

**Manbites Dog Theater co-cofounder Jeff Storer returns with a triumphant production of “RED.”**

**by Byron Woods**

**★★★★ ½**

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**In a rumpled blue work shirt daubed with the paint of his trade, the agitated, gaunt and aging artist stands looking through round silver spectacles at his creation. Wholly focused and unguarded, his eyes disclose a palpable vulnerability: worry, concern, and frustration, tinged with more than a little fear. “Come on, come on,” he cajoles in the silence, “what does it *need*?” When his young assistant dares to offer a single word, “red,” the painter mutters, “I wasn’t talking to you,” before he wheels about, enraged, and yells at him, “DON’T YOU *EVER* DO THAT AGAIN!”**

**We had missed signature moments like these of quicksilver psychological drama at point-blank range since the 2018 closing of Manbites Dog Theater, the award-winning company that, over a 31-year run, set indispensable standards for artistic and social integrity in independent theater. The regional community of practice has frequently struggled to maintain both in the time since they transitioned to a philanthropic organization, even with the funds they’ve generously granted.**

**Ticket sales were brisk when RedBird Theater announced it would produce Manbites director and cofounder Jeff Storer’s return to the independent scene after a five-year hiatus, in a staging of *RED*, John Logan’s biography, pensive and explosive by turns, of mercurial 20th-century abstract expressionist Mark Rothko.**

**Interest intensified when we learned the show would mark a reunion with noted longtime collaborators Sonya Drum, who would design the set and props, and lighting designer Chuck Catotti. Anchoring the production: veteran actor Derrick Ivey, who racked up four five-star reviews from the *INDY*’s critics during his years at Manbites.**

**Saying the least, expectations were high. Frequently they are met and occasionally surpassed in this compelling production.**

**Under Storer’s direction Ivey probes, in extensive detail, the proposition that great art often comes in—and out of—damaged packaging. The theatrical impasto of the Rothko they’ve created gives depth to the character’s contradictory dimensions, setting an artist’s ego that is tyrannical at times alongside poignant moments of fundamental self-doubt.**

**In Logan’s script, Rothko struggles to create the “Seagram Murals,” late-stage works that reflect his own struggles, and that of our culture, between darkness and life—not light—as conflicting colors shimmer and vibrate from an already muted palette. The play’s discourse**

is a coercive master class, frequently delivered under fire-hose pressure, for his young assistant, a rising New York painter named Ken.

But *RED* would hardly be among Storer's best work if it didn't seek to raise new and pointed questions out of the 2009 text. Casting Trevon Carr, a young Black actor, as Ken, causes us to re-see and reevaluate more than their turbulent relationship.

The superstructure of privilege and gatekeeping historically inherent in visual art is exposed and interrogated when a white Rothko berates a Black artist, "Where have you earned the right to exist here with me and these things you don't understand?" The line lands differently earlier when Rothko opines, "To be civilized is to know where you belong in the continuum of your art and your world."

In 1959, a Black artist's knowledge of their supposed place in both entities would necessarily exceed Rothko's grasp.

It's a lot to ask any actor to match Ivey's work at full intensity, and on the production's second night a clearly talented Carr was still calibrating his claims to space on stage, and the velocity required to counter Rothko's boorish excesses. Elsewhere, his Ken resonated with understated but growing confidence and certitude.

You have to watch the quiet ones. Ken's ultimate and wordless assessment of Rothko—as a teacher and a cautionary lesson—serves the famous painter back his most famous aphorism, with top spin: *silence is so accurate, after all.*

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