

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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Art

by Yasmina Reza

State Theatre Company
Space

Plenty of people have bought paintings, and paid more than they could afford, but few have become as well known as Serge, the first-name-only character in Yasmina Reza's hit play *Art*. First the French heard about him in Paris back in 1994. Then Sean Connery decided to back an English language version - scintillatingly provided by ace translator Christopher Hampton. After that, it was a steady round of Evening Standard Awards, Oliviers and Tonys, a five year stint in the West End and a diaspora of performances in thirty five more languages. And the play deserves its success. Despite its fluency, it is not the usual slick Broadway fare. It is a subtly phrased and perceptive account of relationship (and art) which is both disarming and, after so much hype, also refreshing.

The plotline is not, by now, much of a secret. The play is about three men. Serge has bought a painting for 200,000 francs and it is white with white stripes. His friend Marc, something of self-styled connoisseur, is outraged, while Yvan, the third musketeer, is tactfully agnostic. The play revolves around their shifting alliances and the anxiety each feels when the other behaves uncharacteristically or unpredictably.

Art is a play about friendship and the ways in which we are socially constructed by our friends and vulnerable to their disapproval. Serge has moved outside his usual perimeter by buying the painting, hence Marc loses his usual authority over his friend's tastes. Yvan, whose life with his fiance and his mother is perpetually fraught, wants only that his friends remain constant, unchanging and attentive to him.

In this State Theatre Company production, director Chris Drummond has, with designer Dean Hills, made some eccentric choices. The use of a red velvet curtain extended right across the face of the stage is oddly mannered while Hills's set, with its tizzy marble, its tacky ornaments and exaggerated height creates a needlessly cramped and two dimensional acting space. The play calls for cleaner, more generic decor than this, the particulars of the design, here, are distracting and ambiguous. And the

decision to dress the actors in matching yukky mustard linen suits is similarly unfortunate.

Frequently the performances are pitched too nervily. Certainly, in the opening scenes, Keith Robinson is overly busy as Marc, producing a level of eyebrow caricature which Chris Drummond should have cranked back quite a few notches, especially since it is in awkward contrast with Patrick Dickson's more restrained, sometimes wooden, presentation of Serge. Some of this may be opening night jitters, especially as intermittent glitches in the sound system are audibly humming and crackling above the actors' heads.

It is only when Paul Blackwell makes his entrance as Yvan that the production finds some of the fluency and depth of the text. Blackwell is an extremely likeable comic actor and he has more than his share of familiar signatures to call upon. But instead of falling back on these he is finding real invention in his characterisation these days and it is most evident in this performance. He doesn't force the humour and he doesn't hog the scenes - he just does more with his opportunities. His set piece, a lengthy monologue about the disagreements over the wording of the invitation to his forthcoming wedding, is particularly accomplished.

The highpoints of the play, though, are those where the friendships are most in peril and are retrieved with just that touch of emotion which Yasmina Reza adds to keep her comedy of manners from becoming too slick. It is here where Keith Robinson regains ground lost in the opening scenes. When his Marc is repentant for his arrogance and wants to make amends, there is both the comedy of his friends' consternation at his unfamiliar concern for their feelings and a real sense of someone suddenly reminded that life is a lonely place without one's chums.