and I had a nine-month deadline."

That shape eventually emerged as a rather affable approach to storytelling in which Thomas's own experiences (trips to Hibbing, snatches of conversations outside Dylan gigs, personal memories) break up what's often a thorough piece of hard academia. For example, a chapter in which the professor gets his hands on early drafts of *Tangled Up in Blue* at Dylan's archives in Tulsa (a dream for any Dylanologist) is breathlessly introduced by the advice to "fasten your seat belts".

Richard Thomas (above) admits to having an "almost missionary zeal" for Dylan's latest "classical" period.

"The publishers were constantly wanting me to write for people who don't already know Dylan, but I was really writing for the people I met in concerts and who you get a bond with through Bob," he says. "Those experiences were shaping the way I was getting into the songs and into the topic. And okay, it's not what objective authors are supposed to be doing, but since so much of my relationship with Dylan is personal and so close, I felt I could do that. And partly because I've earnt the right to do it – I've written all this stuff on Virgil and Horace already – and if people don't like it, that's tough. Sort of Bob Dylan attitude, right?"

It's an attitude he enjoys adopting. He's a two-a-year concertgoer (five this past year as he got to grips with studying the set lists for the book); his first memory of Dylan is of singing *Blowin' in the Wind* at his Auckland school and realising the version he was being taught was not the radio-friendly Peter, Paul and Mary one; he bought a balalaika ("not a great choice") after falling in love with Julie Christie in *Dr Zhivago* with the intention of becoming a Dylan-esque troubadour; and long before experiencing love and loss, he already knew that any girlfriends would have to live up to the traditions of *Blonde on Blonde*'s *Visions of Johanna*.

But the real thread that runs through Thomas's book is his love for both the poetry and music of Dylan and those long-gone masters. And in an extremely crowded marketplace for Dylanology, his enthusiastic voice does rise above the rather dusty tomes from the likes of Christopher Ricks, Michael Gray and the ubiquitous Clinton Heylin.

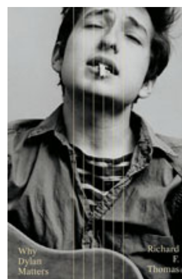
He is happy to talk about his "almost missionary zeal" for Dylan's latest "classical" period and hopes "people who are interested in Dylan having never really known him or having abandoned him in 1965 will come back to see what's there", but he's also keen for Dylan fans to use him as a bridge back to the classics, which he says is enjoying something of a renaissance: "For example, translations of the *Aeneid* haven't been as intensive since the 17th century."

And if that gets more people to emulate Dylan and his Hibbing neighbour of half a century ago and join a Latin club and study the likes of Virgil, Homer and Ovid, so much the better.

"They all deal in what matters to humans and what is most disruptive to the lives of individuals and societies. It's terrifying for me that Secretary of State George Marshall gave a Princeton commencement speech as recently as 1946 when he said no man can expect to be a responsible statesman who hasn't studied Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War, and now we've got this idiot in the White House for whom history is a complete emptiness.

"That's terrifying, but a push back for the humanities … can fight against this absence of information, knowledge and understanding." ∎

WHY DYLAN MATTERS, by Richard F Thomas (HarperCollins, $29.99)



NZ FESTIVAL

Barber-shop brotherhood

A British play hailed as joyous, surprising and moving puts the spotlight on a crisis in masculinity.

by SARAH CATHERALL

Inua Ellams is chatting backstage at England's National Theatre while his acclaimed play, *Barber Shop Chronicles*, is being performed as part of a sellout season.

On its fourth run at the prestigious theatre, the play, which is coming to the New Zealand Festival next month, has been seen by some of Ellams' heroes – Hugh Jackman, Andrew Garfield, Danny Boyle and the singer Sade, to name a few.

During our Skype interview late on a chilly London night, one of the 12 actors, Kwami Odoom, leaps in front of the screen to say hello. "He's on a costume

Inua Ellams: men are struggling to deal with their emotions.

David Webber, left, and Fisayo Akinade: sellout season in London.

change," Ellams smiles.

Though Odoom will be performing in the New Zealand show, Ellams won't get out to this country to watch the local reaction to his play because his British residency recently expired. Ever since he arrived in London from Nigeria with his parents and sisters 21 years ago, the writer and playwright has had battles over his immigration status.

But the 33-year-old shrugs his shoulders and says he explores any such frustrations through his art. "I just laugh and think about how I can make art out of it."

Also renowned for his poetry – he has published four books of poems – Ellams was last in New Zealand three years ago as a guest of the Auckland Writers Festival. "This time, I trust that even though I won't be physically there with my play, I will be there in an emotional sense."

Barber Shop Chronicles came about after Ellams was given a flyer about barbers being taught basic counselling skills. He also reflected on the conversations he heard in barber shops as a teenager. That got him thinking about the role of the barber shop in male culture. He visited several in Africa and London for his research, discovering that men go to barber shops to chat with other men.

Set in half a dozen barber shops in Africa and London and featuring a cast of 12 men of African descent, the play, says Ellams, explores the idea that the barber shop is everything from a confession box and political platform to a preacher pulpit and a football pitch. "It's not unusual for men to spend a lot of time in a barber shop just to talk. They won't even get a haircut while they are there."

While barber shops are popping up around New Zealand to cater for hipsters needing their beards trimmed, traditional ones have existed for many generations in Africa, playing an important role in male culture.

"The rules that men traditionally followed no longer exist. Men don't know how to deal with these changes."

But some of the themes he explores in the play are broader than that. Ellams says he didn't become "a black man" until he arrived in London. "I began to develop a thick skin and to start a conversation defensively. When I arrived from Nigeria, I had no defences like that … I realised that racism invites an aggressiveness to black men. I wanted to discuss African masculinity on stage."

In a play the *Times* described as joyous, surprising and moving, Ellams says masculinity is in crisis. Men don't know what their role is any more. They often earn less than their female partners. "The rules that men traditionally followed no longer exist. Women can do men's jobs, and men don't know how to deal with these changes."

Struggling to deal with their emotions, "men are also realising that the strong, silent archetype doesn't exist".

But if there is a crisis of masculinity, Ellams isn't suffering from it. He thinks that's because he grew up in a household with three sisters and was allowed to be in touch with his emotions. "But a lot of men aren't privy to that."

Ellams is also a graphic artist and designer. He has recently won a Liberty Human Rights Award for his latest solo work, *An Evening with an Immigrant*. The play explores his own history and his relationship with UK immigration.

He said in one interview: "No one leaves their country flippantly. This decision to leave is never taken lightly. There are long-term costs, physically and psychologically. This right to live, to a safe family life, is a human one, and however complicated our communities become, however dark or treacherous a political or social climate, those human rights are worth protecting." ■

The Weta Digital season of Barber Shop Chronicles, *New Zealand Festival, Wellington, February 24-March 4*

MARC BRENNER; OLIVER HOLMS