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review

Before a starry, starry night

THE PAINTER Van Gogh seems to exercise an endless fascination. People who would not know a Picasso from a Constable can tell you that the Dutchman painted sunflowers and cut his ear off.

But how many people know that he spent some of his early life living in Victorian Brixton while working as an art dealer?

That much is true. But little else is known about that period of his life, so playwright Nicholas Wright was able to let his imagination run riot when he wrote his play *Vincent in Brixton* – which was first staged for the National Theatre in 2002.

We first see Vincent in the play being briskly interviewed for his suitability as a lodger by his potential landlady Ursula, as she prepares dinner. She seems a competent, likeable sort of woman, apparently unfazed by the gushing, excitable Dutchman in her house.

Also resident are her daughter Eugenie and a good-natured young painter and decorator Sam, who has aspirations to be an artist.

It seems to be a comfortable, relaxed home. But as Sam tells Vincent 'nothing in this house is what it seems'.

The painful emotional drama that unfolds finds two of the house's residents drawn together by their mutual depression and despair into a doomed affair that destroys one of them.

The pain and inevitability of living

Vincent in Brixton Theatre Royal

with limited horizons and the inability of the truly gifted to commit to their fellow human beings, are all touched on. By the end, Vincent is truly the outsider, even as his pencil starts to sketch the trapped and wretched people whose only chance of immortality is by being captured through his genius.

It is not exactly a bundle of laughs but it is all real and convincing.

Ursula and her daughter cook the most impressive looking meal I have seen created live on stage since Shirley Valentine made egg and chips for her husband.

Mark Edel-Hunt is a fine Van Gogh, young and unformed but already crazily hungry for life and bordering on obsession. Alastair Whatley and Amy Ellen Richardson are pitch perfect as nice, decent Sam and the down-to-earth Eugenie. Nicola Sangster is nicely hateful as Vincent's reproving, obsessively religious sister Anna and Lin Blakley, as Ursula, has to travel a million emotional miles during the course of the play and seizes the opportunity with relish.

Francis Batt

■ *Vincent in Brixton* runs at Windsor's Theatre Royal from Monday, June 22 until Saturday, June 27. Box office 01753 853888.