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## **INTERVIEW: Playwright Lee Hall talks to Northumbria student, Rosie Willan**

In 1998, a selection of Lee Hall's work was read exclusively for Live Theatre audiences. It included *Dancer* which went on to become Oscar nominated film *Billy Elliot*. His later play, *The Pitmen Painters*, premiered at Live Theatre in 2007 and has since sold out the National Theatre in London, run on Broadway and toured the UK. It's obvious that maintaining a strong relationship with the theatre he credits so much of his success to is hugely important for Hall.

"My friends are all jealous of the bond I have with Live Theatre. There are

very few places like it in the country – it’s certainly my artistic home. I wouldn’t be the writer I am or have had the success I’ve had without it.” His most recent project features a series of screenplays still in development, on a range of topics from George Orwell to Elton John. The last of the series, which will be read later this week, is based on the true story of a French composer who wrote one of his most famous pieces of music whilst languishing in a German Prisoner of War camp in the 1940s. Hall explained: “It’s a beautiful story about a group of people coming together to make an extraordinary piece of music in difficult circumstances. The audiences in Newcastle really seem to understand my work so having the chance to present these pieces which are still in development and get feedback at this stage is extremely valuable to me as a writer.”

Born and bred in Newcastle, Hall feels there is a unique connection here between ordinary, working class people and expression in the arts. This could be one reason for his special relationship with audiences in the North East. Like so many great writers, there is a common theme which underpins his work and which makes it so universally appealing. “The stories are really about underdogs who are trying to find meaning in their life,” explains Hall, “Just as you don’t have to know about ballet to enjoy Billy Elliot, you don’t have to love classical music to enjoy For the End of Time. These things are just metaphors for the character creating something bigger than themselves.”

This passion for creating entirely new work is something which Hall hopes to encourage in others. He is a huge supporter of up-and-coming artistic talent, championing Northumbria graduate Paddy Campbell. Paddy’s first play, *Wet House*, began life at Live Theatre and will return in September before touring to Hull Truck and Soho Theatre in London. In 2013, Northumbria launched a formal partnership with Live Theatre which has created opportunities for its students to work with staff in developing their writing or performance.

“The partnership between Northumbria and Live Theatre is a very virtuous one which I would certainly encourage. For writers who are just finding their voice, it’s important to have institutions like Live Theatre who focus on new work, have years of expertise and such excellent actors. You couldn’t ask for a better exemplar than Paddy, who is an extremely talented writer. Just as Northumbria benefit from the partnership, new thinking can reinvigorate a working theatre year on year.”

Hall received an honorary degree from Northumbria in 2012 in recognition of

his cultural contributions to the city. Returning to his home city to receive the award was, he says, very moving. “It meant a great deal to me, since no-one in my family has ever been in higher education. The recognition that I had made a contribution shows that if you persevere, you can be heard. If it inspires another kid like me to have a go at writing, then that’s even better.”

So, what advice would Hall give to other aspiring writers hoping to follow in his footsteps?

“Write about what you know and know who you are trying to address with it. For the past 20 years, I’ve tried to have a conversation with my audience – to make them laugh, cry, think. The importance of your audience is something I had drummed into me during my time as a pupil at Live Theatre and it’s stayed with me throughout my career. That’s what Live Theatre offers to the North East and Newcastle – an on going relationship with art.”

To book tickets to see For the End of Time [www.live.org.uk](http://www.live.org.uk) or call the box office on 0191 2321232.

To read the full article on The Journal website, [click here](#)

Anyone wanting to follow in Rosie’s footsteps can find out more about Northumbria University’s Journalism and Media degrees by signing up to its open days on 27 and 28 June. Visit [www.northumbria.ac.uk/opensday](http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/opensday) for further details.

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## Contacts



### **Rik Kendall**

Press Contact  
PR and Media Manager  
Business and Law / Arts, Design & Social Sciences  
rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk  
07923 382339



### **Andrea Slowey**

Press Contact  
PR and Media Manager  
Engineering and Environment / Health and Life Sciences  
andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk  
07708 509436



### **Rachael Barwick**

Press Contact  
PR and Media Manager  
rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk  
07377422415



### **James Fox**

Press Contact  
Student Communications Manager  
james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk



### **Kelly Elliott**

Press Contact  
PR and Media Officer  
kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk



### **Gemma Brown**

Press Contact  
PR and Media Officer  
gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk