

Stoppard: They don't get my jokes any more

Jack Malvern Arts Correspondent

Sir Tom Stoppard has previously been accused by critics of being too clever for his own good. After more than 60 years of working as a playwright, he is beginning to agree.

Speaking about *The Hard Problem*, his first play for nine years, Sir Tom said that he repeatedly had to revise the dialogue so that audiences would understand his cultural allusions.

Theatregoers have become more ignorant since the 1970s, when playwrights could rely on them to have a basic knowledge of Shakespeare's greatest plays, Sir Tom said.

"It's very rare to connect an audience except on a level which is lower than you would want to connect them on," he said during a talk at the National Theatre, where his new play opened last month. "You could raise it a notch and you might lose an eighth of them. It's to do with reference and allusion."

He said he had rewritten one scene three times between preview performances because he detected theatregoers were not getting the point he wanted to make. He did not specify the scene.

"So in the end, bit by bit, by preview four, the audience made the connection. And I must say that I was completely wrong [in assuming the audience would understand it] and I really resent it."

Sir Tom, who has spoken previously about a declining knowledge of Shakespeare, recalled that audiences for his 1974 play *Travesties* all understood a reference to a scheming character in *King Lear* when it was first performed. The main character is told: "You were a wonderful Goneril at Eton, Henry," Sir Tom said. "In 1974 everybody in the audience knew who Goneril was and laughed. In about 1990 when the play was revived maybe half knew."

Benedict Nightingale, theatre critic for *The Times* between 1990 and 2010, agreed that audiences had become less knowledgeable. "I know it's a widespread problem," he said. "A lot

Tom Stoppard, below, with his wife, rewrote *The Hard Problem*, below right, although audiences still refer to it as *Hamlet in Posenitz* and *Guldenstern*



ALAN JAMES/REXUS; RICHARD YOUNG/REX; GERALD LEWIS

of directors would tell you that they either cut things or find ways of clarifying them." Nightingale cited a joke in Arcadia, a Stoppard play from 1993 in which a gardener called Noakes is wittingly put down as "Culpability Noakes" — a reference to the 18th-century landscape architect Capability Brown.

He said: "I don't know how many people would get that now. I think it's a problem with teaching. There's no question about it that even quite bright people seem not to be very well educated in things we were forced to be educated in. It's a general cultural malaise."

"Stoppard never went to university — he's very much an autodidact. Autodidacts often know much more than the rest of us because they put themselves through it."

Grace Ioppolo, professor of English literature at the University of Reading, said *King Lear* had greater currency in the 1970s because audiences would have remembered Peter Brook's production in 1962, when Paul Scofield redefined the title role. "It doesn't mean that people aren't as smart now. It's just that what's part of the canon or the theatre repertory is different."

She said that even students enrolled in her Shakespeare course gave her "blank reactions" when she asked them about *Lear*. "Hamlet is well known to them. *King Lear* is not. But with Stoppard, he picks extremely specialised topics. I had to stop teaching *Travesties* because his topics are too arcane."

He is reported to have finished *The Hard Problem*, which delves into the scientifically elusive notion of consciousness, after Sir Nicholas Hytner, who directed it, gave him a deadline by announcing his resignation as artistic director of the National Theatre.

The play has had a mixed reception by critics. *The Times* was one of several to award two stars. "Tom Stoppard has often been unfairly accused of writing fiendishly intelligent plays that lack real heart," wrote Dominic Maxwell, this newspaper's chief theatre critic. "For [*The Hard Problem*], the charge sticks." Leading article, page 28