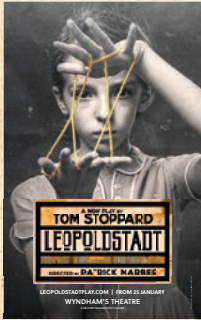


WYNDHAM'S
THEATRE

THE LEGEND RETURNS

Acclaimed playwright **Tom Stoppard** tells **Sarah Crompton** how a journey to discover more about his Czech roots led to the creation of his highly anticipated new drama *Leopoldstadt*, Stoppard's first new play in five years



“My plays tend to get written about as though they might be quite difficult,” says Tom Stoppard, thoughtfully. “And I don’t see them that way at all. They might engage with slightly cerebral subjects but the whole purpose is to make these things easy to absorb and understand and make them work dramatically. I don’t think of them as being theatrically challenging.”

He is looking back, at 81, on a career that has spanned more than five decades, ever since *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* steamed onto the stage of the Old Vic in 1967, announcing the arrival of a writer who was

devastatingly clever and incredibly funny, making plays out of new subjects in new ways. A string of successes have followed, from *Arcadia* to *The Coast of Utopia* and *Rock ‘n’ Roll*, by way of *Jumpers*, *Travesties* and *The Real Thing*, some of the most indelible writing in the English language, full of ambition, ideas and wit, with strong bonds of feeling tying them together.

We are talking ahead of his new play, *Leopoldstadt*, which opens in the West End in January, a family drama that begins in Vienna in 1900 and spans 50 years as it follows a Jewish family through the early 20th century. The anticipation surrounding its opening is all the greater because it is five years since Stoppard’s last new play, *The Hard Problem*, about the question

of consciousness, premiered at the National Theatre.

“Five years is a long time at my age,” he says, in mock despair. “I’ve only once ever had the experience of finding a play to write of which I had no doubt, and that was *The Invention of Love* [About the poet A E Housman] – so while *Arcadia* was still happening, I knew what the next play would be about. I don’t think that’s ever happened before. Finding a subject is like being struck by lightning really. There is not a lot you can do to make it happen. You have to build up a lot of energy just to get the momentum to begin a play.”

He is reluctant to reveal too much about *Leopoldstadt* but acknowledges that it is bound up in the lineaments of his life. Stoppard was born Tomáš Straussler in the former Czechoslovakia, but his family fled to Singapore as the Nazis invaded; Stoppard, his brother and his mother left there just before the Japanese invasion in 1942 but his father was killed. When he was five, the family moved to India where his mother married a British army major, and in 1946 they moved to England. After his mother’s death, he returned to Zlín in the Czech Republic to discover more about a family history in which his four grandparents, and much of his family of his parents’ generation, died in the camps. He says now: “In the long run, that visit accounted for this play, I guess. It’s not about me, but it’s a play I couldn’t have written if I hadn’t lived the life that fate has dealt me.”

Looking back, he feels he

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has led a charmed life. “Not everything that happens is good, of course, for anybody, but I do feel essentially as blessed by fortune as anybody has a right to ask.” In particular, his relocation to England brought about a change of language which set him in the midst of a playwriting tradition in which he has thrived. He came from a generation of aspiring English writers who thought that the theatre, rather than the novel, was the best place to be.

“Not only that,” he says. “I come from 300 years of plays being text driven. The theatre is what happens to a text which rather suits one’s view of oneself.” He laughs, gleefully. This explains why, although he has always worked in film – winning an Oscar for his script for *Shakespeare in Love* – his heart belongs to theatre.

In the process of bringing a play to the stage, it is the writing he most loves, which he does longhand, pen on paper. “It’s a very strange thing because when you are writing you feel completely self sufficient, and in rehearsal you are part of a far more complex equation.” He has, however, always been happy to

make changes to old plays when they are revived; he did so when he worked with Patrick Marber as director on *Travesties*. He is now enjoying working with Marber once more on *Leopoldstadt*. “It feels like a new experience to have a playwright as director,” he says. “I like it very much. After I’d sent him the first draft, he came back with suggestions which in many cases were things I had already thought about and decided to do myself, so it was quite good synergy.

“I am a mixture of stubbornness and co-operativeness. I like to think of it as my seizing on good ideas and rejecting bad ones. But it’s not always clear which are which.” He chuckles, a rich warm sound. It’s hard to avoid the sense that Stoppard is happy to be back in the theatre after so long a break. Audiences will be just as happy to greet him.

Tom Stoppard’s *Leopoldstadt* is showing at Wyndham’s Theatre from 25 January.

For tickets, call 0844 482 5151* or visit delfontmackintosh.co.uk

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