

## **Mark Farrelly**

**Mark Farrelly's solo show, *The Silence of Snow: The Life of Patrick Hamilton* explores Hamilton's turbulent life as a novelist and playwright. Ahead of the show's arrival at The Rondo later this month, Daisy Game chats to Mark about failure, therapy, and the fourth wall.**

"What's wrong with failure? What the hell is wrong with failure?" Mark Farrelly is a fan of getting things wrong – and of talking about it. If we're going to have a conversation, the actor and playwright's candid telephone manner seems to suggest, then it may as well be about something proper.

*The Silence of Snow: The Life of Patrick Hamilton* – Mark's one-man show exploring the life (and failures) of inter-war novelist and playwright Patrick Hamilton (1904–1962) – is soon to make its one-night-stop at The Rondo. *Snow* will mark the actor's fourth professional visit to the theatre.

"The Rondo has a really, really lovely atmosphere", says Mark, explaining that it's an excellent venue for what he describes as his "preferred brand of storytelling": that is, storytelling that invites its audience deep into the theatrical fray.

"All of my plays are written to be spoken direct to the audience", Mark tells me; "There's no fourth wall – because I hate the fourth wall. The Rondo is particularly nice for that. You can get really close to the audience; you can walk in amongst them. You're not up on a stage, and slightly removed."

For those unfamiliar with the term, the 'fourth wall' is an invisible divide between auditorium and stage, which – in more 'removed' shows – remains intact: actor does not acknowledge audience. It's a "we're here, you're there – we won't be getting cosy" situation. In less removed shows, however, performers actively break this wall. They might share some chitchat with the front row, for example – or simply throw somebody sitting on it a grin. Think Phoebe Waller-Bridge and *Fleabag* – or indeed, Mark Farrelly and *Snow*, the latter of whom informs me that he is currently "waging a one man war against the fourth wall".

"The kind of theatre we have now is very solemn, very serious, very white, very upper-middle-class; you have to go in there reverently and be very quiet", Mark observes: "In many ways, we've gone down this terrible cul-de-sac with the fourth wall, whereby the actors stand at a 90-degree angle to the audience and talk to each other – to the other actors – and then two hours later they turn and bow to you. I'm not saying that doesn't have its place, but I personally don't like it. I don't like sitting quietly in the dark like I'm a mourner at a funeral", Mark says.

It's a funeral-parlour to which he doesn't intend on contributing: "When it came to writing my own stuff, I knew that I wanted to talk to the audience and get in amongst them. That's why I do it – because we do live in a horribly distant and disconnected society..."

A disconnected society how, I wonder? “I think people are so terribly ‘distant’”, Mark expands: “In my life, there are so many relationships where people didn’t even say goodbye – they just vanished. In the dating world, it’s called ‘ghosting’ – lots of youngsters will be familiar with that! It’s like an epidemic...”

As one of the youngsters in question, I’ll testify to Mark’s observation. Smiling at strangers, saying thank you to bus drivers: it all seems to have fallen somewhat out of fashion. But I also think that people – young and old – crave connection more than they care to admit. Perhaps it’s simply a matter of giving one another permission to connect, I suggest – of creating a space in which we are allowed, and encouraged, to engage with one another. Mark is in agreement: “Why is it that very often live music and comedy sell better than theatre? Because in live music and comedy, the audience is engaged – they’re spoken to. They’re part of it. And that’s what people really love”.

That’s also, I’m told, what audience members used to get a lot more of: “If you look at a lot of Shakespeare plays, the characters talk to the audience [...] Richard III comes on and says “Hey, I’ve got the dastardly plan – do you want to join me in it?”. You see more than a remnant of that in the pantomime tradition; so many theatres rely on Panto season to remain afloat financially – because Panto is really, really popular. Its popularity has a lot to do with engagement”.

Snow might not quite fit into the festive, “he’s behind you!” bracket, but Mark hopes that the play still gives the people what they want: “My shows are a little bit like speed dating: the moment I come on, the audience realise pretty quickly, “Oh, we can’t just sit here quietly in the dark – we’re in this”. And pretty quickly they decide to go with it [...] You and the audience tell a story together”.

So, what story will audience members be helping to tell in the case of Snow? Set in a 1950s electro-therapy clinic, the show takes us on a 70-minute sweep through Hamilton’s life: from its bright-and-shiny start – to its early finish. At the age of just 25, Hamilton’s play *Rope* became a Broadway and West End smash-hit, whilst critics and public alike piled praise onto his trio of novels, *The Gorse Trilogy*, and their slimy anti-hero Ernest Ralph Gorse.

But Hamilton’s career – and personal life – was of the ticking-time-bomb variety. “Patrick Hamilton needs alcohol as a car needs petrol”, novelist J.B Priestly wryly commented: towards the end of his short life, Hamilton was knocking back three bottles of whisky a day. He died at the age of 58, leaving behind what Mark describes as a small – but precious – “treasure trove of writing”.

“What interested me specifically was seeing a lot of resonance between my own life and [Hamilton’s]”, Mark recalls: “A big and heady successful start to life – I went to Cambridge, played Hamlet on a tour of America... And then I slowly started to slip down as unemployment hit. I went through depression, I had a breakdown, I drank far too much – and I saw a lot of that in Patrick. Playing him is a really interesting way of looking at the way that not only my life, but anyone’s life, could go if you let them slip”.

Snow isn't all doom and gloom, Mark hastens to add; there's a fair amount of humour in the show (albeit of the dark kind) but it "doesn't shy away from the truth of his life", the writer admits. Mark is not only interested in finding truth in the lives of others, but in his own as well. Following the deterioration of a long-term relationship in his mid 30s, the actor spent two years in therapy: "I wrested myself to the floor and started to become who I think I really am, and always was. I just couldn't see it".

With Snow, Mark hopes to encourage audience members to start honest and open conversations about mental health; and to face, wrestle – and make friends with – their demons.

"There's a message in a lot of my plays, and inadvertently in The Silence of Snow – which is 'hang in there'. The temptations in our lives to self-abandon are many and various. You have to keep going, because you don't know what might be around that corner. It might be something terrible – but at least you went round it [...] I think my plays are trying to have that conversation with the audience. It's one of the things that theatre is for – if not, what on earth is it doing? If not, what's the point of all these technicians, all of these lights, all of these posters, all this publicity, all of these – forgive me – all of these interviews? What is the point of all of that, if not to try and change things for the better? [...] Hope is everything. It's all we have."

The Silence of Snow is dedicated to Mark's friend Tim Welling, who took his own life in December 2012. Tim's legacy is recognised through a charity collection in aid of MIND, taken at the close of each show.

**The Silence of Snow will play at The Rondo, Bath on 30 November. Tickets (Full £16, concession £14) available from [rondotheatre.co.uk](http://rondotheatre.co.uk)**