



<< Oct 2018 >>

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31	1	2	3	4

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CATEGORY ARCHIVES: THEATER REVIEWS

RED

Posted on [October 8, 2018](#)



By Philip Pearce

SOMERSET MAUGHAM once said that the secret of writing a play was to decide what your point is and then stick to it ruthlessly. John Logan's *RED*, which opened last weekend at Santa Cruz Actors' Theatre, certainly meets that standard.

The subject is painting. The two characters involved are the twentieth century abstract expressionist Mark Rothko and an imaginary assistant named Ken. They stare at Rothko canvases, move around each other with the love-hate energy of Flamenco dancers, theorize, rage and reflect on why we are moved and changed by shapes and colors smeared onto a piece of stretched cloth. Wilma Marcus Chandler directs 90 minutes of visual and dramatic excitement that make you forget you're just watching two guys arguing in a Bowery attic.

Especially when they are guys as sharp and skilled as Martin Sampad Kachuck, fuming, funny, touching, explosively self absorbed as Rothko and Robert Gerbode as the questioning, quietly subversive Ken. Rothko has hired Ken to clean and straighten up, stretch canvases, apply undercoats ("It's not painting!") and fetch take-out meals. But Ken is a wanna-be painter himself, steeped in the seventies Andy Warhol soup can world outside and below Rothko's airtight and detached studio.

Kachuck is brilliantly comic as the established artist who Ken suggests spends more time portentously exploring the theory of paint than actually slapping it on canvas. Roaming the stage like a kind of rag-doll Groucho, Kachuck doesn't so much develop theories as inhabit them with expressive hand movements, rolling eyes and sudden skating rink scoots around the cluttered room.

He and his lackey cover a wide range of topics. What is the psychology of the color red? Of white? Of black? What happens when popularity turns an artist like Pollock from a painter into a product? When Rothko finally stops talking and he and Ken feverishly slap brushfuls of blood red paint onto a blank canvas they're accompanied by a classical waltz. But when Ken finds himself briefly alone and free of Rothko, the studio is flooded with Brubeck and Bird. It's a subtle but telling audio-visual expression of an artist's need to balance the detached and isolated Apollonian search for eternal perfection and the Dionysian devotion to public freedom, group spontaneity and the immediacy of the present moment.

Kachuck's set piece rant against art as a part of interior decoration is a gem. As is his darker and more damning description of the phony pretentiousness of a Four Seasons restaurant in the newly built Seagram building on 49th Street. He is so endearing that it's hard to admit Ken is right when he gradually discovers the monumental self absorption and esthetic snobbery that produces these testy tirades.

The watchful and wary Ken is aware, for starters, that The Four Seasons is Rothko's Achilles heel. For all his disgust with commercialism, the major project of the two years of their working relationship has been a big-bucks commission from the Seagram company to paint four murals on the walls of its fashionable new eatery.

Robert Gerbode's performance as the more restrained but shrewd Ken is in its way just as remarkable as is Kachuck's Rothko. Actors as young as Gerbode too often enthusiastically fire off all of their acting ammunition at the start, leaving no space for change, growth or development of character. But Gerbode enters skillfully into Ken's early tentative submission to his famous employer. He is or seems to be a humble learner, not a critic. Even as he gains insights into Rothko's bombast and pretentiousness, he acts with a provocative low key truthfulness. The result, when he finally explodes in anger against his employer it happens with a white-hot truthfulness. In the two years he has worked for him, Rothko has never cared to ask whether his employee is married or single, never asked about, let alone wanted to view, Ken's own painting.

Rothko's response to the attack and his further negotiations with Seagram and with Ken confirm but don't change a fascinating but curious conflict between two strong characters.

The play continues at the Art Center on Center Street through October 21st.

Photo by Jana Marcus