



EMPIRE OF LIES

With a screening of his new film at Bridport Arts Centre in June, actor, producer and director Joseph Millson talks to Fergus Byrne.

There's always a question of which character you're going to meet when you first talk to a well-known actor. In Joseph Millson's latest film, *Empire of Lies*, he plays a grieving father consumed by conspiracy theories after his daughter's murder. His performance is so biting and powerful that you could be forgiven for expecting a fiercely intense fire-breathing dragon to turn up and berate you for not believing the earth is flat. However, Joseph greets me with an affability that couldn't be more distant from his reclusive, angst-ridden yet compelling character, Dave Harris. Sporting a New Era Kansas City Chiefs baseball cap and green T-shirt, he is relaxed and ready to chat.

He says he has recently adopted the full name of Joseph. 'I was always Joe, but I've really rather enjoyed readopting Joseph,' he says with a warm, reflective laugh. 'You know, for years, you'd think you're in trouble...' Joseph!!!' but it's certainly not a thing I'm precious about. It's almost the opposite. I'm trying to readopt it.'

Maybe this change is fitting for an artist currently in a season of profound creative expansion. No longer solely an actor hitting his marks, he is a writer, a director, a producer, and an ardent defender of independent, margin-dwelling cinema. His feature film directorial debut, *Signs of Life*, recently shown at Bridport Arts Centre, is now finding a growing audience on Amazon

Prime. In *Empire of Lies*, he is credited as co-writer and producer alongside director Matthew Hope, who directed *The Vanguard* in 2008 and *All the Devil's Men* in 2018.

The genesis of *Empire of Lies* was born out of shared industry frustration. Joseph dared Matthew Hope to return to his roots. 'Who says that this career has to be linear?' Joseph challenged him. 'Why can't you go into a little film and then go back to the big ones? I said, just write something. It's a bloke in a field, in a van with a gun.'

Three months later, Matthew delivered a script about a grieving father pushed to the fringes of society, accused of a gruesome crime, and spiralling into the dark world of conspiracy theories.

Joseph is restrained when talking about his co-writer credits. His input was minimal, he says, maybe offering a counterbalance to ensure the film wasn't entirely polemic. He ultimately took on the lead role of Dave Harris.

His performance in *Empire of Lies* is a tour de force of restrained anger and sorrow. I asked him how he managed to humanise a character who is 'off the scale'. He explains how he leaned into the concept of unresolved trauma. 'What it reminded me of is how often you pass someone on the street who is talking animatedly to themselves,' Joseph explains. 'How do people get there? I think there are some paths. And one path that this film suggested was extreme grief and complicated

grief. Left unsorted, untreated, untherapised, unheard... it can lead to a kind of psychosis where you are hearing and seeing things.'

In an era dominated by digital echo chambers and misinformation, Joseph sees grief as the ultimate catalyst for falling down rabbit holes. People look for solace, for 'some kind of reason for something which is unexplainable.' In *Empire of Lies*, the media acts as a skewed courtroom, leaving the accused to navigate an intangible, shifting reality.

Talking with Joseph Millson reveals a man who understands the deep psychology of his craft, the liberating power of 'no-budget' filmmaking, and the unpredictable path that led him here.

He views the actor as a portrait painter who is ultimately colouring in a writer's sketch. The best actors, Joseph suggests, are the ones who retain the ability to play without ego. 'Basically, good acting is make-believe. It's let's play cowboys and Indians. Let's play grieving father. You have to enjoy your work.'

He cites actors like Olivia Colman in *Tyrannosaur*, delivering a devastating vision of grief on screen, only to playfully ask for a custard cream the moment the director yells cut. 'It's the easiest and the hardest thing all at once,' he says.

This sense of play was crucial on the set of *Empire of Lies*, especially during gruelling six-page takes. Joseph, alongside his nephew and cinematographer Elliot Millson—whom Joseph boldly claims is 'the most talented cinematographer' he's worked with in 30 years—created an environment in which mistakes were welcomed, reminding his 'brilliant' co-star Natalie Spence that 'we have this magic thing called editing.'

Joseph Millson's ability to act as a 'vessel' for the characters he plays wasn't honed in a vacuum. He grew up in a pub in the village of Stanford Dingley in rural Berkshire, where he was exposed to the full spectrum of human behaviour. 'I was exposed to all flavours of humanity in a bar every night,' he says, 'fights and snogs under my bedroom window'. His education further developed his adaptability. After his family's pub became a financial success in Thatcher's Britain, his father briefly sent him to a posh school. When the family later faced bankruptcy, Joseph was thrust into a remarkably rough comprehensive school.

'I managed to mimic these posh boys perfectly, and I just slotted in and became a really posh boy,' he remembers of his brief stint in private education. 'So we went from there to the roughest school in the nearest 100 miles.' Having only just assimilated to being posh he got 'beaten shitless.' He remembers the experience as seeing 'both sides of the tracks'. As far as he can remember, when it came to a career in

acting, 'the writing was on the wall.'

From his initial training at the Rose Bruford College of Speech and Drama in Sidcup to recently gaining a master's degree in screenwriting from Falmouth University his vast experience in front of the cameras now sits alongside talents in many other areas of the industry. He is finding immense freedom behind the camera and at the keyboard.

Left unsorted, untreated, untherapised, unheard... it can lead to a kind of psychosis

Looking forward, he is focusing heavily on writing. His first novella, which he describes as 'a really odd little book that has been bubbling up for years with me', is about a seven-year-old girl in 1980s Utah and will be released soon.

Meanwhile, he is gearing up to direct *Animus*, a thriller he wrote that 'couldn't be further from *Signs of Life*.' The film explores 'rage and positional thinking, and the kind of people that are glueing themselves to the M25'. His concern is the loss of empathy in positional thinking. 'We're starting to lose that area in between,' he says.

Despite the value of films like *Empire of Lies* and *Signs of Life*, their writers, directors and producers operate in the micro-budget space. It's tough to get in front of a large audience. But Joseph points out that it allows them to escape the creative suffocation of studio executives. 'I think the joy of that is you haven't got bankers and investors and Mr. Netflix, Mrs. Amazon, Mr. Whoever and Mrs. Whoever breathing down your neck, worrying about fallout or upsetting people. You can actually dare to use the word "art" more. Like, this is a work of art, so screw you all. But it really does get tricky when fiscal issues start breathing down your neck.'

Empire of Lies tackles some thorny subject matter, not least the debilitating effects of grief and a deep dive into the world of conspiracy theories. With very impressive acting talent, Joseph Millson seems to have navigated a 30-year career in the entertainment industry without losing his sense of reality or his humour. He trades the vanity often associated with acting for a genuine curiosity about human nature, balancing the need to make a living with a sincere desire to tell interesting, boundary-pushing stories on his own terms. *Empire of Lies* fits that arc well.

Empire of Lies directed by Matthew Hope and starring Joseph Millson and Natalie Spence is showing at Bridport Arts Centre on the 13th of June at 7pm. For tickets visit: <https://www.bridport-arts.com/>



Joseph Millson as Dave Harris