

Three Friends and a Great Piece of Modern Art

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Holy Trinity College
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Play: Art

Playwright: Yasmina Reza

Translator: Weigo Lee

Performing group: Dionysus Contemporary Theatre

Performance: 13/8/2021, 8pm

Thetre: Lyric Theatre, HKAPA

“Art” follows three friends - Serge (Chan Suk Yi), Marc (Anthony Wong), and Yvan (Chu Pak Hong), as they arrive at a dramatic conflict over Serge’s one-million-dollar purchase of a white painting.

The subject of the heated debate - a white painting with a few white diagonal lines, opens the play as a centrepiece of the stage. An object of ambiguous meaning, it remains the central source of contention, but every now and then, the characters digress into other matters, as we often do in a conversation. This convoluted discussion is as much about art as it is about their mid-life crises and enduring grudges. It begins with Serge and Marc arguing due to their artistic differences, while middleman Yvan comes to the rescue (and fails), and the debate snowballs with escalating ridiculousness.

Serge is a lover of modern art. He is enthusiastic about the white painting and wants his friends to appreciate it as much as he does. He also takes himself too seriously. Marc adheres to traditional art, and refuses to acknowledge the artistic value of a blank canvas. He is also disgruntled by Serge’s self-importance. Yvan, the most modest of the three, does not care about the painting in the slightest bit. He has his own worries - exasperated in the process of planning his upcoming wedding, all the while acting as a mediator to reconcile differences between Serge and Marc.

The trio, each of them specific in temperament, manages to enrapture the audience in this long-winded conversation about art, and you become increasingly involved in this pedantic debate with seemingly no end in sight.

The play takes place in only three locations - the home of Serge, Marc, and Yvan, so the stage design is kept simple and minimalistic, yet effective and smooth in its

transitions. A change in the location is signified by a different painting in the backdrop – a white painting of Serge’s, a landscape painting of Marc’s, and a painting by Yvan’s father, each a statement of the character’s dispositions. The trio moves around the stage fluidly - resting on a sofa here and there, leaning against a wall, answering the door at the back, so that the stage never feels too large for three people. They are in constant motion, each taking up space in some corner of the stage. There is not a moment of stagnancy.

The stage devices of “Art” are clever. Sometimes, with a turn of the head, the lights dim and one character comes within focus, and he tells the audience his unspoken thoughts, essentially breaking the fourth wall. And then he returns to the actual conversation with feigned courtesy, with the others unaware of his confessions to us. As if establishing a secret relationship with the characters, we feel closer to them, and hence become more interested in what they have to say.

The strength of “Art” lies mainly in its witty dialogue, with the three actors’ charming delivery and chemistry to match. It plays out like a real conversation – overlapping voices, a slip-of-the-tongue profanity, personal attacks, side-tracking, admitting defeat, getting back to bickering again - the play manages to keep the audience engaged by pushing the limits of absurdity. Sometimes, “Art” becomes so absurd that it borders on slapstick comedy, with antics served mostly by Yvan, so that the audience erupts in fits of laughter every time he comes on stage. You can see the actors pause a bit for the audience to clap and cheer after a punchline or a clever joke, and that is perhaps what is special about theatre – an immediate give-and-take between the audience and the performer, which is so unique every time that you cannot help but wonder how the actors have adapted their performance to the audience’s response.

Chu as Yvan stands out particularly. In the middle section of the play is a frustrated monologue, in which he vexedly mimics the tone of his wife and his mother, while rambling in one continuous breath about the complications of designing wedding invitations. This comical outburst brings the first round of applause around the theatre, and sets the tone for the rest of the play, in which his appearances are always accompanied with chuckles from the audience. It fills the play with a lively energy that pulses all throughout.

The three actors deliver impressive and skillful performances in a play with such challenging dialogue. “Art” is comprised of only conversations, some with no breaks in between, in which a wrong line can easily disrupt the natural flow of talking. Yet

“Art” flows so organically that it is likely to mirror an argument from your own life, and it is all the more amusing as the trio is arguing for the sake of arguing, unwilling to back down from their stance, and trying desperately to win the others over. It is truly a delight to witness three experienced actors at work, each of them distinct in character, coming together with the chemistry of three old friends.

The play is not so much a discourse on the value of modern art as an insight into the most peculiar dynamics of friendship, and above all, a comedy which drives you to laugh all the way through. “Art” is sharp, hilarious, and ceaselessly entertaining in the entirety of its runtime. I do not know if “Art” has a moral subtext or message, or if there is a correct way of interpreting the play, but ultimately, when art offers you a few laughs and a lot of enjoyment, even if it is a white painting, is it not already enough?