

Passion amid scholarship in juicy Stoppard

First night

Michael Billington

The Invention Of Love
Cottesloe

WHY A E Housman? Why should Tom Stoppard have chosen him as the subject of his new play, *The Invention Of Love*? Because it gives Stoppard the chance to meditate on scholarship and poetry, goodness and beauty, homo and hetero, Ruskin and Pater, Housman and Wilde and a whole host of

other subjects beside. Whatever the play may lack, it is certainly not raw material.

In fact, the play is one of Stoppard's juiciest. Like *Travesties* it deals with the nature of memory, as the dead Housman looks back on his younger self, and with the coincidences of history. Like *Arcadia*, it is also preoccupied with the quality of passion, the random nature of literary survival and the idea of life as a route march leading inexorably to the grave. It is weighed down with too much scholarship, but it attempts to combine the pyrotechnic dazzle of early Stoppard with the later mellowness.

For my taste, it is crammed with too much detail. He not only recaptures the young Housman's passion for his Oxford contemporary, Moses Jackson, but also the quips and quiddities of dons of the time. But the play really takes wing when the dead AEH confronts the young Housman.

Stoppard always writes best when he writes from the heart; and here he gives the older man a deeply moving defence of classical scholarship. But also, as in the passage on the Alexandrian Library from *Arcadia*, Stoppard dwells on the lottery of literary survival and on the power of passion.

For the other big theme that

runs through the play is that feeling is defined by intensity rather than vociferousness. Housman's passion for Jackson was internalised, unsummed and the oblique source of much of the poetry. But Stoppard's point is that it was just as real as Wilde's more flamboyant infatuation with Bosie. In that sense, the play is an unfashionable anti-Freudian work that hymns the validity of sexual repression and of a closeted love.

What is intriguing is that it offers Stoppard at his best and worst. The Latin learning is laid on with a trowel. At the same time, the jokes are very good and Stoppard writes with

palpable love about a poet fired by the idea of textual integrity who knew the value of Platonic love.

Richard Eyre, in his last production as the National's director, serves the text with his usual exemplary loyalty. I also liked Anthony Ward's back-projections. And at the heart of the play lies the formidable pairing of John Wood and Paul Rhys as the dead and the living Housman. John Carlisle, Benjamin Whitrow and Michael Bryant lend weight to a supporting cast in an evening that reminds us that Stoppard, for all his cerebral qualities, is at his best when he endorses private passion.

Invention Guardian Billington



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