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FIRST NIGHT: THEATRE

# Review: True Copy at the Attenborough Centre, Brighton

This is an oddly fascinating account of Geert Jan Jansen's adventures in art forgery

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The show leaves you dazzled by the overlaps between great art and great fakery

JEN O'BRIEN

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★★★★☆

The celebrated-cum-notorious Dutch art forger Geert Jan Jansen sits on stage in front of a series of digital projections of his remarkable fakes. His props include a pair of

specs on his forehead and an overhead projector. Next to him sits a long-haired interviewer from the theatre company Berlin. They talk quietly in Dutch about his life of art and crime. English surtitles appear above their heads. It is oddly fascinating. It is also about as theatrical as an Open University broadcast from the Seventies.

Appearances can be deceptive, though: an idea the rest of the evening goes on to explore to increasingly alluring effect. Jansen has a terrific story. He chanced into forgery, but soon excelled at it. Karel Appel, the Dutch painter whose work Jansen aped, signed a certificate of authenticity for a painting he mistook for one of his own. And Jansen could run off all sorts of bogus masters, from Matisse to Klimt, by the yard.

The French château he retreated to had rooms made up to resemble those of the artists he took off. It all comes easy to him, but he can't work while being watched by a crowd. It's too private a process. So he slips backstage, his cameraphone catching him dash off a quick Picasso sketch he then gives away.

He would always start with the artist's signature, then do the rest. Because if you do the painting, then botch the signature, you've wasted a lot of time. He takes us through how

he artificially aged his work, emptying Hoover bags on it and putting it under doormats. “It’s not art,” he says, “it’s a trick.” There are tricks too to Bart Baele and Yves Degryse’s production, here as part of the Brighton Festival.

Why, when Jansen was arrested with 1,600 paintings in 1994, did he not get convicted? Could it be that the art world was complicit, that too many people had already staked their reputations on his forgeries? Some of that work, he tells us, still hangs in major museums. We know better, by the end, than to trust his every word. Yet this deceptively artful show leaves you dazzled by the overlaps between great art and great fakery.

**Box office: 01273 678822, to May 26**

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