

Psychoanalysis at the Theatre

# RED

the life and art of  
Mark Rothko



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**RED**

***The life and art of Mark Rothko (1903-1970)***

**John Logan (1961-)**

Premiere: Donmar Warehouse,

London, 2009

John Golden Theatre, New York, 2010

2010 Tony award Best Play

Arena Stage, Washington DC, 2012

*Jill Savege Scharff*

John Logan got the idea for a play about Mark Rothko at the Tate Modern when he was profoundly moved by Rothko's "grand and brooding, mute and magnificent" Seagram murals. Almost overpowered by "the vibrant interplay of colors on the canvasses" he was inspired to put words to the

experience. He would create a relationship between Rothko and a young artist, connected by their immersion in art and engaged in work and conversation that would reflect the interplay of the colors and the seriousness of the magnificent paintings. It would be a dialogue between old and young, teacher and student, dark and light, father and son, black and red (Logan 2011). The result is RED, a “smart, eloquent entertainment” (The New Yorker, April 12, 2010), an “electrifying play of ideas” (Variety, April 1, 2010).

The brilliant and passionate Mark Rothko has hired a new assistant, Ken to help him create a definitive group of murals for an exclusive restaurant. As they stretch the canvas and nail it to the frame, apply the primer from buckets of paint, mixed from heated pigment powder, glue and secret ingredients, Rothko talks and Ken listens, at least at first. Rothko must deal with what this young man represents of himself and the people important to him in his life. Now that he is appreciated by the art world, Rothko is afraid that pop culture represented by art of Ken’s generation will diminish respect for his artistic vision. He is afraid of being corrupted by commercialism. Will his paintings be safe in a restaurant? Will his legacy survive? He feels old and frightened. He must confront his personal demons or be crushed by the ever-changing art world he helped create.

“What do you see?” Rothko asks his assistant, pointing to a large painting. “Be exact – but be sensitive.”

Ken answers, "Red."

Full of contempt for the young man's limited vision, Rothko harangues Ken about his likes and dislikes and his lack of education in literature and philosophy.

"How do they make you feel?" Rothko persists. This time Ken contemplates the painting. Rothko appreciates the effort put into receiving the image and sensing its impact.

Ken articulates his response: "Disquieted, thoughtful, sad."

Later Rothko asks him, "What is red?"

Ken speaks of the emotion of red at sunrise. Rothko is not satisfied.

Ken persists, "Sunrise is red and red is sunrise."

Rothko throws at him the many distinctions in shades of red as color, the endless associations to red as thing.

In Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, a treatise on mythology and culture that Rothko had read, Red is religion: Black is magic. For some of us red is passion, Valentine hearts, sexual desire, life blood. For others red is anger, fire, destruction, escaping blood from a wound, menstrual blood of non-

conception, bright blood of defloration. But within red, Rothko sees black. He finds it inescapable. Black may be melancholy, gloom, despair or emptiness. Black could bring forth feelings of sadness or relief from seeing and feeling too much. Red could bring out desire for or fury at a lover, the effect that it had on the couples visiting the red restaurant in Thornton Wilder's playlet *Flamingo Red: A Comedy in Danger*. Red says stop: Black says nothing. Black says mourning and depression: Red says mania. The black depression of the loss of each developmental stage as we progress through life towards death is cut by the red thread of vitality that runs through a life from childhood to old age. Red gives Rothko hope that life can be endurable, but his greatest fear is that: "One day the black will swallow the red."

### Rothko's story

What of Rothko's life? Born Jewish in Russia in 1903, speaking Russian and Yiddish, Rothko was nevertheless raised without religion until he was 5, when his father returned to Orthodox Judaism. In the play we learn the bare minimum – that his name as a boy was Marcus Rothkowitz, that these were frightening times in Russia where Cossacks were "cutting people up and tossing them into pits," that when he came to the United States he lived with his family in the ghetto in Portland, and that his art dealer changed his name to Mark Rothko for commercial reasons. Worried about conscription into the Czarist army, Rothko's father and brothers departed for the United States

leaving little Rothko with his mother. They sent for Rothko and his mother when he was 10. Tragically his father died soon after their reunion. Rothko entered third grade but soon progressed, as he became fluent in English. He graduated at age 17, got a scholarship to Yale, and dropped out in his second year to work but he continued to read Freud, Jung and Nietzsche and to study art. "Art is 10% paint and 90% thinking and waiting," he tells us. At first the style of painting he favored was representational and then it moved towards mythic abstractionism.

In 1932, Rothko married Edith Sachar, a poet and jewelry designer, but her economic success compared to his lack of artistic success led to problems. They separated in 1937, reconciled, and separated finally in 1943. Rothko suffered a long depression following their divorce, the same year that his mother Kate died. In 1940 he took a year off to read the writings of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* and Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. His style was now mythic abstractionism, moving toward surrealism. By 1946 the multiform paintings began to emerge. As he said of himself and Gottlieb, "We favor the simple expression of the complex thought. We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth" (Ross 1942).

By 1944 he had met his second wife, Mary Ellen "Mell" Beistle, who married him in the spring of 1945. They had two children, Katherine Lynn



(1950) and Christopher (1963). In 1949 he became fascinated by Matisse's The Red Studio. In the play he tells Ken about the powerful effect of this saturated red painting. The experience ushered in Rothko's late period of great large paintings with layers of color. Rothko believed that his paintings had their own form and potential for evoking an emotional and spiritual effect, meaning being irrelevant. He wanted us to grapple with his paintings but never to understand them. One had to stand before them and experience the rushing in and out of the layered color.

The art collecting world began at last to appreciate Rothko. In 1958, the Seagram mural commission began – a series of 40 red-brown paintings for the Four Seasons Restaurant in the Seagram building. But he turned against the elegant establishment and its diners who he assumed to be materialistic social predators totally unable to appreciate his paintings. He had imagined that his art could turn a restaurant into a temple for contemplation and communion, and in the cold light of day he realized that this was impossible. He reclaimed the paintings and put them into storage for years until special rooms were built resembling temples to receive them.

In 1968, Rothko received the diagnosis of an aortic aneurysm – a weakening and separation of the layers of tissue in the wall of the main blood vessel which can eventually burst under strain like a bubble in the sidewall of a tire than can blow out at any moment. So some moderation in his lifestyle

was recommended by his physician. Against medical advice, Rothko continued to drink and smoke heavily, and deep depression followed. In December of that year, Rothko saw a psychiatrist named Dr. Kline, the spelling of his name unlike that of the famous psychoanalyst Mrs. Klein, and his clinical practice even more different. Unlike Mrs. Klein who worked with her patients intensively to understand the black of the death drive, aggression, destructive abuse of self and others, and the red of futile manic reparation, Dr. Kline held that investigating the source of distress only made things worse, that a typical patient visit should be 15 minutes or less, and he prescribed medication alone. He treated Rothko's depression with Sinequan and Valium, which Rothko appreciated because it enabled him to work again. Rothko's physician, however, found him to be dazed and disturbed, possibly as a side-effect of the medication, and he knew that Sinequan could cause arrhythmia of the heart. He asked Rothko to stop the drugs, but Rothko continued to take them on the authority of Dr. Kline. The drugs may have saved his ability to work, but they did nothing to help his marriage or save his life. By 1969 Rothko's insecurity and impotence led to estrangement from Mell and they separated, Rothko moving into his studio. He dissolved in a fury of "titanic self-absorption." In 1970 his assistant found him dead in a pool of blood, an event we see symbolized and presaged in the play when the assistant finds Rothko dripping with red paint. Rothko had taken an overdose of his psychotropic medication and had slit his wrists. The black had

swallowed the red.

### **Rothko in the studio**

In RED, we see Rothko in his 60s working in his studio, a converted gymnasium at 222 Bowery in New York City. There is paint everywhere – on the canvas, in packets, in buckets, on brushes and on the floor and on his clothes. There are bottles of whisky, cigarettes, old coffee cans, tubes of glue, and many large paintings in stacks against the wall. Rothko is working on the Seagram commission for a “continuous narrative of murals” to hang on the walls of the Four Seasons restaurant in New York City. The Rothko we meet is the painter at work – demanding employer and temperamental genius, a narcissistic man, more intimate with brush and paint than with people, more concerned for the protection and companionship of his paintings than for his assistant. We immediately feel impressed by the sight of the great artist in his carefully lit work space, and we feel pushed away by his contemptuous dismissive attitude to his assistant, his competitors, and his patrons. The playwright focuses on Rothko, his attitude to art, and his fear of competition and death, and he tells us nothing about Rothko’s parents, his ex-wives, or his children.

We want to know all about Rothko, but it is as hard for us to connect to such a dismissive, brusque man at first, as it is for the eager young artist who

arrives to be his assistant. Rothko quickly establishes that he will not be a father to him. Why is Rothko so lacking in paternal affection? Perhaps it is because he lost his own father tragically at the age of 10, soon after being reunited with him upon immigrating to join him in the United States. Not only will he not be Ken's father, he will not be his confessor, certainly not his shrink, not even his teacher. He rejects that transference of affection before it can even occur, both in words and in his dismissive and verbally abusive behavior. He will be merely his employer and simply use him as his servant, with no wish for a personal relationship. Yet like an anxious father fearing his son's connection to the pulse of his generation, Rothko cuts Ken down to size, prods him to study and engages him in Socratic dialogue as a teacher might do, and, like a psychoanalyst, encourages him to talk about his childhood trauma.

No longer as vigorous as he once was, Rothko needs his healthy young assistant and at the same time hates being dependent on him. He uses him as his arms and legs to bring him food and clean up after him. He uses him as an object on which to vent his frustrations like a man who kicks the cat. Rothko manipulates his assistant's responses to support his confidence in himself, and then he erases him for doing so. Rothko hates his assistant because he is afraid of him as part of the Warhol generation of artists tearing away at the scaffolding of Rothko's identity as the greatest artist of his Century, much as he himself tears away at Picasso. He hates him for representing that part of

himself that is young and ambitious but insecure, a part of him that wants to be noticed, but that has been overlooked and insufficiently appreciated by the art world, yet young enough to still have hope. The young man is willing to work hard and lend the aging Rothko his vitality, but Rothko cannot express gratitude because that would mean acknowledging his own weakness and his own immense loss – loss of home country, birth tongue, early loss of his father, loss of his mother and his first wife in the same year, the more immediate loss of his second wife, and the loss of his physical and mental health.

### **Impact of the play**

When we see RED, the play, we see a canvas on which we will eventually experience the greatest artist of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. What do we see during the talking, thinking, and looking? We see the incubation of art alongside a tragic collision of sadism and masochism. What do we see as the artists, and the actors who become them, prime the canvas? Drawn by their mutual commitment to the work, they pull together across their differences. What they do in priming the canvas gives it the foundation that will hold the image and give it dimension. The white canvas will become not yet red, but brown, which has probably been made by adding black to red. We see two men mix the paint and vigorously attack the task, sloshing the paint-filled brush from bucket to canvas, racing to get the job done before the undercoat drips or

dries. It is tremendously exciting to watch, and immediately the viewer is drawn in and feels at one with the characters. As the Washington Post reviewer said, this is the highlight of the play, the moment of silent action and resolve that the words have been leading to. It is positively primal. It reminded me of a film I had seen of Jackson Pollock at work. Unlike Rothko, Pollock was working alone, he was painting not priming, and his canvas lay on the floor of his studio. But like Rothko he worked quickly, deftly, energetically. He moved or rather Samba-danced alongside the canvas dripping paint with each step just as in RED Rothko and his assistant reach, dodge, swirl and arc over and under each other in tune and in rhythm. Rothko claimed that his art was a religious experience as he painted, but in the play it seemed highly physical, sensual, its completion orgasmic. The priming of the canvas is the first step in creating layers of paint in colors that will radiate into and out of one another and create in the viewer a profound emotional and spiritual response of intimacy and awe.

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