


FIRST NIGHT
by Nicholas de Jongh
The Invention of Love **
Cottesloe, National Theatre

Stoppard brings to life the sadness of being a lonely poet

FROM the bare bones of the dry life of A.E. Housman, Professor of Latin at Cambridge, who wrote three slim volumes of poems and mostly remained alone at home, Sir Tom Stoppard has been inspired to write the most emotionally powerful and enthralling play of his career. Never before has he written with such exciting eloquence though there's far too many, protracted and repetitive demonstrations of what a dabhand at textual criticism Housman was. It is Sir Richard Eyre's well-sung production as National Theatre director and he makes of it a congenial feast. The *Invention of Love* is a magical minute play which meanders like an elaborate dream. It begins at the close of Housman's life in 1936. Vividly recalls its sad essence in salient vignettes, comic pastiche and riveting glimpses of Housman in poignant encounters with his undergraduate self, Sir Richard, with a clever company of actors, Anthony Ward's dreamy film projections, Peter Mumford's atmospheric lights and Dominic Muldowney's eerie shimmering classical score brings the written elements to bright theatrical life.

Stoppard has always tended to view the ways of the world as puzzling messages in code which he tries to unscramble. His new play, in the same exploratory mode, sets out to explain the enigma of Housman, whose double life as author of the *Shropshire Lad* poems and as a Professor of Latin was remarkable for its wrenchingness. Having fallen at Oxford for the wholly heterosexual Moses Jackson, what drove the homosexual Housman to spend the rest of a life he hated, alone and in semi-seclusion pining for this phantom lover?

Stoppard's way of finding answers to the question is to capture the spirit of the age and suggest what dramatic interest it had for Housman. His play's dreamlike construction also works illuminating wonders. As the older Housman, a superlative John Wood with his air of baffled sadness, quivering mouth and displays of heartfelt pendency, stands waiting for the boat to the classical Greek underworld. "I'm dead then,



John Wood: The actor is dry and jocular as Housman

Good," he observes in Wood's jocular, dry tones. But hardly has he set out on his after-death voyage than another boat, with Paul Rhys as his happy undergraduate self and Robert Portal's phlegmatic Jackson comes drifting by. What pain is conveyed in Wood's cry, as his young self passes by.

Stoppard satirises the Oxford University Establishment of the 1930s when aesthetics was a code-word for screening quon as a troupe of gossiping old trouble makers of very doubtful persuasions. Undercover homosexuals and Oscar Wilde are on hand, Robin Soan's scholarly Walter Pater — in his top hat and yellow hat — plays croquet with John Carls's balliol Master before scandal catches him out. The political world basks in cynicism, with journalists and MPs making money or reputation from stances of outraged morality.

PAUL Rhys, with his remarkable gift for emotionally distraught characters, powerfully makes young Housman, the model of feverish energy, excitement and vulnerability. Rhys rather overprojects some of these emotions. But by the time Housman meets Michael Fitzgerald's brilliant, preening Wilde, it's clear his path is irrevocably set. Wilde argues all erotic love is founded on romantic make-belief and Housman is proud of being sexually bound out, has created his own magical dream-world of male comrades, scholarship his one true pleasure. It's a tremendous, soaring vision of a sacrificed life.

Rating: C — adequate
* good
** very good
*** outstanding
* poor

Invention Standard de Jongh



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