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WEDNESDAY, JUNE 3, 2015

THEATER / THEATER REVIEW

### Theater Review — *The Tempest: Esta isla es mía, Red*

freeFall and American Stage's latest productions venture beyond the ordinary to engage the intellect.

Posted By [MARK LEIB](#) on Wed, Jun 3, 2015 at 6:44 PM

Eric Davis demonstrates so much virtuosity in *The Tempest: Esta isla es mía*, it seems downright ungrateful to note that it's never clear why we're seeing him alone in all the play's parts. Yes, Davis — directed by James Oliver — is superb in 20 roles, as Prospero, Miranda, Caliban and others from Shakespeare's famous work, and as the Old Man, his daughter Amelia, his slave Bembé and others from the Davis-penned parallel story. Furthermore, Davis's writing of the second work is potently eloquent, and his set, a circular environment filled with sand, is just right for the two islands on which the tales take place. Add the Davis-designed costuming, and you've got a splendid illustration of one artist's amazing range, a range which is probably unequalled in the Tampa Bay area.

**The Tempest: Esta isla es mía**



Show runs through

June 14 at freeFall

Theatre, 6099

Central Ave., St. Petersburg; 7 p.m.

Thurs., 8 p.m. Fri. -Sat., 2 p.m. Sat.-Sun.;

\$21-\$44. [freefalltheatre.com](http://freefalltheatre.com).



ALLISON DAVIS

**FANTASTIC VOYAGER: Eric Davis wrote and stars in *The Tempest: Esta isla es mía*.**

Still the question remains: Why? Wouldn't it be preferable to see a female Miranda stunned by the beauty of a young, shipwrecked Ferdinand instead of having to imagine Davis as both lovers? Wouldn't an ethereal Ariel and a monstrous (or post-colonially heroic) Caliban be more satisfying than the exotic creatures we have to imagine as played by all-too-human Davis? This is a roundabout way of saying that freeFall Theatre's one-man *Tempest* has everything but an artistic *raison d'être* (the budgetary justification is just too sad to contemplate). Yes, Eric Davis is splendid, brilliant in all these parts. But oh for a full cast, for an aging Prospero who might remind us of the retiring Shakespeare himself, a Caliban who could provoke us to recognize that it's only a Eurocentric view that equates "natives" with "savages." This bravura production whets the appetite but doesn't slake it. One wants to be deeply moved, not just impressed.

Still, I'm impressed — not least by the parallel play Davis has written about a Cuban professor of theater who escapes Castro's police only to find himself on an island dominated by an old sorcerer strangely like Prospero. I admit I found the appearance of gods from the Santería religion a little off-putting, but the words about freedom from José Martí were inspiring, and the suggestion that Bembé/Caliban might not be so bad after all is as timely as the latest scholarly work on Cultural Theory. And yet, and yet ... Davis is just too smart not to realize that these points can be made with equal (or greater) power by a shrewdly conceived version of the Shakespeare original, one in which Prospero is an imperialist, and Ariel and Caliban the aborigines rudely treated. That's the *Tempest* this *Tempest* evokes, not with one all-embracing genius but with a couple of dozen talents combining to rock our civilized world. That's the stuff "that dreams are made on."

So let me say it one more time: Eric Davis is an astonishment, playing 20 roles with great success.

But oh for a true *Tempest*, with a cast as wide as William Shakespeare's imagination.

**Red**



Runs through June 21 at American Stage, 163 Third

St. N., St. Petersburg; 8 p.m. Weds.-Sat.; 3 p.m.

Sat.-Sun.; \$39-\$49; [americanstage.org](http://americanstage.org).



CHAD JACOBS

**PAINTED MEMORY: Andrew Joseph Perez as Ken and Gregg Weiner as Mark Rothko in *Red*.**

**Shout-Out.** What a relief it is to see an intellectually demanding American play for a change. John Logan's Tony award-winning *Red*, about the abstract expressionist Mark Rothko, actually assumes that its audience will care about the history of modern painting, the emotional resonance of shapes and colors, and the continuing relevance of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Featuring two mentally sharp characters — Rothko and his fictional new assistant, an aspiring artist named Ken — Logan's play depends almost entirely on the discussions and arguments these two have, and doesn't even bother to offer a plot in the traditional sense. Still, the conversation is fascinating, the issues should be of concern to anyone who cares about art, and there's nothing like a cliché anywhere in the vicinity. With the right two actors, this drama could be profoundly satisfying.

But the current American Stage production gives us only one winning performance. That's the work of Andrew Joseph Perez as Ken, the young man who gets more than he bargained for when he takes on the job of helping Rothko. Perez's Ken is callow but (eventually) articulate, and ready, in spite of his initial diffidence, to stand up for his own view of things. Gregg Weiner as Rothko is something else altogether. Apparently he has only two modes of handling dialogue: quietly and explosively, without anything in between. Weiner's Rothko greets Ken with a barrage of condescending language and then proceeds to oscillate between calm and hurricane-like for 90 minutes, demonstrating as he does not deep suffering but plain old rudeness, not pathos but bad temper. And one of the odd consequences of so much uninflected bellowing is that the canvases on stage, examples of Rothko's art, come to lose their overtones of shimmering mystery and begin to seem as un-dimensional as their creator.

Karla Hartley's capable directing can't solve the problem of Weiner's acting, though her sound design, featuring much dissonant art music, suggests a whole world of significant emotion. And Jerid Fox's wonderful set, an artist's studio in a warehouse loft in the Bowery, is a prodigy of closely observed detail; if only this production lived up to its environment. Jacqueline Padgett's costumes are sensible enough.

My favorite moment in *Red* comes when Rothko has to face the fact that pop artists like Jasper Johns are superseding the abstract expressionists just as the latter group once "defeated" cubism and surrealism. At such a moment, Weiner's hollering has a certain kind of logic: This is a man faced down by History, and what else is there to do but howl? But for the most part, I enjoyed the text of *Red* pretty much in spite of the production. It's several IQ points ahead of most American dramas, and that's refreshing in itself.

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Posted by **Brian Shea** on 06/04/2015 at 1:27 AM

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