

caps made up, little party hats that say 'Mamet Family Reunion'."

It's difficult to tell when he's joking. Did his political shift really hurt his career? "Yeah, but so what? As Ernest Hemingway said, call 'em like you see 'em and to hell with it.

"The greatest poker adage I know is not did you win or lose but, faced with the same situation, would you do the same thing again? Have I done a lot of things in my life that are foolish? Absolutely. I don't think writing about politics was one of them."

As for our complicated age, he has this to say: "Who knows the time in which he lives? Nobody." Is he optimistic? "Well, I'm having a good time. Kina hora, as we used to say." It's a Yiddish

**"I think it's dreadful to hear people say, 'This may not be politically acceptable but ...' That's, in effect, a Nazi salute.**

expression to ward off the evil eye. Knocking on wood, again.

And counting his blessings. "I've got enough to eat. I'm crazy about my family. We just had the Olympics and if you looked at the commercials, that's a country voting with its feet. Every commercial is a mixed-race couple; there are gay couples, straight couples, black couples ..." He saw something he's never seen. "Which was a young couple and the guy's got on a yarmulke. Never occurred in American commercials. I was born two years after the Holocaust, so to grow up with that over your head and then to see this after 70 years ... Extraordinary."

It's time to go. "Got to bring home the bacon." He signs off with his latest creative conundrum. "I came up with this great title but I can't get past the title. It's called *I Married an Eskimo* by St Anthony of Padua." That would present some difficulties. "I know. I think I've talked myself into a corner." Leave 'em laughing. At least, I'm pretty sure he's joking, but who knows the time in which David Mamet lives? Still, he's enjoying himself. Kina hora. ■

**CHICAGO: A NOVEL**, by David Mamet (HarperCollins, \$35)

**THEATRE**

# Woman of many parts

Expatriate actress Lisa Harrow reflects on the pivotal points in her life and career.

by SARAH CATHERALL

**L**isa Harrow's 50-year credit list includes television (playing Nancy Astor for the BBC), film (*Other Halves*; *Omen III: The Final Conflict*) and theatre, notably for the Royal Shakespeare Company. This month, she makes her first appearance on a Wellington stage.

**On falling in love with Shakespeare.**

We had no television in my house in Epsom when I was growing up. I was surrounded by books about Greek legends, which my parents read to me. When I was 10, I pulled a book off the shelf – Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*. I went to my local library and began reading Shakespeare, and I decided then that I wanted to be a Shakespearean actress and perform in Stratford-upon-Avon. Shakespeare's language

exploded in me. It triggered something.

**On heading to Britain in 1965 on an Arts Council grant.**

I was 22 when I left my Auckland home for London to study drama at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. It was what allowed me to have the complex and interesting career and life that I have had.

**On starring opposite Judi Dench in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1969 production of *Twelfth Night*.**

It was my first role for the RSC. I played Viola, and Judi played Olivia. I didn't want to be the blonde, beautiful one. I wanted to be Viola. Shakespeare is just so endlessly truthful and he understands what it is to be a human in all its glories. I flew back into Auckland at the age of 25, and I had already achieved my childhood dream.

**On meeting Sam Neill.**

In 1980, I was playing the journalist, Kate Reynolds, on the horror film *Omen III: The Final Conflict*. Being in the film introduced me to Sam [Neill], who gave me my beloved son, Tim. Tim moved back to New Zealand in 2006 to work on Sam's vineyard. He's in the solar industry now. He is 34 and lives in Auckland with his wife, who is also called Lisa, who I just love, and my grandson. I didn't know how much I would love being a grandmother, but I really do.

**On making the New Zealand film *Other Halves* in 1984.**

I came back from London to make this film with emerging actors, such as Temuera Morrison. It was a world I had never



Left, Harrow with Sam Neill in 1980 in *Omen III: The Final Conflict*. Below, in *Sunday*, 1997.



ALAMY



Lisa Harrow: "By 25, I had achieved my childhood dream."

known. I had just come from leading roles in the RSC and West End, and I was working with actors, including some who had never acted before, such as the boy who played the lead, Mark Pilisi. It was so wonderful to be with these kids. We were filming on K Rd, and Mark, who had been part of a street gang, and was in borstal for a while, got very anxious. It turned out that he was in the wrong neighbourhood. I thought, "Wow, this is happening in Auckland?" I was discovering my country completely differently.

**On meeting Roger Payne, her husband, an American biologist, who is president of whale conservation group the Ocean Alliance.**

There are similarities between acting and our environmental state. Acting is reacting. Everything you say and do is a reaction to something else, and that's what has got us into the mess that we are in now. Short-term solutions aren't always the best, but we are short-term people because we only live 80 or 90 years, so why think beyond that?

**On shifting to the US.**

From the mid-70s until about 1995, I

was living in London and my career was shared between film and theatre. Roger hated cities, but we lived in London for 31 years. I was in a film, *Sunday*, that won the Sundance award in 1997, and my friend Patrick Stewart rang me and said, "Lisa, you've got to come to America, because you're all over the *New York Times*, the *LA Times* and so on." I was nominated for

**Shakespeare's language exploded in me. It triggered something."**

an award too. I said, "Okay, I'll move to America now, and Roger will be happy – he'll be near his institute."

But I was without work for two years. The only film roles I was offered were playing mothers of New York brats, and there was sex and drugs and rock and roll. I said, "Look, I'm the mother of a teenage boy. I'm not going to make some stupid film about that. I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in different stories." It wasn't until I was cast in the Broadway show *Wit* that I got work. All my American

work since then has been theatre.

**On playing Joan, the troubled grandmother in Victor Rodger's *At the Wake*, a role she first performed in 2014.**

Victor wrote this caustic, funny, deeply moving, roller-coaster ride of a play. The grandmother is absolutely outrageous, and they have this wonderfully funny interaction before her daughter's funeral. The [estranged Samoan father of Joan's gay grandson] comes to the wake, and at the centre of the table is a bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue Label, which fuels the fire. Gradually, the three of them understand what has never been said. One minute you're laughing, the next you're crying. It's a bit of a volcano, but none of it is over the top or unnecessary.

Victor has created beautifully realised characters. I do relate to Joan's love of a grandson. The play is about love, which I relate to, as I've had a lot of that in my life. What I don't relate to is Joan's ability to absolutely slag someone off. She says things that would never enter my head. ■

*At the Wake, Circa Theatre, Wellington, until March 31.*