

THEATER REVIEW

'Red' keeps audiences spellbound

By Joanne Engelhardt

If you're the kind of person who zips through the Louvre or the de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park in an hour or two, then some of "Red," the intense two-character drama running through Oct. 21 at Center Street Theater in Santa Cruz might be a tad esoteric and full of unknown artistic references for you.

But the electrifying performance by Martin Sampad Kachuck as abstract expressionist painter Mark Rothko is not to be missed. In fact, Kachuck's nuanced, egotistical and finicky characterization is so good, it makes up for some of the less fathomable parts of the Tony Award-winning, highly acclaimed play written by John Logan in 2009.

Besides being self-centered and conceited, Rothko the artist had some very dark, destructive tendencies (somewhat alluded to in the play). He's clearly neither a happy man nor is he concerned about anything or anyone but himself.

Running a little over 90 minutes without an intermission, the Santa Cruz County Actors' Theater production is tightly directed by Wilma Marcus Chandler with a solid, 1950s artist's studio set by Skip Epperson.

Logan's play depends to a large degree on the interaction (and lack thereof) of Rothko and a green-behind-the-ears apprentice named Ken (Robert Gerbode), who walks into Rothko's studio like a lamb heading to the slaughterhouse (though he doesn't know it yet).

Gerbode is somewhat unconvincing in the first two scenes, with body language so awkward and wooden as to be off-putting. But then



PHOTOS BY JANA MARCUS — CONTRIBUTED

Martin Sampad Kachuck as Mark Rothko, and Robert Gerbode as his assistant Ken.

'RED'

Produced by: Santa Cruz County Actors' Theatre

Directed by: Wilma Marcus Chandler

Where: Center Street Theater, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz

When: 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays through Oct. 21

Tickets: \$25 general; \$23 seniors/students

Details: www.sccat.org

he begins to warm to the task, becoming much more believable when he decides to offer up an occasional thought or idea — and he even begins to challenge the master.

The play has five scenes, though the last two, which take place more than two years after the first, are run together with a swift blackout.

Even when he's just spouting platitudes ("Painting is a job of work," "The child must go after the father," "You'll see many ingenious things," and "There's only one thing I fear: One day black will swallow the red"), Kachuck is able to convince the audience that he is, wholeheartedly, this brooding artist.

What makes it all so incongruous is that during

the two-year span of "Red," Rothko is painting a series of gigantic murals for a classy restaurant in a Four Seasons Hotel in New York. When Ken questions that such a project is worth his time and talent, Rothko says smugly, "I will make it a temple."

But, in the end, with Ken now attacking the entire project and chiding him that it's still "just a restaurant," Rothko realizes that even he can't change it into something loftier — that it'll always just be a temple of consumption — and he cancels his agreement to paint the murals.

There's a surprising amount of comedy in "Red," much of it coming from the artist himself who seems completely oblivious to the fact that he's saying things that are thoughtless,



Martin Sampad Kachuck as Mark Rothko, and Robert Gerbode as his assistant Ken.

hurtful and frequently demeaning.

Valerie Marcus Ramshur seems to have a fun time dressing the actors in various stages of the art process: When Ken first arrives he looks like any

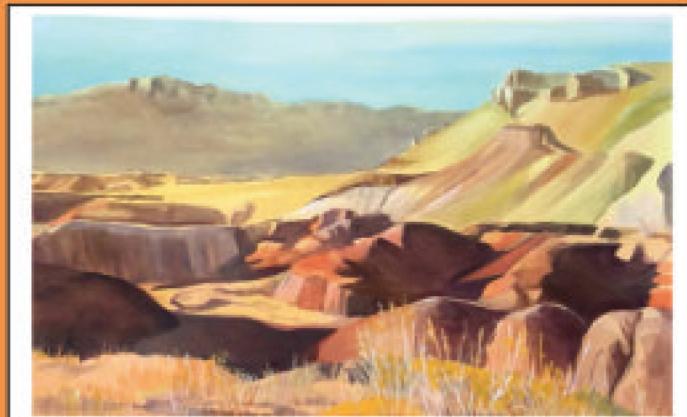
college student, fresh-scrubbed and eager to impress. Once he becomes Rothko's apprentice, his clothes are frequently paint-splotted, though not as much as Kachuck's. It's a mark of thoroughness that

even the shoes Kachuck wears while painting have their own share of paint drops.

Bonnie Ronzio is wearing a number of different hats for this production, ranging from producing and stage managing to operating the light board (with Carina Swanberg's lighting design). Davis Banta's sound design works well, with Buff McKinley operating the sound.

Just be aware that "Red" requires careful attention both to the words, which tumble out in prodigious amounts of dialogue (mostly from Rothko's mouth) as well as at least a passing knowledge and/or interest in art.

Fortunately, Kachuck has the ability to keep the audience spellbound.

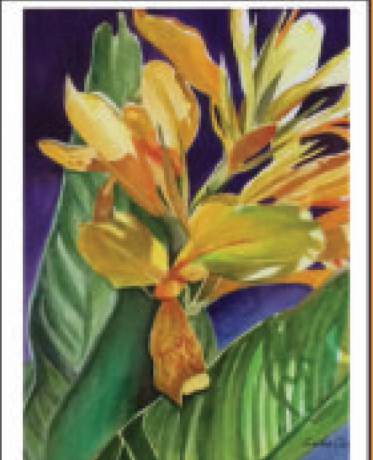
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