

FINDING HOPE IN A QUIET HOUSE

Award-winning playwright Gareth Farr tells *Fertility Road* about his new play, which focuses on the journey of a young couple embarking on IVF treatment and he explains why art has a responsibility to shed light on difficult subjects like fertility.

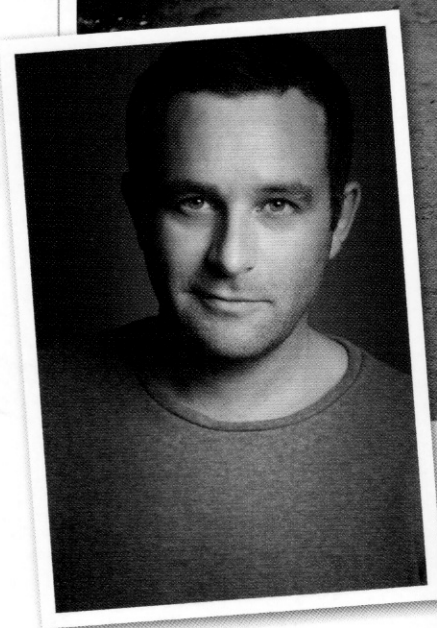
WORDS: Karen Anne Overton

They often say that life imitates art, but for playwright Gareth Farr the opposite is true. Drawing on his personal experience, his new play *The Quiet House* follows a young couple, Jess and Dylan who are deeply in love and long to start a family of their own: "It's passing on your thoughts, your personality, a part of yourself, your DNA. If we don't do that what are we? We're just dust." Eventually, the pair decide to pursue IVF treatment and the outcome is an honest and unflinching account of two people who refuse to give up on the children they so desperately long for. From the emotional turmoil, to the everyday realities of injecting hormones and balancing life and work with doctor's appointments, Farr was determined to represent the tens of thousands of people who undergo treatment every year in the UK alone.

"What I'm really interested in is ordinary people in extraordinary situations; I class myself as a relatively ordinary person and suddenly I was in an extraordinary situation," says Farr, explaining how he came to write *The Quiet House*. "But I wasn't alone; we were going to clinics and

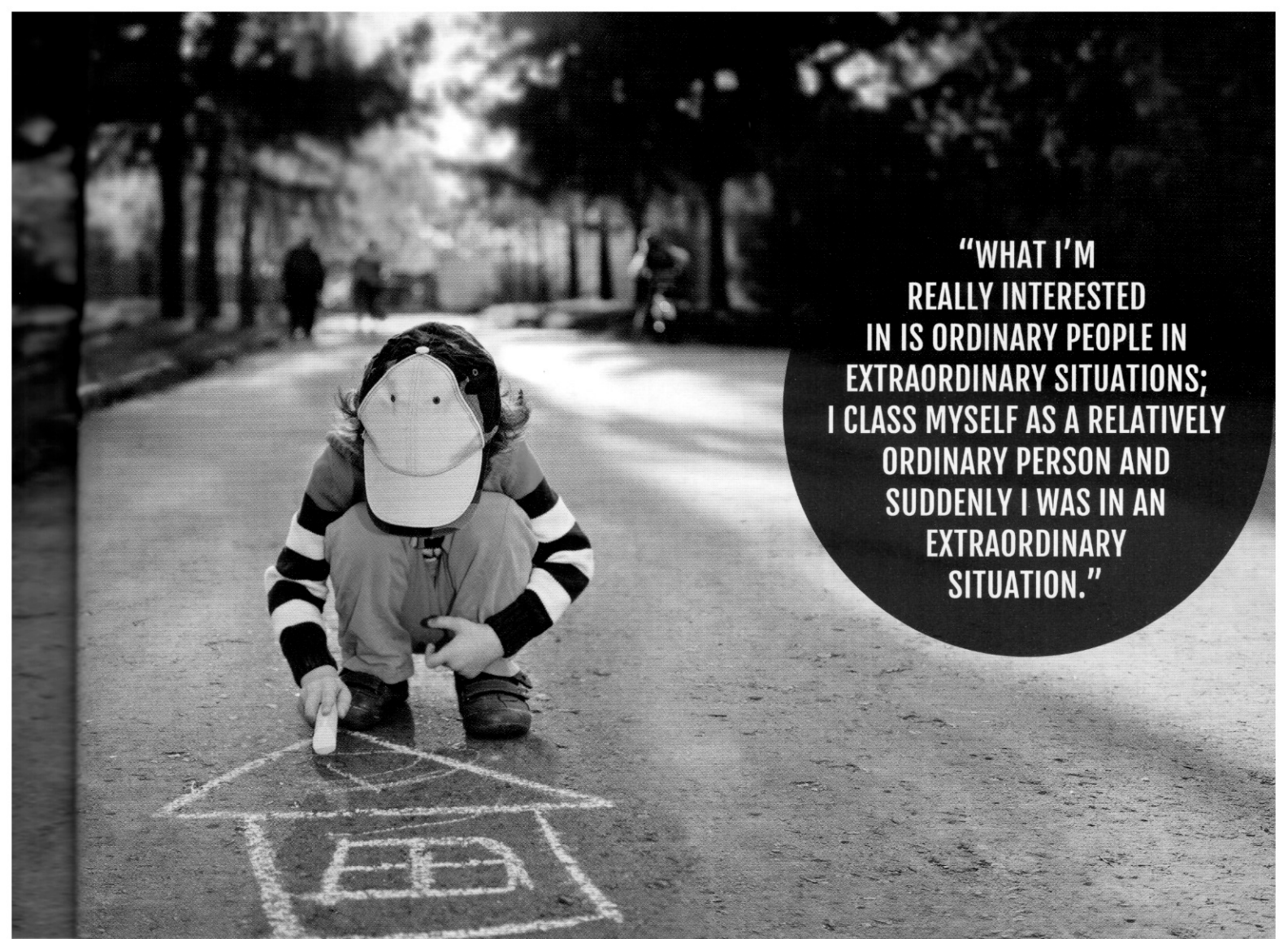
there were lots of other people. I realised that they weren't represented and this world wasn't talked about. Suddenly I was in a dramatic situation, the most dramatic, tense, nerve-racking and hopeful situation I've ever known. So I thought I'd try writing about it and it felt like a scary step to take but one I wanted to explore."

Farr and his wife would eventually undergo four rounds of IVF over four years and now have 15-month-old twins. However, when the play was written and completed, the couple were still receiving their final round of treatment and were unaware of whether or not it would be successful. For Farr, it was therefore vital that the overall message of the play conveyed the experience of IVF without stating whether it is one thing or another; yes the science is incredible and it offers hope for millions, but it isn't guaranteed. "What I want to do is represent the fertility community, so it feels like a story that they know. But it's not saying 'if you just try harder it will work' with me standing on the other side of it. Without giving too much away, the play is about their relationship rather than the success or failure of IVF," he says.



The Quiet House follows Farr's debut, *Britannia Waves the Rules*: an emotionally charged tale of a young man called Carl who joins the army as a way of escaping the pain of his home life, only to return from Afghanistan with even deeper emotional scars. For Farr, a vital part of his work is to expose his audience to thoughts and feelings they are not accustomed to or indeed comfortable with. In *Britannia Waves the Rules* Carl's fury is bruising and visceral but in *The Quiet House* the emotions are more subtle - the overwhelming message is one of hope. That being said, it isn't an easy watch for the audience; Farr doesn't shy away from the difficult side of fertility treatment and says that the scenes where Jess is injecting will be graphic - the couple's vulnerable moments are laid bare.

"There are a cluster of feelings: pain, anxiety, fear and loss but they are balanced with hope and love and support and



**"WHAT I'M
REALLY INTERESTED
IN IS ORDINARY PEOPLE IN
EXTRAORDINARY SITUATIONS;
I CLASS MYSELF AS A RELATIVELY
ORDINARY PERSON AND
SUDDENLY I WAS IN AN
EXTRAORDINARY
SITUATION."**

strength," says Farr. "So it's a really 'grab you by the scruff of the neck and drag you through the storyline' play, because that's what I want when I go to the theatre, I want to feel something. I hope that both people who have an understanding of this world and those who don't will feel something. That's my ambition for the play."

Most of the play takes place within Jess and Dylan's apartment, creating an intimacy between the actors and the audience; the venues where the play will be performed have also been selected for their smaller size, leaving 'nowhere to hide'. The goal is to make these private conversations public, breaking down the taboos that surround fertility and to highlight the isolation couples can feel. Farr addresses this within the plot by showing the difference in attitudes between the couple, saying: "One character feels like it's between the two of them and shouldn't leave the home and the other character says it's bigger than that, it's human and we need to overcome our fears and our shame to get through it with pride." Personally, Farr agrees with the latter train of thought. "I think it's time, I'm very happy to talk about it and I wouldn't have written a play about it otherwise."

The Quiet House will play at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre for two weeks in May before transferring to the Park Theatre in London for five weeks in June and will be directed by Tessa Walker. It will also feature as part of Fertility Fest, the first ever arts festival in the UK exploring assisted conception and alternative routes to parenthood which will take place on Saturday 28th May (Birmingham) and Sunday 11th June (London). In both cities the festival will be a day-long event of theatre, music, film, visual arts, literature, discussion and debate featuring a range of artists and leading medical experts.

Farr has admitted to finding fertility a difficult subject to talk about, and that he understands the shame attached to it because "you don't want it to be happening to you", but as science has moved on so rapidly in the last 25-30 years, so too should our attitudes as a society. He says: "It's about making babies and we're British so fundamentally we get shy about things like that. But it's a shame that it's a taboo; lots of people in lots of streets up and down the country go through this and shouldn't feel ashamed

of that. Children of IVF should be able to shout about it from the rooftops because it's amazing - they're amazing!"

Despite their joy at the birth of their twins, Farr says he and his wife feel the lasting effects of their three failed cycles of IVF, describing them as "a journey that never leaves you." The couple are currently deciding whether to try for more children because they still have frozen embryos, but he admits that it is a difficult choice. Just like in his play, the decision to embark on more IVF inevitably follows the same story arc: from the initial discussions to the sense of hope followed by the possibility of either great loss or joy. Insisting that the process of writing was not cathartic and instead an exercise in telling the story as a piece of fiction, Farr admits he did a lot of deleting and rewriting. The end result is a piece of theatre that doesn't tell the story of Farr and his partner, nor is it about the fictional characters Jess and Dylan. Instead, it captures the hopes and heartbreaks of every couple who ever dared to dream about becoming parents, no matter what the odds.

www.birmingham-rep.co.uk/event/the-quiet-house/