themselves as a company delivering material that is 'popular' in appeal and that meets the needs of a Cornish (local) community and international (global) audience. However, tensions working between local and global interests will be exposed, with an investigation into Kneehigh's own cited solution, their self-created performance space, Asylum.

My research and structure for this book engages with theories of globalisation, adaptation, archives and spectatorship. This is conducted in conjunction with the use of the entire Kneehigh archive and attending a range of Kneehigh performances. Building on the analysis of the above theoretical frameworks, key productions will be used as case studies to explore Kneehigh's brand evolution and artistic practices. The case studies included within the following chapters, chart the development of the Kneehigh brand considering: productions exploring interests within local heritage; a project facilitating cultural exchange between European countries; material engaging with national and international collaborations, and; performances within the Asylum. Finally, productions post Rice's departure and recruitment of Carl Grose as joint artistic director, acknowledge and examine the work of Rice's new company, Wise Children and material under Grose's direction.

The chronology of the Kneehigh brand corresponds with the chronology of the productions examined as case studies in this thesis. Earlier emergences of 'Brand Kneehigh' are analysed in terms of localisation, affirming the company's affiliations with Cornish identity in the

productions, *Quicksilver* (2002), *Tristan and Yseult* (2005), and *Blast* (2010). Progression of the brand within the realms of cultural exchange is seen in the Three Islands Project Case Study (2003-5) and *The Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* (2011). An exploration into national and international collaborations, displaying the dominance of Kneehigh's theatrical style, is examined in the productions: *Cymbeline* (2006); *A Matter of Life and Death* (2007), *Brief Encounter* (2008) and *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (2011). Performances of *The Red Shoes* (2010) and *Global Cornwall* (2012) are case studies considered within the home venue, Asylum, centralising and potentially strengthening the brand. These productions, spanning 2014 to 2020, chart a critical juncture for Kneehigh and Rice, reflecting a change of direction for both parties, a reconfiguration of the Kneehigh brand, and inception of Rice's own independent theatrical identification.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This book explores Kneehigh Theatre Company's notions of 'Brand Kneehigh' in relation to theories of globalisation. It will define Kneehigh's theatrical brand, showing Cornish cultural identity as a core component while also working with international influences through cultural exchange. By looking at the history of this company, analysis of key productions will discuss the qualities attributed to 'Brand Kneehigh' and consider the 'local' and 'global' nature of their work. This research will contribute towards developing a knowledge base about Kneehigh spanning decades, offering a detailed (and durational) study of a theatre company. The selection of productions for examination reveals the changes and reinventions Kneehigh has undergone to incorporate shifting interests and socio/economic engagements. This text will explore Kneehigh's ambitions to establish themselves as a company delivering material that is 'popular' in appeal and that meets the needs of a Cornish (local) community and international (global) audience. However, tensions working between local and global interests will be exposed, with an investigation into Kneehigh's own cited solution, their self-created performance space, Asylum.

Kneehigh is an important contemporary British theatre company to examine, running for forty-two years, before closing in June 2022. They have grown in critical acclaim and were recognised by the British Council as one of Britain's most exciting and innovative theatre companies. Kneehigh has displayed longevity in their career, negotiated by broadening their scope and ambitions to produce work initially for Cornwall, and then with the encouragement of Arts Council England, South West, amongst other funding bodies, to venture beyond the confines of their locality. This has seen the company use business models to grow stronger financially, taking their work to as many audiences as possible, enjoying high profile collaborations nationally and internationally. Additionally, Kneehigh has been acknowledged by educational examining bodies and institutions as influential theatre practitioners, with inclusion in GCSE, BTEC and A-Level specifications in addition to university study.

This book will present my research within the Kneehigh archive (held at Falmouth University, from April 2010), and attendance at the Asylum (since the first summer season in 2010). By using both performance and archive, I illustrate how the company has developed a brand that is a hybrid of local and global artistic influences and ambitions. The text will also explore the complexities Kneehigh experienced in defining and communicating Cornish cultural identity. My consideration of the Kneehigh Theatre archive triggers discursive responses to performance and archival research, offering an ‘experiential’ archive structure. I examine the ‘experiential’ environments that global brands and theatrical companies use to establish their identity, strengthen their product and reinforce their brand. Ultimately my argument establishes Kneehigh working towards an equilibrium between localism and globalism through cultural exchange.

My research and structure for this book engages with theories of globalisation, adaptation, archives and spectatorship. This is conducted in conjunction with the use of the entire Kneehigh archive and attending a range of Kneehigh performances. Building on the analysis of the above theoretical frameworks, key productions will be used as case studies to explore Kneehigh’s brand evolution and artistic practices. The case studies included within the following chapters, chart the development of the Kneehigh brand considering: productions exploring interests within local heritage; a project facilitating cultural exchange between European countries; material engaging with national and international collaborations, and; performances within the Asylum. Finally, productions post Rice’s departure and recruitment of Carl Grose as joint artistic director, acknowledge and examine the work of Rice’s new company, Wise Children and material under Grose’s direction. Within this concluding chapter the closure of Kneehigh will also be considered.

The chronology of the Kneehigh brand, corresponds with the chronology of the productions examined as case studies in this book. Earlier emergences of ‘Brand Kneehigh’ are analysed in terms of localisation, affirming the company’s affiliations with Cornish identity in the productions, *Quicksilver* (2002), *Tristan and Yseult* (2005), and *Blast* (2010). Progression of the brand within the realms of cultural exchange is seen in the Three Islands Project Case Study (2003-5) and *The Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* (2011). An exploration into national and international collaborations, displaying the dominance of Kneehigh’s theatrical style, is examined in the productions: *Cymbeline* (2006); *A Matter of Life and Death* (2007), *Brief Encounter* (2008) and *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (2011). Performances of *The Red Shoes* (2010) and *Global Cornwall* (2012) are case studies considered within the home venue,

Asylum, centralising and potentially strengthening the brand. These productions, spanning 2014 to 2020, chart a critical juncture for Kneehigh and Rice, reflecting a change of direction for both parties, a reconfiguration of the Kneehigh brand, and inception of Rice's own independent theatrical identification. It should be stated that Mike Shepherd, as founder and artistic director, has been in the role since 1980, maintaining a stable sense of leadership and artistic identity.

The research from the above-listed cases studies and theoretical analysis illustrates a company caught in international tensions; an experience still felt by many within the UK because of the EU referendum. In the Brexit referendum, Cornwall voted 'Leave' however the county stands to lose a huge amount of EU regeneration funding. The effects of Brexit and the emerging Covid 19 pandemic, have had a profound impact on Kneehigh, and will be discussed in further detail in the conclusion. The construction of their own branded space, Asylum, offered a sanctuary from global tensions and a place to fulfil their artistic vision. The Asylum also represented a physical manifestation of its growing brand. This study provides an opportunity to explore a company who contended with a range of divergent factors, while maintaining their interests and sense of cultural identity. These factors will be addressed in conjunction with the company's theatrical performance style, arguably the core component of the brand.

Kneehigh was a Cornish based Theatre Company, with a reputation for transforming classic fairy tales, popular films and literature into performance using song, dance, physical theatre, puppetry and multi-media. They have been creating theatre for forty years in the UK, maintaining a reputation as an inventive and enthralling theatre company. As described by the British Council:

Kneehigh tells stories and creates theatre of humanity from an epic and tiny scale. It works with an ever-changing ensemble of performers, musicians, artists, technicians, and administrators, and is passionate about its multi-disciplined creative process¹.

Mike Shepherd, an actor, and former primary school teacher in Cornwall founded Kneehigh Theatre in 1980. He was inspired to create work for his local community and attain creative autonomy. Shepherd had become disillusioned with working as an actor in London, finding the work uninspiring. By returning to Cornwall, he could develop work on his own terms, discover new skills and form artistic connections with musicians, artists and anyone interested in making performances.

The company originally devised performances for schools, with children as their primary audience; hence the name Kneehigh, progressing into

mainstream theatre by producing work aimed at a broader age range. Initially, Shepherd was sole artistic director, eventually sharing this role with Bill Mitchell who has since developed ‘sister’ company, WildWorks in 2005. WildWorks focuses predominantly on site-specific performance, named ‘Landscape Theatre’ on the Cornish coast. In 2003, Emma Rice became artistic director, holding this role for over a decade before moving on to The Globe in 2016, then forming her own company, Wise Children in 2018. Carl Grose (actor, director and playwright) was appointed the role of joint artistic director in late 2018. Despite the company’s fluctuating fortunes and successes (which will be considered in more detail in Chapter 3), Kneehigh continued to maintain its creative identity until the very end of their career. In recent years, they have transcended their national reputation, gaining international interest and followers of their theatrical style.

My first encounter with Kneehigh occurred in 2004 at the Battersea Arts Centre London, with the production *The Wooden Frock*. A colleague and I were taking a group of college students to this performance with some trepidation; a long train journey to an unglamorous venue, and an even longer walk up Lavender Hill, to a dreary and uninspiring entrance. Neither of us had witnessed the company before and were daunted by the prospect of the show not living up to the critical gaze of our teenage tutor group. However, the production was both inspirational and entertaining: providing an introduction to the company. It also afforded the opportunity of engaging with a theatrical ‘experience’ and Kneehigh’s ‘branded’ theatrical style; subsequently inspiring attendance to future company productions.

Brand Kneehigh

Years after attending my first Kneehigh production, a leaflet published in 2010 encouraged membership to their *Friends of Kneehigh Scheme*, to support the company’s new performance venue, the Asylum. It provided an overview of a new environment that offered a complete night out featuring a range of shows, food, drink, and live music. The language used by Kneehigh in this promotional material for the Asylum shared descriptions with other lifestyle brands. In this aspect, it contrasted with literature used by other theatre companies to communicate their work and artistic vision. An invitation to eat, drink, dance and be part of a Kneehigh ‘night out’ asserted the concept of a ‘total’ leisure product. Within this document, the company introduced the phrase, ‘Brand Kneehigh’ to outline their ambitions for a recognisable theatre company with a range of performances and products. This phrase provoked connotations with globalisation;

encouraging my consideration of the company, noting their branded ambitions and observations of cultural exchange inherent in the work.

‘Brand Kneehigh’ is a term that encompasses a broad entertainment experience. I use it as an umbrella term which includes theatrical style; performance events, music gigs, entertainment at the Asylum, food and drink, merchandise, community projects, school tours and workshops. Although other reviewers and scholars refer to the Kneehigh theatrical brand, in most instances they are referring to the company’s theatrical style. In some cases, there are descriptions of the Kneehigh entertainment experience which extends beyond the realms of onstage performance. For clarification, I will use the term ‘Brand Kneehigh’ to discuss the company’s total entertainment experience (including theatrical performance). This will include entertainment events and experiences at the Asylum, food and drink, and merchandise. References to Kneehigh’s ‘theatre brand’ or ‘theatrical style’, will focus more specifically on performance elements, seen on stage and within site-specific locations. I will also use their theatrical style as a term to reflect on their devising and adaptation processes. Although Kneehigh’s theatrical style is part of the company brand; ‘Brand Kneehigh’ displays broader ambitions for entertainment and lifestyle.

The Kneehigh ‘theatre brand’, is a performance style which encompasses an eclectic mix of physical theatre, puppetry, Brechtian Epic theatre, music, and dance, that centralises on themes of love, loss, innocence and experience. The company tends to refer to fairy tales, myths and legends as stimuli for their work, but in recent years has drawn inspiration from classic films and literature, underpinned by references to their Cornish heritage. Although other contemporary companies use similar theatrical components within their performance, Kneehigh specifically uses references to Cornwall and Cornish cultural identity within their work. Performance is used by Kneehigh as a platform to discuss and define cultural identity, with a focus on Cornwall being central to their brand. This is matched with a commitment to storytelling within theatre.

Part of Kneehigh’s theatrical style incorporates their devising and adaptation processes. Emma Govan, Helen Nicholson and Kate Normington in *Devising Histories and Contemporary Practices* (2007) provided a concise overview of Kneehigh as a devising theatre company, exploring cultural identity through storytelling and adaptation. Govan et al. clearly encapsulated Kneehigh’s emerging reputation for storytelling, signposting their adaptations that incorporate a Cornish focal point.

Drama scholar Margherita Laera, proposes a model for considering adaptation which has been beneficial in the analysis of productions discussed in this book. Laera’s notions on the importance of the ‘cyclical

nature' of repetition ² within adaptation in *Theatre and Adaptation: return, rewrite, repeat* (2014) and the assertion of cultural identities within the storytelling tradition are comparable to Kneehigh's practice. Kneehigh will reprise many of their productions, shaping them to fit their company and shifting concepts of cultural and artistic identity, and sense of 'self'. I would also assert that the cyclical nature of adapting theatre can support the development of a theatrical brand and provide an opportunity to engage with a production missed in an earlier tour.

Theatre historian Kara Reilly, in *Contemporary Approaches to Adaptation in Theatre* (2018), established the potential for theatrical adaptation to capture 'moments in history' ³Kneehigh's more socially and politically themed productions have attempted this 'time-capsule' quality; notably *Kneehigh's Ubu! A Singalong Satire* (2019-20) referring to Brexit and the UK 2019 general election. The production, *946: The Amazing Adolphus Tips* (2016), portrayed the story of black American soldiers stationed in the Cornish town of Slapton during the second world war. Within the production programme and marketing campaign, Kneehigh highlighted the 'lost' historical narrative of this true-life story, documenting the 946 soldiers who were killed in a training exercise (unfortunately intercepted by enemy troops).

Heather Lilley, an academic in drama, describes Rice and Shepherd's stance on adaptation, and the company's process of adapting varied stimuli. Lilley signposts the importance of repetition through 're-telling', referring to Rice's preference for this phrase to describe Kneehigh's adaptive process⁴. Descriptions of the adaptation process of the company are outlined, fluctuating between devised group work and solo written adaptation. Interestingly, Lilley questions to what extent the company has 'co-authored' the work; but concludes that a singular modality of adaptation should not solely define the material generated.

Placing works at either end of the 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. ⁵

Lilley acknowledges Kneehigh's theatricality, seeking to explore different ways of devising and adaptation, beyond the text, embracing different sources and perspectives. 'Kneehigh' as a theatrical style is inclusive of all members of the company, but also associated with Shepherd and Rice's adaptation, devising and artistic direction. Duska Radosavljevic, discussed a 'shared' devising process in her interview with Shepherd, describing

Shepherd's ability to utilise the talents within the company. Irrespective of company members having agency over specific elements of the production, Radosavljevic states that it is still very clear who is in charge.⁶

Kneehigh uses the term 'magic realism' to summarise their artistic stance, highlighting the magical aspect of theatre and live performance. Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez (and author of the story *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings*) used magic realism as a way to tell stories, exploring people on the outskirts of society, providing critique for those with political power. Magic realism is a style of fiction which provides a view of the contemporary world, whilst adding magical, fantastical elements. This is implicit in the Kneehigh production of this story and can be seen in many of Kneehigh's shows. Notable examples can be seen in *Dead Dog in a Suitcase and Other Love Songs* (2019), with the appearance of a giant dead dog puppet in the finale highlighting the moral decay of society. Magic realism can be observed in *Tristan and Yseult*, capturing the intoxicating qualities of love by suspending actors in mid-air with wires; literally, rather than figuratively, 'high' on a love potion.

Despite the magic realist nature of these elements, Kneehigh is keen to engage the audience's emotions through moments of realism within the performance. The desire to tell a story, finding the emotional heart, human connections and shared commonalities within the narrative is core to their artistic vision and identity. Theatre Critic Patrick Marmion summarised Kneehigh's theatrical brand, identifiable by its creative qualities as well as the influence of Cornish heritage, as a hybrid of classic works combined with modern theatrical aesthetics. On describing the creativity and originality in devising a chorus of nerds who observed the love story in *Tristan and Yseult* (2005) from a distance, Marmion stated that the company had taken a classic story and embedded it with 'freshness and charm'⁷. Marmion's theatre review for the production communicated Kneehigh's ability to reinvent a story that both entertains and incorporates localism into a global product. Likewise, Marmion presented observations on Emma Rice's theatrical style that incorporated a blend of international performance techniques.

Emma Rice's ebullient production is also an ingenious fusion of theatrical forms, from May Day mumming to circus, pantomime to German cabaret. Underpinning it is a hearty, honest-to-goodness Britishness – the sort that revels in meat pies and Morris dancing.⁸

Revealed within Marmion's commentary are further descriptors of Kneehigh's brand of theatre, fusing selected elements of Cornish and British identity, culturally blended with a range of international influences.

Like other successful brands, Kneehigh utilises the art of reinvention. The company achieves this by updating their ethos, promoting creativity, together with the capacity to reinvent and reinvigorate a product that has become outdated. Tom Gatti observed Kneehigh's ability to re-imagine classic stories and bring them back to life, suggesting that their recognisable brand is as 'theatre's foremost story resuscitators: they breathe new life into old tales'.⁹ Through Kneehigh's flexibility and evolution of past and present brand associations, the company can be adaptable in producing work that may detract and change their core values. Such an example can be seen in Kneehigh's development from Theatre In Education (TIE)^a into mainstream theatre and later in the company's transitions into other cultural stimuli. The selection of myths, legends and fairy tales as a basis for much of Kneehigh's work is a pragmatic choice for a company that started life as a TIE company. Developing these tales made the company marketable and appealing to their primary school age target audience, providing Kneehigh with the opportunity to explore what they perceive as 'universal' and timeless issues in their work. As the company has developed from school tours to adult theatre, Kneehigh has been able to explore these tales, emphasising the darker areas of the subject matter through their own theatrical style.

In many of the company's programmes, Emma Rice and Mike Shepherd stated their reasons behind tackling these stories, indicating that they are 'timeless' and global, thus relevant in the modern age. Shepherd has cited the research of psychologist Bruno Bettelheim as an influence on the company, referring to his work as an inspiration and artistic philosophy in production programmes and interviews. Bettelheim advocated the telling of fairy tales as important in child development, dealing with problems that are global and timeless in nature.

By dealing with universal human problems, particularly those which preoccupy the child's mind, these stories speak to his budding ego and encourage its development, while at the same time relieving preconscious and unconscious pressures.¹⁰

This drive to consider 'universal human problems' is integral to Kneehigh's selection of stimuli, but also informs their theatrical adaptations. As I will explore within the case studies of productions, adaptation can include the physical aesthetics of the production, and specify the focus on worldwide

^a (TIE) – This abbreviation stands for theatre in education and refers to work produced specifically for school tours. Productions can often be accompanied by a workshop to reinforce the themes covered in the main performance.

yet personal issues. In this cultural transaction, emphasis ranges from macro to micro, and vice versa: from personal issues to worldwide commonalities.

Reviews in *The Red Shoes Press Report, Edinburgh Festival (2001)*, documented Kneehigh's reputation as a company who focus on the universal and fundamental themes within classic folk and fairy tales (mirroring the concerns outlined by Bettelheim). Several reviews for this production argued that the company had returned to the 'original' and darker version of the story. They described the production as suiting all age ranges by not being too frightening for children, but 'thought provoking enough for sophisticated adults'.¹¹ Kneehigh's brand identity in developing productions based on fairy tales displays their ability to retain the darkness and edginess of the source material in their work, appealing to a range of audience members and age groups. Through this treatment of fairy tales and classic films, Kneehigh has emerged with a brand association for theatre that presents darker re-imaginings of myths and legends.

The desire to be a brand, in an age of globalisation and capitalism, prompts questions on Kneehigh's brand identity and their appeal to local and global audiences. This is a stance emerging out of their artistic philosophy, company reports and publicity materials for the Asylum. 'Branding' involved the development of a product that is recognisable and synonymous with their theatrical style, and its diversification into varied products and projects contained within the Kneehigh 'banner'. Theatre scholar, Kate Dorney, defined the company in branded terms: 'Kneehigh has a unique selling proposition (USP), a brand, that makes their work popular with audiences and funding bodies alike'¹². Successful brands display the ability to appeal to potential consumers and investors who can offer financial backing. I have found Dorney's work useful in signposting the potential for the Asylum to strengthen Kneehigh's USP. I wish to explore the Asylum's impact on the Kneehigh brand within my research, exploring my own queries and areas of engagement.

Kneehigh's use of the phrase 'Brand Kneehigh' instigated my research into branding and globalisation. It provided a theoretical lens to clarify what 'brands' are, whilst underpinning definitions of business models and strategies. It is a significant area to look into since it relates to Kneehigh's own branded ambitions for local to global expansion, but also describes significant influences on contemporary society. Globalisation (associated with capitalism and neoliberalism) defines how we lived in the twentieth century and how we live now in this century. Emerging arguments for and against globalisation have developed; specifically, with argumentation against this social, political and economic process growing as a pervasive narrative in the later twentieth century. Both narratives for and against

globalism display the impact on modern culture, but also represent the very same tensions Kneehigh contend with.

Kneehigh experienced a range of challenges in trying to create a global theatre product whilst staying true to their Cornish cultural identity. These tensions include; a pull away from creating work in Cornwall, pressure from funding bodies to create work that has national and international appeal, financial hardships forcing the near closure of the company, critique on the evolution of Kneehigh as a local and global company, and artistic backlash against Kneehigh's adaptation or 'retelling' of popular works. This book will consider the Asylum, as Kneehigh's solution to the difficulties encountered, and also as a venue to strengthen their product and reinforce their brand. Ultimately my argument establishes Kneehigh working towards an equilibrium between localism and globalism through cultural exchange. Just as I have focused on branding as a facet within globalism, cultural exchange is also part of a globalised process evident within Kneehigh's brand evolution. I use the term cultural exchange within Kneehigh's work to reflect on sharing of influences, narratives, communities, people and places, as a way to create work. The Three Islands Project (2003-2005) was established to form cultural exchange on an international level and will be considered as a case study in Chapter 4.

Research into globalisation was undertaken to establish definitions and investigate theories useful in considering the tensions navigated by Kneehigh, with the following texts and theorists being particularly instrumental in shaping the research. Phillipe Legrain in *Open World: The Truth about Globalisation* (2000) discussed the benefits of the brand. Within the realms of theatre and performance, many companies have also acknowledged and embraced the advantages of brand association. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore in *The Experience Economy* (1998) suggested an 'experience' within a self-contained environment can strengthen brand association, reinforce repeat custom, and transcend a product into a 'lifestyle' affirmation. Naomi Klein in *No Logo* (2010) offered an alternative view of companies who wish to expand their brand by constructing a 'world' as a powerful display of expansion, removing competition and critique.¹³ Likewise, Klein outlined the backlash against high profile brands (Nike, Levi's, McDonalds, Starbucks, etc.). Starting in the 1990s, Klein illustrated a global awareness of the negative attributes of branded companies and brands; highlighting possible opposition by 'anti-globals' (those opposed to globalisation). Naomi Klein is, of course, a social activist. However, her work was of value in contributing to the global/branding debate explored within this text. Her argument provided a

counter-argument addressing the negativity of brands, in contrast to Legrain's positive outlook.

Argumentation against branding and associations with market globalism are critical discourses facing many companies and genres of theatre, as well as Kneehigh. Immersive theatre company, Punchdrunk, has encountered critique for brand associations with Sony PlayStation and Courvoisier, in conjunction with high ticket costs. This critique was evident in reviews for their production *Sleep No More* (2012). A theatre blog in *The Guardian* by Miriam Gillinson titled, Punchdrunk's "Sleep No More: is this a sell-out which I see before me?" questioned the theatre company's artistic intentions in recreating *Macbeth*. The blog title itself underpins an 'anti-global' positionality, that reduces artistic appreciation, emphasising abandonment of theatrical 'principles' for economic gains. Gillinson found a number of aspects in the production as evidence of money-grabbing and self-promotion:

In these cash strapped times – hell, in any time – why shouldn't a company engage with the business world if it helps them advertise their brand, or make great work elsewhere? But I do worry when these commercial concerns begin to undermine a company's own theatrical productions.¹⁴

Gillinson's shares concerns on the 'commercial' impact on Punchdrunk's productions: the very same concerns explored in relation to Kneehigh within this study. Punchdrunk, like Kneehigh, has experienced criticism for establishing and developing a recognisable brand, with negative associations formed between their artistry and neoliberalism. The 'McDonaldization' of theatre, specifically in relation to musicals produced by Cameron Mackintosh, as discussed in the research of Dan Rebellato and his phrase 'McTheatre' (Rebellato *Theatre and Globalization* 39), explores artistic hegemony and the dominance of the Cameron Mackintosh brand. This argument provided a further dimension to the context of 'Brand Kneehigh'; establishing the backlash against brands and capitalism, voicing a potential negativity towards Kneehigh's theatrical branding. I argue that 'Brand Kneehigh' mirrors both arguments, illustrating the dichotomy Kneehigh faces in its career and within the evolution of its brand.

Globalisation in Theatre

The areas of business, economics, and sociology have offered a range of extensive research and theories on globalisation. A selection of these theories are used as a frame or tool to consider Kneehigh and their work alongside research linking globalisation and theatre. Dan Rebellato in

Theatre & Globalisation recognised the immense range of work on this subject, indicating that: ‘The literature on globalisation is enormous’¹⁵ As introduced earlier, Rebellato discussed the homogenising effects of a global theatrical product described as ‘McTheatre’^b. McTheatre was identified as a globalised by-product of capitalism, citing musical theatre productions (or ‘mega musicals’ by Cameron Mackintosh) as prime examples of franchised theatre. These include *Phantom of the Opera*, *Cats*, *Miss Saigon*, etc. As described by Rebellato, original work was not displayed in opening shows around the world; offering instead new franchises of work already in existence. Referring to the uniformity of McDonald’s products, with little local variation globally, the work inherent in these mega musicals follows similar terms. Likewise, McTheatre can include dramatic theatre productions beyond the realms of the musical.

Franchised theatre shows can include popular work such as *War Horse* (2007-2009), evolving its own brand identity beyond the National Theatre. *War Horse* was resident at the National Theatre between 2007-2009, transferring to the West End, and has been on a tour around the world since 2009, with reprised productions in 2018-19. In addition, *Ghost Stories* (2010-2020) has featured several reproductions since its premiere in the Liverpool Playhouse in 2010. Both productions received acclaim meeting popular audience demand. The term McTheatre suggests a process encountered by a show incarnated so many times (sticking to the original format) that it loses its uniqueness and innovative qualities. This is a dilemma faced by many theatre companies with several factors having a negative impact on their artistic and cultural sensibilities. Aspects related to globalisation and their impact on Kneehigh will be a central focus of this study. In an issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* in 2006, dedicated to globalisation, Harvie and Rebellato suggest that theatre as globalisation is effective in its simplicity and is cheap to make. It has a global relevance in its construction:

...the primary stuff of theatrical work - creating images, transforming meanings, finding new ways of expressing ideas and experiences - has a far greater continuity with the every-day reality of most people's working lives than it has ever had before.¹⁶

Theatre, as a platform, has the potential to encourage communication and exchange, lending itself to sharing processes inherent in globalisation.

^b ‘McTheatre’ is an unflattering term, underpinning the homogenised construct of global musical theatre. It has strong links with the business model of McDonalds, utilising the connection within the name. (Rebellato 2010).

Different arguments relating to globalisation outline the perceived benefits and limitations that this paradigm offers, and theatre can explore varied global opinions. Sophie Nield commented on performance or an 'event' and its ability to communicate an anti-globalist movement.

'Evidently, many oppositional protest events connected to global anti-capitalist activity have acutely considered - in order to exploit - the symbolic summary produced by the moment of the enactment or encounter.'¹⁷

Nield's description of the strategic occupation of public and local spaces to draw attention to globalisation, by the anti-globalist movement, illustrated the intricacies at work between global energies within local limits. However, this does not lessen the validity of an anti-global movement. It does illustrate the complexity of working within varying degrees of this paradigm; even when protesting against globalism, whilst using a platform which is arguably global. David Barnett described the difficulties artists face within a globalised world:

...artists have to ask themselves how they are to apprehend a topography of contemporary life in which long distance travel is not exceptional, corporations straddle continents, and the internet can connect two sides of the world in less than a second.¹⁸

These are challenges Kneehigh have faced within their work, artistic vision, and company ethos and are multi-faceted concepts to navigate. Examples are portrayed within the case studies of the Three Islands Project and *Cymbeline*. In these examples, contemporary life has been explored, spanning countries in the case of the Three Islands Project and engaging in performance across continents in reference to *Cymbeline*. This work has been undertaken to share artistic practices and encourage spectatorship internationally, provoking reactions that are rich in their range of variety and argumentation. As will be explored in more detail in the case studies for the above productions, the Three Islands Projects did establish cultural sharing and an examination of hegemony, whilst opening a debate on the true extent of exchange. *Cymbeline* initiated international recognition for Kneehigh's theatrical style, but also generated critique against its style's dominance over the source material.

Gabrielle Giannachi in 'Exposing globalisation' stated globalisation's ability to transform theatre into a 'new theatre that bursts the boundaries of the theatre of everyday life'.¹⁹ The boundaries of theatre can be both physical (or real) and digital. Giannachi cites Critical Art Ensemble as such an example, describing them as a company who create work: 'both electronically and in 'real' locations'.²⁰ The use of media in theatre mirrors

the technological advancements of globalisation within other areas of modern life. Kneehigh, like other contemporary theatre companies, have incorporated digital elements within their productions and are willing to engage with them as both a stimuli and performance style. The company have broken boundaries between the digital and ‘real’ artistically in *Brief Encounter*, with live actors interacting with their digital counterparts. This was a production that developed material known globally, placing their own ‘localised’ branded style within their adaptation.

Definitions of ‘local’ and ‘global’ are indeterminate, as indicated by Paul Rae: ‘[In] the theatre, “somewhere” and “anywhere” are not so much mutually exclusive as mutually informing’.²¹ Being a spectator in the theatre involves a transition from the theatre space to a fictional place on stage. This potential for fluidity in theatre can transform a space, by shaping and re-imagining local and global elements. It can do this by redefining them, developing imagined worlds on a physical and ephemeral level. Kneehigh’s production *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* (2005) reconfigured their own local and global limits, producing a show (discussed later) in terms of international cultural exchange.

The work of Helen Gilbert has contributed to theatre and cosmopolitanism, post-colonialism and globalisation. Gilbert’s research has focused on post-colonialism and indigeneity within theatre and performance. Although my research is not a study of post-colonialism, it does refer to Cornish cultural identity, which shares prevalent views in Cornwall about ‘English’ dominance. Shepherd has expressed similar views in press interviews and within production work. The Cornish struggles cited in *Blast* (2010) mirror colonialist oppression experienced in Ireland, as analysed by Gilbert and Tompkins: ‘Ireland’s centuries-old political and economic oppression at the hands of the British – and its resistance to such control – fits well within the post-colonial paradigm’²². Similarly, to other ‘colonised’ people, Kneehigh produced plays which seek to communicate Cornish history.

To refute the misguided belief that colonised people do/did not have a history of their own, many plays stage aspects of the pre-contact past in order to re-establish traditions, to lay claim to a heritage or territory, and to recuperate various forms of cultural expression.²³

By communicating stories that have local importance, the ‘local’ has a new focus, a ‘voice’ or ‘narrative’ for consideration. Gilbert communicated the complex relationship between the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ and discussed concerns, shared by Kneehigh, in meeting the needs of local and indigenous communities.

Kneehigh's place within theatre and globalisation covers a number of areas, some of which are artistic, other areas include branding and entertainment. The company's theatrical style portrays a devising and adaptation process that engages with globalism. They actively seek international stimuli and collaborators, with the cyclical style of their work lending itself to reprisals, updates and further globalism. As a brand, their portfolio of experiences continues to grow. The same production can be reprised at different times, at different locations, offering different experiences and mementoes. In the case of *Quicksilver* (2002), the production could be seen within a tin mine, at a later point within a theatre environment with an accompanying 'gift'. *Tristan and Yseult* has been performed on the Cornish coast and in theatres around the world. Kneehigh, like other contemporary devising theatre companies, displays a notable theatrical style, offering experiences (within a range of locations) and merchandise as part of a performance. Kneehigh offers a specificity in aligning their brand with Cornwall and tourism within the county, whilst maintaining their artistic identity. Importantly, all of this is underpinned by the company's desire to tell a story, forming the 'heart' within the company brand.

'Brand Kneehigh' and Globalisation

An emerging by-product of globalisation, originating in the nineteenth century, is the brand. Legrain states that brands started in the nineteenth century as 'badges of quality and consistency'.²⁴ This allowed consumers to be more confident when buying products from strangers, rather than from their local community. 'Brands were the first piece of consumer protection'.²⁵ Legrain argues that this is still the case, with consumers willing to pay more for a brand name they trust, simplifying buying/shopping decisions through brand loyalty. This focus on the brand with its associations with lifestyle and aspirations is pertinent to the current age of globalisation, with Legrain providing recent historical examples such as the virtual branding of Britain as 'Cool Britannia' in the 1990s: 'Companies provide their consumers with opportunities not merely to shop but to experience fully the meaning of their brand'.²⁶

Gillespie and Hennessey in *Global Marketing* describe those in support of brands as 'Global Dreamers' who 'equate global brands with quality and are attracted by the lifestyle'.²⁷ There is an aspirational and idealistic tone to Gillespie and Hennessey's term for individuals and companies pursuing neoliberalist branding as 'dreamers'. Alternatively, the phrase 'dreamers' holds negative associations, emphasising the fantastical, non-tangible and

unreliable quality of dreams. Despite these negative characteristics, Gillespie and Hennessey succinctly highlight the powerful aspirations maintained by 'brand' and brand associations. As described by Legrain, many companies (in pursuit of lifestyle branding) develop their products in a multi-purpose building that may contain many core 'leisure' activities such as shopping, cinema and food and drink. Other areas of leisure include branded travel, driven by the consumer identifying or even aspiring to a specific way of life.

This is the meaning of lifestyle brand: living your life inside a brand. Brand-based companies are no longer satisfied with having a fling with their consumers, they want to move in together.²⁸

This statement mirrors Kneehigh's own plans with the Asylum which it realised with its grand opening including; shows, live music, food and drink, art and photography exhibitions. Merchandise could be purchased, including books, CDs, even clothing. Like other lifestyle brands wishing to appeal to several areas in a consumer's life, Kneehigh has used their website to promote their live theatre work which is central to their brand while also advertising other merchandise which offers different forms of entertainment and experience. As part of the Kneehigh brand online, a 'consumer' can keep up to date with their next performances, buy their collection of plays, poetry or picture books which provide a historical overview with photography. Three CD's of Kneehigh's music are available on their website, including the soundtracks to their acclaimed RSC production, *Cymbeline* (2006), and *The Wild Bride* (2011), with the third CD featuring a collection of love songs from their shows. Likewise, areas of the website offered different levels of paid membership with Kneehigh, sharing many characteristics of other fan clubs, and allowing Kneehigh fans priority notification on performances and other events.

If Legrain's argument that brands are a way of developing consumer confidence in the quality of a product is true, it is understandable why Kneehigh harnessed this view. They wished to develop a strong brand, one that displays excellent quality and creativity in theatre, encouraging loyalty in which customers will spend their money and come back for more. Economically this is a strong business strategy displaying tactics for self-preservation and a steady source of income. Developing a strong brand creates good publicity, attracting more custom. Kneehigh Theatre Company state in their literature (especially in their publicity about their home venue, Asylum), their ambitions to develop themselves into a recognisable brand, synonymous with their theatrical style and quality. Lyn Gardner for *The*

Guardian sums up the company's style of theatre which is central to their brand:

What the company has created instead is an original brand of theatre, born out of Cornwall's lack of red velvet spaces and a need to engage directly with an audience, often outdoors without the trick of lights or effects. Its style is rough, irreverent and belligerent – and venues are queuing up to slot Kneehigh into their programmes.²⁹

The Telegraph, in an interview with Shepherd and Rice in 2010, used similar language in defining Kneehigh as a 'brand' that is playful and irreverent, effective in storytelling and in demand by the RSC, West End commercial producers and 'abroad too'.³⁰

Kneehigh has used the phrase 'to be truly universal you must be truly local', by Joan Miro, a Catalan artist^c, as a strapline on many of their marketing materials and production reports, claiming a global resonance and universality to their work. This quote underlines the ability to incorporate local needs with global/universal interests but places the heart of the process of globalisation within a local origin. However, this notion is problematic, reducing the differences between the local and global, just as globalisation has homogenising effects on local variations. Although Legrain himself is in favour of globalisation, he presents a balanced response to the opposing views of global sceptics, showing a move towards globalism as a choice, rather than an inevitability. Legrain highlights an area of globalisation which is limiting in its appeal, citing mass marketing and branding as having a limited shelf life and being unable to connect with contemporary consumers.

Mass marketing has become a very hard thing to do because people don't like to be seen as 'normal' anymore – they all want to be seen as individuals...The bigger you become, the less appealing you become. It's a dilemma: somehow you have to find a way of exploiting the behind-the-scenes benefits of being big, yet at the point at which you touch the consumer, you have to be seen to be small.³¹

This duality between the global and the local, underlines the complexity of the individual and their macro and micro concerns and identifications. Kneehigh no longer used the above Miro quote on their publicity materials showing an aspiration to move away from the 'one-world' local is global

^c Kneehigh have used this quote from this artist in the past. However, during my research using the Kneehigh Archive, I could find no rationale behind using this particular quote or any links between the company and Miro.

view of cultural identity. Arguably, this is a view that cannot communicate the multi-faceted nature of globalism.

Responding to a question I posed to Rice, about the difficulties the company may experience in aiming to work both locally and globally, Rice suggested that although people around the world have different experiences, ‘we are all on the same emotional and spiritual level’³² (Rice 2012). Rice commented on this former ‘strapline’, suggesting it is not an advertising campaign to underline their ‘glocalisation’, but a code that the company lives by:

We often use a Miro quote which is ‘To be truly universal you have to be local’ and we live by that, but it doesn’t feel like a tension to make work in a very precise, isolated place [Cornwall] and then take it to the world.³³

This response presents the company’s own aspiration to be connected to their own locality, which they see as important to their processes of working and intrinsic to them developing globally. Issues of dominant global businesses obliterating smaller local companies are concerns that Kneehigh know of and have taken on board in a variety of productions. The above issues are explored in *The Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* (2005) and in *Blast* (2010), with both productions providing a narrative platform. Acknowledgements of the differences between global and local culture are not recognised by globalisation, according to global sceptics. It should be noted that Kneehigh may not be responding directly to a local versus global dichotomy, but instead, acknowledging the differences between the local and the global in their own work.

According to Legrain, any product wishing to assert itself as a successful brand should aim to transcend being a product into a lifestyle choice and a form of self-expression:

Expressing its aspirations, its soul, its sense of family, the brands humanised the corporation, lifted it from the land of goods and services up to an exalted moral plane.³⁴

This stance is demonstrated as early as 2000, in an interview with Julie Seyer, the general manager of Kneehigh. Seyer stated Kneehigh’s motive is to be more than just entertainment, but to empower people to ‘make the most of their lives, planting a seed in people’s minds that anything is possible’.³⁵ The tagline in the promotional materials for the *Summer Schools in Cornwall 2001* offered potential consumers the chance to ‘Eat, sleep, breathe and dream theatre’ (Summer School 2001). The statement affirms

Kneehigh's globalist 'ambitions' of becoming a lifestyle product, targeting the senses and allowing for greater participation.

In the report, *The Kneehigh Plan 1999-2001 Appendices* (written by the administration team at Kneehigh and based on company meetings), Kneehigh considered whether they should change their name to rebrand the company. They concluded with the realisation that the name is too valuable to lose in the search for further marketing opportunities:

The reasons for change are outweighed by the benefits of retaining the profile and goodwill associated with the name Kneehigh. There is little point in changing Kneehigh to choose something which will be meaningless for a long time when the product is not being totally changed.³⁶

Their name is clearly intrinsic to their identity, and pragmatically it would take a long time to build new connections with a different title. Arguably, Kneehigh has been successful in changing the branded connotations with their name from children's theatre, generating reinvented associations. Central to this book is the definition of 'Brand Kneehigh', and the company's 'rejuvenation' of their name from TIE to noted contemporary theatre, charting a formative yet seismic development of their artistic identification. Later, this section of the report discusses branding and marketing opportunities, outlining their future ambitions for the Kneehigh brand:

Keep the name but consider it a brand. As a brand - like Virgin or Nike - Kneehigh can be a production company, one or more touring companies, a publishing company, a recording studios, a building, a performance style, a type of social or educational work - even a philosophy or ideology.

There could be:

Kneehigh 2 - a smaller company
Village Kneehigh - organising own rural promotions
Young Kneehigh - a youth theatre company etc.

Recommendation: drop the words 'Theatre Company' and build up the brand. In ten year's time when Kneehigh is very well known for any or all of these things no one will ask what 'Kneehigh' connotes - everyone will know! It's the Kneehigh Experience! Names become transparent once the product they represent is well known.³⁷

Disclosed and revealed within this section were Kneehigh's thought processes, exploring brand identification and embracing the facets they perceived are enjoyed by other brands, having agency over the diverse

products developed and offered. Communicated within this text is their ambition to transcend the range of products Kneehigh can offer to become 'a philosophy or ideology'. This shares commonalities with Legrain's observations on brand, evolving beyond the product itself, taking on fundamental significance to an individual's way of life and ideals. There is also commentary on the possibility of 'dropping' theatre company from their title, to build up their brand and to communicate their vision, aiming to be more than 'just' a theatre company. Within the appendices, a new strapline is created: 'Kneehigh: The National Theatre of Cornwall'.³⁸ Although it is agreed that it would make an excellent strapline, it is eventually unused. Why this was the case was undisclosed (or not recorded as part of a company meeting), with no other references or reasons provided in the Kneehigh archive.

Changing a company name, to fit a developing identity (and product diversity), is an important development for many modern businesses. Using the above 'National Theatre of Cornwall' strapline marginalises them within local parameters, limiting their development as a cosmopolitan company. Interestingly, the company label themselves as the 'Kneehigh Experience!', provoking allusions to Pine and Gilmore's theories of 'experience'. In reference to Legrain's research, brands need rebranding, and marketing campaigns can become outdated or 'usurped, creating the quintessential lose-lose situation'.³⁹ Arguably, Kneehigh needed to create a company name and branded strapline which communicated their links with community and international work; their ambition to create a venue for theatre and non-theatre goers, whilst also generating a tourist attraction appealing to a range of visitors. It is my argument that Kneehigh has achieved these ambitions, considering their brand very carefully to ensure that they do not limit themselves locally.

Arguments against globalisation and branding illustrate a potential homogenising impact; effects considered positive and progressive by supporters of globalism. This, of course, assumes that globalisation is a natural evolution (of modernism and postmodernism) intruding on local communities. Global influences or cultural flows can invigorate local 'niches' rather than overwhelm them, and alternatively, local variations can play an important role in the larger global culture.⁴⁰ Homogeneity of culture may in fact enrich the artistic product by sharing cultural practices, developing it in the global marketplace. Kneehigh collaborates with a range of global artists. Rather than undermining their backgrounds and original local markets, they celebrate these localities by incorporating local influences and references within the performance.