

BWW Interview: Mike Kenny's Never ALONE With RAPUNZEL, Keeping Company With His Multitude of Plays

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24th Street Theatre and The Wallis world premieres Olivier Award-winning playwright Mike Kenny's *RAPUNZEL ALONE* March 5th

24th Street Theatre and The Wallis world premieres Olivier Award-winning playwright **Mike Kenny's** *RAPUNZEL ALONE* March 5, 2022, with live performances alternating between 24th Street Theatre and The Wallis.

I had the chance to ask a few questions to Mike across the ocean on *RAPUNZEL ALONE*, as well as on his very lengthy resume of past plays.

Thank you for taking the time for this interview, Mike!



Mike Kenny
Photo courtesy of
24th Street Theatre

You have been lauded numerous times for your plays for children's theatre. What inspired you to focus your writing talents on children's theatre?

It was never really a question for me. I trained as a teacher in the '70s, but always felt that the way we learn and communicate what it is to be human is through the arts. The penny drop moment, however, was when I saw a demonstration by the Theatre in Education company at the Belgrade theatre in Coventry during my training. It looked like the coolest and most exciting thing I'd ever seen. That was it. That was what I wanted to do, and for many years I was an actor/teacher at Leeds Playhouse, creating work for children, mostly in schools. The writing developed from that.

Aside from more serious content, what would you say differentiates a show categorized as children's theatre to that of general theatre?

I tend to feel that you need to remember that children are near to the beginning of their lives, so I think there always needs to be something redemptive in a play. It's never about the subject matter. Children know only too well that bad things happen in the world, and that they have precious little agency over what happens in their own lives. If you look at Shakespeare's plays *OTHELLO* and *THE WINTER'S TALE*. Both about the toxic effects of jealousy, but *OTHELLO* is about the relentless move towards the catastrophe. It's an adult play. Whereas, in *THE WINTER'S TALE*, the catastrophe

happens at the start, out of the blue, and the play is about how to recover from it. ***THE WINTER'S TALE*** is constructed more like a play for children. It's more like the way children experience the world.

Do you write your children's plays to appeal to adult audiences as well? Or are adults just a welcomed byproduct?



I'm definitely addressing the children, but I try not to ask a question I have already got figured out. I attempt to look at stuff that is of concern whatever your age. I have three children, with 14 years between eldest and youngest. The rule at the dinner table (except for try not to talk with your mouth full) was that no subject was banned, but everyone must be included, listened to and heard.

What cosmic forces brought you (based in York, England) and Los Angeles-based 24th Street Theatre together back in 2019?

I think it might have been PYA, a marvelous agency based in Minneapolis. Somehow, 24th St. found my play ***WALKING THE TIGHTROPE***.



When 24th Street Theatre initially commissioned you in 2019 to write, was The Brothers Grimm classic Rapunzel pre-decided to be the basis of your script?

Yes, Debbie Devine came to me with the idea of using the bones of the original Grimm tale to look at the increasingly isolated lives young people were living. Remember, this was before we had even had a sniff of COVID. I had actually written half of a totally different play, then when lockdown hit, I gradually came to think I was writing the wrong play. Now the whole world was in isolation. So, we agreed that I would start again, and I set the play at the last time when the world was struggling with something which affected everyone, and I looked at the Second World War, when children were evacuated from the cities.

Would you say *RAPUNZEL ALONE* is an updated version of your 2012 *RAPUNZEL*?

It's totally different. It is amazing the way you can take these old folk tales and weave something completely new from them. The archetypes, are there - the girl, the tower, the hair, etc, but in every other way it's different. The one I did in 2012 was closer in some ways to the Grimm Brothers, also it was for younger children.

At what point in pre-production did you record the narration for *RAPUNZEL ALONE* (in the comfort of your walk-in closet in York, England)?

There was a point when we began to be anxious that we would never get to produce this play. It felt like we needed an audience. So the idea came up, to reinvent it as an audio piece, accompanied by visual material. Actually, although I did some rewrites, it transferred remarkably easily, and as part of that process, Debbie cast me as the narrator. It became a memory piece, and I recorded my part last summer, in my room in the UK.

What was your reaction to winning the Olivier Award for Best Entertainment 2012 for your *THE RAILWAY CHILDREN*?

Apart from jumping around screaming, hugging my family and friends and drinking a lot of champagne in a very short time? It does feel like a validation of a long body of work. But everyone in theatre knows that the next day you have to start to see if you can do it all over again. It's the art form that lives forever in the present, and that's why it's so exciting. You can't rest on your laurels for too long or the parade will have gone by.

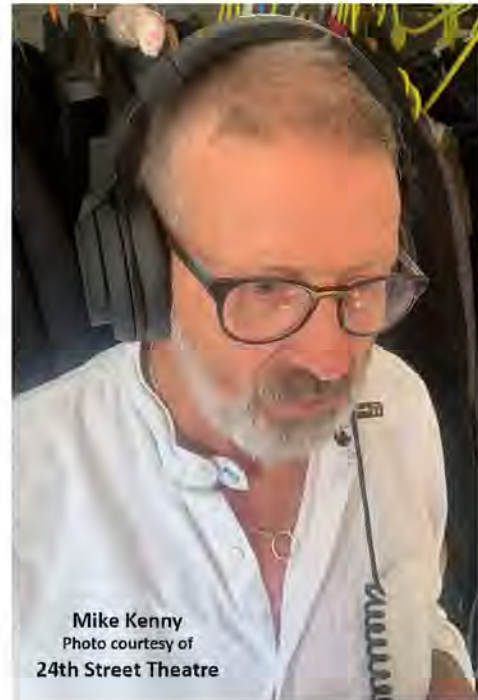
With over forty plays in your repertoire, do you still try to attend your premieres of your shows?

It's actually nearer one hundred and forty! (I've been doing this a long, long time). Practically speaking, it's impossible to see everything. I do try to see as much as I can, because productions can take you by surprise. Although I have been at this for a long time. I don't always really know what I'm doing. My subconscious will put things in my plays that actors and directors will find and show to me.

Any chance of attending your world premiere of *RAPUNZEL ALONE* at 24th Street Theatre or The Wallis in March?

Fingers crossed.

Out of your over hundred and forty shows, which show was the most challenging for you to complete and that you are the most proud of?



This is a bit like talking about your children. There have been turning points. An early play called **STEPPING STONES**, which I wrote for an audience of young people with extreme physical and mental difficulties and challenges taught me, that the play exists under the words, so cut everything you don't need, and that we all share things about being human. Don't other your audience. Come to the place you all meet.



I was proud of **WALKING THE TIGHTROPE**, which talks about grief for the very young.

The most challenging was a play called **CARTOON**. It wasn't really the play's fault. I was writing it when my mum died, and when I came back to it, I couldn't find the place I'd been. It seemed that life has used me up? Does that make sense. It was five years before I finished it, and now, about five years later again, it is finally being given a production in France by the Compagnie de Louise.

Is there a fable or classic children's story that you haven't yet, but are enthused to adapt?

I would love a try at **The Secret Garden**. I know there are other versions, but I think I have one in me. There is a book I loved as a child - **The Family from One End St.** - that I would love to adapt. And I have a question I would love to build a play around -



How do you know who you can trust? It just feels important at the moment.

What's in the near future for Mike Kenny?

I'm working on another radio play at the moment, and on a one-woman show for my friend Jenny Sealey, the director of Graeae Theatre Company.

Thank you again, Mike! I look forward to meeting your *RAPUNZEL*.

For tickets to the live performances of **RAPUNZEL ALONE** at both 24th Street Theatre and The Wallis venues through April 30, 2022; log onto www.24thstreet.org