

Theatre (1979) sits rather oddly in the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, following the early demise of Lemmon and Gambon in *Veterans' Day*. A slight, funny, discursive but fragile two-hander, its carefully fractured rhythms and bewilderingly inconsequential narrative are spun even thinner by the decision to interrupt them with a jolly old West End interval half-way through.

Robert (Denholm Elliott) and John (Samuel West) are two actors in a theatre whose nature is never defined: the play has been quietly anglicised here and there, and the frantic turnover

of old weekly rep is implied. Robert is ageing, sniffing mortality with bright, dark eyes in the dusty backstage air. John is at the start of his career, radiant, wary, deadpan, a civil and tolerant listener to the old boy's maunderings on theatre, society and the cow he has to act against. It is not clear from the crude performance-parodies which punctuate their conversations whether either is supposed to have talent, but that is not the point, and the play proceeds on a path which promises significance but settles for greasepaint charm.



Greasepaint charm: Elliott and West. | Picture by Sue Adler.

Ratcliffe on A Life In the Theatre

Clipped By:



ianharris

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