Show Report

Altrincham Little Theatre

Art

17 November 2026

Altrincham Little Theatre

Art

SHOW REPORT

– 2026-27 Season –

Northern Stage Awards

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PRODUCTION INFORMATION

PRODUCTION	Art
SOCIETY	Altrincham Little Theatre
VENUE	Altrincham Little Theatre
GENRE	Drama
CAST SIZE	3
DIRECTOR	Lisa Barker
STAGE DIRECTOR	John Newman
STAGE MANAGER	Martin Carrick
PROPERTIES	Martin Carrick & Altrincham Little Theatre
CONTINUITY	Josie Stenhouse
COSTUMES	Altrincham Little Theatre & Cast Members
SOUND DESIGN	Jan Taylor
LIGHTING DESIGN	Jan Taylor & Lisa Barker
LIGHTING/SOUND OPERATOR	Amy Auterska
SET DESIGN	John Newman & Lisa Barker
SET BUILT	Under supervision of Stage Director, John Newman by: Paul Blackwell, Martin Carrick, Don Hines, John Howe, Andy Peate & Alan Reidsma
ASSISTED BY	Lisa Barker, Pauline Glover & Stephen Glover

CAST LIST

Serge	John Westbrook
Mark	Richard Sails
Yvan	Ian Fensome

DATE OF PERFORMANCE	Tuesday 17th November 2026
DATE REPORT PUBLISHED	Thursday 19th November 2026
ADJUDICATOR ID	NSA0003

NSA LOGO ON POSTER	Yes
NSA IN PROGRAMME	Logo Only, No Banner
PROGRAMME CLASS	Best Essential Information

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THE REVIEW

REVIEW WORD COUNT	1894
STRONGEST ELEMENTS	**A Picture of Perfect Chemistry**

- **John Westbrook**, **Richard Sails** and **Ian Fensome** delivered a wonderfully believable friendship, with natural chemistry, sharp comic timing and engaging performances that brought both the humour and tensions of *Art* to life.

The Art of Simplicity

- The understated staging, clever rotating panels and considered lighting design created a cohesive visual experience, proving that less really can be more.

Confident Creative Direction

- **Lisa Barker**'s thoughtful direction successfully balanced comedy and conflict, with an effective two-act structure that maintained the play's momentum and kept the audience engaged throughout.

As we creep ever closer to the festive season, the temperatures are dropping and the winter chill is certainly making itself known. However, any chilly weather was quickly forgotten as we received the warmest of welcomes at **Altrincham Little Theatre** for their production of ***Art***.

Chairman **Steve Smith** and his wonderful Front of House team greeted my guest and me like old friends, immediately making us feel at home. Before the performance began, Steve addressed the audience, sharing an update on the society's activities and developments since our last visit. It was a lovely personal touch and a reminder of the sense of community that sits at the heart of amateur theatre.

I must confess that *Art*, written by Yasmina Reza, was a play I knew little about, so I arrived with no real expectations of what the evening might hold. The story centres around three long-standing friends, Serge, Marc and Yvan, whose friendship is tested when Serge purchases an eye-wateringly expensive painting that appears to be little more than a white canvas. What begins as a disagreement over artistic taste quickly spirals into a sharp, witty, and often brutally honest exploration of friendship, loyalty, pride, and the fragility of human relationships.

Who would have thought that a seemingly blank canvas could reveal quite so much?

The staging, managed by **Martin Carrick**, featured an understated set designed by **John Newman** and **Lisa Barker**, with construction support from **Paul Blackwell**, **Martin Carrick**, **Don**

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Hines, **John Howe**, **Andy Peate**, **Alan Reidsma**, **Pauline Glover**, and **Stephen Glover**. The bright white walls created an almost gallery-like environment, immediately establishing a visual connection to the play's central theme. With just four chairs and a white desk positioned upstage left, the space was used intelligently, keeping the focus firmly on the dialogue and developing tensions between the characters. A corridor at the rear provided the sole entrance and exit point, leaving a generous playing area for the performers.

A particularly successful feature was the use of rotating wall panels, which revealed different pieces of artwork to distinguish between the friends' flats. This was an imaginative and practical solution that communicated changes while allowing the space to remain relatively bare, trusting the script and performers to command the audience's attention. Personally, I felt that a couple of carefully selected sculptures or decorative pieces might have further enhanced the gallery atmosphere or distinguished the individual apartments. Nevertheless, the restrained approach was clearly intentional and proved effective in supporting the storytelling.

Lighting, designed by **Jan Taylor** and **Lisa Barker**, with operation credited to **Jan Taylor** and **Amy Auterska**. The bright whitewash complemented the set beautifully, maintaining the contemporary gallery atmosphere whilst ensuring the performers' expressions and reactions remained clearly visible. This was particularly important in a dialogue-driven production where a raised eyebrow or fleeting expression could communicate just as much as the spoken word.

The use of isolated spotlights during the characters' direct addresses to the audience was particularly effective. These created a clear distinction between the conversations unfolding on stage and the characters' private thoughts, as though time had momentarily stood still. This allowed us to gain an insight into their individual frustrations and insecurities, adding another dimension to the storytelling. I also appreciated the coloured lighting around the rear stage entrance, which corresponded with each character's signature colour. Against the otherwise neutral setting, these accents provided a subtle but effective visual connection to the individuals at the centre of the story.

Sound, again designed by **Jan Taylor**, with operation credited to **Jan Taylor** and **Amy Auterska**. We were also pleased to learn that **Remi Robinson** had recently joined the technical team and was training in both sound and lighting, taking responsibility for operating the sound during this performance. It is always encouraging to see societies nurturing new technical talent and providing opportunities to gain practical experience. The traditional French music used during scene transitions was a particularly enjoyable choice. Its distinctly Parisian café-style quality complemented the play's French origins whilst providing a natural pause between scenes. These interludes helped punctuate the action and gave the audience a moment to absorb the preceding exchanges before the next confrontation unfolded.

Costumes, sourced by both the Society and the cast themselves, were contemporary and understated, complementing the production's naturalistic approach whilst allowing unrestricted movement. The incorporation of each character's signature colour created a pleasing connection with the lighting design, demonstrating a cohesive approach to the overall aesthetic.

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With only three performers carrying the entire production, the success of *Art* rests heavily upon their ability to sustain the audience's attention and establish believable relationships. I am pleased to say that all three rose to this challenge.

John Westbrook delivered a thoughtful and measured performance as Serge, adopting a noticeably softer tone than his fellow cast members. His dialogue was clear and conversational, establishing Serge as a comparatively composed presence within the increasingly turbulent friendship.

This restraint proved particularly effective during moments of frustration, as the contrast between his usual gentle demeanour and more aggravated outbursts gave them greater dramatic impact. Westbrook also demonstrated good comic timing, allowing the humour to emerge naturally through his delivery and reactions rather than forcing the comedy. His performance provided an effective counterbalance to the stronger personalities around him.

Richard Sails delivered what I felt was the strongest performance of the trio as Marc, demonstrating a confident command of both the dialogue and the character's increasingly outspoken opinions. His warm, expressive vocal tone and natural storytelling ability made his delivery particularly engaging, allowing the audience to follow Marc's thought processes even as his frustration with Serge intensified. His comic timing was a particular strength, especially in his handling of Marc's sarcastic observations and incredulous responses. Rather than relying solely on the punchlines, Sails made effective use of pauses and changes in vocal emphasis to highlight the absurdity of the situation. I particularly enjoyed his facial expressions, which frequently spoke volumes without the need for dialogue. His looks of disbelief and barely concealed irritation often communicated Marc's judgement before he had even spoken, adding another layer to the comedy. What impressed me most was his ability to make Marc's bluntness entertaining without losing sight of the genuine frustration beneath it. Although the character could easily become overbearing or unsympathetic, Sails maintained an engaging presence, ensuring that his increasingly confrontational behaviour remained rooted in his emotional investment in the friendship.

Ian Fensome delivered an equally engaging and endearing performance as Yvan; the reluctant peacekeeper caught between his two increasingly argumentative friends. His clear diction and slightly bumbling manner captured Yvan's nervous energy and eagerness to avoid conflict, making him a particularly likeable character. One of Fensome's greatest strengths was his confidence in allowing silences to develop. Rather than rushing through moments of uncertainty, he used pauses to communicate Yvan's hesitation as he considered how best to respond without offending either friend. These moments gave his performance a natural rhythm and allowed the humour to emerge from the character's predicament. A particular highlight was his lengthy, fast-paced monologue concerning the increasingly complicated arrangements surrounding his wedding invitations. This was a demanding passage, requiring sustained concentration, precise articulation, and careful control of pace. Fensome managed it with impressive energy, maintaining the frantic momentum without sacrificing clarity. The contrast between his usual hesitant manner and this sudden torrent of exasperation was

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especially entertaining, making it one of his most memorable moments. Fensome successfully balanced Yvan's desire to keep the peace with his own mounting frustrations, ensuring that he remained an active presence within the trio rather than simply becoming the mediator of their arguments.

As an ensemble, Westbrook, Sails and Fensome worked extremely well together, demonstrating a convincing chemistry that brought a genuine sense of verisimilitude to their long-standing friendship. There was a natural familiarity in their interactions, with the teasing, bickering and increasingly intense arguments feeling like the culmination of years of shared history rather than simply three actors delivering scripted disagreements.

The trio demonstrated a strong awareness of one another's timing, allowing conversations to flow naturally whilst giving space for reactions, interruptions, and uncomfortable silences. Their contrasting performance styles complemented one another, and even during the more confrontational exchanges, they maintained that underlying sense of friendship which made the developing conflict so compelling. There were occasional prompts from the side of the stage, although these were infrequent and caused little disruption to the performance. Given the considerable volume of dialogue shared between just three actors, their overall command of the script was impressive, and they recovered confidently whenever assistance was needed.

All three performers also made effective use of the generous playing area afforded by the sparse set. Their movement prevented this dialogue-heavy piece from becoming visually static, whilst their positioning and interactions helped communicate the shifting dynamics between the friends.

The audience was laughing from the moment the curtain opened, a testament to the performers' comic timing and engaging delivery. From sharp verbal exchanges to subtle physical reactions, the humour landed consistently, creating a lively and appreciative atmosphere throughout.

Director **Lisa Barker** demonstrated a clear and confident vision for *Art*, successfully balancing the play's sharp comedy with the emotional tensions beneath its seemingly trivial disagreements. Her direction allowed the performers' contrasting personalities to flourish whilst maintaining the underlying sense of friendship that gives the story its emotional weight.

One aspect I was particularly intrigued by was the decision to present the production in two acts. *Art* is traditionally performed as a one-act play, with its narrative unfolding through a continuous sequence of two-person conversations, direct addresses to the audience and exchanges between all three characters. I initially wondered whether introducing an interval might interrupt the momentum, particularly given how heavily the piece relies upon the gradual escalation of conflict. However, I am pleased to say that my concerns were unfounded. The first act concluded at a suitably dramatic moment, creating a genuine cliffhanger that left the audience eager to discover what would happen next. The second act then opened with a brief return to the preceding dialogue, cleverly re-establishing the situation before allowing the action to continue. What could easily have been an awkward division instead felt considered and purposeful. Barker maintained the play's momentum whilst accommodating the

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practicalities of a two-act performance, demonstrating confidence in both the material and her interpretation of it.

Overall, Altrincham Little Theatre delivered a thoroughly enjoyable and accomplished production of *Art*, proving that you do not need an elaborate set, a large cast or theatrical spectacle to create an engaging evening of theatre. The strength of the production lay in its understanding of the relationships at the heart of the story. Under Barker's assured direction, the cast successfully navigated the delicate balance between comedy and conflict, supported by thoughtful technical choices and a cohesive creative vision. Having arrived knowing little about *Art*, I left with a genuine appreciation for the cleverness of the writing and the skill required to bring such a dialogue-driven piece to the stage.

My sincere thanks go to Chairman Steve Smith, the Front of House team and everyone at Altrincham Little Theatre for their exceptionally warm hospitality. Congratulations to Lisa Barker, the cast, crew, and wider society on a successful production. I look forward to seeing what you have in store for us next.

And as for that white painting? Well, I suppose beauty really is in the eye of the beholder!

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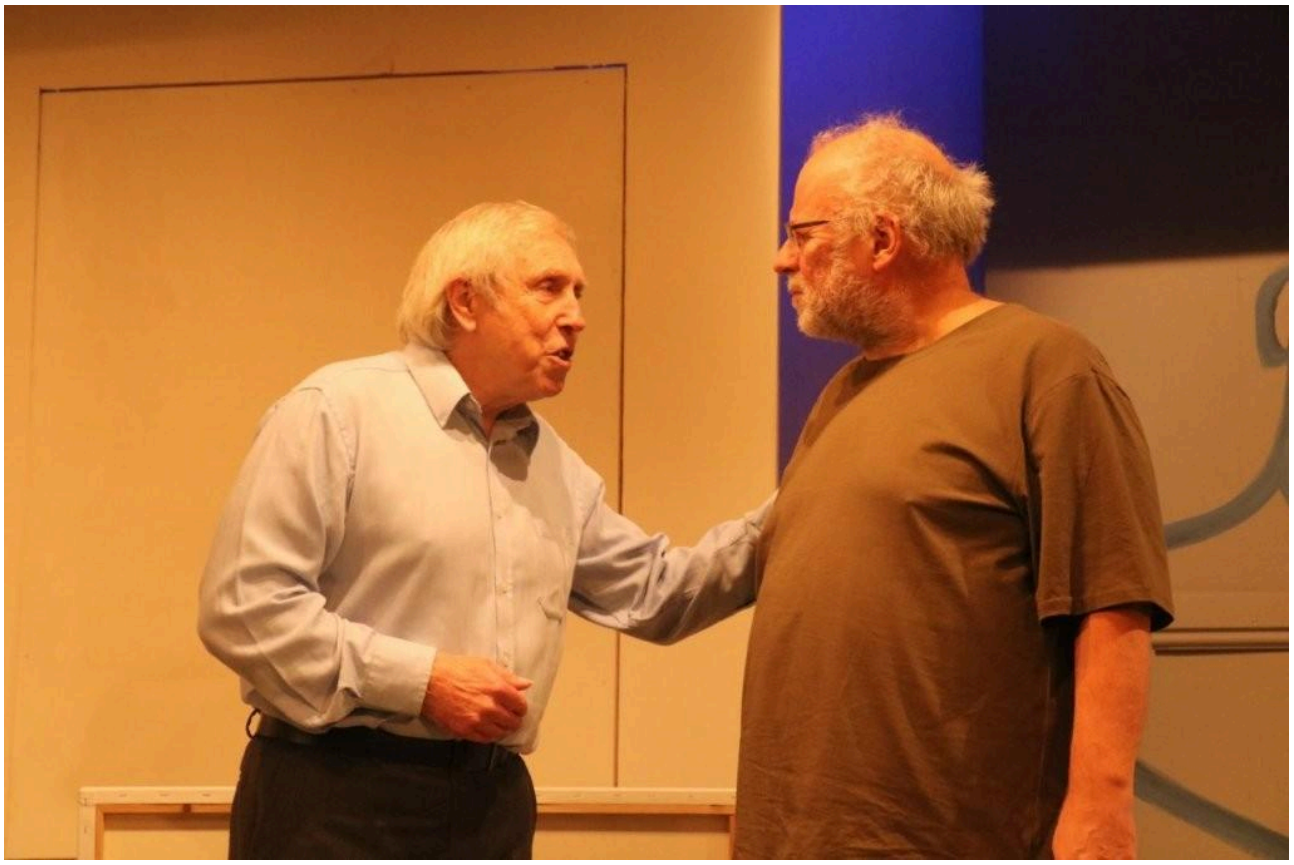

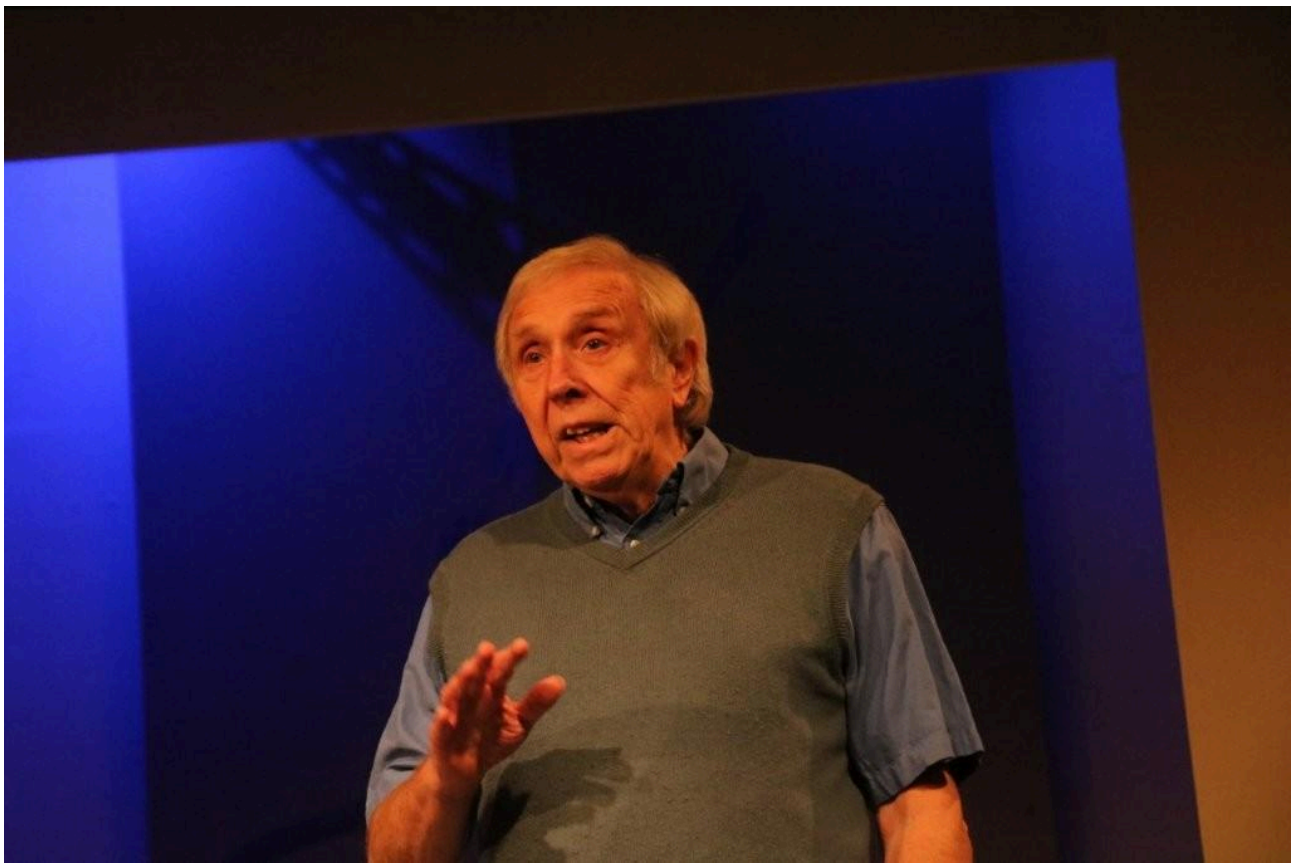

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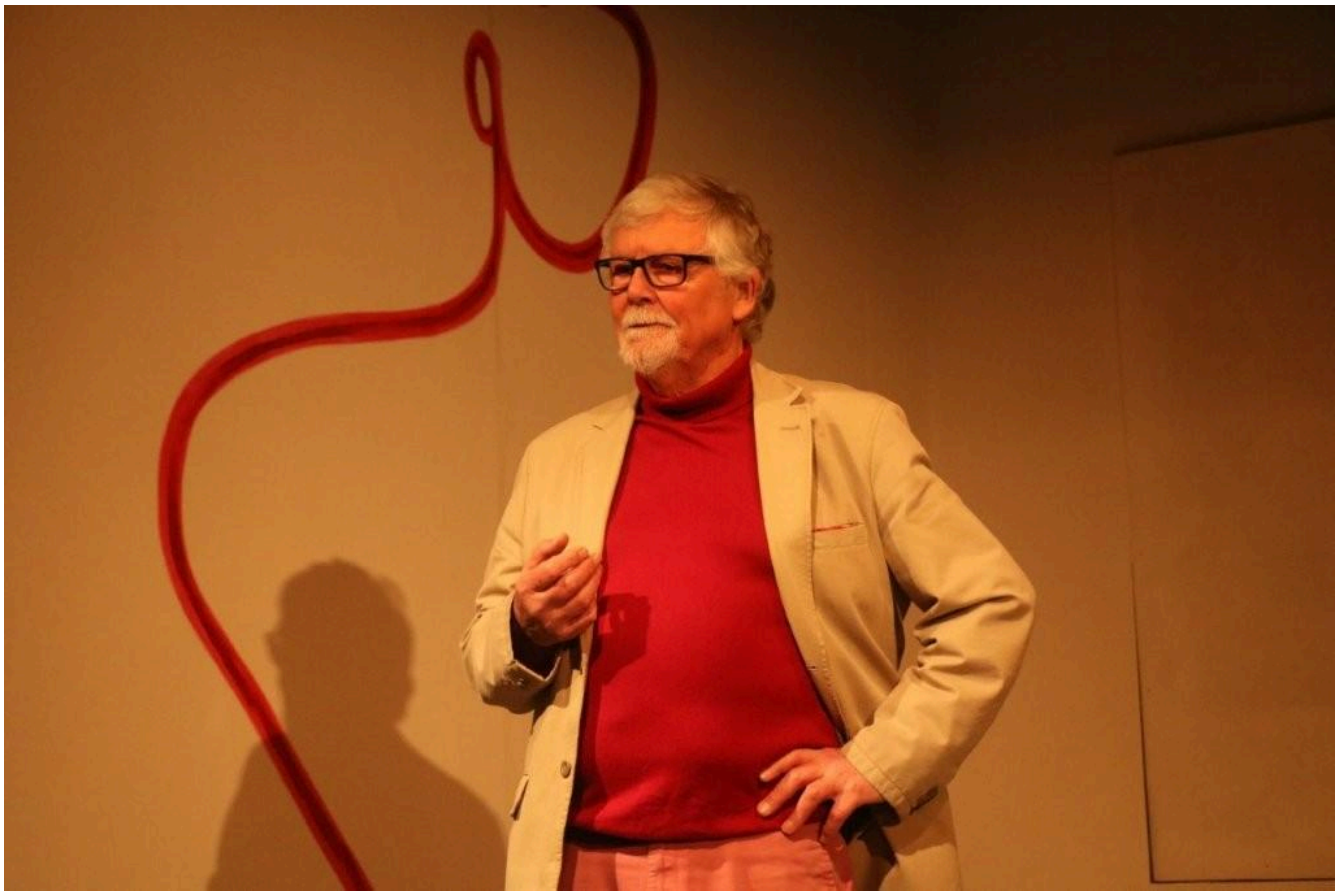



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PROGRAMME



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