

Review

They're friends but is it art?

Michael Billington

Art

Wyndhams Theatre

YASMINA Reza's *Art*, translated from the French by Christopher Hampton, is sharp, witty and clever. It is also superbly acted and directed. But, although it will rightly give a lot of pleasure, something in it disturbs me: the way it panders to the popular belief that modern art is a conspiracy against the public.

Its real theme is art as a test of love and friendship. Serge, a divorced doctor, buys an abstract painting: a pure white canvas costing 200,000 francs. His friend and mentor, Marc, is outraged: he scorns the canvas as a piece of shit. A mutual friend, Yvan, a stationery salesman and a natural trimmer, tries to reconcile their differences, only to be turned on by both.

The initial situation is worthy of a modern Molière; and Reza turns it to great dramatic advantage. She shows, in 90 minutes, how an argument over a canvas opens wider disagreements: Serge and Marc represent not just the modern and the traditional but differing views of friendship. Serge has always been the pupil and Marc the teacher, but investment in the canvas reverses the roles.

Reza pursues the argument with crisp intelligence. But as long-festering resentments come to the surface, you can't help wondering what bound the three men together in the first place.

The play also subtly implies that Serge is a bit of a chump for having paid so much for a plain white canvas: the clinching moment comes when

Yvan, who at first claims to see different colours in the painting, agrees it's a piece of shit. The audience roars its approval. But a work of art is an object that gives pleasure. And if Serge sees, as I do, subtle variations in the painting in different lights, why is he to be denied?

Behind the play's palpable wit lies an easy populism. But the acting, in Matthew Warchus's stylish production, is so brilliant you scarcely notice. Albert Finney plays the truth-telling Marc superbly, like a burly version of Molière's Alceste in *The Misanthrope*, and he is never funnier than when he tries to hide his seething rage under a mask of formal politeness.

Tom Courtenay's Serge is an equally remarkable creation: a man who prides himself on his taste and sensitivity, yet is capable of extraordinary emotional cruelty. And Ien Stott punches his weight as the hapless middleman caught between these two prowling panthers: for sheer bravura, and breath control, it would be hard to beat the scene where Stott launches into a neurotic tirade about the inter-family wrangles over his impending wedding.

When they hand out the acting awards, they are going to have to devise a hydra-headed statuette to cover these three blistering performances.

Add Mark Thompson's pristine white-walled set and Gary Yershon's score, and you have an evening that gives undeniable pleasure. But the real test is whether the play encourages audiences to embrace modern art or reject it: I have an uneasy feeling that Reza's play, for all its manifest cleverness, panders to popular prejudice.

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