

A true adult comedy blooms

AT LAST that rare thing, a true adult comedy, with more than mere laughter on its mind, blooms in the West End waste land. At first Yasmina Reza's *Art*, which triumphed in Paris and Berlin, looks eager to make traditional fun of a man so keen to proclaim his love of daring abstract art that he buys a blank, white canvas for a fortune, and shows it off to his two best friends with pride shining on his silly face.

But Miss Reza's interest lies not in the picture, but the dangerous antagonisms it sparks.

Art is a French female's deliciously sharp imagining of how middle-class men relate to each other — or rather how they spectacularly fail to. This is no low shot aimed below the waist. Miss Reza views the male of the species more in amused resignation than feminist anger. First though a hurdle has to be cleared.

The three middle-aged French men — all of whom have women in their lives — talk about their relationships with each other in a way few heterosexual, or indeed gay, Englishmen would dream of speaking unless trapped on one of those men only, deep therapy and self-discovery weekends away from home: "Have you any idea of what binds me to you?" is how Christopher Hampton's translation ridiculously puts it, when the squabbling takes a turn for the serious.



The scene on Mark Thompson's suitably sparse and anonymous white set, with its towering walls and minimal furniture, is the apartment of Tom Courtenay's Serge, the delighted new owner of an expensive painting which just consists of a white void.

"You're taking the piss," suggests Serge's best friend Marc (boisterous Albert Finney) as he gazes incredulously at the bland nothingness. Ken Stott's Yvan teetering anxiously on the verge of marriage takes the mediator's role by creative lying, claiming to see traces of interesting red, yellow and grey amidst the white.

This basic satire at the expense of some modern art's inanities is lightly amusing. But then Serge, in typical male fashion, comes to see the criticism of his painting as an attack upon himself. The welter of accusations are comically absurd, but come thick, fast and

ugly. The emptiness of the canvas is paralleled by the blankness of the men's friendship, which easily collapses because founded on superficialities.

Only when Serge does the non-male thing and compromises — allowing Marc to disfigure the canvas is there hope of reconciliation. And Marc's final gesture — an admission that perhaps the painting is worthwhile — underscores Reza's provocative belief that we must rely upon white lies, allowing others their illusions since no one can bear very much reality.

That hot young director Matthew Warchus presides over a coolish, not very searching production in which Tom Courtenay and Albert Finney strike up an endearing double act. What a pleasure to see Courtenay's humourless Serge, with his air of wounded self-importance gravely rising to the challenge of Finney — in rather thick voice as a bluff, no nonsense Marc. It's Ken Stott's Yvan, face shrouded in chronic glumness, forever slipping into top-gear depression, who touches comic heights and then, under attack, collapses in poignant tears. An appealing comedy, whose surface charms conceal a dark and interesting interior.

Ratings: No stars — adequate
★ good, ★★ very good
★★★ outstanding, ✖ poor

Art Nicholas de Jongh Standard



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