

t h e a t e r

Stoppard reinvents love

The playwright of *The Real Thing* turns his attention to the unrequited gay obsession of poet A.E. Housman **By Gerard Raymond**

English playwright Tom Stoppard, who has been hailed on both sides of the Atlantic for his seriously funny, intellectually agile comedies such as *The Real Thing* and *Arcadia*, is perhaps more widely known as the Oscar-winning cowriter of the popular 1998 movie *Shakespeare in Love*. Stoppard's new play, *The Invention of Love*, cur-

rently on Broadway, is a change of pace from that lusty heterosexual romp. For the first time in his career, the playwright ventures into homosexual territory to examine the inner life of A.E. Housman (1859–1936), the closeted late-Victorian poet and classicist who is best known for his lyrical odes set in the English countryside.

Throughout his life Housman was

dominated by a futile obsession with Moses Jackson, a heterosexual he met while both were undergraduates at Oxford. In Stoppard's poignant and witty memory play, the poet lies on his deathbed remembering and misremembering his emotional and scholarly life. In the New York production, directed by Jack O'Brien, Richard Easton plays the adult Housman; Robert Sean Leonard, his younger self. The playwright talked with *The Advocate* about his views on Housman and the genesis of *The Invention of Love*.

How did you come to write a play about Housman?

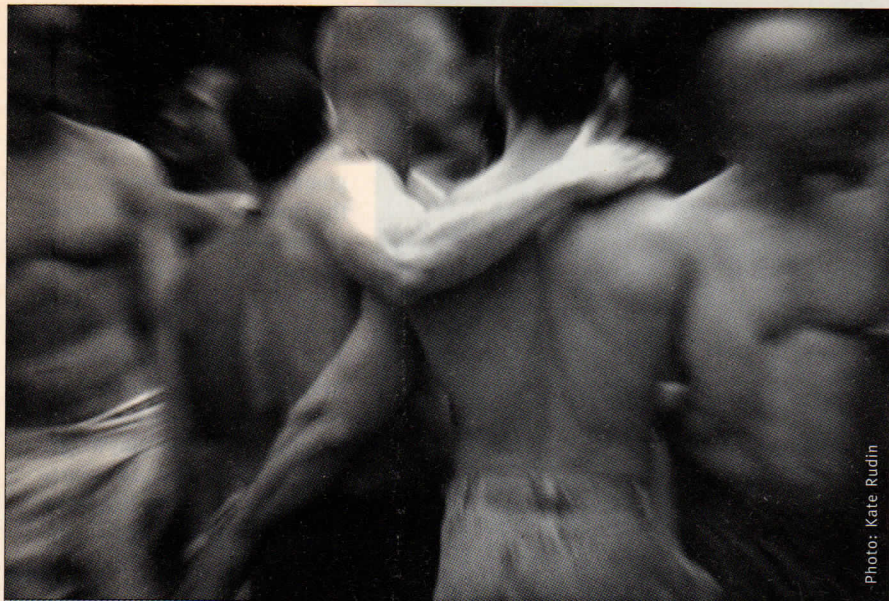
It was the knowledge that he had this career as a Latin scholar and an occupation as a poet—the sense that he had two sides to his nature. I think that all of us have these two sides to us, in different proportions. We are more romantic than we let on, or perhaps some of us are more analytical than we let on.

Did you know it was going to be a gay love story?

It sounds strange, but the thought of writing a play about Housman preceded the knowledge that he was homosexual. As a matter of fact, I was slightly taken aback by the discovery, because the Roman poets, which he was very familiar with, in general [wrote about] the cruel mistress, the beautiful older woman, who had the poet in her thrall. You have to bear in mind that the poems that he

was famous for were in no sense what is called homosexual poems. The poems which revealed his feelings for Moses Jackson were published after his death in obscure places, and it is only recently that the full collected poems have been published. But of course, when you look into Housman's life, it's the first thing you find out about him.

I got a book of his letters and ▶



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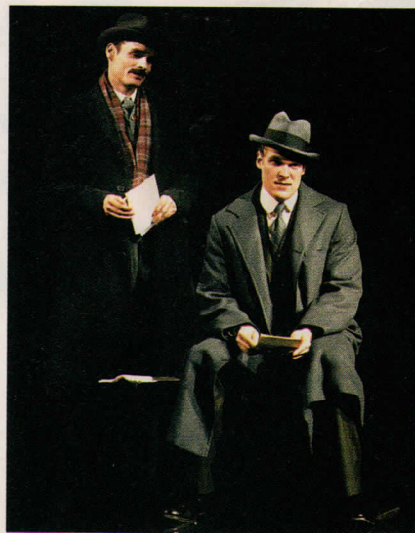
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found this illustration of a page from his diary in which there is a very brief sentence about the man he loved. At one point Moses went off to India to teach, and [the entry read] something like, "His boat reaches Bombay at 8:40 this morning." It didn't even mention his name. One felt there was such emotional suppression. I found the identity of this man suddenly extremely dramatic and moving.

Housman's reputation as a scholar was very severe. I mean, he was capable of being very witty but almost always at somebody's expense. People were



Robert Sean Leonard (left) and David Harbour in Tom Stoppard's *The Invention of Love*

frightened of having their work criticized by him, and so on. At the same time, this same man was suffering tortures of love.

Did you have any trepidation about exploring homosexual feelings for the first time in your work?

Yes, I did. When I realized that I had somehow committed to writing a play about homosexual love, there was a moment, which lasted probably a couple of days, where I thought, Would it ring true? because it is not a world I know much about. But in fact, as you might have guessed, that made no difference. It's a play about love, not about homosexual love.

An unrequited love that totally consumed him—

It wasn't by any means a normal infatuation, because people get over their infatuation,

PAUL KOLNIK

uations. Housman didn't. Furthermore, he was infatuated with somebody who was going to be a nonstarter from the word go. I think there was something in Housman's character which made him hang on to this hopeless devotion. He remained faithful all his life to an ideal which was unattainable from the very beginning. I would imagine that he was no longer a youth when he began to understand that there was a lot of it out there. I think that one of the things that Oscar Wilde's brief, glorious, inglorious career did was to release a lot of young men from the tragic and miserable illusion that there was nobody else out there like them.

In the play Housman meets Wilde. Is this based on fact?


Wilde overlapped with Housman by one year in university at Oxford: Housman's first year was Wilde's last year. But they never met. I found that a very juicy situation. In my play they meet. What actually happened was, in the last year of Wilde's life, when he was a penniless refugee on the continent, he ended up in Naples at one point. It suddenly occurred to me that Housman went abroad for the first time in the same year that Wilde was in Naples. [When I checked my books] I found they had missed each other by a week. So I have this dream meeting in a place near Dieppe [a resort town in France], which is the first place Wilde went to after he came out of prison.

What is the significance of this fictitious meeting with Wilde?

Wilde is very important to me, to the play, because my central thesis, in a way, is that Housman, who died revered and honored, had somehow failed in his life. His emotional life was a disaster. Wilde crashed and burned and died in disgrace. But in fact he had lived the successful life because he had lived it true to himself. And [today] everybody knows who Wilde was, and almost nobody knows Housman. ■

Raymond writes for The Village Voice, Performing Arts, Broadway.com, and Theatermania.com.

Find more about *The Invention of Love* and other plays by Tom Stoppard at www.advocate.com



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