

BIOGRAPHY (EBSCO)

Yasmina Reza is a prominent French playwright, actress, and novelist, renowned for her insightful and often humorous explorations of human relationships and societal issues. Born into a culturally rich family with a Hungarian violinist mother and a Persian Jewish businessman father, Reza's diverse background informs her dynamic works. She began her career in the theater as an actor but soon transitioned to writing, achieving significant acclaim with her first play, "Conversations après un enterrement," which earned the 1987 Molière Award.

Yasmina Reza began her drama career as an actor on the French stage, where she explored the works of Marivaux and Molière. Her mother was a Hungarian violinist, and her father was a Moscow-born Persian Jewish businessman. Her cultured childhood and exotic family history provided Reza with a foundation from which to draw autobiographical sketches of family and artistic conflict.

Reza studied sociology at the University of Paris X Nanterre (now Paris West University Nanterre La Défense) and acting at L'École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq (the Jacques Lecoq International Theater School). Although she briefly worked as a stage actor, by the late 1980s, she had found that she was too impatient to succeed in the profession. Thus she wrote her first play, *Conversations après un enterrement* (*Conversations after a Burial*), in 1987. Its performance in France won her the 1987 Molière Award for best playwright, after which it was translated into several languages and performed across Europe.

Her subsequent work garnered similar acclaim. *La Traversée de l'hiver* (1989; *The Winter Crossing*), a play about three men and three women savoring the final moments of a summer retreat in the mountains, won the 1990 Molière Award for best fringe production. "Art" (1994), which premiered in Berlin before opening in Paris, won the 1995 Molière Awards for best playwright and best show in an independent theater. In 1995 *L'homme du hasard* (*The Unexpected Man*), a mature work about the spoken thoughts of a man and a woman seated opposite each other on a train, was produced in London and France. The Royal Shakespeare Company at the Barbican in London revived it in 1998 before transferring it to the West End for a highly successful run.

It was Reza's hit play "Art" that generated the most enthusiasm and controversy in the international arts and entertainment communities. An intelligent and comical exploration of the nature of male friendship and modern art, it pits three friends against one another when one of them, a dermatologist, buys an all-white modern painting for two hundred thousand francs, causing one friend to become

overtly critical and the other to straddle the fence. The concept was inspired by a real-life encounter when a close friend of Reza's bought a blank white canvas for an exorbitant price and proudly displayed it for her; her initial reaction was to laugh. (The two remained friends, and the owner of the painting loved the play.)

Critics in the art community accused Reza of misrepresenting contemporary art, attributing the disparaging arguments in "Art" to her own opinions. One critic, writing for the Guardian, even compared her to Nazis mocking "degenerate" modern art. (The play's English translator, Christopher Hampton, wrote a rebuttal article chiding the critic for conflating character with author and for seemingly missing the message of the final speech.) By contrast, the acting community happily embraced the play's dominant theme of male friendship. Scottish actor Sean Connery bought the Broadway rights to the play, and highly esteemed American stage actors Kevin Spacey, Al Pacino, and Robert De Niro sought roles in the American stage productions.

In both "Art" and *The Unexpected Man*, Reza's previous stage experience directed her writing toward fewer characters and shorter scripts, thus making these productions financially lower risk and highly profitable. Her penchant for the comedic repartee of "Art" made the play accessible to middle-class patrons who enjoy Neil Simon and Woody Allen, while the underlying serious social and cultural themes that filter through the wit satisfied the sophisticated theatergoers that usually seek the existential conflicts of a French or Russian play. (Even so, the British and American response to "Art", attributable in no small part to Hampton's witty translation, has long frustrated Reza, who views the play more as a tragedy than as a comedy.) This combination of philosophical argument, wry bourgeois sensibility, and theater savvy has inspired critics to place Reza among dramatists such as Nathalie Sarraute, Harold Pinter, and Arthur Schnitzler.

Critics are divided in their assessment of the long-term value of a tragicomedy such as "Art", as the tenuous premise of an expensive abstract painting is reminiscent for some of the thin consistency of a television situation comedy. Reza herself has acknowledged the attitude of the European intellectual sector that any artist who refuses to subscribe to an ideology as the basis for his or her work is often dismissed as reactionary. The comedic flow of "Art" lends itself particularly to the sensibility of an American audience that laughs easily while feeling sympathetic to the sad undertones of a friendship under the threat of destruction. The consistent success of Reza's skill with words and wit maintains her place firmly among the most popular playwrights of the United States and Europe.

BIOGRAPHY (Utah Shakespeare Festival, by Don Leavitt)

Yasmina Reza may have made her mark as an author and a playwright, but she is, first and foremost, an actor. Her plays have been described as acting showcases, displaying a real understanding of the relationship between actor and script. An entry on Reza in *The Complete Review* notes that, as an actress, she has an “ear for what works on stage. Her dialogue is often sharp. . . . Plays such as ‘Art’ . . . [rise] and [fall] with what the actors can do with their roles.” As a result, Reza’s plays resonate with actors, attracting some of the biggest names on Broadway and in Hollywood.

What draws stars from Sean Connery to Robert de Niro is the fact that Reza’s works are character-driven and focused on relationships, or the lack thereof, and the tensions that arise in the normal course of even the most mundane of human interactions. That focus on character also resonates with audiences: few plays have experienced the international success that ‘Art’ has; the Tony Award-winning play has been translated into more than thirty languages and continues to fill theatres around the world. Audience interest in ‘Art’ has carried over to Reza’s other plays as well, helping to make Yasmina Reza one of the most important figures in late-twentieth century theatre.

Yasmina Reza was born 1 May 1959 in Paris, the daughter of a Hungarian violinist and a successful businessman of Russian-Iranian descent. Reza was an intelligent child, and her father’s affluence allowed her parents to instill in their family a love for art in all its forms. “I grew up with wonderful parents in cultured and comfortable circumstances,” Reza has said. “My father never bought anything extravagant or expensive except art, when he had the means.”

Despite her mother’s musical influences, Reza’s artistic talents bent more toward the literary and theatrical. She studied theatre at University Paris X in Nanterre, and later pursued intensive actor’s training at Paris’s internationally renowned Jacques Lecoq Drama School. As a working actress in France, Reza won roles in contemporary and classic productions alike, and, in between rehearsals and performances, she began to write her own plays. “Early in my acting career I saw it was a life of waiting and dependence,” says Reza. “Writing I could do by myself, for myself.” She completed her first play, *Conversations after a Burial* in 1987 and was awarded the Moliere Award for Best Author, the French equivalent of the Tony.

Reza followed that early success with quite an ambitious endeavor: translating an adaptation of Franz Kafka’s novel *The Metamorphosis* for Roman Polanski. That work was rewarded in 1988 with a nomination for the Moliere Award for Best Translation. Thereafter, it seems, Reza could do no wrong. Her second play, *Winter Crossing*, premiered in 1990 and was awarded the Moliere Award for Best Fringe Production; her fourth play, *The Unexpected Man*, premiered in 1995 and was revived by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1998, for which it was nominated for the BBC Award for Best New

Play at the Laurence Olivier Theater Awards. More recently, Reza has written the critically acclaimed *Life X 3* (2000) and *A Spanish Play* (2004), both of which have been produced in theatres throughout Europe, North America, and Australia.

In addition to her plays, Reza has also written screenplays for films shown exclusively in Europe, and she is the author of three novels. But, despite her many varied accomplishments, it is still her third play that has garnered the most acclaim. Since its Paris debut in 1995, *'Art'* has been nothing less than a phenomenon: it is estimated that the play has earned more than \$300 million worldwide, and it has won numerous awards, including the Moliere Awards for Best Author, Best Play, and Best Production; the Laurence Olivier Award for Best Comedy in 1997; and the Tony Award for Best Play in 1998. It is with this play that Reza was launched to international stardom, and, while she appreciates the perks of success, Reza has said that she much prefers her time at home in France with her children: "I don't have any expensive furniture, or jewels, or a country house either. The only things I treasure are emotional—a book of drawings by my daughter. . . . My spirit is my only possession."

One thing common to all of Reza's plays is a wit that either not everyone gets, or that prompts people to mislabel her works as comedies. Reza adamantly maintains that her plays are not meant to be comedies, and she fears that her plays may not be taken seriously. In fact, it has been written that Reza believed the Paris premiere of *'Art'* was a disaster because she could hear the audience laughing. While this story is anecdotal, it is supported, at least in theme, by comments Reza has made elsewhere. "My plays are tragedy, funny tragedy," she told *Business Week* in 2001. "To me, *'Art'* is heartbreaking."

However, there is no denying that her works have largely been a success, and Reza does acknowledge that audiences and actors alike have embraced her writing, a talent that she says she falls back on when life isn't enough. "Writing helps me survive," she has said. "I don't write a lot, but I can write anywhere, on anything. It's a strength." Of her own writing, Reza has said it is not intelligent but may appear to be: "I write from my intuition, my sense of freedom, my feeling for words and rhythm. Sometimes from my heart, but not very much."

Did her experiences as an actress influence the way she writes for the stage? Reza says yes, but, unlike other people, Reza sees no real distinction between her acting and her writing. To her, they are simply parts of her that seemed to naturally mesh. "I don't feel writing is my profession," she has said. "I don't know what my profession is. I loved the theatre, and I loved words, so it was logical to write for theatre." That mutual passion for both talents has revealed an ability to write for actors in a way that makes it seem to each actor that the part he is playing was written specifically for him. The *Complete Review* notes that one of the fascinating aspects of *'Art'* is the fact that so many different sets of actors have successfully played these roles: "It is an odd sort of star-vehicle at which few seem to have failed."

Fabienne Pascaud, a writer for the French arts magazine *Telerama*, once wrote that famous actors dream of parts in Reza's plays because of her masterful use of silence. "[Reza] has a wonderful way with ellipsis, those rejoinders embroidered on the thread of the essential, apparently simplistic, but in which any great actor can hint at great depths through perfectly timed, almost musical silences." Reza agrees. "Most writers don't know that actors are never better than in the pauses or in the subtext. They give actors too many words," she has said. "In a play, words are parentheses to the silences. They're useful for the actors, but . . . they aren't the whole story."