

ARTIST DESCENDING ON A STAIRCASE IS TESTAMENT TO YOUTH – EVENING STANDARD REVIEW

* * * Fiona Mountford's Rating

By Fiona Mountford, Evening Standard 07.12.09

Max Irons and Olivia Darnley – 'Artist Descending a Staircase'

It's always heartening to see a fringe theatre packed to bursting point. It's even more pleasing to report that those lured by this Tom Stoppard curio, which fizzes with Stoppard's customary wit and erudition as he riffs mischievously about modern art, are going to go away largely contented with the quality of the production, too.

Those who encountered Artist as a 1972 radio play — it was first staged in 1988 — must have had to concentrate mighty hard as, even with the performers in front of us, it's tough to get a handle on who Beauchamp, Martello and Donner are, and quite why we should care that Donner has plunged to a staircase-induced death.

In a slip-sliding of scenes, the three elderly artists, who share an attic studio, comment acerbically on each other's work and make constant reference to "Sophie". We're mildly intrigued but predominantly frustrated that crucial sparkiness is missing from the performances.

It says much for the quality of the younger actors (Ryan Gage, Max Irons and Alex Robertson) playing the trio that, once we're transported back to 1914, things settle pleasingly into focus in Michael Gieleta's slick production.

Pursuing crazy Dada-esque projects — the sound recording of a pretend ping-pong match, for example — the friends all fall for Sophie (Olivia Darnley), a witty young blind woman who enjoys pricking their pretensions.

Darnley, with the face of a puzzled cherub, does a terrific job of fixing the narrative with a steady centre, and Gage's affability is particularly appealing.

The blending of art and romance in some scenes isn't perfect, but it's hard not to smile at a drama that offers the tea-sweetening option of dunking a mini Venus de Milo made from sugar. If the old 'uns could sharpen up a little, this would be cracking.

Until 31 December (08444 771 000, www.oldredliontheatre.co.uk).