

Three Men and a Painting

A review of OFVS's production of "Art" at Guild Hall

By Judy D'Mello | May 1, 2019 - 3:54pm

Long before France's Yasmina Reza became one of the powerhouses of European playwriting, her compatriot Molière introduced the world to the notion that sincerity in society relied upon a hypocrisy. That true integrity could be had only by those who spoke the truth, no matter how painful.

In Molière's "Le Misanthrope," about one man's refusal to "make nice" in accordance with the social conventions of 17th-century France, the playwright drew upon black-and-white caricatures and colored them outside the lines of social acceptance by using layers of humor to make his point.

Ms. Reza's multi-award-winning play and commercial cash cow, "Art," first produced in 1996 and later translated to English by Christopher Hampton, also integrates wit into a typical overused love/friendship triangle-plot in order to emphasize her point, which is not unlike Molière's: That we continue to function as social beings only as long as we stick to the accepted rules of the game.

Our Fabulous Variety Show's pleasing revival of "Art," playing through Sunday at Guild Hall, quite literally offers us a small play about big issues. Seating is onstage at the John Drew Theater, placing you in the midst of the action of this three-hander and the inanimate star of the show — the \$500,000 piece of art — "a white canvas with fine diagonal white streaks" painted by Antrios, an obscure fictionalized artist.

It's a viciously funny look at snobbery and the complexities of long-term friendships. Most of the play consists of an escalating argument among three male egos as viewed through the prism of their aesthetic preferences. An added bonus of the intimate onstage seating at Guild Hall is that you can really examine the painting in question, especially as the characters discuss the merits of, or assassinate, its artistic value.

Serge, played energetically by Joe Pallister, is a prissy dermatologist who fancies himself an art collector and has just bought the white-on-white painting for a small fortune. His old pal Marc — played superbly here by Edward Kassar — has popped round to check it out. Serge's grinning face (as though he has found the answer to eternal happiness) is more than Marc, a self-proclaimed aesthete, can take. He smiles, too, but only because he thinks the outrageously expensive, seemingly blank canvas is a joke. The smile is really a sneer, behind which is discernible meanness.

Still, Serge presses for his friend's appraisal. Finally, when Marc pronounces his verdict, it appears that he has found just the excuse he needs to articulate the superiority he's long felt toward Serge. And this is when Mr. Kassar really shines. He displays solid comic timing with a slow unraveling of bemusement, contempt, disgust, and, eventually, pure hatred. He hangs back at first, then gracefully steps forward and over that point of no return between friends.

The white artwork, not only in this opening scene but also as an overarching theme, is actually a red herring, a McGuffin. What's really at play here is an elegantly structured observation of friendship. And thank goodness for



Edward Kassar, Sawyer Spielberg, and Joe Pallister star as Marc, Yvan, and Serge in the Our Fabulous Variety Show production of "Art" at Guild Hall.
Michael O'Connor

that, because the “What is art?” debate has certainly been clobbered to death.

The third wheel in this triumvirate of friends is Yvan, played by Sawyer Spielberg as a sort of hapless chum who lacks the aesthetic sensibilities and self-assuredness of the other two but who, while trying to play peacemaker, gets caught in the barb-slinging. Mr. Spielberg is clearly a talented actor, as demonstrated in one particular scene in which he brilliantly, and breathlessly, offers an explanation for being late for a date with his pals. So, the decision by Jenna Mate, the director, to play him as more of a slapstick character during the rest of the play seems like a real missed opportunity.

After all, in 1998, when Ms. Reza won an Olivier Award for this play, she was surprised that the prize was for comedy. “I thought I had written a tragedy,” she said. Indeed, she does what the French do best: Dissect the bourgeoisie like a child plucking off the limbs of an insect. She crucifies her characters with a cruel sophistication. And, with “Art,” she raises one of drama’s eternal conundrums: How much truth and honesty can human beings withstand, especially between people who love each other?

I really hope the decision to have Serge wear a pair of neon fuchsia socks originated from this production team’s brain, because it’s a clever touch. Which one of us, upon seeing such a pretentious fashion statement on a friend, especially a middle-aged male friend, would not be full of judgment and contempt?

Like the painting, the socks, too, are a symbol of the tenuous ties of civility that bind us, without which we would so easily burn our friendships to the ground. In the intermission-free 90 minutes, we are forced to explore the connection between taste and friendship. What happens when egos are bruised because a dear old friend loves something you hate, or hates something you love? Is biting your tongue the only way to preserve a relationship with someone who has radically different views than yours? And why can some conflicting preferences peacefully coexist while others incite superiority or viciousness?

“Art” obviously touches on mysteries of the human ego, but, rather like the painting itself, how to interpret these riddles is entirely up to you.

Shows are at 7:30 p.m. and on Sunday at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$28. More information can be found and tickets purchased at the [OFVS website](#).

About the Author

Judy D’Mello
Contributing Writer

631-324-0002

Need to Know

[PSEG's Montauk Substation Won't Land on Flamingo Avenue](#)

[Arson Arrest In Winter Fire At Tennis Club](#)

[Slowdown Zaps Open Space Fund](#)

[EH Fusion Party Seeks Ballot Line](#)

[Money for Armored Vehicle](#)



NORACORA UP TO 45% OFF [Shop Now](#)

Now Available on Newsstands and in Fine Shops

