

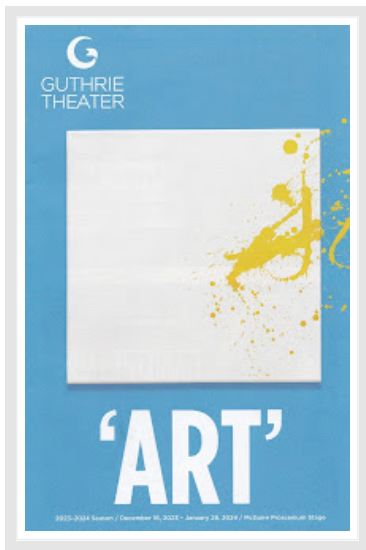
# Cherry and Spoon

theatrical musings in Minnesota and beyond

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Friday, December 29, 2023

## "Art" at Guthrie Theater



What inspires someone to spend \$200,000 (or francs) on a piece of art, especially one that to others looks like a plain white canvas with some marks in a slightly different shade of white? This question is at the crux of the play 'Art' by French playwright Yasmina Reza, most famous for the play *God of Carnage* (which played at the Guthrie 12 years ago, and a few other theaters since). Both plays won the Tony, and both plays are of the talky variety (my favorite kind). Not much happens and the play is pretty much just people sitting around a room talking. But that talking is some pretty deep and intense conversation and confrontation, in this case ostensibly about the nature of art, but in reality more about the nature of friendship.\* The Guthrie's new production features a fantastic trio of actors (two of them local favorites), crisp and clear direction, and a stunning "modern"

design. This is often a quiet time in #TCTheater, after the holiday show rush and before things get moving again in mid to late January, but thankfully we have some great 'Art' to fill in that gap. See it in the Guthrie's proscenium theater now through January 28.

We're told that the three characters in this play have been friends for 15 years, although I had a hard time understanding why; there isn't much love lost between any of them. Serge is the one who bought the expensive work of art, and Marc is the friend who can't understand it. More than that, he's downright angry about it. The two argue repeatedly about it, and their friend Yvan is stuck in the middle trying to make peace, while dealing with the stress of planning a wedding. The 90-minute play consists of several scenes between various pairs, asides by one character while the other is frozen, and a final confrontation between all three when things get a bit heated. This piece of art is the catalyst for the three men to delve into issues in their friendship that were about to boil over long before this white painting came into their lives.\*

An interview in the program explains how Kimberly Senior took over as director after the original director, Lisa Portes, had to step down after she had made all of the casting and design decisions. Whatever the background of how it came to be, and the challenges this history might have entailed, the result is a smart, sharp, funny play,



Yvan (Max Wojtanowicz) is stuck in the middle of fighting friends Serge (Robert O. Berdal) and Marc (Patrick Sabongui)

that's not without some emotion as we do come to

(photo by Dan Norman)

care about these characters, as infuriating as they are. Some of the credit for that is also due to this genius cast, who create such clear, specific, flawed humans with believable relationships between them. As the proud "art" collector, Robert O. Berdahl (in a welcome return to the stage after his fabulous performance as Billy Flynn in [Theater Latte Da's regional premiere of \*Chicago\* four years ago](#)) is a delight, at times funny and gleeful, at other times pretentious and sullen. Max Wojtanowicz is perfectly cast as the affable Yvan, easy-going peacemaker until his glorious breakdown. He delivers a lengthy, breathless, hilarious monologue that stopped the show with applause. **Completing the trio is Guthrie newcomer Patrick Sanbongui (with a long list of film and TV credits to his name, including *Firefly Lane* and *Homeland* to name a few), who does righteous anger well (or at least Marc thinks it's righteous). The three of them are a joy to watch, individually, in pairs, and as a trio, like the most gorgeous harmonies, but without music.**

The stage of the proscenium is glaringly white, with only two clear chairs and a few chic tables in the space. But like the painting in question, white isn't really white. The color changes to reveal more shades as the conversations get more layered. The lighting and sound design work in tandem to help define the staccato nature of the beginning of the play, with scenes stopped abruptly (and often hilariously) for character asides. As the long final scene plays out, the mounting tension in the conversation is echoed by the ominous sounds. At some point during this confrontation I remembered that there's a fight director listed (Aaron Preusse), and things do get physical. But don't worry, no blood (or other bodily fluids) are shed. But the boys' neatly chic character specific outfits do get a bit ruffled. (Scenic design by Brian Sidney Bembridge, costume design by Raquel Barreto, lighting design by Xavier Pierce, sound design and composition by Mikhail Fiksel.)

'Art' is engaging, thought-provoking, and laugh out loud funny. It would be the perfect way to start your year of #TCTheater in 2024 (and set the bar high).

\*Some text borrowed from my review of Theatre Coup d'Etat's 2015 production.

Labels: [Aaron Preusse](#), [Art](#), [Brian Sidney Bembridge](#), [Guthrie Theater](#), [Kimberly Senior](#), [Lisa Portes](#), [Max Wojtanowicz](#), [Mikhail Fiksel](#), [Patrick Sabongui](#), [Raquel Barreto](#), [Robert O Berdahl](#), [Xavier Pierce](#), [Yasmina Reza](#)

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