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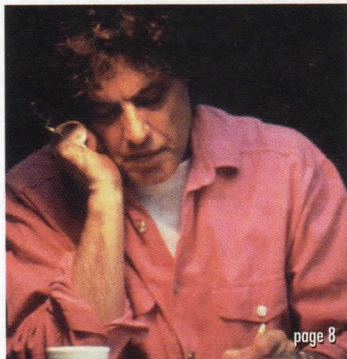
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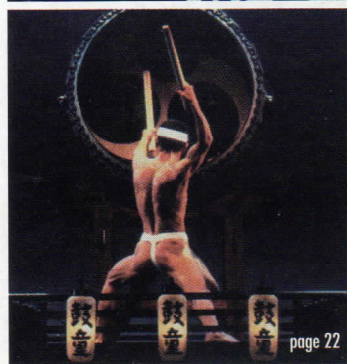


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ARTFUL Intellect

Fresh from his Oscar-winning triumph for *Shakespeare in Love*, the witty and erudite playwright Tom Stoppard brings his new play to the American Conservatory Theater (January 6–February 13).

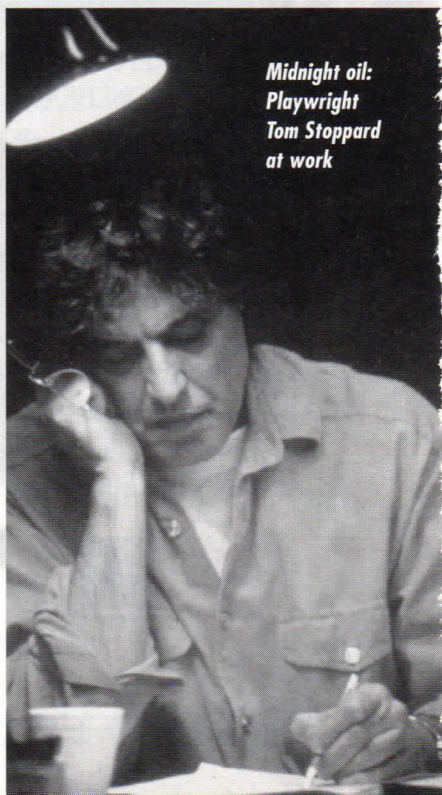
GERARD RAYMOND sheds light on the author's eclectic interests.

There's no predicting what might catch the fancy of Tom Stoppard's inquiring mind. His plays incorporate an eclectic range of subjects: quantum physics and cold-war espionage (*Hapgood*), chaos theory and landscape gardening (*Arcadia*), the concept of *rasa* in Indian art and aesthetics (*Indian Ink*). In his latest play, *The Invention of Love*, which receives its U.S. premiere this month at San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater, the polymath playwright has written a biographical play for the first time. His central character is A.E. Housman, the English poet best known for his collection *A Shropshire Lad*.

Of course, real life characters have populated Stoppard's work before. But mostly for the fun of it—Lord Byron in *Arcadia*; Lenin, James Joyce, and Dada leader Tristan Tzara in *Travesties*; and the famous Elizabethan playwright-hero of his Oscar-winning movie *Shakespeare in Love*.

His current play is a more serious attempt at biography. Hallucinating and near death in 1936, the 77-year-old Housman remembers and misremembers the past. Awaiting his turn to be ferried across the River Styx, the old man encounters various figures from his personal and scholarly life, including himself as a young man.

Stoppard's interest in Housman was initially piqued when he discovered that the poet had a separate career as an eminent Latin scholar. "It was the sense that he had two sides to his



Midnight oil:
Playwright
Tom Stoppard
at work

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New directions:
A.C.T. Artistic
Director Carey
Perloff stages
the American
premiere of *The*
Invention of
Love.

nature," the playwright explains. Stoppard says he had rather glibly expected to find a Shakespearean "dark mistress," because Housman's particular field of study had been Roman poets who wrote lyrical odes of suffering and love while in thrall to beautiful, older women. Instead, he discovered that Housman had fallen in love with Moses Jackson, a heterosexual fellow student at Oxford in the 1870s, and had remained smitten all his life.

Housman's emotions were so tightly repressed that he couldn't bring himself to mention Jackson's name even in his most private jottings. Marking the occasion when Jackson sailed to India to take up a teaching position, for instance, Housman's diary entry reads: "His boat reaches Bombay at 8:40 this morning."

"There was such emotional suppression in the brief sentences he wrote about the man he loved," says Stoppard.

"It wasn't by any means a normal infatuation, because people get over their infatuations. I think the experience rather shut down his capacity to love people. Housman's reputation as a scholar was very severe. He was capable of being very witty, but people were frightened of having their work criticized by him. At the same time, this man was suffering tortures of love."

Those who have followed Stoppard's career have observed a growing emotional dimension in his work since his 1982 play *The Real Thing*. Now 62, Stoppard smiles wryly when it is suggested that he has become more emotionally unguarded over the years. "We are more romantic or more analytic than we let on," he reflects. "I think all of us have these two sides in different proportions." With his new play Stoppard seems to be making a strong case for the romantic side.

In a key scene toward the end of the play, the buttoned-down Housman encounters the notoriously flamboyant Oscar Wilde. This is pure Stoppardian invention. In real life, the two never met. They had, however, overlapped at university; Housman's first year at Oxford was Wilde's last. And in 1897, the year Wilde was released from prison and went into exile on the continent, Housman traveled overseas for the first time. But tantalizingly, they missed each other in Naples by a week. "Wilde is very important to my central thesis," Stoppard explains. "Housman's emotional life was a disaster. Wilde, on the other hand, crashed and burned and died in disgrace, but he had lived a successful life because he had lived it true to himself." As Wilde says to Housman in Stoppard's play, "Better a fallen rocket than never a burst of light."

Gerard Raymond, a New York-based writer, contributes to New York magazine and the Village Voice.