

# LIVING/ARTS

## Learning a lost art

Writer-sailor probes the wisdom and power of the Polynesian navigator

By Charles E. Claffey  
Globe Staff

**O**n the tiny Caroline island of Satawal, in Micronesia, lives a man called Piailug, a mythic seafarer out of a Joseph Conrad novel. Piailug is the last practitioner of the ancient Polynesian art of ocean navigation using only natural signs: stars, ocean swells and birds.

Stephen Thomas, a young American sailor, became interested in the 6,000-year-old navigational technique several years ago when he captained a 43-foot sloop on a voyage from England to San Francisco by way of the Panama Canal and Hawaii. Somewhere between the Gala-

pagos and the Marquesas he lost the ship's taffrail log — a nautical odometer — and was forced to gauge the speed of his boat by observing the flow of water past the hull. Thomas found he could make this measurement fairly accurately, and this improvisational navigating adventure made him want to learn more about the technique.

In 1983, Thomas received the numerous governmental clearances that allowed him to visit Satawal, where he was accepted by Piailug as an apprentice in order to learn his navigational secrets. Out of Thomas' two-year experience in the Carolines has come a book entitled, aptly enough, "The Last Navigator."

Thomas' book is, at one level, a readable and literate adventure story; it is also the insightful account of a man coming to understand himself, his relationship to his Polynesian mentor and, ultimately, to his father.

In an interview this week in Boston, Thomas, a native Californian who now lives in Salem, said that in the Carolines a *palu*, the island name for a navigator of outrigger canoes, has traditionally been a man of great wisdom and power, "in a way, almost like a brain surgeon in our society."

In the journal he kept during his apprenticeship, Thomas wrote of the protean characteristics of a *palu*:

"Traditionally the navigator is the mediator of the physical and the metaphysical elements of the sea. The knowledge of both is essential. The secular is not sliced away from the spiritual, the physical from the metaphysical. The *palu* is bound to serve his people. He is bound to NAVIGATOR, Page 10



Stephen Thomas of Salem practices what he's learned from the Polynesian navigator Piailug, left.



# 'This Old House,' this new host



**New host Thomas and old hand Abram.**

By Ed Siegel  
Globe Staff

**L**OS ANGELES — You wouldn't think that a seafaring adventure to Micronesia in search of someone named Mau Piailug would be the best way to become the host of a program about home construction with someone named Norm Abram.

In a circuitous way, that's how Stephen Thomas became this new host of "This Old House," according to producer Russell Morash's introduction of Thomas to a group of television writers yesterday. Thomas, who lives on the North Shore, got a call to set up an interview for "The Last Navigator," an episode of Channel 2's "Adventure" series that was based on his 1987 book about ancient navigational skills.

When Thomas told the publicist that he was in the middle of renovating his attic, she told him that "This  
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# 'Old House,' new host, new season

## ■ THOMAS

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'Old House,' also produced at WGBH, was looking for a new host because of the advertising-underwriting controversy that resulted in Bob Vila's departure from the program. Thomas thought about it for a while and decided to throw his hat in the ring. Morash thought about Thomas for a while, along with 400 or so other applicants including a "well-known female concert pianist" while wondering "what a book about an ancient form of navigation had to do with homebuilding and remodeling."

Morash then looked at a rough cut of the program and saw "a guy in a diaper on a canoe, but he had a certain je ne sais..." Thomas went through some tests, including a "mind-game for how people think on their feet" and Morash gave him an audition. Morash was concerned about Thomas' beard, thinking that he and Abram, the program's master carpenter, "looked like a younger version of the Smith Brothers." When the two of them met, Morash said he asked, "What about the beard?" and Thomas glanced

down at his pocket toward a Bic shaver.

Thomas had been out of town, if not out of civilization, while "This Old House" was getting de-vilafied. "I was sitting on an ice floe in the Alaskan Arctic in the biggest winter parka you've ever seen." He was "contemplating the damage I had done to the attic of a house built in 1836" when he got the call and the rest, if not history, is "a total fluke" and "serendipity for me."

The first task for Thomas and Morash is renovating an 1835 barn in Concord, Mass., a job that reminded Abram of an earlier renovation in which someone said, "The best thing we can do to this house is to go across the street and shoot a Stinger missile at it. That's how I felt about this house."

In a clip from the first of 20 shows, which begin in early October, Thomas and Abram come across as the Luke Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi of home remodeling. Thomas, whose role is to bridge the gap between homeowner and craftsman, is all wide-eyed wonder at the joys of old houses while Abram is the jaded realist

about the job. (Although they come across as rookie and veteran, Thomas is 36 and Abram 39.)

At a follow-up press conference after the presentation, many of the questions were about some of the old "This Old House" problems, rather than the new host. Morash repeated his version of the chronology, how Vila was allowed to do endorsements until rumblings came from underwriters (Weyerhaeuser and Home Depot) about withdrawing their money from the program (about \$1.7 million between them). In hindsight, does he regret allowing Vila to do endorsements? "Oh, boy, do I." Thomas will not be allowed to endorse products, said Morash, who added that they now "read the riot act" to clients about what "This Old House" will do and how strict the budget is following the controversy over a Wetherby Farm client who claimed he wasn't told what the total job would cost.

Another "This Old House" practice that drew questions and criticism yesterday was the on-air underestimation of what the project would cost. Thomas and Abram are seen on the first program discussing how the clients, a dean at a local college and a special-needs tutor, couldn't pay more than \$250,000. During the later session, Morash added that the total cost would be about \$400,000 once the donations from companies like General Electric (for such things as a modern kitchen) were factored in.

Morash defended the practice by saying that a no-frills house would be closer to the \$250,000 range and that price is not a major issue for the show.

All of this will probably have less of an impact on the show's popularity, which Morash said is the highest of all PBS shows, than the presence of a new host. Can Stephen Thomas, fresh off the boat, find happiness with stress-skin panels and radiant heat? Undoubtedly. Thomas isn't quite the "cockeyed optimist" he seems. He has renovated five houses and was a construction foreman and contractor in the Pacific Northwest, though he says he is still a novice compared with Abram.

And what of the art and craft of television? "Russ told me to watch Mister Rogers and Charles Kuralt."