

Review: Guthrie's entertaining 'Art' punches hard into men's feelings

Yasmina Reza's 1994 play gets a taut and timely staging in Minneapolis.

By Rohan Preston (<https://www.startribune.com/rohan-preston/6370560/>) Star Tribune |

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He may think that the middle is the safest place to be when stuff hits the fan, but Yvan, the most anodyne member of a polarized three-man friend group, soon finds out otherwise.

When Serge and Marc raise their fists at each other in what, ultimately, is a fight for their friendship, Yvan gets the worst of their blows. So much for being a namby-pamby "Minnesota Nice" buddy who's always trying to please everyone.

Male friendship gets entertainingly tested in "Art," Yasmina Reza's Tony-winning one-act now in a taut, timely production by Kimberly Senior at the Guthrie Theater. "Art," which was later translated from the French by Christopher Hampton, premiered in 1994 in the wake of that era's culture wars.

The cultural milieu has changed since then. Critical theory has given way to critical race theory as the cultural bugaboo. But the discussions around modernism and the value of art remain timely, even as the play has become more sharply focused on the stakes for the men's friendship.

When divorced dermatologist Serge (Robert O. Berdahl) buys a white-on-white painting for 200,000 francs, Marc (Patrick Sabongui), an engineer, takes existential offense. He is so unsettled by the fact that his friend has "spent two hundred grand on some piece of white [expletive]," he begins to take homeopathic anti-anxiety meds.

Both Marc and Serge respectively turn to Yvan (Max Wojtanowicz) for support. Yvan, naturally, agrees with both of his friends.

Senior has staged the action on a literally listing edge. Brian Sidney Bembridge's set is a floating floor suspended like a raft on water, tilted at an angle, so we get the sense that these men can easily slide off. That austere design is effectively married to Xavier Pierce's similarly spartan lighting scheme and Mikhail Fiksel's go-go party score.



DAN NORMAN.

Robert O. Berdahl, left, Patrick Sabongui and Max Wojtanowicz play friends at odds over an expensive painting in the Guthrie Theater's

The three actors are unreservedly excellent, with Wojtanowicz delivering a showstopping sequence. It happens after Serge and Marc have been waiting on Yvan so long, they miss their planned movie showtime. Both men are incredibly agitated when Yvan barges in to explain himself.

He's been in an argument with his mother and fiancée about the invitations for his upcoming nuptials, he tells them breathlessly, then re-enacts the dispute using changes in cadence and fluid, almost dance-like comical gestures. Wojtanowicz is flawless as he breathlessly evokes the distinct characters. He delivers like a skilled master musician who effortlessly switches between instruments to play vivid, comically disarming music.

His florid performance contrasts with the appropriately contained turn by Berdahl as Serge, who has recently gone through a divorce and is using modern art to soothe his aches. Berdahl plays him as an instinctual, no-nonsense figure who finds solace in something that he may not even fully understand. And if Serge sneers at Marc, it's because he's mirroring his high-strung friend's condescension.

For his part, Sabongui mines Marc's discomfort with how to deal with new, mystifying things by leaning into a sputtering disdain. Marc's vocabulary is studded with curt, brusque putdowns and Sabongui hitches that to similarly brisk delivery and movements. His Marc may be an engineer by profession but he's a closeted prizefighter ready to rumble against anything he does not comprehend.

The play offers instruction not only about friendship but about being social animals. For we're all bound together and how we see each is similar is how we look at art: We see in sculptures, paintings and performance what we need to see.

As Yvan says, quoting a syllogism from his therapist: "If I'm who I am because I'm who I am, and you are who you are because you are who you are, then I'm who I am and you're who you are. If, on the other hand, I am who I am because you're who you are, and if you're who you are because I'm who I am, then I am not who I am and you're not who you are."

Who: By Yasmina Reza. Translated by Christopher Hampton. Directed by Kimberly Senior.

Where: Guthrie Theater, 818 S. 2nd St., Mpls.

When: 7:30 p.m. Thu. & Fri., 1 & 7:30 p.m. Wed. & Sat., 1 & 7 p.m. Sun. Ends Jan. 28.

Tickets: \$29-\$82. 612-377-2224 or guthrietheater.org (<http://guthrietheater.org>).
(<https://www.guthrietheater.org/>)