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## The 'Art' of friendship and relationship

By Robert W. Bethune

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Yasmina Reza wrote a play called "Art," now in performance at Williamston Theatre, but don't let the title send you astray. She is writing about friendship and relationship, not art, even though the bone of contention in the play is a four-by-five white-on-white color-field painting worth two hundred thousand dollars.

The play is about three men: Serge, the man who bought the painting, and two of his friends, Marc and Yvan. Serge is the kind of person who can get so excited about a work of art that he spends far more on it than he can truly afford. Yvan is a very ordinary man, a man with no particular distinction or achievement in life, and a very emotional person, much henpecked by quite a few more women than he can possibly deal with. Serge buys this painting, and Marc can't stand it, and from there things go on, rather in the manner of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," until all three sides of the relationship have been stripped bare and run ragged far past what any friendship can be expected to endure.

Marc drives the play. The highly intellectual sort, he would be very much at home anywhere where intellectual exchange is a blood sport. What's his problem? He can't accept that the kind of person he values as his friend is also the kind of person who would pay two hundred grand for a white-on-white color-field painting. Expecting him to accept that there is anything in art or in life that might violate his carefully preconceived, completely egoistic and distinctly fanatical opinions would be like expecting a fish to breathe air.

The play is brilliantly performed. Tony Caselli and the cast (Bruce Bennett as Yvan, Paul Hopper as Serge, John Lepard as Marc) have refined every moment of the play, physically and vocally, to a delightful level of precision and timing. There's a great deal of humor in the play. The characters don't know that, but we certainly do, and every bit of it is delivered with marvelous clarity.

By the way, it is quite intriguing to see what people will laugh at in a play like this. Some of the lines in the play that got the biggest laughs are some of the cruelest and most bitter things you'll ever hear one human being inflict on another.

Williamston's small stage does not give any great scope for set design, but within those limits Kirk Domer's set captures the artsy feel of Serge's place with clever minimalism in white, black and dark wood.

The play itself does not quite overcome the major challenge it faces. About three-quarters of the way through, despite the best efforts of the excellent cast, I started thinking, "Haven't I heard this before?" Once the major issues have been aired, the characters have a tendency to do what people do in real life - to say it all over again. Fortunately, by the time that sets in, we are almost done, and there is still more good stuff to come.

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REVIEW:

'Art'

*Williamston Theatre, 122 South Putnam, Williamston. Thu.-Sun., through Feb. 17. Tickets: \$18-\$24. For information: 517-655-7469 or [www.williamstontheatre.org](http://www.williamstontheatre.org)*

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