SEEING *Differently*

> “I think for a large part of my life, I used my ears first and eyes second”

Internationally renowned playwright WILLY RUSSELL chats to SALLY HALES about his love of painting

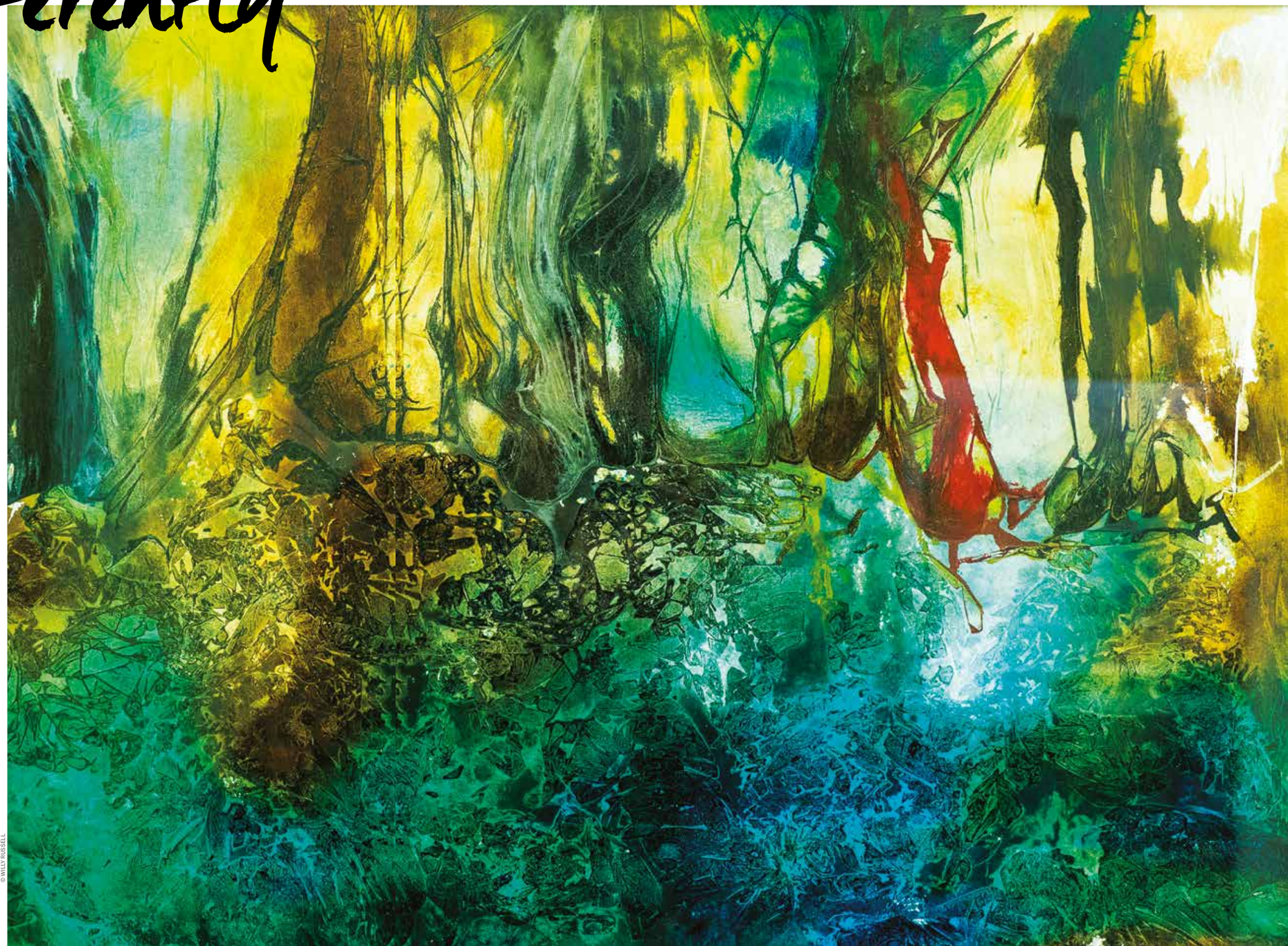
Willy Russell’s trajectory from ladies hairdresser to acclaimed dramatist seems to bear the hallmark of a polymath with profound creative gifts, who effortlessly excels at anything he tries. So it might not, at first, seem surprising that when the playwright, lyricist and composer behind stage and screen hits *Blood Brothers* and *Shirley Valentine* turned his hand to painting, two successful solo shows resulted. Last year *Willy Russell: Another Aspect* showed at the Kirkby Gallery, near Liverpool, and *Seeing Better: Willy Russell Paintings 2008-2017* was on display at London’s Coningsby gallery. What might be more surprising is the prevalence of landscape in the work of someone widely regarded as a great son of Liverpool. But, as we meet Willy at his studio, it becomes clear such simple narratives belie complex beginnings – and the bags of hard work he puts in.

He explains with typical humility that before he began painting, he thought of himself as a writer who lacked a visual imagination: “I would say to stage designers, ‘Until I see it, I just don’t know.’ I think for a large part of my life I used my ears first and my eyes second.” This lack of confidence he blames on the fact that art didn’t form part of his upbringing. “I have no recollection of having painted at home when I was a kid,” he says, and school provided an even poorer introduction. “I was smacked around the head and told to get out of the art room – the only thing I would ever be able to draw, if I was lucky, was the dole.”

FIELDS OF JOY

But Willy did enjoy a kind of country childhood. “In every interview I’ve done I’ve talked about the fact I was raised rurally, but nobody prints it because I’m indelibly associated with Liverpool – a city I don’t originally come from,” he says. Born in 1947 in Rainhill, outside the city’s boundaries, Willy and his family later moved to Knowsley. “The estate we were on was thrown up during the war as cheap housing for munitions workers,” he adds, “but it was in the middle of fields. I would be out pea-picking, spud-picking, roaming all day through woods, streams and fields. That’s why I’m still terribly moved by landscape.”

Yet the idea of responding to it – or any other subject – in paint didn’t come until he was in his fifties and, even then, it was almost by accident. “I was in Portugal,” he says. “I couldn’t sleep because of a crisis happening back >



RIGHT *Homer Wood,* acrylic on paper, 71x89cm

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home in England. I couldn't get any mental peace or sleep. I just started messing with my kids' little paintbrush and palette set that had been left on an outdoor table. Half an hour later I realised that I had had the first mental rest in days." Almost unconsciously, he'd created a watercolour landscape. The next day he painted his wife a birthday card, and the creative flame was lit.

Since then, Willy has been committed to painting. Like many amateur artists, he taught himself by grappling with watercolour before help came in the form of Peter Moore's Teaching the Eye to See class at Liverpool Hope University, which he still attends. "I remember the embarrassment of my first night. I was terrified beyond belief," he says. But his long career in the arts meant he could draw on reserves of creative stamina and knowledge that success is born of failure. "As a playwright, the great truism is that plays are not written, they are rewritten," says Willy. "Paintings are the same. Regardless of what the art is, the same rules apply. There is the same joy, same fear, loss of confidence and a belief that, finally, you're creating a masterpiece."

He also understands the importance of strong foundations. "As a dramatist, I require structure in a play, even if you cannot see it. If the structure is good, the play will look almost improvised," he says. And the same is true of painting. "In recent years, I've begun to appreciate very loose painting, such as the work of the great Northwestern painter Donald McKinlay, who died recently, and I admire enormously," he says. "It struck me that the looseness attests to the brilliance of his draughtsmanship. It's what's underpinning that looseness that makes it able to appear effortless."

> **"What I love about acrylic ink is that I hardly apply a brush stroke"**

HAPPY ACCIDENTS

Willy's Liverpool studio is a testament of the joyful eclecticism of his approach. Dotting its walls are his representational landscapes and group portraits nestled alongside works by friends and fellow painters, and his own sketches and adventures in a variety of media. Having come to art later in life, he has embraced his pupillage, experimenting widely and exploring boundaries he soon discovered did not exist. But improving his technical ability did help him banish his "puritanical streak" which told him anything not achieved with a brush and consciously controlled was somehow a fraud. "I discovered acrylic ink a couple of years ago," says Willy. "What I love about it is I rarely, if ever, apply a brush stroke to it. Some of what the accidental gives you is incredible. Ten years ago I don't think I would've been able to see it and, not only that, I would've said to you, 'I'm not doing that, it's cheating.'"

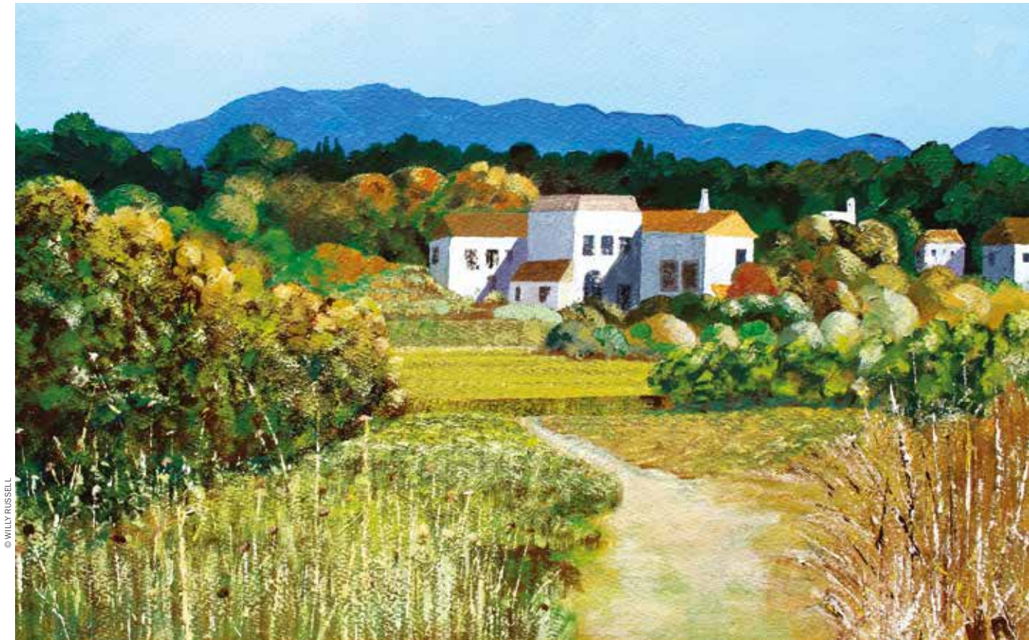
These days, his technique depends on his subject and style. He sketches outdoors with pencils and Quink. For open vistas and works using brushes, he'll create a watery wash and draw loosely on a ground, blocking in the main areas before completing a work using Liquitex Heavy Body acrylics. For experimental paintings, he'll add, among other things, an atomiser, Daler-Rowney acrylic inks, bleach and watercolour, and roll paint around, spraying, shaking, and creating marks with cling film and other materials. He has been developing a technique using PVA glue, inspired by his tutor's idea of applying cement-like textures to canvas. "I hated the gritty effect," says Willy. "But I liked where it was heading. I remember thinking 'There's another way.' So I put a load of kitchen paper in a bucket of PVA." Now he uses this mix – to which he adds cardboard and "all sorts of things" – to create textured works such as *Homer Wood*. He utilises syringes, too. "I like to run lines along the ridges of cling film when it's on the picture. Sometimes you'll get an air bubble and I want to examine what it would be like to put pure paint in the bubble." For Willy, art represents exactly this kind of endless creative experiment, with no end point. He paints and draws every day, just enjoying the journey. "I love to learn," he says. "Love it to bits."

www.coningsbygallery.com; www.willyrussell.com

LEFT *Os Pescadores,* acrylic on paper, 65x84cm
RIGHT *Meadow/ Hills – Holling Grange*, acrylic on board, 83x110cm
BELOW *Track from Vau,* acrylic on paper, 62x86cm



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