

60 seconds

TIMOTHY SPALL

FROM Auf Wiedersehen, Pet, a string of Mike Leigh films to Wormtail in the Harry Potter franchise, Timothy Spall is a familiar face on both stage and screen. His latest role is as Peter Farquhar in *The Sixth Commandment*, based on the true story of how the inspirational teacher met charismatic student Ben Field and the murder that followed. Spall, 66, discusses his moving portrayal of Peter, what it's like to watch his son on stage and why he's happy being all at sea...

Tell us about Peter Farquhar...

Peter was for a long time an inspirational teacher who then semi-retired and became a lecturer at Buckingham University.

All his life he had been a man alone. Always struggling to reconcile his faith with his yearnings, with his sexuality, for the want of a better word. There is this kind of resignation of realising he is never going to find anybody. And then he does. And it does not go well. I was very mindful that there was a hell of a responsibility to try

and play Peter as much as I could for all the subtleties of his life, the dignity of the man. Masses of people loved him and loved his neighbour, Ann Moore-Martin [played by Anne Reid].

How important was it for you and dramatist Sarah Phelps that this is a celebration of the lives of Peter and Ann as much as an examination of this extraordinary and shocking crime?

The nature of these things is often that the

perpetrator is the person who gets the most press because they are the ones in the court case.

It's really important in this story that you see Peter and Ann for the fullness of their lives. You are seeing them for their frailties as well. That's a lovely thing to be able to do.

Sarah Phelps is a fantastic writer. The way she distils this amazing mixture of drama and plot all seamlessly – I found it fascinating and deeply moving, and quite harrowing.

It's based on the toughness of life, but God bless them all.

Normal People's Éanna Hardwicke gives an unnerving, hypnotic performance as Ben Field, the church warden convicted of murdering Peter...

Isn't he fantastic? Éanna is a lovely fella. But I think this story is a tragedy for everybody. There is a whole family around Ben Field.

When something happens like this you kill part of everybody – it's not just the people that die. Parts of other people go with them.

There is a scene where Peter and his neighbour Liz (Sheila Hancock) visit a friend in care and she says: 'This absolutely terrifies me, being helpless.' Do you have concerns about the way people are treated in old age?

It's a bit of a lottery. There are great places and there are places that aren't so great.

It happened with my mum. She was down in Margate and they looked after her very well. My brother was down there and he was brilliant.

The nature of life is that we don't really plan for it until it hits us, do we? You've made me think now.

I've got kids. I don't know what they're going to do with us [laughs]. The next time we're all together I'm going to have that conversation. 'What are you going to do with us when we become a burden?'

Talking of your kids, do you have a favourite role that you've seen your son Rafe play?

I recently saw him in *To Kill A Mockingbird*. He was fantastic in it. He played Atticus Finch. I'm always nervous when I watch him. He's my boy, isn't he? But I am constantly astounded. He's brilliant and he's a nice bloke as well.

What pastimes do you enjoy?

I like boating. I like going on the sea, on the water. I do that quite a lot. I don't know why because I'm frightened of the sea.

Have you had any bad experiences while out boating?

Oh yeah, terrifying. On the North Sea, in the Irish Sea, on the Mediterranean. The trouble is with water, even if it's a small stretch, once the wind blows up it does what it wants.

But it is also beautiful and it's a bit of an adventure.

Turn up on a boat to somewhere you've never been to before. You feel like, all of a sudden, you're Marco Polo. Even if it's Ramsgate.

Have offers of a blockbuster Marvel or a Bond movie ever come your way?

Not yet. Should I be offended? The wonderful thing about being in this business is that you simply do not know what's going to come next.

Sometimes if it's completely ludicrous and I think, 'Do they mean me?' I have to do it. I've got a vague idea what I might be doing at the end of the year, but it could be nothing. It could be all over.

Every time I finish a job and I don't know what the next one is then as far as I'm concerned that's it. Over. Rumbled. Thank you very much. It's been a good run. I'll watch *Flog It!* and do a bit of painting.

PAUL SIMPER

The Sixth Commandment begins on Monday at 9pm on BBC One



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