



WELL RED: Alfred Molina (left) and Eddie Redmayne in *Red*. Photo: Johann Persson

Theater Review

Alfred Molina's portrait of the late American artist Mark Rothko gives Olivier-winning British import *Red* its dramatic edge in Broadway production

Red

Written by John Logan

Directed by Michael Grandage

John Golden Theatre

252 West 45th Street, (212-239-6200), www.redonbroadway.com

Limited engagement through June 27, 2010

By David NouNou

"What do you see?" This is both the opening line and closing line of John Logan's new play, *Red*, which recently opened on Broadway after an acclaimed run at London's Donmar Warehouse. This is the question asked by Mark Rothko (Alfred Molina) to his assistant Ken (Eddie Redmayne), and it easily applies to the audience. At the onset we are seeing one of the abstract expressionist red paintings by Rothko, for which he was commissioned to do for the restaurant The Four Seasons.

The time is 1958 to 1960 in Rothko's studio, where he is struggling about the quality of his paintings that are about to be hung in the newly built restaurant. It is the largest commission of its day for which he was paid \$35,000, which he ultimately returned, and in the end kept his work. Every artist has that lifelong struggle about how will the world perceive his or her work. After all, Rothko's art pieces are his children. They have a proverbial life of their own. They are living, breathing pieces that affect the senses and tastes. What do the eyes see in these works? They are going out in the world to be judged by the masses. And no parent ever wants to see his or her children criticized, trashed, or be forgotten. For Cubism preceded abstract expressionism, and Pop Art followed it. Are they going to endure through the ages like a Rembrandt or Matisse—or will they be the *art de jour*?

Ken is the latest assistant that has entered Rothko's abstract world. He is there to learn from the master and, as the play progresses, he takes what the master has taught him and uses it to stand up for himself and question the master's grandstanding. A lot is discussed in the 90-minute play that amounts to two years of their lives and Rothko's belief that, to understand his art, you must know the works of Shakespeare, Freud, and Nietzsche.

Intellectual conversations abound, from art and what it represents to other artists like Jackson Pollack and Andy Warhol, as well as their works. From classical music and philosophy to their own personal lives, Rothko is the bullying, self-absorbed tyrant and

Ken, the hardworking, eager-to-learn apt pupil. A role reversal is inevitable. As Ken learns more about Rothko's ideologies, in the end he uses them against him. Why did Rothko sellout? Was it that important for his art to be hung in an eatery, and would the people there actually appreciate that art amid the cacophonous clatter of cutlery and glasses in a restaurant?

Alfred Molina as Rothko has his best role to date on the New York stage. Underneath all the bluster and tyranny, he imbues his character with humanity and a soul. He is excellent as his fear is realized throughout the play. Success may come to some artists, but sustaining it for the ages is the difficult part. He is aware of that ever-changing fickle public taste and doesn't want to be steamrolled by it. His fear isn't just whether the pieces are good; his concerns also involve the ever-present new breed (the Jackal) that is just waiting outside your door to take down what you have created. Eddie Redmayne as Ken (who won the Olivier Award in Britain for Best Actor in a Supporting Role) is the green student/apprentice who comes in meekly and exits with the roar, and is the inevitable mirror for Rothko to see himself through, and Redmayne is equally brilliant. His performance is more timed and calculated. It does come full throttle in the end.

Because the play is quite verbose at times, Michael Grandage deftly directs his characters by constantly giving them something to do. Be it changing a canvas, mixing paint, or priming a canvas, they are never left standing still. The lighting by Neil Austin is exceptional, as his lighting must illustrate Rothko's taste of never using natural light but muted lighting to see his abstracts to their best advantage, in order to actually see and feel the lines on his canvas move. In the end we have to actually ask ourselves "What did we see"? What was that red canvas with the horizontal, black squiggly lines, and what did it mean? What would the masses dining at The Four Seasons have thought of Rothko's works, and would the paintings still be hanging there? The easygoing late 1940s through to the early 1960s was the age of this new-wave abstract expressionism. Would it have survived the late 1960s and 1970s, with the advent of Pop Art, Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein? With age and the passing of time, we know what the outcome and answer is. However, in 1960 one might have asked how long would Rothko's painting be hanging at The Four Seasons had he allowed them to, and what would those rich patrons actually seen in them? These are just some of the provocative questions playwright John Logan poses in this absorbing drama.

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