

The signs on the wall imply that the Old Red Lion pub (or Lyon, depending upon era) has been on this site in Islington since 1405, or something like that. It's held up pretty well, as has the Old Red Lion Theatre, which occupies the small but serviceable theatre space on the upper level. Last night's performance was of *Joe and Ken*, by John Dunne, which concerns the rise and fall of actor & playwright Joe Orton and his partner Kenneth Halliwell. This two handed play, in two acts, starts with our dissolute stars playing themselves in the pinnacle of self-referential theatre, from shortly after they met at RADA, in the 1950s, and then settled in an Islington flat for as long as Ken's dad would pay the bill.



Joe Orton

It's an odd duck, this show. The two characters are mostly talking to themselves, until they're not; they start to talk to us. They perform scenes from their own lives, but constantly squabble over who must play what role, how each is to be presented, etc. Joe (Craig Myles) is the bon vivant of the two, outgoing and brash. A kidder. Ken (Tino Orsini) is quieter, withdrawn. Joe will go anywhere to chase a fuck, Ken will stay home and wait to hear about it later. Together [they dissect library books](#) to add irreverent collages, or tear out blank pages from the back on which they type up bogus blurbs, inserted into the front. This is a crime which [ultimately lands them both in jail](#).



Ken Halliwell

By the time we get to Act II, the two are in Tangiers, bedding the same series of boys and young men, complaining about them, and the “thieving” maid. All the time are the rapid fire jokes, asides, snarky commentary, foreboding intimations.

Not much more can be said about the plot, without giving too much away. The performances are fairly good, with the occasional stumble over dialogue or dialect. The lighting is basic, given how small the space. This is very much actor’s theatre, but with a script so freighted with theatrical conceit that it’s an awful burden to carry.

A nice night at theatre, but nothing to write home about...