

British Theatre Guide

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Art

Yasmina Reza

David Pugh and Dafydd Rogers

Sheffield Lyceum

14–21 April 2018

Yasmina Reza is a playwright from an exotic Eastern European / Iranian / Jewish background. She writes in French, so the version of *Art* that we see is in a translation by Christopher Hampton.

As a Parisian, she has imbued the values of French classical theatre, where tragedy is a profound form of drama and comedy a poor second best. She is consequently not happy when her plays are classed as comedy. "My plays have always been described as comedy but I think they are tragedy. They are funny tragedy but they are tragedy".

Art pricks the bubble of pretentiousness and shows how disagreement can ruin life long friendships. As a perceptive friend commented, "Art, like politics or religion, can place people in opposing positions from which it is difficult to retreat".

In the play, Nigel Havers as Serge has recently paid £200,000 for a painting by a well established contemporary artist. The painting is a white square with barely visible markings in a different shade of white. He shows the painting to his two close friends, Marc (Denis Lawson) and Yvan (Stephen Tompkinson).

It is clear from the outset that we are watching a satirical comedy. In a hilarious opening sequence, we watch the three friends adopting contorted physical positions in order to appreciate or make some sense of what they are looking at. When the outspoken Marc describes it as "a load of shit", Serge is deeply offended and a wedge is driven into their relationship.

The play is almost musical in structure. The opening theme is presented, then returned to with variations, in which, for example, the reconciliatory Yvan attempts to make positive comments about the painting, but ultimately describes it as "white shit"; and the alliances within the threesome constantly change, with Serge and Marc, whose friendship now hangs on a thread, ganging up at one point on the bemused Yvan.

Later in the action, a second theme is introduced when a fraught Yvan bursts in late for a dinner date and embarks on a brilliantly delivered long monologue about the agonies he's going through in trying to get his extended family to agree whose names should go on the wedding invitation for his forthcoming marriage. "Cancel it," advise Serge and Mark coldly.

This is an elegant, coherent and beautifully judged production. Set design (Mark Thompson) with lighting and sound designers (Hugh Vanston and Mic Pool) work together in perfect harmony to provide an appropriate simple setting for the action, a convincing painting, and most importantly sharp lighting and sound effects which punctuate and add variety to the action and allow the actors to directly address the audience with their real thoughts in the middle of longer scenes.

Two directors are credited in the programme, Matthew Warchus (original director) and Ellie Jones. There is absolute certainty about the style of the production. This is undoubtedly social satire and the nuances in the performances of the three actors are a tribute to their experience and artistry and a delight to watch.

The short play runs for an hour and a half without an interval.

Reviewer: [Velda Harris](#)