Seeing Red
By: Naomi Greenberg-Slovin, Dramaturg

The first four words of *Red* - "what do you see?" - were Mark Rothko's guiding mantra. As one of the leading avant-garde Abstract Expressionists of the late 1940s, 50s and 60s, he wanted his paintings to envelope the viewer. He wanted to express "basic human emotions - tragedy, ecstasy, doom...the people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them." His goal was to deliver a total, intense emotional experience.

From this moment on, we are taken on a journey though a massive canvas-stretching, paint-spattering, soul-searching one-act play called simply *Red*.

Rothko was a man of enormous artistic and intellectual strengths, but he was constantly assailed by an insatiable ego. He craved success but could rarely reap its pleasure when it came.

Still, to most of those who knew him, he was a devoted friend and a caring father. He was informed in music, poetry and dramas, as well as philosophy, psychology, mythology and theology. With his deeply ingrained social consciousness, he was a bold crusader on behalf of young artists. But this didn't stop him from being jealous of such contemporaries as Jackson Pollack, Willem De Kooning and Robert Motherwell.

The play takes place at a time when Rothko was already acknowledged as a leader among the Abstract Expressionists. He had one-man shows around the world. Harvard University and the Phillips Collection had commissioned his work, as did the world-famous architect, Phillip Johnson. In the course of the play, he is working on Johnson's project to create a uniquely posh Four Season Restaurant in the new Seagram Building in NYC.

Mark Rothko relished the recognition he was getting, but he could never free himself from long-held resentments. Back in 1913, at the age of 10, he and his family fled Czarist perfection in Russia and landed in the United States. That was surely a difficult time for an immigrant boy. Yet, even though he went on to experience success as an artist, he still was head to say that he 'was never able to forgive his transplantation to a land where he never felt entirely at home.'

His biographer, James Breslin, carried this statement further: "Rothko perceived himself as persecuted because he was Jewish, and because of his strong opinions, compromised by the greed and ego of others. He was an outsider who wanted in and once inside, found instead that there was no inside."

It seems that his nagging self-doubt and anxiety was only sporadically diminished by success. It wasn't unusual for him to throw up before the opening of a new exhibit.

As time went by, he was increasingly haunted by the idea that a new school of painting would come on the scene and displace him; just as he and other Abstract Expressionists had superseded such Surrealist artists as Salvador Dali, Andre Breton and Max Ernst. And indeed, although it
certainly didn't put him out of business, Pop Art, championed by Andy Warhol, was making its presence felt. Rothko was not only threatened, he was outraged.

To him, his transcendental, soul-inspiring paintings were comparable to music and drama; they were capable of reaching the inner-most emotions of our fellow man. How could they be in competition with pictures of a can of Campbell's Soup and Billo Boxes? It was inconceivable. When Rothko was introduced to Warhol, he refused to shake hands with him.

In 1964, he received a commission to paint an impressive number of murals for what was to become an interdenominational chapel to be built in Houston, Texas. For Mark Rothko, it was a dream come true. He could conceive of no more fulfilling project than to create a monument that could stand in the great tradition of Western religious art. It was a project that would take several years to complete. The palette he used consisted of only two colors - red and black - differing only in nuance and density.

In the ensuing years, as his bouts of depression became more frequent, his use of color often became more than subdued and darker. The self-doubt that haunted him all of his life was now compounded by ill health, and what had been a good marriage was disintegrating. He did not live to see the chapel completed. It was dedicated almost exactly a year to the day after he died. On February 25, 1970 his assistant found him. He had committed suicide. He was 67 years old.

On a PBS program dedicated to Rothko, a panel of artists, knowing how complex and troubled a man he was, were discussing how he might have wanted to be remembered. After much deliberation, they all agreed: "The Power of Color." In the end, they said, "it's an epitaph that even Mark Rothko might have liked."