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Revising Rothko: Scenic Art in a Theatrical Production of *Red*

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In March 2012, the Alley Theatre in Houston, Texas, became the first regional theatre to produce John Logan's Tony Award-winning play, *Red*, with permission from the Rothko Estate to create and display six replicas of the Seagram Murals for the run of its production. This paper, written by a scenic artist who personally created two of these replicas, will examine aspects of the Alley's pre-production process and then briefly compare the Alley's detailed reproductions with that of the original Broadway premiere's artistic interpretations of Rothko's famous works. While both productions sought to represent Rothko's Seagram Murals as accurately as possible, they went about it very differently. An examination of these two productions may prove that artistic expression rather than replication is the most important aspect to consider when producing John Logan's play.

Red's plot revolves around legendary abstract-expressionist painter Mark Rothko and his mural contract with the Four Seasons Restaurant. The biggest problem many theaters face when deciding whether or not to produce *Red* can be found in a simple yet fundamental design

question: “What do you do about the paintings?”¹ After the 2009 Broadway premiere set the precedent for presenting Rothko’s murals onstage, having a physical representation of his work seems almost essential to any theatrical mounting of the play. One option is to simply ignore the paintings altogether and have the actors mimetically acknowledge their existence (a theatrical effect that is supported in Logan’s text, as the play opens with Rothko looking outward, over the audience, contemplating his artwork). Although this conceptual approach may provide a theatrically clever, artistic, and even dramatic effect—allowing for the audience’s imagination to run wild along with the artist’s imagination presented onstage—the suspension of disbelief can be potentially shattered when Rothko abruptly turns on the florescent lighting in a moment that is meant to expose how delicate and fragile the paintings actually are. Without the paintings, the audience is left viewing a bare and ugly stage and is thus robbed of the opportunity to respond physically, emotionally, and/or intellectually to the abrupt change in lighting cast upon the monolithic paintings. In this moment, the play becomes less about Rothko’s artwork and more about the audience themselves. This approach can certainly provide a wonderful moment of Brechtian self-reflection as the aesthetic distance is instantly removed, and the audience is reminded that they are indeed watching a play. However, without the paintings, another problem arises in consideration of a single question: How exactly do you reconcile having invisible paintings for the scene in which Rothko and his assistant are required to furiously prime an actual canvas onstage before the audience?

Although the theatre is uniquely qualified to accommodate such conceptual challenges, there is another option when approaching the problem paintings, and according to Alley General

¹ Ten Eyck Swackhamer, in discussion with the author, December 30, 2013.

Manager Ten Eyck Swackhamer that option is to “whole-heartedly embrace them.”² For better or worse, the original Broadway production, designed by Christopher Oram, had already established this model of theatrical presentation by creating enormous murals that were described by *Bloomberg News* drama critic John Simon as “great fakes” and “quasi-Rothkos.”³ Since Houston is home to one of only two Rothko Chapels in the world, Swackhamer firmly believed that “doing the show without paintings would [have been] a huge mistake.”⁴ But the Alley did not just want to represent Rothko’s murals in a reasonable or dramatic facsimile; they wanted, as Swackhamer put it, for “the [paintings] to be as authentic as possible. [They] wanted it to be good.”⁵ So, along with the rights to produce the play, the Alley also purchased the rights to replicate and display six Seagram Mural “replicas” for the run of their production of *Red* in 2012.⁶ The six murals, chosen by scenic designer Takeshi Kata, were Rothko’s “Untitled, 1958,” “Red on Maroon Mural, Section 4, 1959,” “Mural Sketch, 1959,” “Untitled Mural for End Wall, 1958,” “Mural no. 4, 1958,” and “Black on Maroon, 1958.” With such vague titles as these, Kata decided to simplify the matter by renaming the paintings in his designs as “Walls 1-4,” respectively. Those of us involved in the painting of these replicas soon found that the term “wall” was highly appropriate as most of the paintings averaged about eight or nine feet in height from the ground and one of the “partials” was almost forty feet in width.⁷

² Ibid.

³ John, Simon, “Mark Rothko Disses Expense-Account Crowd in ‘Red’: John Simon,” *Bloomberg News*, April 1, 2010, accessed January 19, 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-04-01/high-minded-rothko-explodes-among-four-seasons-crowd-in-red-john-simon.html>.

⁴ Swackhamer, in discussion.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The rights to create the six replicas were purchased through the Artists Rights Society (ARS). ARS is best described as a clearinghouse for artisans (including architects, sculptors, and photographers), and it is the company that currently represents and protects the intellectual property rights of the Rothko Estate. Anyone attempting to display, derive, reproduce, perform, and/or record Rothko’s work, in any capacity, must legally go through them first.

⁷ “Partials” refers to a coined term we used to describe six other paintings that were used as background scenery for the production and were neither intended to *be* nor presented *as* actual replicas. In the same

When tasked with the challenge of replicating six Seagram Murals, Alley Scenic Charge Artist, Micha Rudack commented:

The first real challenge was tracking down the correct source material. I was given reference material for the design of the show by the scenic designer. His research material consisted of printed digital images. [However] when comparing Tak's [i.e., Takeshi Kata's] research material to a catalogue collected at the Rothko Chapel, in Houston, it was soon apparent that Rothko's work was dramatically effected [sic] by external factors such as lighting, quality of photography, [and] what specific media the image was being viewed from, to name a few. Our challenge was to accurately reproduce the work, but a single painting had a variety of different examples from which to reference.⁸

Apparently, accurately photographing the correct coloring of an original Rothko is a famously difficult task. Rudack initially turned to a book titled *Mark Rothko: The Works on Canvas*, edited by David Anfam, but was soon referred, by the Rothko Estate, to use *Rothko: The Late Series*, edited by Achim Borchardt-Hume, for the most accurate color elevations currently in print today.⁹ This roughly two-hundred dollar collector's item was ultimately ripped to shreds as the painters quickly discovered that a photocopy or digital scan of any given picture would drastically alter the color elevation.¹⁰ Therefore, in order for each artist to work on individual paintings simultaneously, all the mural elevations had to be directly torn from the pages of the book.

Scenic artist Francisco Robledo and I were each responsible for recreating two of the six replicas. One replica was painted by Rudack, and the last replica was specifically given to intern

vein, the partials were not prominently displayed but rather inconspicuously stacked together in corners or peeked-out from behind walls. These partials were certainly the easiest and most enjoyable to create, as we were instructed by the charge artist to simply study a photo of a given painting for a few minutes and then proceed to paint it largely from memory and/or personal interpretation.

⁸ Michael Rudack, email message to author, November 20, 2013.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ In scenic art, an "elevation" refers to a scaled painting or print (usually supplied by the designer) that depicts the correct and/or desired color, texture, or overall look of any scenic element.

Christy Howell in partial fulfillment of her “final project” for the Alley’s internship program. On the subject, Howell recalls:

It was intimidating because it was my first week, and I was tasked to copy—with intricate detail—a painting that was painted emotionally. It was really satisfying to find myself connecting with it—with Rothko, in a way—as I continued working with it. It was a lot more fulfilling than I thought copying someone else’s work could be.¹¹

All of the artists working on the replicas seemed to have shared Howell’s sentiments. In fact, most of us had never thought twice about Rothko’s body of work until we were tasked with the act of intricately and painstakingly recreating some of it. It is safe to say that John Logan’s Rothko accurately summarized our initial thoughts when he said: “all those fuzzy rectangles, my kid could do that in kindergarten...”¹² It was only after we took an Alley-sanctioned “field trip” to Houston’s Menil museum and the Rothko Chapel to study a few of his paintings first-hand that we realized there was much more to it than just a bunch of “fuzzy rectangles.” We found that a studied, in depth, and personal contemplation, armed with the benefit of research, revealed that these paintings had immense profundity, both in artistry and craftsmanship. While in the hallowed Rothko Chapel (wherein all manner of holy books are provided at the front desk), we even found that a certain spirituality existed in his work and that Rothko had succeeded in reaching through time to emotionally touch his spectators more than fifty years removed. It seemed that we were not alone in this discovery, as evidenced by actor Alfred Molina, who premiered the role of Rothko in both the London and Broadway productions; he commented in an interview that he was “now informed with something different,” after visiting The Rothko Room at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.¹³

Rudack, spent about a week painting the first replica, “Untitled 1958” (or “Wall 1”), to be

¹¹ Christy Howell, text message to author, January 18, 2014.

¹² John Logan, *Red*, (London: Oberon Books, Ltd, 2009), 35.

¹³ Carol Vogel, “2-Man Cast Shares Stage With a Vivid Character,” *The New York Times*, March 29, 2010, accessed January 19, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/30/theater/30red.html?_r=0.

personally presented to Christopher Rothko—the son of Mark Rothko—as a general sample for his approval. The Rothko siblings (both Christopher and Kate) frequently make trips to Houston, and according to Swackhamer, “[The Alley was] very fortunate in that regard” because they were able to have Christopher Rothko visit the Alley scene shop in order to personally approve the painting.¹⁴ Rudack’s sample painting was intended to serve three functions: 1.) The completed sample would be considered a fulfillment of the first replica; 2.) It would give Christopher Rothko a directional, artistic, and stylistic sense for how the other unfinished paintings would ultimately look; and 3.) If approved, the scenic artists would be free to complete the remaining replicas in the time-efficient manner typical of the Alley’s standards.

Rothko’s arrival in the scene shop was a very stressful moment in the pre-production process. Due to scheduling concerns, we had already begun the process of painting the other replicas before the original sample was approved, in order to ensure that the paintings would be completed on time for load-in. This act was definitely a risk because one word from Rothko could have effectively sent all the scenic artists back to the drawing board, setting us far behind schedule, as we would have to designate several days to build, stretch and prime six new behemoth canvases. However, much to Rudack’s surprise, Rothko was “very complimentary and gave his approval for how we were progressing,”¹⁵ further stating that our artwork was the most accurate theatrical representation of his father’s work that he had seen so far.¹⁶

Ultimately, we found that having the other replicas already in progress was more of a benefit than a risk, as Rothko was able to view various stages of our painting process and subsequently compare them with memories of his father working in his studio. Rothko’s approval gave us the confidence and assurance that we were on the right track in both application

¹⁴ Swackhamer, in discussion.

¹⁵ Rudack, email to author.

¹⁶ Christopher Rothko, in discussion with scenic artists and author, 2012.

and artistic style. After Rothko's visit, Rudack recalls that the scenic artists became "less concerned with [the] complete accuracy of brush strokes and were able to focus more on the style, color and layering of the individual artworks. This provided the [scenic artists with] more freedom to paint."¹⁷ As a result, Rudack believed that "the scenic artists were able to create more authentic-looking Rothko paintings than the original piece of scenery [i.e., his own sample painting] initially presented to Christopher Rothko."¹⁸ Rudack further stated that Rothko's "loose gestural painting style with multiple layers [or glazes] for creating depth was actually very similar to how we paint scenery for theatre."¹⁹ In other words, Rudack believed our personal experience as scenic artists allowed us to imitate Rothko's work with more accuracy than other traditional, fine, or visual artists. After Rothko's departure, the remaining five replicas were finished within the next week.

Before Christopher Rothko's arrival in Houston, the painters had closely studied the color elevations from Borchardt-Hume's book—in order to evaluate the drip patterns and directionality of certain brushstrokes—and quickly discovered hints revealing the painting process of Mark Rothko's technique. For instance, it became immediately apparent that the famous painter would begin a mural in one orientation and finish it in quite another. This suspicion was eventually confirmed by Christopher Rothko, who promptly admitted that the intended authorial orientation of several of his father's works is still largely unknown even to his family, as Rothko's death occurred before the painter could oversee the installation process of many of his works.²⁰

¹⁷ Rudack, email to author.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Rothko, in discussion.

Upon completion of the six replicas, the next challenge was to accurately photograph and document each finished painting in order to submit them to the Estate for final approval. I was personally tasked with this feat and quickly discovered that a correct white balance was essential when almost every one of the photos I shot differed in value depending on a variety of factors including shutter speed, camera stability, and lighting. The final photos were digitally submitted to ARS for approval. Though the images were decidedly more orange than red, it seemed as though the Estate was empathetic to my plight as the only comments made about the paintings were tonally-aesthetic in nature and did not regard any visual discrepancy in digital-color. After the photos were submitted, a representative of ARS replied with an email, informing us that the Estate only had two concerns about the paintings, stating:

The Rothko Estate has minor concerns about two of the replicas...the other replicas were approved. 1.) In the large horizontal [i.e. Wall 5]...the light patch around the central "bar" should be toned back so that it is only just noticeable. 2.) In the more purple vertical [i.e. Wall 2], the red patch in the lower right hand corner should be toned back so that it is no lighter/brighter than the lower left side of the painting. We ask that you please make these adjustments and submit new photos.²¹

These two revisions fell under the responsibility of Francisco Robledo, and he was able to correct the described areas in under an hour. After the new photos were submitted, the artists did not hear back from ARS.

As a part of the Alley's agreement with ARS, the theatre was not permitted to sell or rent-out the finished paintings and was contractually obligated to physically destroy all six replicas within thirty days of the final performance. Proof of this destruction was to be photographically documented and submitted by email. Arguably, the word "destroy" is an ambiguous term, much like art itself. Once informed of the obligation, we began to empathize with actor Alfred Molina, who premiered the role of Rothko in both the London and Broadway premieres, when he

²¹ Adrienne Fields, email message to Ten Eyck Swackhamer, February 17, 2012 (Forwarded to author December 30, 2013).

confessed in an interview that he had become “incredibly proprietary and defensive. [But didn’t] know why.”²² Although we painted the replicas with the full knowledge that they would have to be ultimately destroyed, when the end arrived we inevitably began asking: what does it *really* mean to destroy a painting? With this question in mind, the scenic artists began feverishly submitting various solutions to Rudack as to what might constitute the destruction of our beloved paintings: “What if we painted the Alley logo in the corner of all of them, so we could hang them in the lobby? The *patrons* might like that!” No. “What if we cut them out of the frame, altering the exact dimensions of the work, so it’s not truly a replica?” No. “I got it! What if we sewed them all together, like a quilt, and stretched it over a hundred foot frame that we could then hang as a memento in the scene shop?! They would never leave the building...!” No. Unfortunately, all of these suggestions were not sufficient definitions of destruction, and what took several weeks to create only took about fifteen minutes to tear down with several slashes of a matte knife. Although it was the most entertaining fifteen minutes I have ever been professionally paid for, it was also a truly painful experience to rip the artwork apart. However, in the process, I suppose there was still a silver lining to be found: The Alley paint shop gained several beautiful new drop cloths that day, and the scenic artists gained several beautiful new bandanas. The all-too-familiar notion that art is relative and the theatre ephemeral was reaffirmed, and we were immediately reminded that the artwork we created was done so under the full acceptance of the “living theatre.”

In the end, however, a nagging question remains: Was our degree of replication absolutely necessary for the success of the show? In other words, did the act of painting highly accurate “fakes” make the Alley’s production any better than if we had simply interpreted them based on the play’s dramatic needs? When *Red* first premiered on Broadway in 2010, designer

²² Vogel, “2-Man Cast,” *New York Times*.

Christopher Oram was not concerned with authenticity as much as he was concerned with generating feeling and inciting emotional engagement from the audience—a concern that plagued Rothko for much of his career. While painting the murals, Oram considered how the paintings could most efficiently come to life in a theatrical setting. Critic John Simon noted that Oram had “devised colors to accommodate stage lighting, very different from the subdued kind Rothko stipulated.”²³ *New York Times* reviewer Carol Vogel elaborated on a similar point saying:

Mr. Oram sought close but not exact matches for the shades of the [Seagram] canvases. Instead he came up with different recipes of pigments and glazes that deliberately change, along with the lighting, so that the black and red become more or less pronounced as the power balance shifts between Rothko and his assistant [Ken].²⁴

In theatrical production, it is well known that many intricate details perceived in close proximity are quickly lost and washed away in a sea of stage lighting and distance. If, as Logan’s Rothko states, the Seagram Murals were originally painted with the intention of being viewed under the specific lighting of a dimly lit restaurant, then Oram’s interpretive methods seem incredibly appropriate, as his murals were painted with the intention of being viewed under the specific lighting conditions of the theatre. As Oram noted in an interview, he “worked very closely with...lighting designer, Neil Austin. The description of Mark Rothko’s studio was key about how he controlled life. I knew I had to have close dialogue with Neil about how I would design the space, how he would light the play.”²⁵ Despite the authoritative approval given to our Alley murals by Christopher Rothko himself, it seems that Oram’s simulations may have actually come closer to accurately representing the emotional heart and sensitivity of Rothko’s work; Oram, like Rothko, created his paintings for a specific venue with a specific set of lighting conditions.

²³ Simon, “Mark Rothko,” *Bloomberg News*.

²⁴ Vogel, “2-Man Cast,” *New York Times*.

²⁵ Jesse North, “Broadway Brain: ‘Red’ set designer Christopher Oram doesn’t like color,” *Stage Rush*, May 13, 2010, accessed January 19, 2014, <http://www.stage-rush.com/2010/05/broadway-brain-red-set-designer-html/>.

In his 1958 address to the Pratt Institute, Rothko stated, “My current pictures are involved with the scale of human feelings, the human drama, as much of it as I can express.”²⁶

Unfortunately the “scale” Rothko is referring to is easily lost from the back row from either the eight-hundred-and-twenty-four seat auditorium of the Alley’s Hubbard Stage or Broadway’s eight-hundred-and-four seat John Golden Theatre. In order to effectively capture both the emotional intimacy and grandeur that Rothko was known for, it is likely that a literal replication of his work is not nearly sufficient for the unintended medium of theatre. In his 1961 letter, entitled “Instructions for Exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery,” Rothko stipulated in great detail the ideal lighting arrangement for his paintings:

The light, whether natural or artificial, should not be too strong: the pictures have their own inner light and if there is too much light, the color in the picture is washed out and a distortion of their look occurs. The ideal situation would be to hang them in a normally lit room—that is the way they were painted. They should not be over lit or romanticized by spots; this results in a distortion of their meaning. They should either be lighted from a great distance or indirectly by casting lights at the ceiling or the floor. Above all, the entire picture should be evenly lighted and not strongly.²⁷

For an artist who infamously oversaw every minute detail of the presentation of his work, there is an alien element specifically found in theatre that Rothko most likely never imagined his work to be presented under, and that element is stage light. It is easy to imagine how the intended “meaning” of Rothko’s murals might become distorted in the theatre.

Visual storytelling is central to theatrical production, and it is important to consider in *Red* how the lighting aids in telling the story and how it helps the audience more fully understand the meaning of the play. Many critics have commented on Austin’s lighting design for the Broadway production of *Red*, which won the 2010 Tony Award for “Best Lighting Design of a Play,” praising his ability to light the paintings from within and artistically underscore the

²⁶ Achim Borchardt-Hume, ed., *Rothko: The Late Series* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), 92.

²⁷ Borchardt-Hume, *Rothko*, 96.

various emotional states of the two characters throughout the play. Austin's light design has led some critics such as Frank Scheck of the *Hollywood Reporter* to claim that his design "forces one to look at the art in new and exciting ways,"²⁸ and Bob Verini of *Variety Magazine* to say:

Most striking of all is Neil Austin's amalgam of realistic and expressionistic lighting, in which a normal floodlamp can suddenly pinpoint a character's terror. Austin keeps transforming plainly objective illumination sources into subjective creative statements, inspiring insight and discomfort - just as Rothko's art does. The world brought alive under Austin's instruments is completely recognizable. So is the excruciating pain at its heart.²⁹

With comments such as these, it becomes immediately apparent that Austin's lighting design played an integral role in shaping the dramatic story of the play.

Interestingly, it seems that the lighting designer for the Alley's production of *Red*, Paul Whitaker, attempted a strikingly similar goal. In conversation with Whitaker, he described his design process for the show. Like the Broadway production, a close collaboration with the set designer, Takeshi Kata, was extremely important to maintain throughout the process. Whitaker explained that he and "Tak" held their first design meeting in the Rothko Chapel in Houston. The meeting consisted of spending about an hour and a half simply examining and discussing the three monolithic paintings permanently on display. Regarding the way the chapel is naturally and indirectly lit by sunlight, Whitaker recalls, "it was overcast that day, but as the clouds showed through, you got to see different colors come out of the paintings. After I saw that, I got really excited about the project, especially after I found out that the painters were going to be faithful to Rothko's process."³⁰

²⁸ Frank Scheck, "Red—Theater Review," *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 14, 2010, accessed June 1, 2015, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/red-theater-review-29459>.

²⁹ Bob Verini, "Review: 'Red,'" *Variety*, August 13, 2012, accessed June 1, 2015, <http://variety.com/2012/legit/reviews/red-3-111794804/>.

³⁰ Paul Whitaker, in discussion with the author, June 2, 2015.

Whitaker summarized the Alley's production as a mostly naturalistic "talking play" with heightened poetic moments. As a result, he described his design for the play as "Realism, layered over with treating the [artwork] in interesting ways." According to Whitaker, he attempted, "within the confines of not completely obliterating the naturalism, to heighten moments of tension and emotional resonance." One of the ways in which Whitaker endeavored to achieve this was to "cut-in" the lights to fit specific shapes on the various paintings. He even incorporated the use of moving lights by designing remarkably subtle changes to help the paintings pulsate and come to life during different moments in the play. On the subject, Whitaker admitted, "it was a little bit of a cheat, but we were also trying to figure out ways to heighten the value of the paintings—to give them a pulsing energy of their own. That was great because [Logan's] Rothko talks about the art in a very personal way, like the paintings have their own special power." In this way, Whitaker explains that he was able to "treat the paintings as a backdrop to what was going on between the two characters."³¹ Ultimately, the authenticity of the Rothko replicas took a back seat to the needs of the dramatic story.

In spite of the Alley's emphasis on the accuracy of Rothko's artwork, it seems that complete authenticity in a production of *Red* is simply impossible in consideration of theatrical lighting. Using a a rented YMCA building for a studio, Rothko famously controlled every aspect of lighting while painting the Seagram murals, with only a few flood lamps to light his workspace. However, as Whitaker suggested, "you can't [realistically] replicate that onstage. The trick is, you have to still make people visible on stage while maintaining a believable dark setting...you have to be very careful that everybody can see, and is comfortable, and that the lighting is not calling attention to itself."³² In the theatre, any representation of Rothko's work is

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

ultimately and platonically an imitation—thrice removed from the Creator. Moreover, it is an imitation that was specifically created for a theatrical purpose. Regardless of how authentic the paintings may appear, Rothko's authorial "meaning" of the pieces (whatever that may be) is unavoidably altered by simply being displayed onstage. A spectator can go to a museum to appreciate the true meaning of an original Rothko but should go to the theatre to appreciate the true meaning of John Logan's play. In other words, an audience goes to see a production of *Red* not to emotionally engage with Rothko's artwork in and of itself but rather to engage more with the dramatic story being told.

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