

THEATRE

Gaining in translation

A French theatre sensation is making a mark in the English-speaking world.

by SARAH CATHERALL

France's hottest playwright has won acclaim outside his home country, from the West End to Wellington. Florian Zeller started out as a novelist but now writes more for the stage, and his plays, which arrive in symmetrical pairs – *The Lie* and *The Truth*; *The Father* and *The Mother* – have been keeping English playwright Christopher Hampton busy as translator.

The Lie – a ruthless, witty examination of love and deceit in the age of alternative facts and fake news – is the second Zeller play at Wellington's Circa Theatre (*The Father* was a sell-out success last year). The director of both local productions, Ross Jolly, describes the 38-year-old playwright as “a theatrical magician and the most exciting theatre writer of our time”.

With the help of an interpreter, the *Listener* interviewed the award-laden Zeller in Paris.

You began your career as a novelist but you have since turned largely to writing plays.

What brought about the change?

This is not a change I planned. When I began writing, my dreams were always focusing on novels. I did not know anything about theatre at the time, so I never imagined that it would become so central to my life. All I can say is that it's a deeply moving art because it's about sharing. I find what happens in a theatre is quite magical and unique.

What ideas are you able to explore in the theatre that you can't in novels?

To me, the big difference between novels



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and the theatre is the role played by the audience. When we do theatre, we do not play for an audience, but rather *with* them. The particular atmosphere of a venue has a direct impact on a show. If you write a play, you need to use this atmosphere and, in a way, manipulate your audience by creating false leads, pre-empting emotions by contradicting them and setting traps. Theatre is much more a building art than writing novels.

The Father, a play that touches on dementia, has been your biggest international success.

What gave you the idea?

The starting point was a famous French actor called Robert Hirsch, for whom I wrote this play. He was 89 at the time, so from my meeting with him came the story. The theme also came from my personal experience, but what matters is not whether an author refers to his own life in a play but rather that the audience is convinced it is about their own life. Dementia is a very common theme in a lot of people's lives. It is both the saddest and the most common subject in our current society.

My mother suffers from early-onset Alzheimer's, and when I watched *The Father*, I understood for the first time what she went through as her mind began fading. I could feel my mother's horror through the immersive theatrical experience. What research did you do?

I did not do any particular research,



The Circa Theatre cast of *The Lie*, clockwise from left, Claire Dougan, Gavin Rutherford, Bronwyn Turei and Andrew Foster. Left, Florian Zeller: life as “a perverse game around truth”.

because I did not have very clear intentions. I could clearly picture the character while his daughter appeared on stage, and I remember vividly thinking, “What would happen if it was a different actress coming on stage? An actress pretending to be his daughter.” This is how things started. In a way, I write as if I am in a dream, and I am the first one to attend an imaginary performance.

And the idea behind *The Lie*?

That play is a direct answer to the first comedy I had written, *La Vérité (The Truth)*, which had the same characters. And in a way, it is the same story but told from a different point of view. Of course, these two plays should exist independently of each other, but for me, it was a way of prolonging a treasure hunt around those themes.

How does *The Lie* relate to modern life?

It is sometimes a perverse game around truth. It is very difficult to know if you should always tell your loved ones the truth. So the play explores all those possibilities, between absolute transparency on one hand and permanent concealment on the other.

Between *The Father* and *The Lie* you have

pivoted from tragedy to thoughtful comedy. How do you do that?

For me, writing a tragedy or a comedy derives from the same work and desire. Personally, I do not rank these genres. But in *The Lie*, the genres are a bit mixed up because the play starts like a comedy and unfolds into something painful before your eyes. The characters lose themselves in their own lies and end up getting lost in themselves in a tragic way.

Now that your plays are staged around the world, do you still write for a French audience or do you think more

internationally?

I am essentially a French author. But I think a play is interesting when it reaches something wider. Human beings are all inhabited by the same fears wherever they’re from. In this regard, I think that emotions do not really have a nationality.

Theatre can often seem highbrow and out of touch. Are you aiming to connect with a new audience? And if so, how?

The latest play I have just written is the one I am most proud of. It is called *Le Fils (The Son)*. The main character is 17, and the play is about his angst as a teen. It is a tragedy, but I thought that by touching on this subject, I would be able to attract a younger audience who would identify themselves just because the main character is very young.

Increasingly, your plays are becoming films too. What’s that like?

Most of the time they have been disappointing, as you need a lot of consecutive miracles for a film to be a success. This has therefore given me the desire to make a movie myself next time.

What next for Florian Zeller?

I am currently working on a movie that I will produce based on my play *Le Père (The Father)*. It will be in English, with Anthony Hopkins. This is a project that is close to my heart. ■

The *Lie* is playing at Circa Theatre until May 7.

TOP 10 NZ FICTION

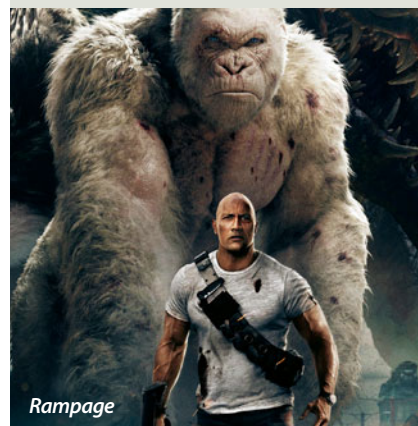
- 1 **A YEAR AT HOTEL GONDOLA**, by Nicky Pellegrino (*Hachette*)
- 2 **ALL THIS BY CHANCE**, by Vincent O’Sullivan (*Victoria University Press*)
- 3 **THE CAGE**, by Lloyd Jones (*Penguin Random House*)
- 4 **MAZARINE**, by Charlotte Grimshaw (*Penguin Random House*)
- 5 **GABRIEL’S BAY**, by Catherine Robertson (*Penguin Random House*)
- 6 **DIFFERENTLY NORMAL: A spellbinding love story of hopes, dreams and sacrifice**, by Tammy Robinson (*Hachette*)
- 7 **BARRY CRUMP: COLLECTED STORIES**, by Barry Crump (*Potter & Burton*)
- 8 **THE NECESSARY ANGEL**, by KJ Stead (*Allen & Unwin*)
- 9 **THE 10PM QUESTION**, by Kate De Goldi (*Penguin Random House*)
- 10 **HE’S SO MASC**, by Chris Tse (*Auckland University Press*)



Nicky Pellegrino

TOP 10 FILMS

- 1 **RAMPAGE**
- 2 **A QUIET PLACE**
- 3 **PETER RABBIT**
- 4 **READY PLAYER ONE**
- 5 **A WRINKLE IN TIME**
- 6 **BLOCKERS**
- 7 **SHERLOCK GNOMES**
- 8 **LOVE, SIMON**
- 9 **FINDING YOUR FEET**
- 10 **SWEET COUNTRY**



Rampage

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