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Artist Descending a Staircase at Old Red Lion, London, N1

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Tom Stoppard has said that a line in his *Travesties* often provoked an appreciative mutter in the stalls. But it first appeared, slightly altered, in his 1972 radio play *Artist Descending a Staircase*: “In every community of a thousand souls there will be 900 doing the work, 90 doing well, nine doing good and one lucky dog painting or writing about the other 999.” How can creative people justify their privileged existence? What’s the use of their art? Aren’t their lives self-indulgent in a perilous world?

In *Travesties*, questions that have always worried that principled writer, Tom Stoppard, assume special importance when Lenin declares that artists are useful only when they subordinate themselves to communist need. In *Artist Descending the First World War* raises the same concerns.

Three young friends, all artists, are trekking through France in 1914 when armoured vehicles pass and men begin to dig what one insists must be a ditch for pipes, not a trench for men. Only when gunfire is followed by explosions does he revise his first opinion, which is that a European war is impossible, by saying that “these continentals are always squabbling over their frontiers”.

It’s the play’s most entertaining scene and it brings together several of its themes. Aren’t artists prone to get cut off from reality? And isn’t it hard to interpret reality anyway? This last question, one asked again and again in Stoppard’s work, pervades *Artist Descending*. Why has Donner, the painter played by Edward Petherbridge, ended up dead at the bottom of the stairs to the attic that he shares with David Weston’s Martello, a sculptor, and Jeremy Child’s Beauchamp, who is into “audio art”? Which of his old friends has murdered him or could there be another explanation?

Yes, there’s a very different explanation, as we later discover. Likewise with the death years ago of the blind girl, Olivia Darnley’s Sophie, who continues to obsess all three. Whom did she really love and why? Stoppard whisks us to and fro through time,

allowing old Donner, Martello and Beauchamp and Max Irons, Alex Robertson and Ryan Gage playing their younger, more hopeful selves to debate issues galore about art and artists.

By bringing the play to the stage Michael Gieleta's revival loses something. On radio the audience, being presented with often ambiguous sounds faced the same challenge as the characters. What signifies what?

The greater clarity a visual production brings doesn't sink a play that has its dull patches but, like so much Stoppard, genuinely stretches the mind.

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