

Syracuse Stage's "Red": A Powerful Evening of Theater

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By **Tony Curulla**

Set in a New York City artist's studio in the late 1950's, Syracuse Stage's taut production of John Logan's "Red", a bio-drama of contemporary painter Mark Rothko (1903-1970), is a 90-minute, two-character tour de force that questions not only the nature of art and artists, but the nature of the rest of us, as well.

Directed by Penny Metropulos (Stage's "Picasso at the Lapine Agile" and "Up"), "Red" features Joseph Graves in the role of Mark Rothko and Matthew Amendt as Ken, his young, but challenging assistant.

Rothko, a member of a new artistic movement in the early 1940's known as "Abstract Expressionists" or "The New York School", challenged conventional art with an emphasis on spontaneity and improvisation, utilizing bold colors and forms, often executed on large canvasses. Other famous (or infamous, depending on your artistic point-of-view) artists of this movement were Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) and Willem de Kooning (1904-1997), among others.

This one-act, chock full of meaty quotes about life as well as art, is book-ended, however, by the identical query at the beginning and end when Rothko asks his assistant, "What do you see?" It's as though the playwright is asking us, as well. Perhaps we didn't see as much the first time as we see some ninety minutes later.

So it is between the two questions that we witness these two characters argue, explore, rant, and bond as they deal with questions about art, but more importantly, about each other.

We learn, for instance, that the elder artist's only fear is that "one day the black will swallow the red". Rothko makes frequent reference to his mortality and his visceral feelings about the color black, and its role in his paintings. Yet, the necessity of it, like death, is unavoidable.

We learn part of Ken's tragic background when, upon gazing at a dried, red canvas, he reveals to Rothko the violent death of his parents. Revelations about both characters abound in the play and are brought to fruition by either references to colors or outright confrontations with the colors.

William Bloodgood's scenic design, dominated by several large, red canvasses, is a powerful visual statement. Its effect seems as though the paintings, like frozen tableaux, become portals from which the characters and their individual and common conflicts emerge. It is visually stunning as Thomas C. Hase's lighting design creates the varieties of mood and emotion throughout.

The plot is driven by a fictionalized account of Rothko's real commission for a large number of the canvasses to be hung in a famous New York City restaurant, The Four Seasons. This set-up gives rationale to the juxtaposition of the two characters' ensuing conflicts, in that Rothko hires Ken to assist in materials preparation, canvas stretching, clean-up and sundry duties, as well as painting the large numbers of mono-chromatic backgrounds prior to Rothko's actual painting.

Metropulos' casting and direction is spot-on with both performances being extremely powerful and balancing each other through the twists and turns of mood and phrase that Logan's poetic dialogue demands.

The characters, although different from one another in age, backgrounds and philosophies, emerge as changed individuals from having been with each other for the two-year period of the play, and seem to become an amalgam of each other, almost as if they have considered the repeated line, "You have been weighed in the balance, and you have been found wanting".

Such is the stuff of relevant, powerful theater.

Details: Length of Performance: 90 minutes, no intermission.

Attendance: About $\frac{3}{4}$ capacity on an SU Playoff night.

Family Guide: Mature themes and language. Not for young kids.

Syracuse Stage presents "Red", March 7-March 25, 2012, in Archbold Theater, 820 E. Genesee St., Syracuse. For tickets and information: 315.443.3275 and www.SyracuseStage.org