# PERFORMING ARTS

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BLOG

## Review: 'Red' at American Stage

*Inside the Mind of a Tortured Artist*

By **DANIELLE DAVIS** on June 3, 2015 11:44 PM

Andrew Joseph Perez and Gregg Weiner in "Red," by John Logan, presented by the American Stage Theatre. Photos courtesy of American Stage.

Imagine gaining access to a room in which you have no earthly business. The space is dark, industrial — almost cavernous. The dingy hardwood floors are bespeckled with layers of red paint,

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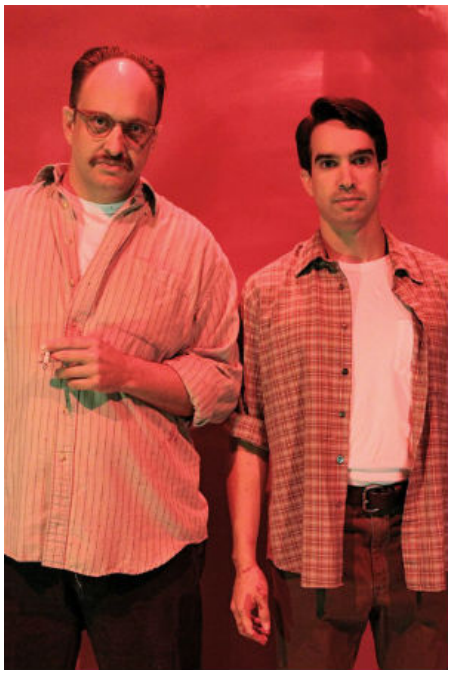
dropped from the brush of an artist who would prefer you not be privy to this inner sanctum. Tables are cluttered with the paraphernalia of a painter: tubs of turpentine, tubes of pigment, crates of eggs. Some of these things don't make sense and perhaps they were always meant to be kept secret.



You have entered the studio of the Abstract Expressionist artist Mark Rothko who has been working unabated on a massive mural commission for the new Seagram Building's famed restaurant The Four Seasons. Such an undertaking seemed antithetical to the artist's ideology, holding staunch disdain for art meant purely for decoration. Yet after forty paintings and $35,000 had been exchanged, Rothko abruptly rescinded the agreement. The exact reason why Rothko made this decision back in 1959 will always remain a mystery. *Red* satisfies this curiosity and flings open the door to reveal the renowned painter's inner demons and exposes what could have been the undoing of the "world's most expensive overmantels."

The creative mind behind this clever portrayal belongs to accomplished playwright and screenwriter John Logan, who also has an impressive resume of film credits including *Any Given Sunday*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Gladiator*, *Rango*, and *The Aviator*, as well as the television series *Penny Dreadful*. *Red* first premiered in London at the Donmar Warehouse and then moved on to the Golden Theatre on Broadway the following year. It won a total of six Tony Awards in 2010 — more than any other — including Best Play.

Fresh off her run as director for the uplifting musical *In The Heights,* local favorite Karla Hartley returns to the **American Stage Theatre** to deliver a production that lives up to her title as 2014's "Best Director" for *Creative Loafing*'s Best of the Bay. *Red* is an edgy one-act play that spans the course of two years as Rothko struggles through the working and reworking of the vast murals to be included in the commission. He meets Ken for the first time — his young and timid new assistant — who winds up receiving the full brunt of Rothko's philosophical diatribes in a series of intense exchanges, pushing the vainglorious artist to his limits.

Instead of breaking, though, Ken retaliates under the pressure, forcing Rothko to admit with regret he did a great disservice to his own principles, and in turn, to the paintings themselves. He was not adorning a temple with images of contemplation for all eternity, but merely playing interior decorator, installing backdrops for the vapid dinner conversations of the wealthy elite. Rothko eventually in real life did achieve his magnum opus, the *Rothko Chapel,* yet sadly succumbed to suicide before he ever saw it to fruition.



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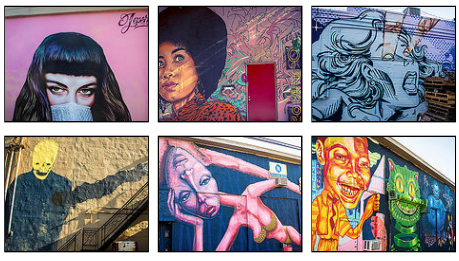

Miami-based actor Gregg Weiner makes a solid American Stage debut as the conflicted Mark Rothko. He was so commanding in his role as the domineering master that, at times, I felt like it was *me* who didn't answer the question right or didn't mix the paints correctly. I ached for Ken as he was scolded and chastised. As an aspiring and academically trained artist, Ken yearned to stay in mental lockstep with Rothko, soaking up every ounce of knowledge he had to impart, only to be dashed away on the very onset with: "I am not your rabbi, I am not your father, I am not your shrink, I am not friend, I am not your teacher — I am your employer. You understand?" This must be a character very near and dear to Mr. Weiner, as this is the second playhouse where he has undertaken this role.

Contrasting to Mr. Weiner's incessant verbal assault, **Andrew Joseph Perez** plays Ken like a rising crescendo, allowing the character's timidity to be slowly eroded, reflective of the grueling passing of time Ken must have endured over those two years. Once Ken finally snaps, though... oh, is it is a glorious sight to behold. Ken gives voice to all those phrases you've been muttering in your head since the moment words started rolling out of Rothko's mouth: "And the pretension! Jesus Christ, the pretension. I can't imagine any other painter in the history of art ever tried so hard to be SIGNIFICANT!" Mr. Perez delivers a performance that sent chills up my spine; he made me want to stand up and cheer. As an actor and choreographer hailing from California, he is also making his American Stage debut.

If you are embarrassed to admit you fell alseep during your art history lecture on modern art and you have no clue who Mark Rothko is, don't fret. One need not be well-versed in the rhetoric of visual art to appreciate what this gritty, thought-provoking play has to offer. However, if you consider yourself any kind of art aficionado, this production should be required viewing. It is not to be missed.

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**Red**

By John Logan; direction and sound design by Karla Hartley; set by Jerid Fox; lighting design by Phillip Franck; costume design by Jacqueline Padgett; production stage manager, Rachel Harrison; technical director, Timon Brown.

WITH: Gregg Weiner (Mark Rothko) and Andrew Joseph Perez (Ken).

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**American Stage Theatre Company is located at the Raymond James Theatre,**

**163 3rd Street North in the heart of downtown St. Petersburg, Florida.**

***Red* runs through June 21.**

**Shows are Wednesday - Saturday at 8PM. Saturday and Sunday matinees at 3PM.**

**Tickets start at $39 and can be purchased by calling (727) 823-PLAY (7529) or by going here. Discounted rates are available for students, seniors, military and artists.**

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