

Review: In 'Red,' American Stage delivers gritty truths about art and life



Andrew Meacham, Times Staff Writer

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ST. PETERSBURG — If you have ever found yourself a reluctant witness to a bitter argument with friends, you already have some sense of what it will be like to watch *Red*, the latest offering at American Stage.

The Tony-winning play by John Logan, a fictionalized exploration into the mind and New York studio of painter Mark Rothko in the late 1950s, is a brawl interspersed with discussions of art, mythology and capitalism. It is also the story of Rothko, played by Gregg Weiner, a man who is riding on the crest of post-World War II abstract expressionism yet hates change, an artist so protective of his work he can barely stand for the public to view it.

Into the vortex of that internal conflict walks Ken, an admiring assistant played by Andrew Joseph Perez who serves as Rothko's student and foil, surrogate son and sparring partner. But for a rotary phone and a record player, the set by Jerid Fox could come from almost any time in the 20th century, a neutral blood-spattered boxing ring in which the past and future collide.

This production, directed by Karla Hartley, comes with all the freight demanded of any two-character play. It contains its share of monologues; it is intensely psychological; it must work harder to sustain interest.

Yet the tension in the theater at the Sunday matinee was so riveting as to be uncomfortable.

That tension starts early, as soon as Ken has taken off his blazer. The costume design by Jacqueline Padgett set the characters apart, Rothko's paint-splotched clothes contrasting with Ken's work pants and white T-shirt that look as if they were pulled from the dryer minutes ago. Weiner's Rothko takes all the space in the studio, pushing Ken out of the way when need be. He sprawls, insults with haranguing lectures, throws temper tantrums and tubes of paint at his protegee, who at first can never seem to come up with the right answers to the master's questions or pass his artistic tests.

Perez as Ken is subtler, a Floyd Mayweather to Rothko's George Foreman. But as the 90-minute, one-act play progresses, it becomes clear that the smaller man is piling up his share of points.

In a central moment, he lays bare Rothko's essential conflict — his contract to paint abstract murals the swanky Four Seasons restaurant in the Seagram building on Park Avenue.

"You rail against commercialism in art, but pal, you're taking the money," Ken says.

Their performances contrast as well. Weiner, who won a Miami *New Times* Best Actor award and a Carbonell nomination in 2012 for his portrayal of Rothko, paces through his studio with an expansiveness reminiscent of his brush strokes. If he makes the audience dislike him at times, it's because that's his job.

Perez, by contrast, holds his space with precision, his body language becoming more assertive with the growth of Ken's confidence. During his monologue about a traumatic event in Ken's childhood, the only sound from the audience was the growling of someone's stomach.

Part of the discomfort in this play, well reflected in the production, is a certain voyeuristic guilt. The audience is in the studio of a man who does not trust people or particularly like them. That his points often ring true — about oft-spoken platitudes about art and "collectors" who only want to match the furniture — adds to the intrigue.

Weiner's Rothko reveals his vulnerability grudgingly, reluctantly, at one point confessing that letting his paintings go feels like "sending a blind child into a room full of razor blades."

That remark is one of a few in the dialogue and action foreshadowing the real Rothko's suicide in his studio in 1970, by slashing his wrists.

Snippets from Shostakovich's *String Quartets* play during scene changes, edgy harmonies and dissonances grating, nerve on nerve. That touch by Hartley represents one more way in which this production remains faithful to the uneasy truths embedded in *Red*.

Even with a first-rate production such as this by American Stage, this is not an easy play to watch. But *Red* will stay in the mind long after the curtain falls.

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Courtesy of Chad Jacobs
Gregg Weiner and Andrew Joseph Perez in *Red* at American Stage in St. Petersburg.

.IF YOU GO

Red

See the play through June 21 at American Stage's Raymond James Theatre, 163 Third St. N., St. Petersburg. Shows are at 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays and 3 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. \$29-\$59. (727) 823-7529. americanstage.org.

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