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Artist Descending a Staircase, Old Red Lion, London

In step with the family business

Reviewed by [Rhoda Koenig](#) | Sunday 23 October 2011 | [0](#) comments



Why were we told that Tom Stoppard first wrote with emotion, rather than just cleverness, in *The Real Thing*?

At least, that was how the play was promoted in New York when

I, then living there, interviewed its dashing young star, Jeremy Irons, in 1984. Twelve years before, however, a British radio audience heard a play that had enough feeling choked behind its stiff upper lip to dampen their eyes. And now, in *Artist Descending a Staircase*, Irons's son Max, who did not exist until a year after our talk, acts in a manner so painful and sweet as to make the romantic young and the regretful old pay him tribute with their tears.

This stage version was originally seen in 1988, when it was criticised for being explicit and heavy-handed where the original was delicate and sensitive. I can only say that this one, shuffling time sequences like a stacked deck, full of emotional collisions and near-misses and light-as-air symbolism of the closeness of life and death, is more than sensitive enough for me.

There is also, of course, plenty of characteristic Stoppard playfulness (an artist talks about meeting Tarzan when he means Tristan Tzara, of having danced with a woman at Queen Mary's wedding – "no, maiden voyage") and waspish wit. Modern painters, says a traditional one, are "like priests – they demand our faith that something is more than it appears to be – bread, wine, a can of soup."

The play opens with two artists, Martello and Beauchamp, who have shared a studio with Donner for 60 years, discovering his body at the foot of the stairs. A tape recorder captured his last words: "Ah, there you are." Who was the visitor, and did he give the old man a push? Trying to solve the riddle, the two re-enact ancient quarrels and rivalries but miss, until the last seconds, what is literally under their noses.

Michael Gieleta's production is beautifully judged and cast. David Weston and Jeremy Child as the old Martello and Beauchamp, Ryan Gage and Alex Robertson as their young selves are all impeccable. But the highest honours go to Irons, as the young Donner to Edward Petherbridge's fierce, flinty old one; and to Olivia Darnley as the beautiful blind girl who tragically

shows that, when it comes to love, there are none so blind as those who will not see.

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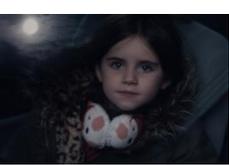
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