

Artist Descending a Staircase

Old Red Lion, London

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An elderly painter, Donner, lies dead at the bottom of a staircase while his two studio colleagues argue over the milk order and which one of them is the murderer. Nothing is quite what it seems in Tom Stoppard's jolly jape, a ridiculously enjoyable look at memory, love and the arbitrary patterns of life.

Even the deft structure of the play, with its 11 scenes moving initially backwards and then forwards in time, is a joke on Duchamps's *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Providing you don't take the curmudgeonly pronouncements on artistic endeavour to heart, there's much to give pleasure in this 90-minute piece that is not so much a whodunit as a riff on "how do you see it?".

The trio of artists in question are Donner, Martello and Beauchamp, three former artistic pranksters who in their youth throw in their lot with the surrealists, but whose real passion is for the beautiful Sophie. Although blind, she is rather more perceptive than the three of them put together. Even so, the unreliability of memory plays a part in the tragedy that unfolds and reverberates down the years. Michael Gieleta's revival of the play, originally written for radio but transferred seamlessly to the stage, makes a virtue of the cramped space.

It seems odd not to cast a blind actor as Sophie, but that's not to discredit Olivia Darnley's performance. And Edward Petherbridge and Max Irons excel as the older and younger Donner, a man destined to see the truth too late.

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