

Arts and Culture

A review of 'Art': French Seinfeld at the Guthrie

Alex V. Cipolle Minneapolis December 29, 2023 4:00 AM



Robert O. Berdahl and Max Wojtanowicz admire the “piece of white [expletive]” in “Art.” Courtesy of Guthrie Theater

The plot of “Art” is simple: Three middle-aged men — old friends — bicker ad nauseam in an apartment. Sound familiar? Seinfeldian, even?

There’s a Gallic twist, however. The play is set in Paris, not New York. Instead of the friends arguing about astronaut pens or whether soup is a meal, the friends here argue, and wax philosophical, about the nature of art — and, by proxy, friendship.

The agitation is provoked by a minimalist canvas composed of layers of white paint, striped with more layers of white paint.

Seated next to me at the Guthrie Theater’s McGuire Proscenium stage is a suspender-clad man with a white chinstrap beard.

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I ask him what drew him to a play that is ostensibly about contemporary art. He shrugs and says he and his wife are season ticket holders, but they try to avoid the Shakespeare stuff.

Onstage, Serge (Robert O. Berdahl), a bourgeois dermatologist, has bought a painting by a “famous” artist for \$200,000. Marc (Patrick Sabongui), a rancorous and at times redeemable cynic, takes personal offense to his friend not only shelling out for a “piece of white [expletive],” but also putting on airs that he is moved by such “art.”

And there’s poor fragile Yvan (Max Wojtanowicz), caught in the middle as a sort of mediator. He neither hates nor loves the piece and consequently is labeled a coward. “Art” is the high drama of low stakes.

Director Kimberly Senior has crafted French playwright Yasmina Reza’s “Art” into an exquisitely tight 80 minutes, a pressure cooker for increasingly heated and petty arguments. The cast creates lived-in friendships, layering resentment and tenderness with all the backstory that implies

The offending artwork is presented on stage within minutes. Seeing it, my white-bearded neighbor grumbles “Are you kidding me?”

The treatises offered by each of Yasmina Reza’s characters are perennial and good. They bicker about whether this is art at all, and what makes good art, scratching at unresolvable answers.

Serge, played by Berdahl with wonderfully unselfconscious pretension, has a fetish for the modern and conceptual. He needles Marc (**played with crackling righteousness by Sabongui**) for his tastes stagnating — he prefers representational art, as demonstrated by a prized Flemish landscape.

“It’s very *pretty*,” Serge tells Marc with condescension.

Marc berates Serge in turn. Serge, according to Marc, only craves status and the novelty of contemporary works. Marc says that this type of art is dead as soon as it arrives.

Meanwhile, Yvan remains anemic, saying the only metric that matters is that a piece of art moves you. With Yvan, Wojtanowicz provides an abundance of comic relief — he recalls “Will & Grace” actor Sean Hayes.

To Marc’s dismay, Serge claims the work of art does make him happy.

“Ay-yai-yai,” my neighbor groans.

The arguments are fun and satisfying. Each character is annoying in their own right, but none are necessarily wrong. I can imagine making any one of these arguments with the right foe.

As the play inches forward, the crux becomes less about art and more about the limits of middle-age friendship. Marc is so embittered by the chasm in values between friends, by what he sees as the shallowness of Serge and the spinelessness of Yvan, that the painting becomes a referendum on their relationship.

“Do you have any idea of what binds me to you?” Marc asks his friends, as much as himself. My neighbor shakes his head.



Robert O. Berdahl, Max Wojtanowicz and Patrick Sabongui play bickering old friends in "Art." Courtesy of Guthrie Theater

“What binds me to you?” is an important question, and one I’ve been thinking a lot about as I’m on the precipice of turning 40. How do our friendships change as we settle into separate lives?

In youth, friendships are brash, clumsy and more honest. Relationships at this stage are often born from convenience — the overlapping time and space of a school, a

neighborhood, a job — than aligned worldviews or values. There is time and space to argue, the flexibility to become different or better people because of friends who challenge us.

As we carry these friendships into adulthood, like the characters in this play, their quirks and novelty can lose their charm: they are now bugs, not features. But we don’t talk about it honestly. Politeness prevails.

We have settled on our schema, and hardened into our worldviews. A friend that challenges us now can be an existential threat. So if not politeness, polarization will do.

In a time when loneliness is a pandemic, and society is divided, it’s thrilling to see “Art” push past politeness and polarization. What happens if we *keep* talking?

In a very Seinfeldian manner, this breakdown happens as they try to leave for dinner. Unlike Seinfeld, however, the friends seemingly experience some personal growth.

As we leave our seats, my neighbor tells me he doesn't like it. I respond that I found it to be a thoughtful meditation on adult friendships.

The friendships were “too involved,” he says.

“Art” plays through Jan. 28 at the Guthrie Theater.

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