

THEATRE

A patently good invention

The Invention of Love
Cottesloe, RNT, London

Richard Eyre brings out the shining intelligence and heartbreaking intensity of Tom Stoppard's latest play, writes Paul Taylor

When he was in his forties, A E Housman – severe classical scholar and haunting lyric poet – embarked on an affair with a 23-year-old one-eyed gondolier called Andrea. For him, it was a case of “Life in Venice”. You’d have no way of guessing any of this, though, from *The Invention of Love*, Tom Stoppard’s brilliant and, at times, heartbreaking play about the great man.

In a scenic sense, Andrea would have fitted in well here. Beautifully directed by Richard Eyre, the play takes us into a dream landscape where the septuagenarian Housman (John Wood) has just died and is being ferried across the Styx by a classical Charon (Michael Bryant) who would have nothing to learn from a London cab driver about matey unhelpfulness. With a naughty nod to *Three Men in a Boat*, the undergraduate Housman (Paul Rhys) is rowed in by his Oxford chums. Just the place, then, for Andrea to pop his pole. Thematically, though, he would have muddied as well as congested the waters.

Oscar Wilde, who enters the play several times as an offstage rumour then, in person, as an exiled scandal (Michael Fitzgerald), tells the posthumous Housman that the facts are only facts – “truth is quite another thing and is the work of the imagination”. In that sense, Andrea is only a fact; the truth is Moses Jackson, the heterosexual

scientist and keen athlete for whom Housman developed an unrequited, life-long passion. He was real, all right, but, as one of the many meanings of the play’s title suggests, Housman’s love turned him into a partly imaginary being – the heroic comrade-in-arms, from the Greek classics.

Forever unobtainable even in the Underworld, where John Wood reaches out in agony and in vain as the youthful Moses glides by, he’s the man for whom, as Stoppard’s Housman puts it here, he would have died if he had had the luck. Wilde of course, had that “luck” in spades. You feel it would be impertinent to speak of winners and losers as you watch this out-of-time meeting between the writers. “The choice was not always between renunciation and folly,” cries Housman, savagely nostalgic for the classical past. Nor, in fact, was it always such a clear-cut one for him. When Stoppard’s Wilde refers to “stolen waters”, you could easily forget that this phrase also crops up in one of Housman’s then unpublished poems. He was no stranger to the Parisian *bains de vapeur*. But art cannot put in everything and, in Stoppard’s hands, the two writers become powerful symbols of repression and abandon. The point is that both positions produced lasting art.

The confusion and hardening contemporary attitudes to homosexuality are aired in vignettes full of learned larkiness, where the greats of the period (Jowett, Pater, Ruskin et al) behave like hobbyhorse-riding escapees from the *Alice* books. There’s the intriguing conjecture that the infamous Labouchère Amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Bill of 1885, which provided against “any act of gross indecency”, was introduced to expose the absurdity of the whole bill – a play that tragically backfired.

Paul Rhys and John Wood as the younger Housman and the older AEH: two lonely, awkward people who have suddenly found a soul mate

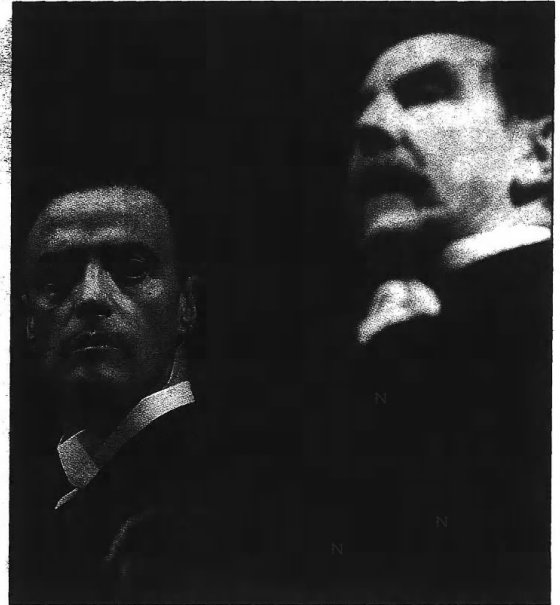


Photo: Geraint Lewis

It’s the older Housman’s encounter with his witty younger self that, superbly acted here, provides the most moving scene. Like two lonely, awkward people who have suddenly found a soul mate, the nervous, burningly intense undergraduate and the buttoned-up, passionately pedantic professor sit side by side on a bench enthusing each other. They are clearly one and the same person but, divided by the cataclysm of Moses’s rejection (still-to-come for the younger man), they are like jigsaw pieces that don’t quite fit. Watching them together, though, you see that the poetry and scholarship are driven by the same fierce desire and

that it would be simplistic to regard Housman’s textual criticism as a displacement activity. The undergraduate shakes the old man’s hand with compassion but also disowns responsibility for his unhappiness and determines to have a less miserable fate. It’s almost unbearably moving.

I have probably made this work seem less witty and diabolically clever than it is. But it was the emotion that got me. Richard Eyre’s direction makes the play’s heart beat loud. It’s wonderful that he leaves the National on such a note of triumph.

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Invention Indy Taylor



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