

Kay Daly writing sample: Theater review
Published in *TimeOut Chicago*, Issue #4, March 24-31, 2005

Vincent in Brixton

By Nicholas Wright. Dir. Frank Pullen. With David Blatt, Caroline Dodge Latta, Michaela Petro, Rebekah Lewis, Jeff Schmitt. Journeymen at Storefront Theater (see Fringe and storefronts).

It's hard to watch *Vincent in Brixton* without imagining a room full of movie execs pitching the story. "It's *Shakespeare in Love* meets *Harold and Maude!* A *Portrait of the Artist as a Crazy Young Man!*" But perhaps that's because this story of the young van Gogh treats a common motif – the riddle of how artistic genius comes in to being. Faced with the spectacle of remarkable talent, mankind seems fated to cry aloud, "How'd that happen?"

Playwright Nicholas Wright's answer is nothing new – he credits a heady mix of passion, depression, and hormones. Building on scant details of the artist's early adulthood, Wright imagines a young Vincent working in London as an art dealer. Not yet an artist, van Gogh falls passionately in love with his mature landlady, Ursula. The boy becomes the man. The art dealer becomes the artist.

In staging this evolution of the artistic soul, director Frank Pullen wisely trusts the quiet moments of the play, allowing postures and body language to speak the painterly language of unverbalized turmoil. But the production's success is due largely to David Blatt, who plays Vincent as a whirlwind of emotions and impulses kept just barely in check by his eagerness to please. It's fortunate Blatt's performance is so powerful and nuanced; his intensity sells the May-December romance. As Ursula, Caroline Dodge Latta fares less well. Vincent is drawn to Ursula's dark despair, but in Latta's performance, there's little hint of the passion that should be the tonic to that compelling darkness. Instead, her mournfulness plays as lethargy.