



A Fertility Fest in a Quiet House

*Jessica Hepburn, author of the **The Pursuit of Motherhood** and **Trustee of I N UK**, writes about how she got involved in a new show and festival about fertility and what she hopes it will achieve.*

One of the things that always strikes me about infertility is how it is a hidden epidemic. Hidden because people rarely talk about it and an epidemic because it's everywhere. I can't actually remember the day my friend and colleague, Gabby Vautier, confided in me that she and her husband, Gareth, were about to go through IVF, but I'm pretty sure she wouldn't have mentioned it unless she'd known what I'd been through myself. It's not the sort of thing people find easy to disclose.

A few years later, Gabby told me that Gareth - who had recently won the coveted Bruntwood Prize for Playwriting for his first play *Britannia Waves The Rules* - had been asked to write a new play and had decided to tackle the subject of IVF. I was blown away by his bravery. The male voice is even more silenced than a woman's in the world of infertility. I read an early draft and within the first few lines I was hooked. The writing was bold, beautiful and so totally truthful.

This summer, the world premiere of Gareth's play, "The Quiet House" will open at Birmingham Rep on 26th May before transferring to London's Park Theatre for a five week run until 9th July. The play tells the story of Jess and Dylan, a thirty-something couple who are in love and want to start a family. It shouldn't be an unrealistic dream. It's

what many young couples want and get, but for Jess and Dylan it isn't going to be easy. Enter infertility, followed by IVF with all the desperation and disappointment they bring.

Gareth is quick to say that the play is not autobiographical although it is informed by his personal experience: 'IVF has shaped the person I am today,' he says 'but I wanted to write a piece of theatre with compelling characters that everyone would empathise with regardless of their knowledge of infertility. As a writer I'm really interested in ordinary people who find themselves in dramatic situations. The Quiet House is as much a love story as it is a play about IVF.'

When I ask him what he wants it to make audiences feel, he says simply that he hopes it will make them feel something: 'If someone who is going through infertility watches it and feels less alone or another person who knows nothing about the subject goes away feeling like they've learnt something new, I'll be happy, but most of all I just want the audience to feel something. It doesn't matter what it is, but that's what great theatre does and when you don't feel anything it's disappointing.'

He also says there was nothing about writing the play that felt like therapy because the real-life experience he was going through at the time was so hard: 'I felt alone, I felt that nobody really understood, and I felt a sense of shame, weirdly, that I wasn't expecting.' He really hopes the play will help shine a light on the silent world of infertility and play a part in tackling the taboo that surrounds

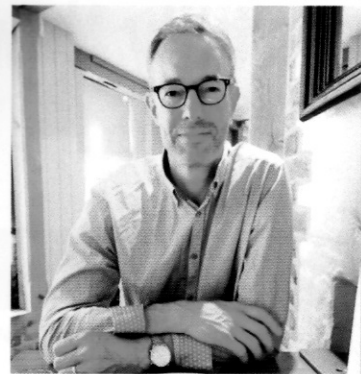


it despite the millions of people going through it.

The play is being produced by Gabby – Gareth’s wife – who is a professional theatre producer. It’s the first time they’ve worked together, but they felt if they were going to do so on any project, this would have to be the one. When Gabby told me that the play was going to go into production, she also issued me with a challenge. She knew that I’d become very interested in the art of infertility – or what I call the art of ART (Assisted Reproductive Technology for those who don’t know the acronym). She suggested I curate a mini-festival during the performance run of *The Quiet House* which would bring together artists from a range of different disciplines who have made work about fertility, infertility and IVF. The result is “Fertility Fest” which will be a day-long event in Birmingham and then in London. It will celebrate the work of twenty visual artists, writers, composers, theatre-makers and film-makers in a day of performance, discussion and debate. Some of the people appearing at the festival were known to me before, like the artist Tabitha Moses who won the Liverpool Art Prize for her series of lightbox installations which depict embryos floating in the cosmos of a Petri dish and were made with the needles she used to administer her fertility drugs. And the poet Julia Copus, also award-winning, who brought out a beautiful collection entitled: *The World’s Two Smallest Humans* which concludes with a series of poems about her experience of going through IVF. But in the process of programming the festival I also



Gareth Farr



Fergus Davidson

started uncovering artists who were interested in making work on the subject for the first time. Like the musician and composer Fergus Davidson who will be sampling a new piece about his and his wife Tomoka’s eight-year journey to have a child, their story in music will break people’s hearts. And the theatre director and playwright, Matthew Dunster who is writing and directing a piece which will be performed by drama students about the different approaches young men and women have to talking about their fertility with their friends.

Fertility Fest is the first time so many leading artists have been brought together to discuss their shared experience of the world of fertility and infertility and they’ll also be joined on stage by some of the country’s foremost medical experts. If there’s one thing I know: when art meets medicine, taboos get busted. I can’t wait.

But before you go off and book your tickets which of course I’d love you to do, I realize that I’ve told you lots about the artists involved in *The Quiet House* and Fertility Fest and very little about their personal fertility journeys. Amongst those that I’ve listed there are parents of IVF triplets and IVF twins and beneficiaries of egg donation. There are also people who are still living with involuntary childlessness after IVF. Because if I have one hope for the show and the festival, it is to start to bring the stories of failure and success closer together. Like Jess and Dylan we are all united in our dream of being parents even when our fertility fails.

For full details and to book your tickets, see:
<http://www.birmingham-rep.co.uk/event/the-quiet-house/and:>
<https://www.parktheatre.co.uk/whats-on/the-quiet-house>



Julia Copus



Tabitha Moses