

Festival: Jessica Hepburn

'It's a taboo subject but fertility affects us all'

Valerie Browne speaks to Jessica Hepburn, a writer who has founded the UK's first fertility arts festival after her own gruelling struggle to conceive

"It's an awkward subject, we don't want to scare people, and say they might be infertile – but this affects us all."

These are the words of Jessica Hepburn – a writer and arts producer from Hampstead, who is bravely speaking out about her own personal struggle with what she terms "the silent epidemic" – infertility.

She has now founded Fertility Festival, the UK's first arts festival dedicated to fertility, which she stresses is not just aimed at those who are struggling to have a baby.

"It's for the wider public – it's likely to affect anyone who wants a family and there's a huge likelihood you already know someone who is going through this. It could be your daughter, niece or a friend," Jessica says.

Jessica, 45, is an expert in fertility, having endured 11 rounds of IVF, suffered multiple miscarriages and had an ectopic pregnancy that nearly claimed her life.

She underwent treatments for over a decade, yet she remains childless.

In 2014, she found the courage to talk candidly about her personal pain with her book, *The Pursuit of Motherhood*, after which she suddenly found herself classed as a fertility expert, becoming a trustee of the national charity, Infertility Network UK.

She is a fierce advocate for getting people to start a dialogue on this seldom talked about, somewhat taboo subject.

Although it's a widespread issue, according to Infertility UK, one in six couples are struggling

to conceive.

The Fertility Festival programme is filled with expert talks, workshops and artist performances dedicated to entertain and inform anyone interested in understanding their own fertility levels and supporting friends and family facing problems.

It also provides a unique opportunity to ask experts questions and identify problems that usually go unexplored.

The festival finishes with a performance of award-winning playwright Gareth Farr's new show, *The Quiet House*: a love story in which Farr communicates his own painful experiences of infertility treatments.

Jessica is keen to highlight the scale of fertility problems in the UK, as the most recent statistics from the Human Fertilisation Embryology Authority (HFEA) show that the number of people receiving treatment is on the increase.

HFEA estimates that about 18,000 women will receive IVF treatment in London in 2016, compared with 11,106 who received IVF treatment in the capital in 2007. That's more than a 60 per cent increase over the last nine years.

Infertility UK state that age is one of the key issues for couples experiencing infertility.

Jessica says: "Natural fertility rates decline in women from 33 years of age, then gradually until 38-39, and then more rapidly after the age of 40."

ONS statistics show that in 2014, women waited on average five years longer to have their

first child than their mothers' generation, a telling societal trend that is undeniably one of the causes of the problem.

Jessica agrees, saying no one educated her generation in fertility – therefore, she says, she wasn't really given a choice.

"We are born with our lifetime supply of eggs, they gradually diminish in quality and quantity as we get older, and it gets harder to conceive."

She is fearful the next generation may suffer the same fate should no-one speak up.

"The fact that women are leaving it later in life to have children is definitely one reason that the fertility industry is booming, without a shadow of a doubt."

Then there's the financial pitfalls of fertility treatments, something Jessica is all too familiar with. The NHS has a strict eligibility criteria for IVF treatment and differentiates the number of cycles available to patients depending on which part of the UK they live in. It means that about 60 per cent of patients resort to paying for private fertility treatment, according to the HFEA – a typical three cycle IVF package can cost upwards of £6,000.

Jessica's main aim is to teach people the basic fertility facts so they don't make the mistake many make in thinking that they will have no problems conceiving until they reach their 40s.

"People need to understand what diminishing fertility means, and what the implications can be if you put off having children until later on in life."

■ Jessica Hepburn



Hepburn will always champion choice – "I am not telling people to prioritise having children before their careers" – but she wants to share her own experience with people to demonstrate how important it is to realise that fertility has its limits.

"I don't want to tell people how

to live their lives, but it's important to be informed, so people can make a choice."

■ Fertility Fest will be held at Park Theatre, Clifton Terrace, Finsbury Park on Saturday, June 11. For more information, visit: fertilityfest.com.

Smart dialogue from Eisenberg, but there's too much millennial self-analysis

THE SPOILS Trafalgar Studios ★★★★☆

Not content with playing narcissistic misfits in Hollywood movies like *The Social Network*, actor-turned-writer Jesse Eisenberg is creating them for himself. In his third play, he's a weed-smoking failed filmmaker, loafing around the swanky Manhattan apartment his father bought him, and alternately patronising and tormenting his hard-working Nepalese roommate.

"The most interesting characters are initially difficult to like," Ben pontificates, and *The Spoils* takes that as its mission statement, giving us an arrogant, self-

loathing, needy misanthrope whose emotional development stalled aged eight, when he developed a crush on school friend Sarah.

She's now engaged to banker Ted, but Ben sets about winning her affections in cringe-worthy fashion, climaxing in a failed date where his pushy "niceness" tips over into aggression. It's a showy central role, and Eisenberg excels at the fast-talking, neurotic, un-PC scorn, and live-wire physicality. But he's more a walking think-piece on toxic millennial privilege than an actual human being. Yet Eisenberg the playwright is determined to win our sympathy – by dubious, late-in-the-game manipulation, if nothing else.



■ Alfie Allen, left, and Jesse Eisenberg star

Scott Elliott's fluid if overlong US production has a good combination of British and American talent.

Annapurna Sriram excels as Kalyan's pushy girlfriend Reshma, who has the good sense to loathe

Ben, and *Game of Thrones*'s Alfie Allen is a delight as the happily oblivious Ted. As accommodating Kalyan and compassionate Sarah respectively, Nayyar and Katie Brayben bring real heart, but their continued tolerance of Ben is baffling.

That's the real problem here. Eisenberg crafts smart dialogue and enjoyable comic set-pieces, but this is more a broad, cynical sitcom – with a sleek *Friends*-esque apartment set from Derek McLane – than layered theatre. Too much self-analysis makes for a passive audience experience, and, like Ben's staged documentary, it ditches hard-won engagement for flashy shortcuts.

Marianka Swain