

theater

PROSCENIUM

BY DALT WONK

High Art

There seem to be two kinds of plays. One kind of play has much in common with the movies. *Morning's at Seven* (which recently received a sterling revival by Keith Briggs at Rivertown Rep) could easily be filmed on a sound stage. All it needs are a few extra locations to satisfy the camera's restless eye. Shakespeare uses a different approach to achieve the same basic aim. His plots are episodic; jumping in location and in time, they move forward cinematically (or, films move forward "Shakespeareanly"). Of course, there are a host of modern plays written with this narrative thrust.

The other kind of play is more quintessentially "of the stage." It wholeheartedly accepts the smallness of theater and the poverty of means at theater's disposal. It achieves its triumph by a sort of abnegation.

This type of theater usually doesn't sound very "sexy." A few years ago, I dragged myself, "snail-like, unwillingly" to Perry Martin's production of *A Walk in the Woods*, a play that promised a series of encounters between a Russian and an American diplomat during breaks in a disarmament conference in Switzerland. Talk about "unsexy." And yet, the show was fabulous! Delicate, funny, touching, truthful.

Art, currently on the boards at Le Petit, sounds even "unsexier" than *A Walk in the*

Woods. But in the hands of three veteran performers and under Shelley Poncy's assured direction, this deft little comic set-to is a total delight.

I suppose most people already know the premise. Serge, Marc and Ivan, three middle-age, middle-class Parisian men, have been close friends for more than 15 years. One day, Serge (Bert Pigg) buys a piece of modern art, a white-on-white painting by a successful contemporary artist for a whopping 200,000 francs. Serge is "hip." The furniture in his apartment has an expensive, design-conscious look. He dresses in black, naturally, for he is a natty upscale soldier of the avant-garde (which is, of course, newspeak for the artistic establishment). He is devastatingly articulate — a man, as he says, "of his times."

Marc (Paul Schierhorn) is, in all ways, the antithesis of Serge. To him, the white-on-white is obviously and self-evidently a fraud. "This painting," he exclaims on first viewing, "is shit!" For Marc, purchasing this canvas (and adopting the vocabulary that justifies it) amounts to a personal betrayal.

Marc runs off to discuss the ominous event with the third buddy, Ivan (Russell Hodgkinson), the ne'er-do-well of the group. At present, he is working as a salesman for wholesale office supplies in the firm of his future father-in-law. Ivan is much obsessed with his upcoming marriage, especially with



Paul Schierhorn, Bert Pigg and Russell Hodgkinson infuse an ensemble spirit that is crucial to the success of Shelley Poncy's version of *Art* at Le Petit.

the protocol of the celebration — an emotional minefield of maternal belligerence. A neutral in the culture wars, Ivan gets blasted for his refusal to take a stand.

There is really no way to give a sense of how much fun this all is. The script is elegant and witty and, despite its high-flown theme, it is utterly unpretentious. The same may be said for the acting. Schierhorn, Hodgkinson and Pigg, with a superb sense of timing and clear, believable characterizations, capture the silliness and the significance of this clash of opinions and the crisis of friendship it ignites.

The roles of the three men are equally important, and the secret to the success of the show is the fine ensemble spirit of the cast. But it is impossible not to pause a moment to remark on a hilarious set piece: Ivan's breathless tirade on the prenuptial gauntlet of mothers and stepmothers he is forced to run.

Art was written by Yasmina Reza, and it's French down to its bones — not the least in its portrayal of civilized discourse. Americans seem to fear that they are verbally responsible

for the well-being of their interlocutors — as though their sense of self is so fragile a direct contradiction might cause some sort of post-traumatic stress. The French do not suffer from this exaggerated need to be "nice." In France, you can sit at a dinner table

where peremptory and opposed views are lobbed like fragmentation grenades. Afterward, no one seems the least bit ruffled. One feels an amiable rough-and-tumble of this sort is taken for granted by Marc, Ivan and Serge.

But, when the white-on-white painting is introduced, the rough-and-tumble risks destroy the bond that has held them together for so long. What is at stake is not a theory of aesthetics, but the nature of friendship. Like her illustrious predecessor Marivaux, a French theatrical miniaturist from the 18th century, Reza handles her serious theme with a light and entertaining touch. ☺

■ Art

■ Directed by Shelley Poncy

■ Starring Bert Pigg, Paul Schierhorn

■ 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, Nov. 23-24;
2 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 25

■ Le Petit Theatre du Vieux Carré,
616 St. Peter St., 522-9958