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## Review of Artist Descending A Staircase, Tom Stoppard ([event/90417/artist-descending-a-staircase-tom-stoppard/](#))



*"Witty, creative production. Intimate venue"*

by P Umachandran ([user/19780/p-umachandran/](#)) for  
remotegoat on 07/12/09



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The quiet lives of three elderly bachelor artists is punctured by the sudden death of one of their number, Donner, and is captured on the recording equipment of another, Beauchamp. Tom Stoppard's 'Artist Descending A Staircase' begins with this whodunit scenario which unravels to reveal wider concerns. Flashbacks pepper proceedings, to the artists' younger days when the three had become enamoured by a blind girl Sophie who meets a tragic end. The surreal mixing of the younger and older versions of each character introduce a chopped up chronology and musings on memory and identity.

The title of the play is a take on Duchamp's cubist work 'Nude Descending A Staircase'; here Donner's descent is fatal. There are riffs on history of art aplenty, with other paintings making an appearance (a mustachioed Manet hanging in the younger characters' flat) a case of mistaken identity via artwork and name checking of various movements and artist. The revisiting of the three friend's absurd walking tour around France, complete with imaginary horse, as World War One becomes entrenched eruditely questions the limits of art and the social value of artists.

The venue is the suitably wonky upstairs of the theatre/pub the Old Red Lion. The Magritte inspired set, painted with cotton wool clouds, cleverly mimics the real rooftops outside and easily moves between the interior of the older characters' studios and the various locations of the flashback scenes. The lighting is vividly evocative and helps to transcend the physical limitations of the relatively small space. The use of sounds from different locations, on stage from a gramophone and tape player, and off stage is well done and gives a new spatial weight to this aspect of the play, over a radio version.

This is the first outing in twenty years for what was originally a radio play. On the whole, the production is so well staged that there are no odd moments where this lineage becomes apparent. There are a few scenes which err on the side of mawkish, which may not have happened in a radio version-these scenes often seem to be those with the love story in them. In contrast, the performances of the older characters have an enjoyably light quality, from the pacey repartee between Beauchamp and Martello to the quiet torment of Donner, adding immensely to this witty and stylish production.

### Event venues and times













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Old Red Lion ([venue/417/old-red-lion-6/](#)) | 418 St John Street, London, EC1V 4NJ

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*Absurd abstract fun. Fantastic set.*

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