‘ART’
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‘Art’
by YASMINA REZA
translated by CHRISTOPHER HAMPTON
directed by KIMBERLY SENIOR
December 16, 2023 – January 28, 2024
McGuire Proscenium Stage

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“It’s a complete mystery to me, Serge buying this painting. It’s unsettled me, it’s filled me with some indefinable unease.”

– Marc in ‘Art’

About This Guide

This play guide is designed to fuel your curiosity and deepen your understanding of a show’s history, meaning and cultural relevance so you can make the most of your theatergoing experience. You might be reading this because you fell in love with a show you saw at the Guthrie. Maybe you want to read up on a play before you see it onstage. Or perhaps you’re a fellow theater company doing research for an upcoming production. We’re glad you found your way here, and we encourage you to dig in and mine the depths of this extraordinary story.

NOTE: Sections of this play guide may evolve throughout the run of the show, so check back often for more information.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Thanks for your interest in ‘Art’. Please direct literary inquiries to Resident Dramaturg Carla Steen at carlas@guthrietheater.org.
Synopsis

Marc is viewing the painting his old friend, Serge, has just acquired for a large sum of money. Serge, thrilled with his purchase, sees it as a significant piece of contemporary art by a famous artist. But Marc cannot fathom why Serge would spend so much money on what he perceives as a “white canvas.” He ridicules it, and Serge is stung by Marc’s response.

Unsettled by the tension the painting has caused in their relationship, Marc and Serge each turn to their mutual friend, Yvan, who finds himself caught in the middle. He struggles with his own personal issues, including his upcoming marriage and pressure from his family, which adds another layer of complexity to the trio’s friendship dynamics.

Even though Marc and Serge are at odds over the painting and increasingly disturbed by what it has revealed about their friendship, the three friends plan to go out one evening. They grow tense and impatient while waiting for Yvan, who is late. When he finally arrives and regales his friends with problems around his impending marriage, Marc and Serge criticize Yvan for being self-involved and pathetic.

As the night wears on, the three men engage in an extended argument. Allegiances shift, wives and girlfriends are insulted, and Marc and Serge erupt into a fist fight. In the aftermath, Serge brings the painting into the room, hands a pen to Marc and invites him to draw on the canvas. Uncertain whether the invitation is a dare or an attempt at reconciliation, Marc draws a skier on the white canvas. Despite having watched the expensive painting he loves be defaced, Serge suggests the three men resume their evening plans and go to dinner.

Later, Marc and Serge work to clean the skier off the painting. Serge addresses the audience, revealing that the pen he gave Marc was washable. He expresses some guilt over lying to Marc, but he doesn’t wish to endanger the fresh compromise in their friendship by admitting it. The play closes with Marc sharing a somber statement with the audience that the painting represents “a man who moves across a space and disappears.”

CHARACTERS

Marc, a middle-aged French man, an aeronautical engineer, friends with Serge and Yvan
Serge, a middle-aged French man, a dermatologist, friends with Marc and Yvan
Yvan, a middle-aged French man, a stationery salesman, friends with Marc and Serge

SETTING

Paris. The main rooms of three different apartments.
## Responses to ‘Art’

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<th><strong>The Guardian</strong></th>
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<td>[The play’s] real theme is art as a test of love and friendship. Serge, a divorced doctor, buys an abstract painting: a pure white canvas costing 200,000 francs. His friend and mentor, Marc, is outraged: He scorns the canvas as a piece of shit. A mutual friend, Yvan, a stationery salesman and a natural trimmer, tries to reconcile their differences, only to be turned on by both. The initial situation is worthy of a modern Molière, and Reza turns it to great dramatic advantage. She shows, in 90 minutes, how an argument over a canvas opens wider disagreements: Serge and Marc represent not just the modern and the traditional but also differing views of friendship. Serge has always been the pupil and Marc the teacher, but investment in the canvas reverses the roles. Reza pursues the argument with crisp intelligence. But as long-festering resentments come to the surface, you can't help wondering what bound the three men together in the first place.</td>
<td>‘Art’ belongs to a tradition that once flourished on Broadway but is seldom represented there these days: the sleek, pleasant comedy of manners with an intellectual veneer that allows audiences to relax at the theater without feeling they’re wasting time. ... The level on which ‘Art’ works, and there it works quite successfully, is as a limber comic exercise in escalating tensions. The play begins by sounding the first note in a debate that almost instantly turns from academic to personal, when Serge first shows the painting to Marc. Most of what follows is a spirited anatomy of clashing perspectives and shifting alliances that is less a study in character than situation. Indeed, the mirth to be mined from mounting friction among old friends is as ancient as commedia dell’arte and an abiding staple of American sitcoms. You might find yourself thinking of those “I Love Lucy” episodes in which Lucy and Ethel would fall out over something as seemingly insignificant as their taste in dresses. This, after all, is a play in which a character will say, “I’m not touchy,” with infinite touchiness. While Ms. Reza’s script, in Christopher Hampton’s fluid translation for the London production, with some colloquial amendments for American audiences, provides monologues of spare eloquence for each of the characters, words are secondary here. You could even envision mimes like Bill Irwin and David Shiner performing the play without too much being lost. Don’t be misled by the title or the European pedigree of ‘Art’. It is far from a Stoppardesque consideration of the role of aesthetics or the kind of talky clash of confused identities found in Eric Rohmer’s movies. It is more subtle than traditional slapstick is, but it shares slapstick’s vision of a world always waiting to trip you up and send you spinning into collisions with even your closest friends. The banana peel, in this instance, just happens to be a painting.</td>
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The Fabric of Life: An Interview With Yasmina Reza

By Violaine Huisman

EDITOR’S NOTE: Yasmina Reza, who rarely grants interviews, was in the U.S. in 2015 for the American release of her novel Happy Are the Happy. She agreed to speak with Violaine Huisman, Director of Humanities at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and the following is an excerpt from the resulting interview, which was published in The Paris Review.

VIOLAINE HUISMAN: Your American publisher, Judith Gurewich, warned me that you don't like interviews.

YASMINA REZA: It’s not that I don’t like interviews; I don’t like promoting myself. I don’t like the feeling of having to step outside the work in order to sell it. And sometimes professional journalists can be nightmares — they’re only waiting for you to make a faux pas. They have nothing personally invested; they’re not really there. It’s all business.

VH: Like Charlie Rose?

YR: Yes. I refused to go on “The Charlie Rose Show” because he’s a perfect example of that kind of professional journalist who just asks a series of smart, pre-written questions and doesn’t bother listening to the answers. It feels like being faced with a brilliant question machine. It’s a horrible experience that I’d rather not put myself through.
VH: In your play *The Unexpected Man* — a series of internal monologues between two characters on a train — an aging novelist describes his early works as so far removed that they might as well be someone else's. At the time, you were just starting out as a writer, so you had to be guessing. Now that 20 years have passed, does it feel true?

YR: Writing is so prophetic — at 20, you already know everything there is to know; you don’t need to have experienced life to be able to write about it. There’s an intuitive phenomenon at work that’s almost clairvoyant. I’m not only speaking for myself. Many other writers have shared this impression.

In *The Unexpected Man*, I remember the character adds that the work “has been calcified. It remains active for others.” That’s absolutely true. There’s something calcified in past works, in the sense that you can’t alter them anymore. One day, I tried to edit some of my earlier plays. I was switching publishers, and I wanted to change a few things I didn’t like, but I realized I couldn’t do it because I would have had to rewrite them entirely! It felt like an object that was no longer permeable. If I were to write *The Unexpected Man* today, I would do it very differently, but at the same time, I do recognize in my past works a very strong continuity. It’s the same spirit, the same being, the same vision of the world. So it’s ambiguous. The work is calcified, but the thought that conceived it endures.

VH: And writing for the stage allows the work to remain more obviously active, too. How do you feel about seeing your work produced?

YR: It all depends. My reaction can vary as widely as stagings differ. A good play — or one that is good enough to survive its author, its time [and] its native culture — is necessarily, essentially, destined to be reinterpreted. The more interpretations it can take, the better it is. That’s the case with Chekhov, Shakespeare, all the great playwrights. From my contemporary purview, I’m thrilled to see unexpected stagings with completely different decisions as long as they’re sound. If they’re bad, then everything falls apart and can even become shameful. I’ve been ashamed of seeing my work onstage. Now I’m much more selective, but in the beginning, I was so happy to see my plays produced, I would go to everything. And I’ve sat in the audience mortified by what I had written because all of a sudden, the language fell apart. Because the actors were bad, the rhythm was off, there was no intimate understanding of the lines, no vision. ...

VH: Reading *Happy Are the Happy*, I was stunned at how your characters take shape seemingly instantaneously. As soon as they appear on the page, you’ve answered who, when, where. Odile, in bed, picking up her thriller. Paola, going to her lover for the first time.

YR: I wrote a play called *Life x 3* — it was performed here in New York with John Turturro in the lead role — and it opened with a woman in bed and a man walked in and said: “He wants cake!” And the woman replied: “You know he can’t have cake after he brushed his teeth,” and the man went on, “Yes, but he wants cake anyway.” And the man walked out again. That was the start of the play, and then the kid raised hell for the rest of the night.

In France, there was a very famous director [named] Roger Planchon — he has since passed away — who had come to see the play, and after the performance he said, “How do you do it? In one sentence you clear the decks, you tell us exactly what we need to know, where we are, who we’re with.” ... I think my impatience is to blame. Nothing bores me more, in writing, than long introductions, explanations of ...
childhood, that heavy backpack of contextualization. I’m not at all interested in that. In fact, I find that you can get to the point right away through recognizable symptoms, which everyone shares. I don’t necessarily look for efficiency, but I try to stay true to myself, to what I care about, and I suppose there might be a small narrative talent there, too.

It’s very difficult to evaluate one’s own work, and there’s something pretentious and annoying about it, but the one thing I can say is that I really identify with painting in my craft. I feel much closer to a painter than a writer. A painter doesn’t waste any time. With a dot of color, he can make a flower. Contemporary art, roughly since the rise of the Impressionists, has favored ellipsis. It sacrificed all the unnecessary context in order to focus on one precise detail. I think of it as a more modern approach.

VH: *Happy Are the Happy* is a novel, yet each character is engaged in an interior monologue that could easily pass for theater.

YR: My writing is profoundly inspired by the immediacy of theater. In my books, everything is always in the present tense. There’s clearly theatrical DNA in whatever I write.

VH: After reading your novel, I couldn’t tell whether I was imitating you or whether I heard myself differently because of you. How can you imitate people’s inner voices so precisely?

YR: To my mind, to understand a character is to understand their inner voice. There are writers who understand their characters through their destinies — as in an epic — in the series of landmarks that define their lives. This makes novels that work on a broad time scale necessarily very different from mine, which all take place in the present tense, in the moment. But the present tense requires interior monologue. You can’t just write, “She picks up her teacup.” You have to add to it, to give it depth. She might pick up her teacup thinking. ... The present tense is the temporality of thought.

VH: You don’t do epic. That’s true of the content of your books, too. You always write about trivial matters, everyday stuff, but it’s in the prosaic, the frivolous, that you reach the profound.

YR: Yes, that’s very true. I find frivolousness to be very deep. The frivolous is the foam that floats over the depths. Human drama doesn’t consist of big tragic incidents. Naturally, they happen in the course of a life — but for the most part, it’s full of small details, minor scrapes, wrinkles and micro-events that together make up the struggle of being. Infinitely more than losing one’s mother at 8. That’s what I’m interested in most; what I track down is how the fabric of a life wears out, how it hurts, how it’s irrational, through tiny details that might seem trifles. I choose to pick at what seems most irrelevant, most superficial, most unfit to dig into, and I dig into it — that’s how I write.

VH: You’re one of the only contemporary playwrights who has had a chance to see her work adapted on European and American stages. Are there obvious differences?

YR: When I started out 30 years ago, there were dozens of great directors in France, but the theater landscape has been completely decimated. We had huge personalities like Antoine Vitez, Roger Planchon, Patrice Chéreau and Claude Régy. ... Today, when I write a play in French, I can’t think of a single stage director I’d like to work with in my own language. My next play will be adapted in German by Thomas Ostermeier at the Schaubühne because there’s no one in France to do it.
But when I think of English and American theater, I feel it’s too neat, too well done, too structured, there’s too much of a desire to entertain. There’s always a sort of wink at the audience, which I find distracting and annoying. Of course, it’s a silly generalization, and there are plenty of counterexamples. There’s Bob Wilson, to name one. I’m thinking of the mainstream theater productions in the English-speaking world.

When I was first produced on Broadway and the West End, I was beyond thrilled. I thought: Here we have great, famous actors, but I must say I don’t completely relate to that style of theater. And English actors are just so extravagant — they really overdo it. I kept thinking as I watched them perform: “Hold it, rein it in a little!” That’s just a cultural difference that I haven’t been able to get used to. I find its aesthetic not as elegant.

In Europe we have a tradition of minimalism that I love — that or the other extreme, something hysterical, fanatical — but it’s very different from the Anglo-American tradition. It doesn’t cater to the audience in the same way.

**VH:** Do you ever give your opinion on a production? Do you ever try to have them change anything?

**YR:** If I do contribute, I’ll do so early on in the process. [Most] of the time, I’m not involved at all. My plays get performed all over the world. Sometimes for important new productions in significant theaters, I’ll look into it — I’ll check the translation, who’s directing, who the actors are. If it’s in London or Berlin or Paris, certainly I’ll pay attention. Occasionally a director might invite me to watch a rehearsal. That’s rare. More often it’s a reading, and I say what I have to say, and then it’s a surprise. It’s not a good idea to intervene — you have to let it be.

**VH:** You’re one of the only French writers who’s known in the U.S. One might say you represent a certain idea of France. Having lived in New York for a long time myself, I hear it a lot, too — that I’m very French. Do you have any idea what it might mean?

**YR:** I think it probably has a lot to do with fashion. I remember when I was first published in the English-speaking world, when ‘Art’ came out in England. I gave an interview, and, in the middle of it, I fixed my lipstick. And the journalist — a woman — stared at me, completely mesmerized, and said with utter befuddlement, “You’re putting on lipstick?” And I said, “Yes, why not?” And I saw her write it down, and look at me and say, “That’s so French!” Then I realized that a woman writer had to be … dressed in a shapeless rag, with graying hair, and that to reapply lipstick in the middle of an interview — especially since I was quite young at the time — didn’t conform at all to the image of a serious author. And this hasn’t always been good to me — I’ve had to wrestle with that image quite a bit.

**VH:** A dear friend of mine — French, also — told me she put on lipstick every time she had to make an important phone call.

**YR:** I understand that very well. It makes perfect sense. So logical!
The Artworks Behind ‘Art’

Playwright Yasmina Reza chose a fictional artist named Antrios as the creator of the controversial painting that divides Marc and his friend Serge. However, the painting references the work of real-life painters, notably American painters Robert Ryman and Robert Rauschenberg.

**ROBERT RYMAN (1930–2019)**

“I don’t think of myself as making white paintings,” Ryman said. “I make paintings; I’m a painter. White paint is my medium.” This statement conveys the radical practice that the artist began in the mid-1960s — one that narrowed the focus of his work to white paint alone. In *Twin* (1966), the surface of the canvas is covered in tightly tiered rows of white brushstrokes pulled in one motion across an unprimed canvas. Its scale required the use of a specially made 12-inch brush and thinned paint so Ryman could complete each horizontal stroke without interruption.

**ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG (1925–2008)**

The ever-irreverent Rauschenberg created a series called *White Painting* (1951) with house paint and rollers. They had completely flat surfaces devoid of any human touch as a joke about the artistic merits of Ryman and his ilk.

Rauschenberg also attracted a flurry of attention with another off-white response to an older artist with his *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953). He spent a month erasing an ink-and-crayon drawing by Willem de Kooning, a much-revered artist of the day, and displayed the empty sheet as a work of his own. Interestingly, controversy arose not from this act of “vandalism” to de Kooning’s work but from a surprised de Kooning’s hurt feelings that the final piece was publicly exhibited rather than kept as a personal keepsake.
“The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.”

- John Berger, Ways of Seeing

In the Eye of the Beholder

Selected by Dramaturg Elissa Adams, this excerpt from The Plays of Yasmina Reza on the English and American Stage by Amanda Giguere explores how ‘Art’ came to be and uses Reza’s own words to illuminate the play’s core themes of friendship, identity and conflict.
[Yasmina] Reza’s three-actor comedy ‘Art’, her most well-known play, made her an internationally recognized playwright. She is currently one of the few living French playwrights with a global reputation, and ‘Art’ reminded the world that there was more to French theater than Molière and Corneille. The enormously successful ‘Art’ came out of an unlikely situation: It was written in six weeks to distract her from her father’s death, and she believed the play was dreadful — “not worthy of me or of him.” … Beneath the slick veneer of ‘Art’, Reza challenges the notion of a single, cohesive narrative through her fractured storytelling techniques, and these new techniques mark the start of a new phase of her theatrical poetics.

The premise of ‘Art’ is simple: A man buys an expensive, white painting by a famous artist, and his two friends react to the purchase in very different ways. The quotation marks surrounding the title, coupled with the splintered way in which the narrative is constructed, suggest that, despite its title, the play is not actually about art. More than anything, the play’s structure and theme raise questions about friendship. In an interview about the play, Reza said, “Friendship is at least as strong and as difficult as love. We are used to thinking that it is easier to be a friend than a lover, but that is not so.”

The play tackles a crisis between friends who realize they do not know each other as well as they imagined, which prompts a struggle for power. Reza astutely observed, “In friendship, sometimes the relationship is not equal. And you don’t even know it.” The purchase of a painting is the inciting incident in the play, but art has little to do with the action in ‘Art’. The characters do not fight over their aesthetic taste, but about something far deeper: who they are, what they value and how well they know each other. They find that, although they act independently, they are intrinsically connected, and their actions affect each other in serious and psychic ways. The alternating narrators in the play draw focus away from the controversial painting and ask the audience to ruminate on the conflicting narratives set forth by the three characters. …

‘Art’ was inspired by an actual event in which Reza’s friend, Serge, to whom she dedicated the play, and after whom she named his fictional counterpart, bought a white painting. When Reza found out how much her friend had paid for it, she was shocked. They didn’t fight about it, but she was intrigued by the idea that two friends could have such differing notions of value.

‘Art’ is Reza’s first play (and her only play to date) to feature an all-male cast. She abandons the gender balance of her early work for a play dominated by men. The women mentioned in ‘Art’ (Serge’s ex-wife, Marc’s girlfriend, Yvan’s fiancee, mother and stepmother) only appear through the male character’s words. These women are talked about but never seen. Reza told a reporter that she had grown accustomed to spending time with men who talked so much that they often forgot she was in the room. With ‘Art’, Reza extracted the women from the situation and left the men to battle out their feelings. The fact that Reza wrote an exclusively male play supports the idea that she was attempting to create a tightly focused world, but perhaps her male-dominated play afforded her more success on the commercial stages of Paris (and later London and New York) than if this play had been about three women. Plays about women could be interpreted as feminist, whereas plays about men could be read as universal parables. Reza told June Ducas from London’s The Times that the roles in ‘Art’ could not be played by women: “Women are more curious, inquisitive beings. After years of camaraderie, they would be completely au fait with each other’s foibles.”

This excerpt is from The Plays of Yasmina Reza on the English and American Stage ©2010 by Amanda Giguere and has been reprinted with the permission of McFarland & Company, Inc., Box 611, Jefferson, North Carolina, 28640, www.mcfarlandbooks.com. It has been edited for style.
For Further Reading and Understanding

WORKS BY YASMINA REZA


God of Carnage (play) by Yasmina Reza, translated by Christopher Hampton. Faber, 2008.


ABOUT YASMINA REZA’S WORK


ABOUT CONTEMPORARY ART


MEDIA
