


THEATRE

With David Benedict

 Art by Yasmina Reza, directed by Matthew Warchus. Wyndham's Theatre, London WC2 (0171-369 1736)

I'm worried. *Art* has been hailed in most quarters as the perfect West End play. Albert Finney and Tom Courtenay are perfectly contrasted as friends whose relationship is rent asunder when Courtenay spends £25,000 on a seemingly dead white canvas, and Ken Stott is now a dead cert for Best Actor with his third cracking performance this year.

The production certainly merits praise. Director Matthew Warchus's attention to detail pays off throughout. Everything, from Gary Yershon's chilly, ringing vibraphone score, to Mark Thompson's design, is perfectly attuned to Christopher Hampton's first-rate translation: cool, elegant and deliciously witty.

But without wishing to be curmudgeonly, I worry that the play isn't quite up to all this. For all its modernist intercutting of address with sharply characterised scenes about art and the demand for friendship, I suspect its appeal for mostly middle-aged, married male critics is, strangely enough, one of nostalgia. It reminds them all of the days when the West End was supposedly packed with such intelligent entertainment.

Not everyone has hollered its praises in so unequivocal

a fashion. The *Guardian* asserted that Reza's anti-art arguments pandered to popular prejudice. "The real test is whether the play encourages audiences to embrace modern art or reject it." Perhaps Michael Billington was unnerved, as I was, by the braying first night crowd. Finney's implacable response to the canvas – "It's shit" – was met with delight by an audience giving vent to their closet philistinism. The play's discussions are funny and fascinating but there were times when I began to sense what it was like being at Nuremberg, as Courtenay's attempts to justify "art" were met with belly laughs.

Even if Reza were attacking modern art (she is not) that has nothing to do with whether it's a good play or not. She's a dramatist, not modernism's defence lawyer. Whatever happened to objective criticism? Silly Yasmina Reza. She pandered to the audience's prejudices. Obviously she should have pandered to the critics.

EYE ON THE NEW

A double whammy: Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?* transfers into the West End, and *The Day After Tomorrow*, which won Albee the second of his three Pulitzer Prizes, receives its belated British premiere. *Aldwych Theatre, London WC2 (0171-416 6003); Citizens Theatre, Glasgow (0141-429 0022).*

Art David benedict independent



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