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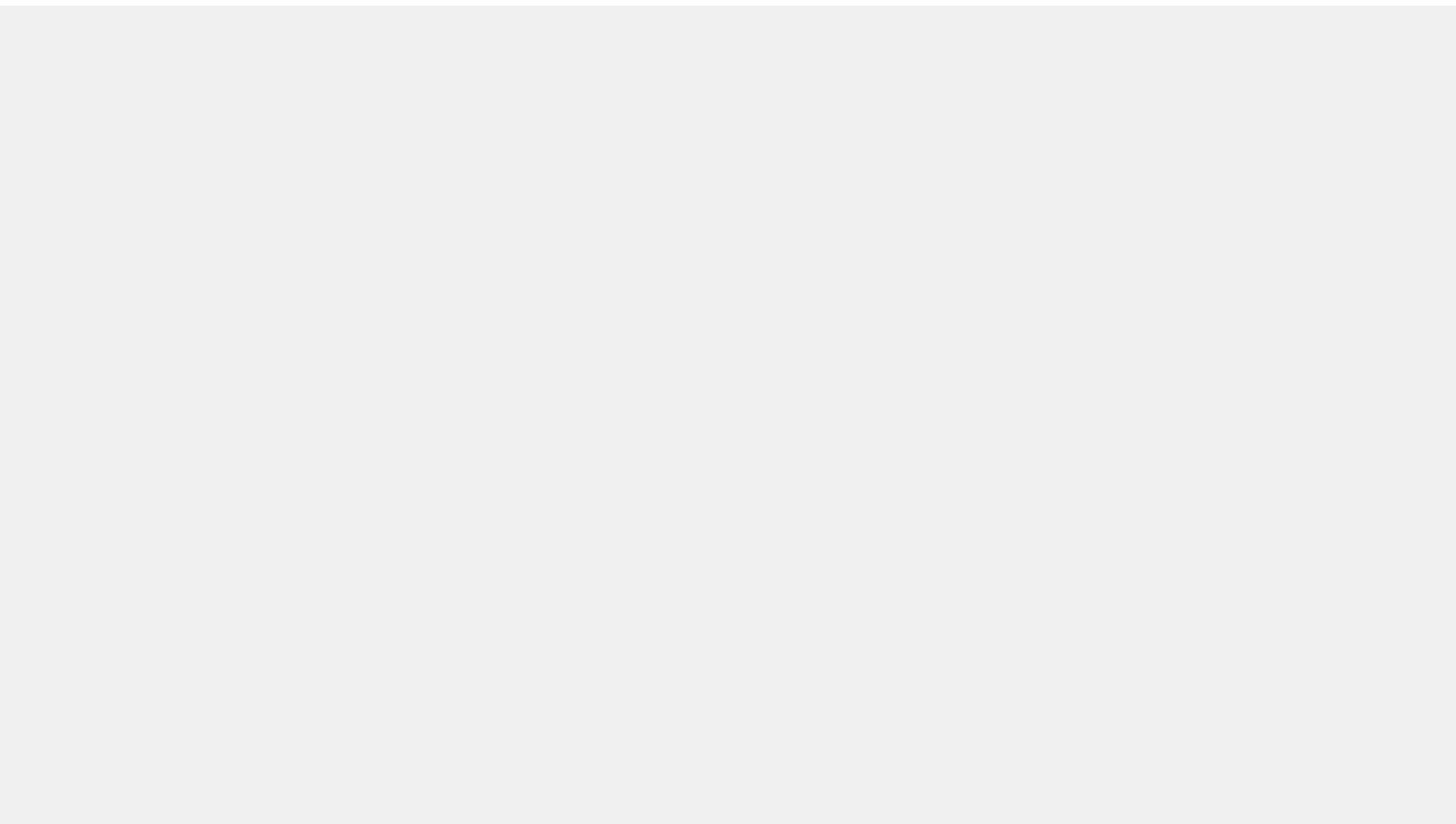


THEATRE

# Patricia Highsmith and her hero Tom Ripley are brought back to life in a new play, Switzerland

The author of *The Talented Mr Ripley* 'oozed nastiness from every pore'. A new drama explores her final days

Andrew Wilson



Stranger on a train: Patricia Highsmith pictured in 1987

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**P**atricia Highsmith, the author of *Strangers on a Train* and *The Talented Mr Ripley*, said she was “born under a sickly star”. When she was still in the womb, her mother, Mary, tried to abort her by drinking turpentine. Later, Mary would laugh and taunt her daughter: “It’s funny, you adore the smell of turpentine, Pat.” By the time she was eight years old, Highsmith, who was born in Fort Worth, Texas, in January 1921, dreamt about murdering her stepfather.

Highsmith went on to write some of the most unsettling novels of the 20th century. Graham Greene called her the “poet of apprehension”, a writer who created “a world without moral endings... Nothing is certain when we have crossed this frontier.” The novelist Will Self has said: “The experience of reading my first Highsmith book was a physical experience of being confronted with evil.”

When I was researching *Beautiful Shadow*, my biography of Highsmith, I traced the links between the author’s dark personality and her greatest creation, the charming psychopath Tom Ripley, who features in five of her novels. Highsmith forces the reader to identify with this amoral but charming killer, and at the end of each book we root for him to get away with murder.

Now the relationship between Highsmith and Ripley is the subject of a play, *Switzerland*, which receives its UK premiere at the Theatre Royal Bath next month. The action of the two-hander takes place in 1995, with Highsmith at home in a modern house that could double as a nuclear bunker in Tegna, Switzerland. A young man, Edward Ridgeway, turns up, sent by her American publisher to persuade the ailing American author (played by the *Downton Abbey* actress Phyllis Logan) to write one last Ripley novel. It’s not giving away too much to say that, although the curtain comes down to the strains of the song *Happy Talk*, from *South Pacific*, there is nothing jolly about this particular ending.

The dark denouement is appropriate for a novelist who, in her later years, seemed to ooze nastiness from every pore. Friends told me that if she had not had the outlet of her writing — through which she could purge her most violent thoughts — they were

sure the unbalanced author of the Ripley books might well have committed a serious crime herself.

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“On the face of it, Highsmith was deeply unlikeable, nasty, mean, cruel and narcissistic,” says Joanna Murray-Smith, the Australian playwright of *Switzerland*, which premiered in Sydney in 2014. “But I kind of fell in love with her, too. Yes, she was an anti-semitic and a racist, but she had also been a passionate woman, with a deep capacity for falling in love. She had incredible erudition and wit, and, at her best, she probably had the greatest insight of any 20th-century writer into the darkness of the human mind.”

Highsmith’s fascination with evil had its roots in her troubled childhood. She told one of her closest friends that when she was four or five, she was sexually abused by two travelling salesmen at her grandmother’s house. She said she was six when she realised she was attracted to her own sex, an instinct she said she felt forced to suppress. While her classmates were reading *Little Women*, she had her head in Karl Menninger’s *The Human Mind*, full of lurid case histories of pyromaniacs, sex criminals and kleptomaniacs. “I learnt to live with a grievous and murderous hatred early on,” she wrote in one of her diaries. “And learnt to stifle also my more positive emotions.”

By the time she came to write the first Ripley novel, *The Talented Mr Ripley*, published in 1955, Highsmith had fixed on the exploration of evil as her central theme. “What I predicted I would once do, I am doing already in this very book (Tom Ripley): that is, showing the unequivocal triumph of evil over good, and rejoicing in it,” she wrote in a notebook. “I shall make my readers rejoice in it, too. Thus the subconscious always precedes the consciousness, or reality, as in dreams.”



Worst intentions: Matt Damon starred as Ripley in the 1999 adaptation

REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

The novel, filmed in 1960 by René Clément as *Plein Soleil*, starring Alain Delon, and again by Anthony Minghella in 1999, with Matt Damon in the title role, tells the story of a young American, Tom Ripley, who ventures to Italy to bring back the estranged son of a wealthy businessman. Highsmith completed it in only six months because, she said, “it felt like Ripley was writing it”. She believed one reason the book became so popular was its “frenetic” prose “and the insolence and audacity of Ripley himself. By thinking myself inside the skin of such a character, my own prose became more self-assured than it logically should have been. It became entertaining.”

The novel was nominated for a prestigious Edgar Allan Poe award in 1956; a few years later, when the certificate became mildewed, Highsmith removed the glass to clean it. But before hanging it back in her bathroom, she scribbled the words “Mr Ripley and” before her own name because she felt he deserved the honour as much as she did.

In truth, it was not hard for Highsmith to think like Ripley: he was her alter ego. “After Pat’s death [in 1995], John Mortimer wrote a tribute, saying he thought she was in love with Mr Ripley,” one of Highsmith’s friends, Charles Latimer, told me. “But actually she

was Ripley, or, I should say, she would have liked to have been him.” When Highsmith gave Latimer a copy of her second Ripley novel, *Ripley Under Ground*, published in 1970, she inscribed it with the words: “For Charles with love — April 2 — ’71 from Tom (Pat)”.

Highsmith’s final Ripley novel appeared in 1991 with the title *Ripley Under Water*. Published by Bloomsbury in the UK, it netted her an advance of £60,000, the largest of her career. Yet at the end of her life — when Murray-Smith’s play is set — Highsmith did not have an American publisher, after her final novel, *Small g*, was rejected by Knopf. “I think she probably knew it wasn’t quite up to snuff,” her editor Gary Fisketjon told me.

In Murray-Smith’s alternative reality, the character of Edward Ridgeway (played in *Bath* by Calum Finlay) taps into this sense of insecurity to try to tease one last Ripley novel out of Highsmith. After she insists she is done with the character, Ridgeway responds: “But you need to cement your place in the pantheon, and to do that you need one more Ripley. Structurally tight, emotionally deft, thrilling, dark beyond our wildest nightmares: classic Highsmith.” A cat-and-mouse game between author and assistant ensues, with Ridgeway at one point telling Highsmith that in America she is regarded as nothing more than “a creepier Agatha Christie”.

Switzerland’s director, Lucy Bailey, says that before she began working on the production, she was more aware of Christie than she was of Highsmith: she recently directed a tour of Christie’s *Love from a Stranger* and a production of *Witness for the Prosecution* at County Hall, London. “I had never read any of the Ripley novels before I was offered this,” she says. “I was immediately fascinated by the character. But I think the play works for those who know Highsmith’s work as well as for audiences who are not familiar with it. *Switzerland* is a Frankenstein story of a writer who creates her own monster.”

Bailey was keen to explore the sexuality of the two protagonists in *Switzerland*. “It’s all about sex for me,” she says. Highsmith had a string of unhappy love affairs — many of them with married women — while it’s clear that the character of Ridgeway is sexually ambiguous. “You’re a fairy,” the blunt-speaking author says to him. In fact, audiences who seek out safe spaces may well be surprised by some of Highsmith’s shocking comments in the play. As one of her friends put it, she was an equal-opportunity offender: “You name the group, she hated them.”

Another of her friends, the writer Roger Clarke, told me he believed the amorality in Highsmith's work was genuine. "Some writers, like Martin Amis, do a good job of amorality, but the bottom line is that Amis is probably not an amoral person. But I think Pat really was amoral. There was this strange blankness about her."

This is one of the reasons why Murray-Smith decided to name the play Switzerland, a country known for its neutrality. As the character of Highsmith tells Ridgeway, it is not her job to pass judgment: while the reader takes sides, she sits there, right in the middle, rather like Switzerland. "Writers are exceptional because we don't care about your moral compass," she says. She relishes the thought that murderers transgress. "The anatomy of a killer is always going to be more captivating than the anatomy of a victim," she says. And when Ridgeway tries to argue that not all of us go on to commit murder, Highsmith replies: "We all might."

The question in Switzerland is, who will step into the role of murderer and who will end up as the victim?

*Switzerland, Theatre Royal Bath, from August 1. Andrew Wilson's Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith is published by Bloomsbury at £12.99*

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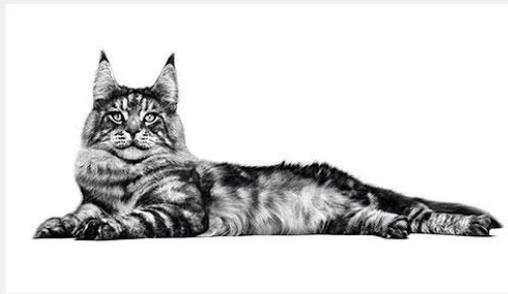
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