

'Art' is the Title and the Result in Exhibition at the Guthrie Theater. **Three Actors, One Word, Brilliant!**



Robert O. Berdahl, Max
Wojtanowicz, and Patrick
Sabongui
Photo by Dan Norman

In a brilliant crack at counter programming the Guthrie Theater opened its production of Yasmina Reza's 'Art' the Friday before Christmas opposite the ongoing run of their annual heart warmer *A Christmas Carol*. Not everyone celebrates Christmas and even those who do sometimes take a year off as the Ceasefire Carolers outside the theater reminded us tonight. So if you are not in the holiday spirit or want to relive some of the holiday trauma, come January but in a safe non-personal way, the darkly comical 'Art' is going to be the ticket for you. For a story about three friends who are incredibly hostile to each other, you wouldn't think you'd leave the theater feeling so alive and invigorated. But that's what great

art does. When you see three roles so perfectly played, a script so layered, rich in humor and insight into the human condition, you can't help but feel uplifted. Or maybe you're just grateful that your friends don't talk to you this way.

Reza's play has been translated from the original French to English by Christopher Hampton, you may be familiar with Reza's play *God of Carnage* which was adapted into the film *Carnage* starring Jodie Foster, Kate Winslet, Christoph Waltz, and John C. Reilly. 'Art' has a similarly critical view of people and their more childish and selfish sides. The play follows three Parisian friends and the fallout that results when one of them, Serge, buys a all white painting for 200,000 francs. It begins when Serge shows the painting to Marc, who calls it a piece of shit. He then ropes their mutual friend Yvan into the painting critique. Yvan, always the peacemaker tries to essentially play the middle, telling Yvan he likes the painting, while telling Marc that agrees that's too much money for a painting that is basically white. This middle ground noncommittal response angers both Marc and Serge who see Yvan as a coward. And this is where we get to the heart of what is really going on in the play. It's not about their own opinions as much as it is about how each others opinions reflect on them. Marc sees Serge's stance on the painting as a reflection on himself because how can he be best friends with someone who would buy a white painting for 200,000 francs? When Yvan tries to make peace between the two friends, they both unite against him, because his wishy washiness in their minds reflects upon them for being his friend. It's easier for them to attack and hurt him than each other, as he doesn't put up much of a fight. They are really all three reflections of the different and conflicting aspects of all of our psyches. We all have it within us to behave one way with one friend and another with the other, just going along to get along, we also can get defensive when something we are proud of is proclaimed to be ridiculous, or can come off as judgemental or pretentious from time to time. Reza's script is so articulate and sharp witted, we laugh and agree with what the characters are saying while also laughing at the fact that they are saying these things to each other, things we would never say to a friend. The fact that a disagreement over a painting one of them bought almost ends three longtime friendships is a comment on how egotistical and immature people can be, how little distance there is sometimes between the playground and adulthood.

The three person cast is perfection, each one of the actors is exactly right for their role. Max Wojtanowicz as Yvan edged out the other two by the smallest of margins on the car ride home. Wojtanowicz not only delivers every line in what feels like the only possible way they could be done, but his reactions to the other actors are as good as his own line readings. He is so good at listening and reacting to the other actors that I frequently found myself watching him rather than the actor that was speaking. He also has a monologue about his wedding invitations to explain why he arrives late for an evening out with Marc and Serge that is the best 5 minutes in the entire play. Robert O. Berdahl plays Serge, he has the look and speech patterns of the Modern Art lover, I can't really explain that, but you'll see what I mean. Berdahl is adept at feigning aloofness one moment and then launching a counter attack with laser precision. He does a great job as well of making us believe that he doesn't care what Marc thinks of the painting while also showing us that what he thinks really does hurt him. **Patrick Sabongui plays Marc I've never seen him on stage before but am familiar with some of his TV and film work. This is one of the few times the Guthrie brings someone in from out of town that you won't hear me whining that they should always use local actors. Sabongui is just so good in the role I wouldn't want to change anything about the production. He, maybe more than the other two, really succeeds in getting the audience to completely agree with him in one scene and then be very critical of his attitudes the next and then swing us back to his side. We are right there with him when he laughs at Serge for buying the painting, and then before long even though we agreed with him, we find ourselves wondering why he can't just let it go. One of the biggest thrills of the evening is seeing the three actors play off each other, great acting can be entrancing as evidenced by those on display in 'Art'.**

Kimberly Senior directs the play and keeps it moving along at a brisk pace keeping the show at under 90 minutes, it flies by but feels like the perfect length. There are some nice beats where the characters step out of the scene and share their thoughts directly with the audience. Senior and Lighting Designer Xavier Pierce use the lighting to direct our focus in these moments and create a nice visual addition to what are usually humorous comments. The Scenic Designer Brian Sidney Bembridge has gone for a very sparse design. The action takes place in each of the three mens apartments the only change being that when we are in Marc or Yvan's apartments a painting comes down from the ceiling. Otherwise the entire set is either white or in the case of the two chairs transparent. The design echoing the white painting underlining the absurdity of what has threatened the friendships of the three men.

'Art' runs through January 28th at the Guthrie Theater in downtown Minneapolis for more information and to purchase tickets go to <https://www.guthrietheater.org/shows-and-tickets/2023-2024-season/art/> (<https://www.guthrietheater.org/shows-and-tickets/2023-2024-season/art/>)

This Holiday season why not start a new tradition of taking in a live theater production with family and friends? It's a great way to create lasting memories and will give you something to look forward to every year as you experience the magic of live theater. Whether your budget is large or small, there is a show for you. Looking for gift ideas? Don't we all have enough "stuff"? Give the gift of live theater, go to your favorite theaters website, see what shows they have coming up in the new year and give the gift of an experience over material.

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