

A funny debate about art - and friendship

By Howard Shapiro
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Serge, recently taken with modern art, stands bursting with pride by his new acquisition - a canvas that is all white.

Well, he sees color in it, sort of. "It's *not* white!" he protests. "It has a white *background!*" This essentially blank canvas is Serge's treasure, literally. It cost him 200,000 francs.



The players : (from left) James Michael Reilly as Serge, proud owner of an all-white painting; Pete Pryor as wishy-washy Yvan; Stephen Patrick Martin as Marc, who hates the painting.

That's the plot of *Art*, being given a fresh, animated and thoroughly funny revival by the Delaware Theatre Company. Like Yasmina Reza's play, which won the Tony 10 years ago, the production is a tight, and tightly wound, piece of theater. The blank canvas - or art in general - is really the catalyst for a deeper plot. The concepts of taste and the dynamics of buddies are what *Art*'s really about.

How do you react when you think a friend has done something absurd? When you can appreciate the absurdity but not the idea behind it? You could call the canvas sheer garbage, as does Marc, who takes smug offense at Serge's purchase because his friend is losing "every ounce of discernment through sheer snobbery."

Or like another buddy, Yvan, perhaps you're confounded by the purchase, not sure whether you should try to quietly understand the painting (while you're with Serge) or ridicule it with your silence (while you're with Marc). "If it makes him happy, he can afford it," Yvan decides - an impassivity neither Marc nor Serge accepts.

And so a 15-year bond among the three men begins to unravel in a play that examines friendship with brutal frankness and feverish repartee. David Stradley, the director, stages it without an ounce of fat; the production marches steadily toward its conclusion, on Beowulf Boritt's monochrome set of Spartan elegance.

Stephen Patrick Martin, who works primarily on stages in the Baltimore-Washington region, is insufferably self-righteous as Marc, who hates the painting. His character is far sharper in tone than my memory of Alan Alda's rendition in the Broadway production. In giving us the extreme, Martin also forces us to think about the whole range of arguments he could be making.

Veteran Philadelphia actor Pete Pryor is the soft-spined Yvan, always trying to mollify and never really willing to side. He has an extended monologue that has become *Art*'s most memorable piece of writing and that deals more with establishing character (or lack of it) than with advancing the plot. Pryor performs it, and the role, with brio.

Serge, adoring his painting, is James Michael Reilly, whose assertive expression makes this exploration of taste all the more fun. You may not see why he likes what he likes, but you know he has no doubts.

As I recounted *Art*'s plot to two first-year Villanova law students last weekend, one began musing on the foolishness of people who make a big hullabaloo about, say, a little blue dot. "Wait!" the other interrupted. "An artist can see meaning that other people might also find."

And *Art* was off to the races for a younger generation, at my dinner table.

Art

Written by Yasmina Reza, translated from the French by Christopher Hampton, directed by David Stradley. Set by Beowulf Boritt, costumes by Charlotte Cloe Fox Wind, lighting by Joshua Schulman, sound by Mark Valenzuela. Produced by Delaware Theatre Company.

The cast: Stephen Patrick Martin (Marc), Pete Pryor (Yvan), James Michael Reilly (Serge).

Playing at the Delaware Theatre Company, 200 Water St., Wilmington, through Feb. 10. Tickets: \$31-\$49. Information: 302-594-1100 or www.delawaretheatre.org.