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The Safari Party

"To understand 'The Safari Party'," says Tim Firth, "you have to understand what a safari party is."

In Kenya, it's fairly self explanatory. In Cheshire, it isn't.

"No," agrees Firth.

"That's because a safari party in Cheshire is a dinner party with three couples, where the starters are at one house, the main course is at another and the dessert at another. This particular safari party is the idea of a rural couple who have just bought a barn conversion, and it brings together people who would otherwise never have met." Soon,

snorts Firth, a perfectly nice middle-class dinner party turns into a real hunt for blood. On the surface, the squabbles seem to be about the goods sold at an antiques shop. "But," says Tim, "at it's heart, this is a story about who owns the countryside." Firth wrote the play without a commission and handed it to Ayckbourn to get his opinion. And now look what's happened. "I wanted to produce a fast, funny short play. There's a lot more to it than that - but if you don't want to take that home with you, you don't have to."

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Box 01723-370541



Article by Tony Greenway
Picture by Andy Bulmer

Tim Firth

Tim Firth is talented, well off, successful and really rather nice. Tcha! It's enough to make you boycott his plays...

Before you get talking to Tim Firth, you presume that he is hopelessly and permanently plugged into terminal luvviedom. But what do you expect? Firth is an ex-Cambridge grad and Footlights writer-performer who became an award-winning playwright ('Neville's Island'), popular radio scribe ('Now in Colour') and sought-after TV scriptwriter ('Once Upon a Time in the North', 'Preston Front', 'The Fleet Street Nativity'). The walls of his designer office are covered with starry photos and posters of his greatest TV and stage successes, and in the loo there's a television prop which is littered with celebrity signatures ("Please don't ever do that to me again. Thank you. Martin Clunes.").

Then there are Firth's current projects: a big American corporation (which we can't name) has hired him to re-write a big movie (which we can't talk about) but, trust us, when it comes to pass it will be A Very Big Deal Indeed. And so will his forthcoming West End musical collaboration with Madness ("you know... the band?") and a TV film with Steve "ah-ha!" Coogan.

Meanwhile, Firth's latest play, 'The Safari Party', is premiering this month at The Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough, directed by (low bow) Sir Alan Ayckbourn.

And if that ain't 'hooray-for-Hollywood' enough for you, Firth's close personal friend Sam Mendes (with fragrant squeeze Kate Winslet) came to stay for Christmas. Very nice.

Ah, but later things mellow out somewhat, and Artscene's green-eyed monster gets half-back into its box (although we're still a bit pissed off about that Kate Winslet thing). It seems that Firth is no big fan of today's chilly TV commissioning climate ("it's cowardly, is the best I can say for it") and he plays down his star associations in a deadpan, world-weary way

("Yessssss, Sam was herrree and he brought Kate with him. I thought this was for Artscene?"). He is rooted, Tim Firth, in real life, which is why

he still lives in rural Cheshire with his wife and three children and doesn't spend any time kissing the air at The Groucho. "I got back to Cheshire after 'Neville's Island' opened in London, and bumped into this local guy," recalls Firth. "He said: 'Haven't seen you for ages! How's things?' I said: 'Really good. Just written this new play, it's opened in the West End and it's been nominated for four Olivier Awards.' And he said: 'Great! Hey, I've got a new shed...'"

As a teenager, Firth was influenced by TV classics like 'Porridge' and 'The Likely Lads', but his real turn-on was the modern musical ("My friends were into to punk, and I was listening to 'I Don't Know How to Love Him'.") He'd already written several of his own musicals and persuaded his school to stage them – so it seemed natural that, in 1983, he should attend a course tutored by Willy Russell. "I went on Willy's course purely to write music – but on the first night he said: 'Go away and write two minutes of dialogue.' I'd never written a word of dialogue in my life. I was 18 and the youngest one there. I felt so little and so young and so stupid".

The next morning, Firth turned in a page of script about two youngsters trying to write a song – "because that's all I knew about" – and Willy and his director, Danny Hiller, read it out to the group. "On the third line, Danny laughed for a minute. Just laughed and laughed. And if everyone has a minute where their life changes, that was mine".

At Cambridge, Firth went dialogue crazy, writing sketches for the Footlights and meeting the likes of David Baddiel, Nick Hancock and Mendes. "Five per cent of the time I was writing essays; for the rest I was writing for Footlights and the theatre. Sam directed all my plays and got me commissions afterwards." After college, he turned to radio and then TV, writing a one-off script for 'Minder' ("it was OK") and a one-off script for 'The Bill' ("it was crap"). 'Neville's Island' wasn't his first stage play, but it was his first huge success; premiering in Scarborough, transferring to the Apollo in London and becoming a TV production with Timothy Spall.

Firth's work – all of it – is character driven and always comic. Ayckbourn's is much the same. So does Tim think it important for people to leave the theatre with changed perspectives? Or aching ribs? "If you can change people's perspectives, you've cracked it. It's most important to me that people come away having laughed and laughed and laughed, having loved the characters and the story."

But is that enough?

"No, it's not. Because I'm not writing farce. I'm writing plays which I feel very strongly about; I'd like to say that I deal with issues that are best expressed through humour. This may not be the case, actually – but humour is the only thing I can do. Whatever I do will be told through a degree of character comedy, mainly because that's what I like most in people. I like wit and a sense of humour." He admits, though, that he doesn't 'do' jokes.

"I can't write them. Can't tell them, either. Alan would say much the same."

Writing in a vacuum is hard, Firth says, so get your script finished and then read out by a bunch of actors. That's the best way. "I'll read things I wrote a while ago and think: 'Yah-eeeeesh! Come ON.' Because you grow up and hopefully get better the more you do. You can hide from your mistakes on the page, but when the actors read your dialogue aloud, you think: 'No, no, no, no...'"

The dynamic of Firth's scripts dictate where they will ultimately end up: ITV, BBC2, your local multiplex, the West End or the Stephen Joseph. "I have no preference, but there are purists in each camp who are very snotty about the others. There will be television people who can't understand why you insist on writing for the stage. Then there are film people who don't know why you should want to write for TV when you could be doing a movie; and theatre types who reckon you're a sell-out for writing for either of the other two. No, sorry. I'm not going to be drawn by any of that bollocks. I go idea by idea."

The money he makes for his film work means that he is in the lucky position of "being there" for 'The Safari Party' as Ayckbourn and the cast get to grips with it. How does he feel about handing his baby over, even to someone as esteemed as Sir A? "I've never had Alan direct a non-musical play of mine, so I don't know. But I'm really looking forward to it, because a) it's a beautiful theatre and b) you have to win your audiences. In the summer season at Scarborough you can be fighting Bobby Davro at the Futurist – and that's a great challenge for a playwright."

Firth is now working with the writers who influenced him as a young man: Ayckbourn, Russell, Rosenthal. "They were people I felt an affiliation with, and they have a degree of populism which I think is a fabulous thing for a playwright to have." He will continue to produce TV scripts for one-off comedy-dramas, but is put off writing full-blown series. Television is too bland, too safe, too full of cops and doctors – and you have to smuggle in your real ideas under the cover of something else. Once, Firth put out a hoax pitch for a new TV drama called 'The Emergency Family'. "I mooted this story where every member of the family was in a different branch of the emergency services. And some executives said: 'Hey, Tim! Would you come and talk to us about that...?'"

For the immediate future, his energies will be centred on 'The Safari Party' at the Stephen Joseph. "I really want lots of people to come and see my plays," says Firth. "I want the plays to have a life."

He is fairly sure that the next thing he does will be for theatre, too, and that it will be a play about a fish tank (possibly because there is an enormous fish tank right in front of his desk which he stares at all day).

"I said to my wife: 'I've got a great idea for a new play!' She said: 'Is it about a fish tank?' And I said: 'How the fuck do you know...?!'"