

Profile

Stage struck

Playwright and *Shortland Street*'s 'Dr Love' Michael Galvin talks to Sarah Lang about his work and treading the boards again after a 10-year absence.



EARLY DAYS: Michael Galvin as a young Chris Warner.

ODDLY, I FEEL a little nervous before meeting Michael Galvin in the flesh. Perhaps not that odd, given my schoolgirl crush on him in the early days as *Shortland Street*'s Dr Chris Warner. Since he tore that leotard off an aerobics instructor (played by future *Prime News* presenter Suzy Clarkson) in the soap's first, very green episode in 1992, the young buck has morphed into the clinic's star surgeon, on-and-off chief executive, and lothario. I've watched him saving lives and breaking hearts most week nights since.

The 42-year-old doesn't take himself as seriously as Chris Warner. "It's really not on for Kiwi guys to be snobby and a bit prissy like Chris," Galvin says, "but that's what makes him fun to play."

Was he ever a playboy himself? Galvin laughs. "What single guy doesn't at least try to, you know, be that way. It's so long ago. I got partying and drinking out of my system before I got married."

His wife of five years Melissa, with whom he has 3-year-old Lily, is "very cool" about his onscreen smooches. And Galvin's love scenes have certainly earned him his share of fans.

Admirers aside, part of *Shortland Street*'s appeal is the regular pay cheque. "But I wouldn't be able to do it just for the money, because when you get into that space — and a lot of people do — you just become so bitter and unpleasant to work with and it's very boring for everyone around you."

"But I don't want to be that person again, and I was a little bit before I left the first time." After four years travelling, writing and performing overseas he returned to the show in 2001 with a less-precious perspective. "I've done that now so I don't have that thing gnawing away at me saying 'Ooh, you never tried!'"

But Galvin is no one-trick pony. He has had two short stories published, sung in musicals, starred in films and is pitching TV screenplays. But it is plays where he's making his mark.

After a well-received production of his first play, *New Gold Dream* (2003), Galvin was recognised as an outstanding emerging playwright with the 2007 Bruce Mason Award for his second

play, *The Ocean Star* (2006).

Galvin, who writes during downtime on the *Shortland Street* set, is now staging his most ambitious work, a black comedy titled *Station to Station*. On Wednesday's opening night, a crowd of *Shortie* and *Outrageous Fortune* actors and the who's who of the thespian world packed the steep pews of the Herald Theatre.

Galvin, who has taken a few weeks leave from *Shortland Street*, admits he's scared about treading the boards for the first time in 10 years. But he channelled those nerves into his opening scene, preaching as TV presenter-turned-evangelist Simon, whose fervent leaps, crazy eyes and talking in tongues makes first-row onlooker Fleur Saville (*Shortie*'s Libby) laugh out loud.

Spoiler alert: religious zealot Simon and his supposedly sweet sidekick Veronica

(*Outrageous Fortune*'s Antonia Prebble) are trying to help purge Jerusalem of Islam so the Jews can reclaim it and thus hasten the Second Coming of Christ. To this end, they manipulate a soldier (*Orange Roughies*' Mark Ruka) into committing a terrorist act; his cancer-stricken mum (Ilona Rodgers) is merely collateral damage. Although trapped by the confines of their story, the screwed-up foursome are determined to believe in a happy ending.

With its gripping storyline and cracker one-liners, *Station to Station* holds your attention for the entire 90 minutes.

You can almost smell the pungent whiff of brimstone and the

Apocalypse permeating the aisles. Spare, snappy dialogue lets the story speak for itself, while the humour balances out weighty themes about politics, religion, destiny, death, lies, and particularly the illogicality and self-deception of faith. "I don't have much to offer in the way of answers but I'd like to pose some interesting questions," says Galvin.

He borrowed the play's title from the eponymous David Bowie album, which was a reference not to the musician's transient lifestyle but to the Stations of the Cross — the 14 stations of Jesus' journey to his execution. Begging the question of whether our lives are already mapped out, these stations are symbolised on-set with slides of pretty then progressively more disturbing images.

But the story is not a far cry from the world we live in. The genesis of the play was a *Guardian* article on a town meeting in America's Deep South, Galvin says, "where they were having this stand-up fight about Mideast politics". The reason wasn't altruism but a belief that Israel has to take full ownership of Jerusalem before the Second Coming can, well, come. "So the US Government is under enormous pressure from tens of millions of right-wing religious Americans to supply the Israeli Government and help its Army. I transplanted that to New Zealand," says the lapsed Catholic, who believes Aotearoa is no exception to a global trend towards religious extremism.

"Really, I can't find any more reason to believe in God than to believe in Santa Claus. They have an awful lot in common. If you behave in a certain way you get certain rewards and if you don't you don't."

But right now, Galvin is putting primping before philosophising; he's off home to check whether his new haircut, which nullified the Chris quiff, is too short for Simon's slicked-back do.

Although admitting he penned *Simon* for himself, Galvin purposefully chose the least-sympathetic character. "If you write a play then cast yourself as the hero, it's all a bit self-aggrandising, even for an actor. I just want to tell a great story and keep people on the edge of their seats."

Station to Station plays at Auckland's Herald Theatre until July 11. *Shortland Street* screens on TV2, weeknights at 7pm.



MULTI-TASKER: Michael Galvin writes in between *Shortland Street* takes.