

**Study Guide: *Red***

by **John Logan**

directed by **Kim Collier**

November 19 – December 17, 2011

**Overview and Classroom Activities**



## Study Guide: *Red*

### A letter to teachers and students:

Education is a vital part of what we do at Canadian Stage. We are committed to sharing material with our audiences that will challenge, enrich and deepen their perspectives. Sharing art diversifies our conversations. At once provocative, beautiful and curious, the intense and exciting two-character show *Red* is sure to inspire viewers of all ages.

Canadian Stage's production of the Tony award winning play *Red* is directed by Associate Artist Kim Collier. The play tells the story of celebrated 20<sup>th</sup> century Abstract Expressionist painter Mark Rothko as he struggles to create a masterpiece that supports his artistic philosophy and aesthetic while being challenged by fame, fortune, commercialism and the threat of Pop Art. The two-man cast reflects the master-apprentice dynamic between the play's characters, with veteran performer Jim Mezon playing the role of the established artist Mark Rothko and dynamic emerging actor David Coomber playing his assistant Ken. An original score is being composed by former *Barenaked Ladies* musician Andy Creeggan.

*Red* is an interpretation of two important years in Rothko's career. Playwright John Logan uses Rothko's words, ideas and techniques and blends them with his own interpretation of a man challenged to balance a seductive commission with his artistic vision. The result is a fictionalized character study with relatable themes about personal purpose, integrity, legacy and art.

This is a play of ideas with vast emotional depth. *Red* provides an opportunity to consider artistic expression and **History, Philosophy, Psychology** and **Science** by exploring what **Visual Art** says about our society. Though its focus is clearly artistic, *Red* is an incredibly interdisciplinary play. The concepts, methods, styles, rhetoric and staging of the play will afford students new perspectives, critiques, challenges and vocabulary to inform their thinking, perspective and work.

See you at the theatre!

Cheers,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Erin Schachter". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

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# A Guide to Live Theatre

## Here are your responsibilities:

1. Thank you in advance for turning off your cell phone, iPod, iPhones or anything else that makes noise before entering the theatre. These items distract the actors, your classmates and you! They can also affect our in-house technical signals and spoil the show. This is a common courtesy. Vibrate/silent is not the same as off.
2. No texting! Because your phone is off you will need to wait until intermission to update your Facebook status (and when you login, link to Canadian Stage at [www.facebook.com/cdnstage](http://www.facebook.com/cdnstage)).
3. No headphones of any sort. Listening to your own media is not only rude, but distracting to those around you.
4. In order to respect our theatre and you, our patrons, we only allow water in the theatre and no other food or drink.
5. Please refrain from talking during the performance. The theatre is small, so the actors and the audience will hear you! (Laugh when it's funny, cry when it's sad. Otherwise, zip it!)
6. Please sit in the seat assigned to you. If you sit elsewhere the seating for everyone is disrupted.
7. Represent your school and yourself with good behavior. Theatre is awesome. You should be too!
8. Keep an open mind and think critically. Theatre is engaging and challenging. Be prepared to examine what you see rather than judge it. You'll be surprised how much you learn, even about yourself, when you try to see things differently.
9. Enjoy the show and come again soon!

# *Red*

## Characters

**Mark Rothko**- American painter, 50s or older

**Ken**- Rothko's new assistant, 20s

## Setting

Rothko's studio, 222 Bowery, New York City. Circa 1958-1959.

“Under the watchful gaze of his young assistant and the threatening presence of a new generation of artists, Mark Rothko takes on his greatest challenge yet: to create a definitive work for an extraordinary setting.” (Logan, 2009)

In 1958, Rothko is commissioned to paint murals to adorn the new Four Seasons\* restaurant in the Seagram Building in New York City. As the project unfolds, he begins to question not only the task at hand but his role as an artist. When he sees that his great commission will reduce his paints to being decorative rather than transformative, he confronts this new truth through a visceral and passionate debate of ideas, art and relevance. As he struggles to accept his growing riches and praise, Rothko also struggles to accept that his prominence might not last.

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\* Throughout this study guide, an asterisk denotes a vocabulary word defined in the glossary section.

## Theatrical Context

Mark Rothko is faced with Ken, an eager protégé who eventually comes to challenge his idol and forces Rothko to confront his fading importance in the art world. His descent from being an in-demand artist is something that Rothko refuses to accept, believing that his vision is pure enough to survive where other artistic movements have failed. However, the major project he is working on, a commission by the prestigious Four Seasons Restaurant in New York City's newly built Seagram Building, challenges Rothko's position as a visionary and reduces his masterpieces to simply being overmantles.

*Red* presents the audience with a look into the life of a man at a time art historians refer to as his peak. Rothko refuses to pass the torch, arguing with Ken over the merits of up-and-coming painters like Frank

ROTHKO: *Courage in painting isn't facing the blank canvas, it's facing Manet, it's facing Velasquez. All we can do is move beyond what was there, to what is here, and hope to get some intimation of what will be here. 'What is past and passing and to come.'*

*That's Yeats, whom you haven't read.*

*(Red, scene 2)*

Stella and Andy Warhol. It is Ken who points out that Rothko's current project, his crowning achievement, is being commissioned for the interior of a restaurant – bringing into question the motivation behind the works. Rothko does not strive to make the art simply decorative and appropriate for the venue, and in the end cannot accept that the patrons of the restaurant will not appreciate the artwork for its emotional depth. This begs the question, if not for the viewers, who is the art for? What is its purpose? Is Rothko merely trying to match his inflated ego with an inflated wallet? Ken laments: "I can't imagine any other painter in the history of art ever tried so hard to be significant!" (

## Study Links

### Art/Art History

What value does Rothko's artwork have? How did seeing the play help/develop/improve your ability to understand and conceptualize his work? Still art often attempts to create movement both on a literal level and on an intellectual level. What techniques can be used to create this feeling? How does Rothko's work specifically achieve this?

ROTHKO: *Look at the tension between the blocks of color: the dark and the light, the red and the black and the brown. They exist in a state of flux – of movement.*

*(Red, scene 2)*

### History

How does art reflect a society? How does society impact art? What does looking at Abstract Expressionist Art or Pop Art tell us about the people they were produced by and for? Can you control how you'll be remembered in the future? Who are some other historical figures, artists or not, who have attempted to control their own legacies?

**Drama**

What is unique about a two man show like *Red*? How do the playwright's and the director's choices allow the audience to develop an understanding of the characters? Do we develop empathy for either character? Actors often have to portray emotions and feelings that are not expressed by words in the script. How do performers in *Red* evoke feelings through their performances beyond the script?

**Science**

How does colour impact perception and knowledge? Do art therapies such as colour therapy have scientific merit?

**English**

What parallels can we draw between Rothko's journey in *Red* and other personal journeys in literature? How have artistic movements in visual art been mirrored, inspired or challenged by similar trends in literature?

**Psychology**

How might psychologists in Rothko's time interpret his behavior and way of thinking? How might they, or you, consider his nature today? Does a piece of art's location affect how it is interpreted? If yes, how so?

**Philosophy**

Frederich Nietzsche\* had a great impact on Mark Rothko. Are Nietzsche's theories relevant to our society today? Do you agree with his philosophies? How do playwrights and directors incorporate their own emotions, concerns and fears into their works? Do they do it on purpose? Can you truly only write/create about what you know?

**Historical/Social Context****What came before Rothko: A brief study of Art History**

Though he rejected the categorization, Mark Rothko is commonly considered to be a part of the Abstract Expressionist movement popularized in New York following World War II in the late 1940s. The mostly anti-figurative style was characterized by works in which artists address themes, events or feelings by using expressive action based painting techniques (gestural Abstract Expressionism\*) or carefully selected and placed colours (colour-field Abstract Expressionism\*). The abstract product is meant to evoke an emotional response from the viewer. The shift towards this abstraction of content was directly influenced by censorship in art during the post-war McCarthy era.

This is not an exhaustive chart, but it does demonstrate that art is constantly evolving and directly affected by a myriad of societal influencers such as politics, economics and technology.

Time Frame	Artistic Movement	Brief Description	Key Artists
1867-1890	Impressionism	Depicting everyday life, landscapes and architecture in a style that emphasized light and air.	Manet
1890-1905	Post-Impressionism	Challenged the theories of Impressionism by delving into the emotional and expressive side of art. Post-Impressionists paved the way for Expressionism.	Van Gogh
1905-1910	Fauvism (Expressionism)	Defined by use of exaggerated colours and wild brush strokes, artists of this style aimed to express the feelings of a scene rather than to create a realistic portrayal.	Matisse
1907-1915	Cubism	The first abstract style of modern art and heavily influenced by multi-cultural art such as African masks, Cubism showed three dimensional subjects from several perspectives.	Picasso
1924-1939	Surrealism	A creative philosophy established in Europe post WWI that appeared in both literature and visual art. The movement aimed to depict the subconscious mind and reconcile it with reality. Several practicing Surrealists immigrated to the US around WWII which directly affected Abstract Expressionism.	Max Ernst, Joan Miró, Salvador Dali and René Magritte
1940-1959	Abstract Expressionism	An expressive art form originated in New York in response to the devastation in the world around this time including WWII, the Holocaust and atomic bombings. Works range from carefully selected colours strategically placed on the canvas, called 'colour-fields', to complex lines and shapes created through a physical process called 'action painting'.	Rothko, Pollock, de Kooning, Newman, Motherwell, Smith
1950-1970	Pop Art	Art directly influenced by popular culture depicting familiar imagery of celebrities and consumerism.	Warhol, Johns, Rauschenberg

### Abstract Expressionism

Abstract Expressionist painting can be split into two distinct factions: the 'Colour Field' style and the 'Gesturalist' style. The latter was characterized by "action-painters" such as Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock who energetically splattered, smeared, dabbed or dripped paint onto the canvas. On the other hand, many paintings by artists such as Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still and Barnett Newman were vast canvasses of either a single colour or blocks of colours that critic Clement Greenberg referred to as "fields". Such works were intended to reach the sublime rather than the beautiful. Three principal traits of this style, known as Colour Field painting, were using colours that were close in tonal value and intensity, using particularly simple compositional elements and creating art on a large scale.

## Contextualizing Mark Rothko

Ken suggests that art should “speak for itself” (Logan 56). But, just as the audience’s background informs how they interpret a painting, so too does an artist’s inform and direct the creation process. Mark Rothko’s life experiences are essential influences on his nature, artistic sensibility and his work. Some examples of possible relevant events include the fact that Rothko was born to a Jewish family in Russia during an anti-Semitic period, that he struggled culturally and linguistically when he immigrated to America, and that he lost his father at a young age. A more extensive artist biography is included in the Additional Resources section of this Study Guide.

Rothko, like all Abstract Expressionists, believed that the creation process was as important as the final piece. For this reason he followed a strict and rigorous painting process. The technical features of his paintings were paramount: form, colour, shape, balance and composition were his main concerns. Rothko’s painting technique involved a great deal of physical stamina. First he applied a binder mixed with pigment directly to an untreated canvas, using fast light brush strokes. Only once this phase was complete would he apply the colour. This process is recreated in an exciting moment in *Red*.

Rothko sought to move his viewer. From his very earliest days as an artist, he saw painting primarily as an expression of his philosophical questioning. These ideas were deeply rooted in ideas from Frederich Nietzsche’s book *The Birth of Tragedy*. He also regarded his images as metaphors of sad and unjust life experiences. He used the formal elements of painting to give voice to an emotional journey and was primarily interested in expressing basic human emotions. Understanding the events and mindset that drove Rothko and his artistic vision enables one to make better sense of and contextualize his work as well as the play.

ROTHKO: *You ever read Nietzsche? The Birth of Tragedy?*

KEN: *No.*

ROTHKO: *You call yourself an artist? One can’t discuss Pollock without it. One can’t discuss anything without it.*

*(Red, scene 1)*

## Critical Exploration

### 1. The Evolution of Art

Despite Rothko's belief that his work had an inherent value above and beyond other styles of art, the masses were turning away from Abstract Expressionism and towards Pop Art by the late 1950s.

Pop Art was gaining popularity, in part because it was entirely antithetical to the moody and volatile nature of Abstract Expressionism. Works by Pop Artists such as Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol depicted familiar images from popular culture and were a departure from the emotionally intense work of Rothko and his contemporaries. Where Rothko's work was emotional, pop art was critical and ironic. As with artistic movements of the past, this new form of expression challenged and overpowered the last.

ROTHKO: *You know the problem with those painters? It's exactly what you said: they are painting for this moment right now. And that's all. It's nothing but zeitgeist art. Completely temporal, completely disposable, like Kleenex, like –*

*(Red, scene 4)*

In *Red* Rothko's critique of the "next generation" is clear. He found Pop Art vapid. As Ken finds himself and develops his own artistic sensibilities he is able to challenge this idea by saying that Pop Art is "neither good, or bad, but it's what the people want." When Rothko responds that this is because people don't understand art beyond "what they like," Ken says "You're just mad because the Barbarians are at the gate. And whattya know people seem to like the Barbarians!" (Logan 51) This conflict between the two artists around the purpose and impact of art is

the conflict that runs through all artistic movements. The relationship between Ken and Rothko, and Rothko's firing of Ken at the close of the play because he belongs "out there" is significant. It demonstrates that though the transition is painful, as always, we must move from the old to the new.

### 2. The Meaning of Colour

#### Perceptions of Red:

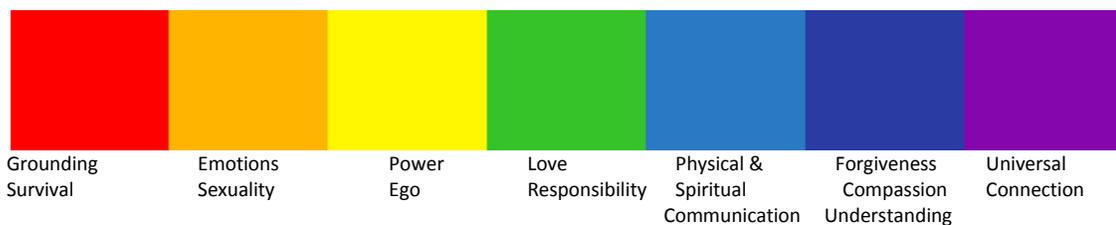
Among the many points of debate raised in *Red* is a recurring discussion about the meaning of specific colours. Throughout the play both Rothko and Ken are forced to defend their views and values of colours. A good example is Rothko's reaction when Ken calls his perception of black "cliché" (Logan 45). Similarly, Rothko forces Ken to explain his perception of white as evil (we learn that he associates it with his parents' death). Colours mean different things to different people, despite the fact that, scientifically, colours are believed to directly correspond with certain temperaments. Rothko and Ken list many varied feelings and senses associated with colours.

How the viewer sees colour in a painting is entirely individual and a temporal\* reaction. While the artist can fully direct the choice and application of colour, and while he can sometimes control how the colour is lit in a public space and the presence of additional colours in the environment, he cannot ultimately direct how each individual person experiences the colour. Surrendering this control is an ongoing struggle for Rothko and a testament to his nature.

*Red* is about the colour red being anything but red; the focus is on what is behind the paint. Logan compels his audience to examine the meaning infused into the use of red and the acceptance or rejection of the idea that colour must mean something more than it appears to mean. Rothko works tirelessly to find the exact shade of red that suits his purpose; Ken learns to articulate his true reactions to colour; and the looming movement of Pop Art contends that that maybe red can just be red – and that that is enough.

### Colour and the Brain:

Chromotherapy, or colour therapy, is an alternative medicine which aims to balance the body's energies to provide healing based on how colour affects us subconsciously. The base idea is that certain colours are intrinsically tied to certain emotions and feelings in a person. As such, they can be used to help heal bodies otherwise in discord. Practices involving similar ideas existed as far as back as Ancient Egypt and Greece. Colours are often given a position related to the body with red being the base of the spine and violet being the top of the cranium. By exposing a subject to the colour that best offsets their current problems – such as green if they are irresponsible or blue if they feel out of sync with themselves – chromotherapists believe that the subject's energy levels will balance into harmony. The colour breakdown is as follows:



RED: grounding, survival

ORANGE: emotions, sexuality

YELLOW: power, ego

GREEN: love, responsibility

BLUE: physical and spiritual communication

INDIGO: forgiveness, compassion, understanding

VIOLET: universal connection

**Chromotherapy**, like many holistic approaches to healing, is considered by critics to be a pseudoscience. A more accepted and equally interesting connection between the brain and colours is called synesthesia.

**Synesthesia** is a neurologically-based condition where stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway leads to automatic, involuntary experiences in a second sensory or cognitive pathway. One well-known synesthetes is British-born Daniel Tammet. In addition to being an author and educator in a variety of languages, Tammet has what is called ‘savant syndrome’. To Tammet, every integer between 1 and 10,000 has a unique colour, texture, form, or feeling. He describes 333 as being “beautiful” while 289 is “disgusting.”

### 3. The Question of Legacy

Artists are often praised, slandered and categorized long after they stop creating art and even after their death. While many works have gained accolades posthumously, others have been deemed irrelevant and forgotten shortly after achieving success during the artist's lifespan.

Consider the poet William Blake (1757-1827). For the duration of his life, Blake's poetry and illustrations were never widely adored and he was commonly condemned for his anti-church and anti-slavery views. In the 40 years after his death his works vanished from conversation. Though he gained some notice with Alexander Gilchrist's 1863 biography *Life of William Blake*, in 1905 he achieved popularity that continued to grow over the rest of the century when his work was included in the Oxford edition of *Poetical Works* by Dr. John Sampson. Now William Blake is considered one of the seminal figures of the Romantic period of poetry, his name alongside those of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Byron and Shelley – which is not to say that his relatively new-found stature cannot change with the transient nature of artistic critique.

ROTHKO: *I was walking up to my house last week and this couple was passing. Lady looks in the window, says: 'I wonder who owns all the Rothkos.' ...Just like that I'm a noun.*  
A Rothko.

(Red, scene 3)

At one point in the play Rothko vents, “Do you really think Andy Warhol will be hanging in museums in a hundred years?” (Logan 50) This quote is poignant in reminding us that interpretation of art can change over time. Furthermore, witnessing this statement now, it can be interpreted as a comment from Logan about the nature of temporary fame.

### 4. The Role of Environment on Art

Where is it appropriate to display, share and view art? The physical environment in which we engage with a piece of art can be as impactful as the artwork's content. Despite what Rothko might think, his Seagram paintings are going somewhere where they will frequently be ignored. Ken notes that artistic works have to speak for themselves but throughout the play many variables that affect the viewer are addressed.

Context is another essential factor that contributes to interpretation of art by the viewer. Understanding the conditions under which a piece is created can shift and develop the viewer's perception.

### Elements that Impact the Interpretation of Art

Whether an artist likes it or not, certain elements affect how a patron engages with their work. There is no such thing as a context-free viewing. Regardless of its content, a painting's impact is influenced by the variables in the space in which it's displayed such as lighting, temperature, noise, size and even smell.

ROTHKO: *I do get depressed when I think how people are going to see my pictures. If they're going to be unkind...Selling a picture is like sending a blind child into a room full of razor blades. It's going to get hurt and it's never been hurt before, it doesn't know what hurt is.*

(*Red*, scene 4)

Some paintings may evoke stronger emotions in dull or bright light, or if angled or particular light. The temperature of the room while viewing a painting can affect the perspective of a patron. While most studios are kept by artists at a careful temperature best for their paint – and galleries are often even more precise – not all showrooms have similar insulation or care. The amount of noise in, say, a crowded room could upset a fickle gallery patron in the same way that the absence of noise may perhaps not fit properly with an energetic piece. Many artists, like Rothko, want to control these elements in order to facilitate proper access to their work, but there are also elements beyond their control.

Every critic, colleague or member of the general public bring with them a set of beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, a personal history and a worldview that informs their understanding of a piece of art. In this way no artist can plan completely for how their work will be interpreted. In *Red* we see Rothko struggle with the fact that he cannot control these elements himself and ultimately he makes a dramatic choice not to surrender the Seagram Murals as a result.

## 5. An Afterward: The Four Seasons Restaurant

Mark Rothko's ultimate decision to return the money and refuse to hand over the commissioned paintings, known as the "Seagram Murals", was a significant decision. As recently as 2009 it is reported as the restaurant's biggest controversy.

In the years following the Rothko fiasco, The Four Seasons Restaurant in the Seagram Building on Park Avenue, New York City found alternate talent to decorate its walls including Picasso, Pollock, Lichtenstein and Rauschenberg. In 1982 artist James Rosenquist was commissioned to create a permanent mural. The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission designated it an 'interior landmark' in 1989.

## Pre-Show Activities

### 1. Creative Space (Drama, English, Visual Arts)

*Rothko's studio is an old gymnasium. The hardwood floor is splattered and stained with hues of dark red paint. There is a cluttered counter or tables filled with buckets of paint, tins of turpentine, tubes of glue, crates of eggs, bottles of Scotch, packets of pigment, coffee cans filled with brushes, a portable burner or stovetop, and a phone. There is also a phonograph with a messy stack of records...Rothko had a pulley system that could raise, lower and display several of the paintings simultaneously.*

Space for creativity is essential to Rothko's work, and above you see John Logan's stage directions that set the stage for the show.

- a. Read the stage directions out loud to your students, encouraging the students to focus on the senses beyond sight. What does Logan's description of Rothko's creative space tell them in terms of sound, smells, textures? What does the fact that his studio is in an old gymnasium make them think/sense?
- b. Explore this idea of a space that promotes creativity. Either as a writing exercise or a sketching exercise, have the students re-design your classroom space for their own ideal creative inspiration. For Rothko, his ideal space is huge and hanger-like, with piles of the materials that he needs to work (paints, pigments, turpentine, scotch, music and brushes) surrounding him. Encourage the students to focus on all their senses. What promotes their creativity?
- c. Have the classes share these spaces with each other. In pairs they can create vignettes of them working in this space. What happens when someone intrudes? What do they make/do in this ideal creative space?

**Extension:** The students could look through magazines, the internet and other sources to define their ideal creative space using borrowed images. What colours, themes, and things dominate their ideal space? Is their interpretation of creative space literal, abstract, detailed or minimalistic? Have the class discuss in small groups what each other's space says to them. The collages could be examined like a "gallery walk" around your space, where each student displays their work and the class walks around in silence. Perhaps music is playing (like in Rothko's space). Discuss observations: what stood out for them, surprised them, what they connected to and what they did not.

## 2. The Employee/Co-Op Placement (Drama/English)

*“I want to be a painter, so I guess I aspire to painting” (Logan, 11)*

*Red* is a two-character play featuring Rothko, closely based on a real person, and Ken, who is a mostly fictional character. For many, Ken is more relatable and therefore easier to empathize with; be it his experience of being student to a teacher, or assistant to a specialist, or employee to an employer, the students may have had a chance to be in a similar situation to Ken. As a character, Ken has tremendous respect for Rothko and looks to him for guidance and tutelage as a want-to-be artist. In short, Rothko is a hero of Ken's.

- a. Explore the idea of admiration with your students. If they had a chance to work with someone, a hero of theirs, who would they choose? What would they be doing?
- b. What do they imagine the first encounter would be like? Do they imagine themselves being impressed or disappointed? Have the students explore this idea in a writing exercise or a scene creation.
- c. Who do they imagine would seek them out as a hero? What do they have to teach people younger than themselves?

**Extension:** Discuss or explore through performance the idea of how age, or “your generation” talk can affect a relationship. Rothko keeps Ken at a distance for a very long time and a significant amount of this apprehension is based on age. How has age affected potential relationships, when a mutual interest is shared?

## 3. The Critical Gaze (Drama or English)

At points throughout the action of the play, Rothko “contemplates his central painting”. As Rothko and Ken look to the piece, they look directly at the audience, who naturally, we hope, is staring back.

- a. Why do you think Logan would set up this kind of relationship with the audience? What potential does it bring for a playwright? For an audience member?
- b. In partners have the students explore the power and discomfort of the gaze. In pairs they can start off by simply having a staring contest; however, each time you can raise the stakes by changing the relationship. Try: Friends, Parent and Child, Teacher and Student, Significant Others, Boss and Employee, siblings, Enemies, etc. Afterwards, look to the students for observations of what they noticed - which relationships were easy and which were uncomfortable?

- c. Try the same exercise with one person playing the “object” and the other the “critic”. Have the students take on a neutral stance and have their partner examine them as if they were in a museum or art gallery. Have the students take turns on either side of the gaze. How has the gaze changed? Try expanding the size of the critical mass and observe how this changes the feeling. If the object can move, perhaps walk around the room, does movement complicate the emotion behind this?
- d. The group can examine scenes and moments in which the critical gaze is central. Have them explore scenes with a beginning, middle and end, in which the gaze is central. Try: *The Blind Date*, *The Job Interview*, *Canada’s Next Top Model...etc.*

**Extension:** Have the students write a written response to the exercise. How did they feel on either side of the gaze? Why do they think this is? When have they been on either side of such a gaze as a person? What do they think Logan is trying to achieve by having the audience stand in as one of Rothko’s pieces? By partially breaking the fourth wall, what ideas about Rothko, art, and the critical gaze do you think Logan is toying with?

#### 4. “Engage” with artwork? (English, or Drama)

*“So, what do you see? – Be specific. No, be exact. Be exact – but sensitive. You understand? Be kind. Be a human being, that’s all I can say. Be a human being for once in your life! The pictures deserve compassion and they live or die in the eye of the sensitive viewer, they quicken only if the empathetic viewer will let them. That is what they cry out for.” (Logan, 10)*

Explore semiotics and the idea of empathy in images. Bring in a series of colourful and black and white images. Begin by showing images of non-living things (landscapes, nature shots, close ups of things) and then move towards portraits. Start to incorporate “famous images”. Look to National Geographic, Time Magazine, Sports Illustrated, Vogue. Then share some abstract paintings, include some of Rothko’s.

- a. How do semiotics and empathy bring these images to life? How do they inspire, confuse or spark curiosity? Do students see themselves as an active viewer or an apathetic viewer? What types of things do they engage in actively versus apathetically?
- b. If they had to think of a new colour spectrum that links to emotions and senses, how would they alter it? How do they see Red? Blue? Green? Purple?...etc. Can the meaning and sensation behind colour change with time/experiences? Can the students think of a moment in their lives that is intimately connected with a colour?

**Extension:** Have the students, in small groups, stage short scenes that represent these moments of colour. If the activity is working well, have the students meld their moments together. Perform these colour collages in front of the class and re-address the questions around empathy and semiotics.

## Post-Show Activities

### 1. A Dedication (Music, Visual Art, English or Drama)

John Logan dedicates his play to Stephen Sondheim (the well known musical genius behind many unique musicals such as *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *Sweeney Todd* and *Into the Woods*), and says that he has done this as a thanks “for reminding me.”

- a. Discuss the nature of music and its relation to art. How much of a role did music play in Rothko’s process? From the play, how did music become a character? If the students were to take on this production, how would music’s role change for them? How does music remind us and how does it help us forget?
- b. If *Red* were to be a musical how would it sound? What instruments would be used? What mood would it evoke?

**Extension:** Explore John Logan’s connection to music in his work.

### 2. Layers (English, Visual Art or Drama)

*“I’ll paint them and then I’ll look at them and then paint some more. I do a lot of layers, one after another, like a glaze, slowly building the image, like pentimento, letting the luminescence emerge until it’s done layering exercise, what is luminescence.” (Logan, 12)*

Rothko’s work is famous for its layers.

- a. Discuss the presence of layering in *Red*. What elements of the production were layered effectively? What layers surprised you? What elements of the production seemed to go over well with the audience?

Layering can texturize but can also cover up.

- b. After seeing the show, do you think there is anything that Rothko is covering up?

**The Generation Gap (English, Drama)**

*“Maybe I’m speaking a lost language unknown to your generation. But a generation that does not aspire to seriousness, to meaning, is unworthy to walk in the shadow of those who have gone before, I mean those who have struggled and surmounted, I mean those who have aspired...” (Logan, 10)*

*Red* as an example of the generation gap is interesting because it has the layer of art and art history so intimately woven in it (Abstract Expressionist vs Pop Artists, for example). Everyone knows what it is like to have your age-group referred to as a “generation,” and most often flattering words do not follow.

- a. Have the students explore a dramatic situation in which generations and assumptions are the key conflict. How does this kind of communication deflect from true meaning? What happens when the tables are turned?

**Getting a push at the right time (English, Drama)**

*“You need to get out there now, into the thick of it, shake your fist at them, talk their ear off...Make them look.” (Logan, 65)*

Explore this idea with your class and why they think the play concludes this way.

- a. What does this final push mean for Ken at this moment? Rothko? How does this circumstance match up with the historical context of the Seagram paintings and what happened subsequently?
- b. Can your students think of a time when they too have received a push, which they may not have wanted, that ended up being exactly what was best for them?

## Glossary:

**Abstract Expressionist Art** - An expressive art form originated in New York in response to the devastation in the world around this time including WWII, the Holocaust and atomic bombings. Works range from carefully selected colours strategically placed on the canvas, called 'colour-fields', to complex lines and shapes created through a physical process called 'action painting'. This artistic movement was active between the years 1940 and 1959.

**Colour Field** – a sub-category of Abstract Expressionism characterized by vast canvasses of either a single colour or blocks of colours. Three principal traits of this style are: using colours that are close in tonal value and intensity, using particularly simple compositional elements, and creating art on a large scale.

**Four Seasons Restaurant** – a famous Manhattan fine eatery that opened in 1959 in the Seagram Building. Originally Rothko was commissioned to create a series of murals to adorn the walls. He ultimately cancelled the contract, returned the advance and gave the paintings to the Tate Modern museum in London instead.

**Frederich Nietzsche** – 19th century German philosopher whose work, specifically the book *The Birth of Tragedy*, is considered to have had a profound influence on Rothko's earlier work. In short, Nietzsche believed that classic myths and specifically Greek tragedies allowed spectators to value their own existence by witnessing the extreme terror of immortals. Rothko adopted this perspective and aimed for his paintings to evoke a similar reaction from viewers. Rothko even identified himself as a "mythmaker" in the 1940s (Rothko, Gottlieb, Corwin, Bartlett, & Travis, p. 78) which was used as a title for a future exhibition of his work.

**Gesturalism** – a sub-category of Abstract Expressionism characterized by "action-painters" such as Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock who create lines and shapes, such as splatter, through physical movement or gesture.

**Overmantles** – a decorative piece of art. The term comes from the practice of art commonly being displayed in a home over the mantle.

**Pop Art** – a movement of art in the 1950s that first emerged in Britain followed by the United States. Pop Art depicts objects from mass culture such as Warhol's presentation of Campbell's soup cans and Lichtenstein's comic book-like paintings.

**Temporal** – related to one's present life in the material world.

## Who's Who:

**Frank Stella** – Abstract artist whose work is categorized as Minimalist Abstract Art.

**Andy Warhol** – Pop artist whose work most famously depicts iconic images such as commercial goods and celebrities.

**Willem de Kooning** – Abstract Expressionist artist associated with Gesturalism.

**Jackson Pollock** - Abstract Expressionist artist associated with Gesturalism.

**Clyfford Still** - Abstract Expressionist artist associated with Colour Field Painting.

**Barnett Newman** - Abstract Expressionist artist associated with Colour Field Painting.

**Roy Lichtenstein** – Pop Artist whose works emulated a comic book style and were based around cultural icons.

## Additional Resources

### About Mark Rothko

[www.dramatists.com](http://www.dramatists.com)

Born Marcus Rotkovich in the town of Dvinsk, Latvia, then part of the Russian Empire, Mark Rothko immigrated to the United States with his family at the age of ten, settling in Portland, Oregon. A gifted student, Rothko attended Yale University on scholarship from 1921-23, but disillusioned by the social milieu and financial hardship, he dropped out and moved to New York to "bum around and starve a bit." A chance invitation from a friend brought him to a drawing class at the Art Students League where he discovered his love of art. He took two classes there but was otherwise self-taught. Rothko painted in a figurative style for nearly twenty years, his portraits and depictions of urban life baring the soul of those living through The Great Depression in New York. The painter Milton Avery offered Rothko both artistic and nutritional nourishment during these lean years.

In the 1930s, Rothko exhibited with The Ten, a close-knit group of nine (!) American painters, which included fellow Avery acolyte, Adolph Gottlieb. Success was moderate at best but the group provided important incubation for the Abstract Expressionist school to come. The war years brought with it an influx of European surrealists, influencing most of the New York painters, among them Rothko, to take on a neo-surrealist style. Rothko experimented with mythic and symbolic painting for five years before moving to pure abstraction in the mid 1940s and ultimately to his signature style of two or three rectangles floating in fields of saturated colour in 1949. Beginning in the early 1950s Rothko was heralded, along with Jackson Pollock, Willem deKooning, Franz Kline and others, as the standard bearers of the New American Painting--a truly American art that was not simply a derivative of European styles.

By the late 1950s, Rothko was a celebrated (if not wealthy) artist, winning him three mural commissions that would dominate the latter part of his career. Only in the last of these, The Rothko Chapel in Houston, was he able to realize his dream of a truly contemplative environment in which to interact deeply with his artwork. *Red* presents a fictionalized account of Rothko's frustrated first attempt to create such a space in New York's Four Season's restaurant. Rothko sought to create art that was timeless; paintings that expressed basic human concerns and emotions that remain constant not merely across decades but across generations and epochs. He looked to communicate with his viewer at the most elemental level and through his artwork, have a conversation that was intense, personal and, above all, honest. A viewer's tears in front of one of his paintings told him he had succeeded. While creating a deeply expressive body of work and garnering critical acclaim, Rothko battled depression and his brilliant career ended in suicide in 1970.

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*NGA Mark Rothko, Introduction.* (2011). Retrieved 10 12, 2011, from National Gallery of Art:

<http://www.nga.gov/feature/rothko/intro1.shtm>

A collection of images of Rothko's works, biographical information and a comprehensive anecdote of his career as a painter.

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*Abstract Expressionist New York.* (2011). Retrieved 10 12, 2011, from AGO Art Gallery of Ontario:

<http://www.ago.net/abstract-expressionist-new-york>

About the exhibition "Abstract Expressionist New York: Masterpieces from The Museum of Modern Art" on display May 28-Sept 4, 2011. Useful short video clips about Rothko, and other Abstract Expressionist painters, in 'multimedia' section.

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