

# EDWARD GERO

## A Bigger Canvas

The prize-winning actor brings a Chicago triumph home to D.C.

BY NELSON PRESSLEY

Patrick Andrews, left, with Edward Gero as Mark Rothko in *Red*, at Goodman Theatre in Chicago this past fall.

LIZ LAUREN

**E**DWARD GERO, STANCE WIDE AND EYES ABLAZE, holds center stage for the majority of the 100 minutes of *Red*, at Goodman Theatre of Chicago. Gero is one of the first U.S. actors (among many this season, as the Tony-winning drama rolls out in theatres coast to coast) to play Mark Rothko in John Logan's account of the brilliant, anguished artist wrestling with his lucrative 1958 commission for the Seagram Building's Four Seasons restaurant. As director Robert Falls says, the role is "an extraordinary opportunity for any actor." And Gero, teamed with Patrick Andrews as the painter's young assistant, makes the 856-seat Albert Theatre vibrate with Rothko's intellectual fervor and egotistical tirades.

The 57-year-old Gero, a staple of the D.C. theatre scene, has worked in Chicago exactly once before: He was Gloucester in the Goodman's 2006 *King Lear*, directed by Falls and starring Gero's pal Stacy Keach. Otherwise, Gero marvels, "I had not had to leave Washington for 23 years."

But here he is on the Saturday before Halloween, during *Red*'s final weekend at the Goodman before the co-production (with Arena Stage) moves to Washington in January, lingering in the lobby after the performance to talk with admiring theatregoers. When he strolls next door, the staff of the steakhouse attached to the theatre greets him by name. A drink is delivered, dinner is ordered, then a waiter discreetly delivers a message: A fan is hoping for a word with the actor.

The man is brought around. He is familiar with Rothko's life and work, has seen Gero's Rothko several times, thinks it's masterful. As luck would have it, he also adored Gero as the 37th president of the U.S. in *Nixon's Nixon* at the Round House Theatre—inside the beltway, in Gero's home com-

munity of Bethesda—a few seasons ago. (Gero, shoulders hunched and eyes darting, played Nixon in Russell Lees's comic fantasia for the Round House in 1999 and again in 2008.) The table-side encounter is not exactly the Hugh Jackman experience, of course, yet Gero is tickled. Does this happen much in Washington?

"Never," he beams. The actor looks like he's afraid of waking from a delightful dream as he glances around and chuckles, "Why would I ever want to work anywhere else?"

**IT WOULD BE OVERKILL TO CLAIM THAT *LEAR* AND *Red*** in Chicago have reanimated Gero, for his long career in Washington—first as a mainstay of Michael Kahn's troupe at the Shakespeare Theatre Company, then flexing his chops around town in more modern material like Neil LaBute's *bash: latter-day plays* and Conor McPherson's *Shining City*—has never been dormant. Yet *Red* at the Goodman marks a height that Gero has not yet fully scaled at home, even with his 14 Helen Hayes Award nominations, four trophies, and a sterling reputation as an actor's actor and as a teacher (at George Mason University and elsewhere). With his son, Christian, freshly graduated from Northwestern University and starting his own creative life in the Windy City as a sound designer, Gero *père* is clearly getting a kick from the chance to prowling this different platform and be viewed by new eyes.

"Audiences get used to seeing people doing remarkable work," Falls opines. "It's been very valuable for Ed to refresh himself by getting out of D.C. I believe it's been very satisfying for him to do his work in front of different audiences, critics, theatre staff, everybody."



DANISHA CROSSBY

Conrad Feininger as Henry Kissinger, left, and Gero as Richard Nixon in *Nixon's Nixon*, at Round House Theatre in Bethesda, Md., in 2008.

“It’s like being in a theatre monastery, with good accommodations,” Gero enthuses about the novelty of working away from home. (The accommodations, courtesy of the Goodman: lake view, two bedrooms, gym access.) Life in Washington has meant “dividing one’s time between work and teaching and home, raking the leaves and cleaning the gutters. To be able to just focus in—it takes me back to my youth, when I didn’t have to think about anything else. It’s invigorating.”

This moment has been a lifetime in the making, but it started in earnest with Falls’s searing, crash-of-1990s-Slavic-dictatorships *Lear*. Falls asked Keach to recommend actors; Keach named Gero, a longtime friend. Gero flew to Chicago—“I took a meeting with Bob Falls,” he deadpans—for a chat that led to the role.

“That was a real eye-opener for me,” Gero says of the show. “It felt like real American, sinewy, full-blooded stuff. How could it be otherwise with somebody like Stacy Keach at the helm, right?”

Gero first got religion about classical acting when he was 15, watching Keach play Hamlet in Central Park. With the character of Lear, Keach was “at the top of the Shakespeare mountain,” Gero recalls thinking. “And to be his number two was a real thrill.”

What the gig really meant for Gero, though, wasn’t clear until the flight home after *Lear*’s acclaimed 2006 run (later revived at the Shakespeare Theatre Company’s Harman Center in D.C. in 2009). “I thought: Maybe perceptions of me have changed. Then I thought: No, that’s not it. My perception of *myself* has changed.” He already knew he could “work toe-to-toe” with anyone, but the new environment drove that home.

Gero, the product of a New Jersey

blue-collar Italian-American upbringing, settled in Washington in 1983 as part of the Shakespearean company at the Folger Theatre. When Kahn took over in 1986,

Gero was one of a handful of actors invited to stay. The troupe quickly bloomed, thanks in part to Kahn’s casting stars like Keach, Kelly McGillis, Brian Bedford and Richard Thomas, with Gero often playing a second lead or stout support. He was Macheath in Kahn’s *Beggar’s Opera* and eventually nabbed Hayes trophies for his Hotspur and Bolingbroke. It was just as likely, though, that he’d be playing Don John, Oliver, Banquo, Enobarbus.

No complaints, or at least not many: “Michael Kahn was doing such great, risky, clear, solid, intelligent stuff, and I was having a ball,” Gero contends. He was performing classics and teaching locally—for an actor, it was a reasonably stimulating and secure set-up.

The chance to stretch came in 1995 when Joy Zinoman, founder and producing director of D.C.’s Studio Theatre, invited



# The School at steppenwolf

Taught by members of Steppenwolf’s world renowned ensemble, **The School at Steppenwolf** is a ten week acting residency for experienced actors who want to learn more about the ensemble traditions, values and methods that make Steppenwolf unique.

**Residency runs June 11 - August 17, 2012**

Application deadline February 10, 2012

Auditions will be held in Chicago and New York in March 2012.



For more information regarding **The School** and the inaugural **Acting Fellowship** visit [steppenwolf.org/education/school](http://steppenwolf.org/education/school) or call 312-654-5667.

