

## ***Mojada: A Mexican Medea***

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Luis Alfaro's *Mojada* is a true testament to the universality of the classics, while also expertly illustrating his ability to transpose the ancient tales into a context readily accessible to a Chican@ audience. Ironically, at the performance on September 17, 2015, at the Getty Villa in Los Angeles, most of the audience were Caucasian couples who invariably fell under the term "Senior." While that isn't surprising for many theatre performances across the United States, it does raise an important question: who is Alfaro writing for? Everything about the script would suggest that it is written for a Chican@, or at least someone from "el barrio" or Boyle Heights, where the play takes place. Yet the production is staged in Malibu, across town from the place it brings to life, and at an unaffordable price for the people it depicts.

So if the playwright identifies as Chican@ and knows our culture, why has he removed his work from those it hits closest to? Alfaro made *Mojada* about his people, and he made sure the cast consisted of his people, but the staging fails to allow access to his people. Almost all of the characteristics of a Chican@ piece are present; it is political, it represents the hybrid of Nahuatl/Mexican culture and the American dream, and it celebrates the depth of our culture. But alas, when it was performed, it was not performed for our people, and that is a disservice. This disservice quickly becomes apparent when the actress playing the role of Tita (the Greek chorus) begins her first monologue by addressing the audience and yelling "COMO ESTAS?" She is full of old world Mejicana pride, *duende*, and disregard for the politics of contemporary respectability. The predominantly anglo audience gave a relaxed "bien/good" in response to her question. Tita quickly rebutted the less than stunning response with a demand for more by shrieking "I asked, COMO ESTAS?" The second time she was met with a slightly more boisterous "bien," but it was still not how a Chican@ audience would have



Tita addresses the audience. Photo: Craig Schwartz, J. Paul Getty Trust

responded. She sought the soul of La Raza, her people. And it was not there. It was not there because her people were across town in Boyle Heights, where the character Tita lives. She then continued her monologue with a Nahuatl ritual that was generally lost upon the audience, and the show began. Tita proceeds to tell us that she is a *curandera*, a healer, and introduces us to Medea. Medea is a seamstress with the presence of La Virgen. She is saintly, beautiful, diligent in her service to others, and above all loving. Even knowing the story of Medea, the image that Alfaro, the director (Jessica Kubzansky), and the actress (Sabina Zuniga Varela) create makes such a tragic outcome seem impossible. Alfaro then introduces the character of Acan, Medea's child, using him to illustrate the core identity issue of the Chican@: where do I belong in this society, what do I wear, who do I strive to be?

Alfaro makes all of his classic characters Chican@, and in doing so makes them contemporary, but also dynamic and human. Even knowing the cruelties Hason will commit, the audience feels compelled to empathize with him. From a Chican@ position there isn't a single character you couldn't weep for. They're tragic. Not only are they tragic, though; when you're Chican@, they're also your relatives and loved ones. Alfaro's female characters are especially interesting. While they still have aspects of "La Virgen, La Madre, y La Malinche," none of them are stereotypes. Tita is hilarious, and the much needed comic relief of the piece. She is part of the mother archetype, as all the women are, but she ironically has no biological children. Just Medea. Tita brings the old world and the comedy of the chicana woman. She is the embodiment of mothers and tías sitting around a table, making tamales, and speaking irreverently of everyone and anyone they can. It's beautiful. It's personal. Her spanglish and personality are home for a Chican@ audience, and yet, while she is enjoyable for any audience, she isn't familiar to an Anglo audience.

Tita's failure at the end is, allegorically, the failure of almost every Chicana mother. When Medea brings her the dress, all she can say is "deja la brujeria. Por favor." But Medea disregards the plea, and Tita does as she is told. Within the Chican@ community, the mother is always in her child's corner. It doesn't matter if they're right or wrong; with a Chicana mother, they're safe. While Tita taught Medea her morality, and is largely her conscience throughout the piece, Tita fails to restrain Medea when it counts. Tita knows how to protect Medea, not how to challenge her. From an Anglo perspective, though, the nuance of this moment is lost. It is hard to under-



Subina Zuniga as Medea. Photo: Craig Schwartz, J. Paul Getty Trust

stand that until this point Medea has probably never challenged Tita. That doesn't happen in Chicana@ culture. Women do not challenge their mothers in Mexico. America is different. Josefina or "Josie" brings the culture of the Chicana to the stage. She works. She wants to be a mother. She wants the old world here. She's learned to play the game, but she hasn't forsaken

where she came from. In an idealized sense, Josefina strives for the archetype of “La Madre,” but in reality just embodies the positive aspects of “La Malinche,” the sellout. She’s a “vendida,” but not so much a sell out that she forgot her roots. Josefina’s character comedically illustrates the cardinal issue for an older Chicana woman in America. If she can’t be a mother, what can she be? Josefina is a part of a community, yes, but even within that community she still feels she must be a mother in order to be accepted. “Josie” represents all the pressures upon the heterosexual Chicana and feels trapped by her accountability to her community. Josefina can’t even be Josefina anymore; she has to be “Josie.”

Medea is on the opposite end of the spectrum. She has isolated herself from the “new world” community. She has only her family and her memories. She lives for La Familia, but they don’t do the same. Medea embodies all the sacrifice, sexuality, and subservience necessary to create a dynamic hybrid between the archetypes of “La Virgen” and “La Madre.” This impossible hybrid is the principal problem for the Chicana mother. These conflicting archetypes and their expectations are what create the conflict in *Mojada*. Medea does not, however, silently accept defeat as many Chicanas do when their husband leaves them; she evolves and develops an identity that goes beyond the archetypes of mother or holy virgin. Credit for this dynamic character development can’t entirely be given to Alfaro, given that the plot was created by Euripides, but he clearly understood he was breaking a stereotype when he wrote Medea in *Mojada*. She is not the passive virgin-mother impossibility she appears to be. This image of Medea is what makes Hason’s betrayal all the more poignant. In reality, Medea in *Mojada* is a fallen woman. Her purity was robbed from her, but instead of staying down she rises with a vengeance, and it is beautiful to see.

Medea’s character development is so beautiful you almost don’t feel for Armida, but Armida herself is so well written and so familiar that a Chicana@ audience can’t help but feel a little sorry. Armida is the Chicana who embodies America, and consequently the negative aspects of “La Malinche” or “La Vendida.” She’s a female Hason, but she has already achieved success; she sold out a long time ago, and even better, she got a good price. Ironically, though, even as a successful woman, Armida still feels compelled to fulfill the role of mother. That is how strong the pressure for a Chicana to be a mother is; it doesn’t matter if you’re successful in any other ways, you still have to be a mom. It was no casting mistake that the actress playing Armida was obviously white passing. She made it into white society, and as one



would expect, that meant she had to look like she belonged there. It is important to note that Armida did not wish to steal Hason from Medea. It was that Armida needed to be a mother, and realized Hason was her opportunity. It was a matter of circumstance. Armida exemplifies the sacrifice a Chicana@ must make to succeed in an Anglo world. They must in essence become "La Malinche," sell out, assimilate, become white. Even when a Chicana@ does sell out, though, they still have to live as a Chicana@, and for a woman that largely means being a mother,

This concept of motherhood, and its strong connotations in society, are what make *Medea* matter, and why *Mojada* is relevant and touching. Motherhood is a reality for everyone, but what it means to be a mother varies from culture to culture. Hence many of the nuances of what this play is saying about Chicana motherhood are lost on a predominantly older, Anglo audience. There are many poignant moments that affect everyone in the audience, but there were also other moments when a Chicana@ perspective was necessary to understand the language, or to understand the social implications of the piece. It is disheartening to know that this piece and its performers carry a soul that can't be fully received by the audience at the Getty Villa. Alfaro is to be commended for creating a Chicano piece that is accessible to all people, but should he have let it be taken away from the people he wrote it for/about? That is the true question.

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