

**"I AM . . . DOLL PARTS . . ."**  
**LA CASA AZUL BY SOPHIE FAUCHER**  
**ZELLERBACK HALL, BERKELEY**  
**MAY 10, 2003**



Took in the new traveling production from the Canadian company that calls itself Ex Machina, produced in collaboration with Cabildo Insular de Tenerife, UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UCLA, Wiener Festwochen of Austria, the Theatre de Quat'Sous of Montreal, and Pilar de Yzaguirre of Madrid, Spain. The play was an original work call *La Casa Azul* by Sophie Faucher, who also

performed the lead role of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo. Director Robert Lepage provided innovative staging and stylized visuals to exhume layers of meaning from the text, drawn largely from Kahlo's own writings.



Frida Kahlo, subject of a recent movie starring Selma Hayek, lived the sort of white-knuckled artist-in-pain existence upon a life-canvas slathered with such violent broad strokes as to give any prospective wannabe artist the blue-horrors just thinking about it, and the sort of mythic scope as to inspire a legion of "Frida-maniacs" for the next half century, including one group of "Kahloists" that worships Frida as the One True God. Where other artists claimed, sanctimoniously, to "suffer for their art" or derive "art from pain," Kahlo had them all beat in the pain department hands down. Nobody but nobody wants to compete with what she went through, creating this eternal "art from pain schtick

that just will not go away, no matter how much reasonable living enters into the picture. Which is unfortunate, as the lady could actually paint well.

Briefly: Frida survived an early childhood polio attack that withered one of her legs (not mentioned in the play) and then, at age 18 survived an horrific tram accident in which her pelvis was crushed, her leg broken in seven places, and her spine in three. A handgrip bar impaled her through the abdomen, emerging through her vagina and, thus impaled, she held on for about six hours before rescue. Not expected to survive, she was placed in a full-body cast after being freed and so taught herself to paint with a kit supplied by her mother while in the hospital.

In 30 subsequent operations upon her legs and spine, she entered into a world of eternal pain without end. Eventually one of her legs -- the polio-stricken one -- was amputated below the knee. Despite these obvious problems, the always scrappy and tomboyish Frida cultivated a flamboyant and life-loving lifestyle, well-fueled with demerol and liquor, that featured passionate affairs with numerous men and women, including a notable marriage to the internationally famous Diego Riviera and to one Russian in Exile -- Leon Trotsky.

"I suffered two grave accidents in my life. One in which a streetcar knocked me down.....The other accident is Diego."

The extent of carnage inflicted on her body would have shoved just about anybody into a sanitarium, but she continued up to her death in 1953 to produce a series of vibrant self-portraits as well as a handful of gory surrealist curiosities.

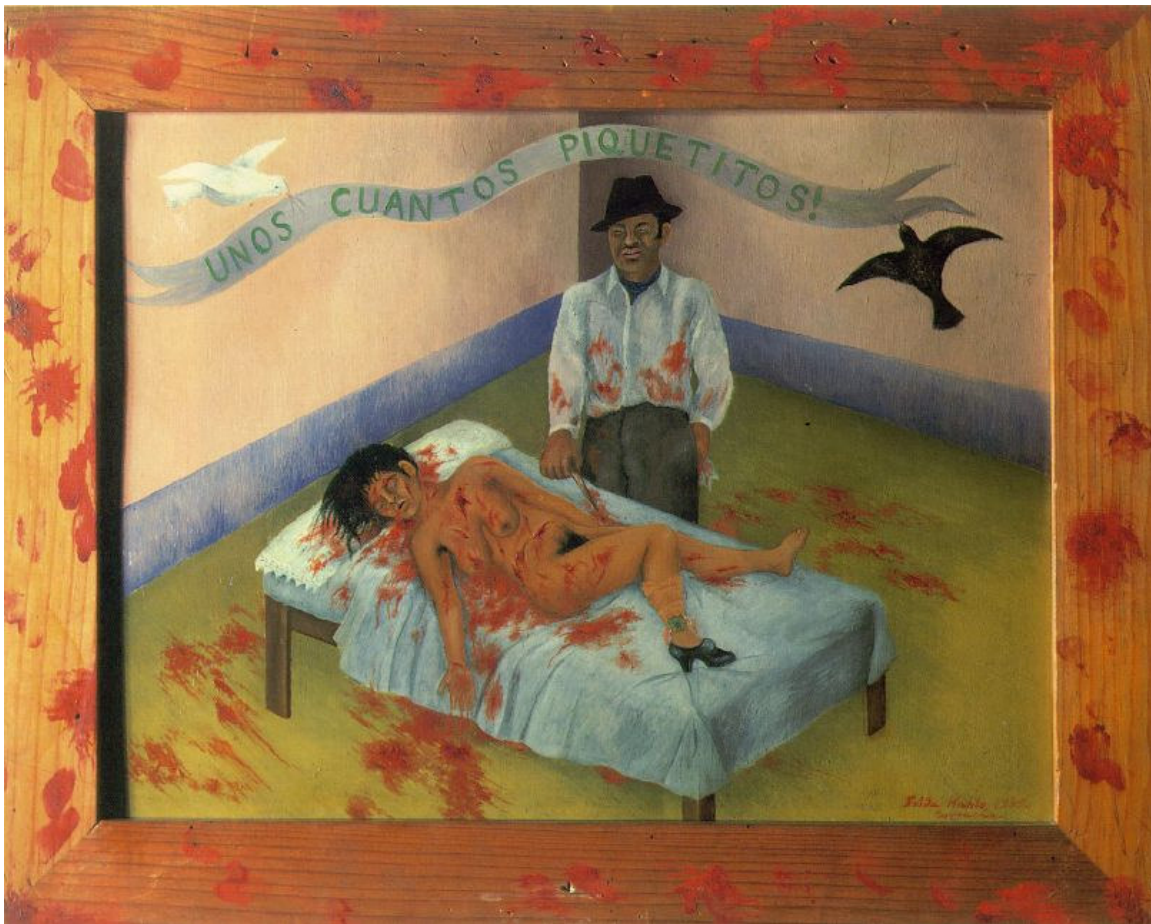
Usually she is treated as "Suffering Artist Wronged by Everybody". This has led to the further victimization of the woman by every special-interest group with a grudge from here to Seville. While the Art part has often been overlooked in favor of the Cult of Personality so well known here. In truth, Frida minimized her efforts in painting self-portraits, preferring the notoriety of the Personality Cult as her avenue to fame. Her peasant dresses and bright scarves were more intended as calculated diversions to hide her withered leg and her operation scars than any addition to the native Mexican aspect of her painting.

Nevertheless, as portrayed in the play, and as realized in real life, Frida Kahlo did possess genuine talent and her work does contribute significantly to the history of western art. Likewise, her paintings, rooted in 19th-century Mexican portraiture, ingeniously incorporated elements of Mexican pop culture and pre-Columbian primitivism that, in the 1930s, had never been done before. Frida Kahlo, in this area, was the first. Usually small, intimate paintings that contrasted with the grand mural tradition of her time, her work was often done on sheet metal rather than canvas, in the style of Mexican street artists who painted *retablos*, or small votive paintings that offer thanks to the Virgin Mary or a saint for a miraculous deliverance from misfortune.

Nevertheless, the Cult of Personality grinds on long after the artist's death. And in the case of female artists, the result is the sad switch of the Woman as Author to Female as Subject once again. In this reversal, the Female becomes the Object, not any different from a 4-color spread in *Playboy* or *Penthouse*. And in this sad switch the feminists take such a gleeful part,

portraying Frida as Victim, instead of highlighting the value of the woman's work, which Frida valued above all else, as she stated in her *Diaries*.

"My painting carries with it the message of pain.....Painting completed my life.....I believe that work is the best thing."



The play works as a simplification of ideas to stark visuals and the translation of the events and facts into a dialogue between the Frida character and a figure that has accompanied her lifelong and only realized in the last year of her life as the Figure of Death. In the production, when Frida realizes this lifelong discussion has been a kind of courting by Death, which she has desired with equal measure to Life, the stage became intense with vibrant antagonism. In a

punk moment, Frida shouts through a mirror frame at the figure of death, a bald-shaven and enigmatic Lise Roy, "Oh fuck you Death! Just fuck you! Fuck you!" It was a moment entirely in keeping with the earthy product of an Hungarian Jew and a Mexican-Indio as well as a great moment of theatre. Who else could say such a thing to Death so convincingly and be in such character? It was also the production's high point, other than the introductory description of the primary colors and their basic correlatives in terms of emotional states.

There were some additional high points, in which the scrim, behind which all action took place, variously hosted video, fresco projections and animated works in progress, and in which lighting projections filled a bathtub with smoke or blood, evoking the famous painting of Marat's murder while simultaneously presenting the events of the streetcar, however the best moments took place with simple, old fashioned dramaturgy and use of physical props. A nice scene evolved when Lise, portraying Leon Trotsky, removes the moustache and beard and glasses and toupe, applying them to the sugar skull given Trotsky during the annual El Dia de los Muertes, while becoming in the same process -- once again -- the figure of Death.

It is interesting to note, that not mentioned in the play, Frida repudiated her affair with Trotsky in favor of her lifelong attachment to the figure of Joseph Stalin, whom she continued to extol long after it was commonly known that he had casually murdered millions of people.

The play is not, ultimately about the "real" Frida Kahlo, but a take off from factual events into a place where the human spirit contends against an all

destroying power and needs to be seen as such to be appreciated. Real people are far too thorny and conflicted to be used as convenient symbols or predictable characters for theatre. Critics have stated that actress Selma Hayek looks "too pretty" to represent the real Frida with her scars and deformities. Well, that is the nature of film these days in what it does. To some extent, that is also what happened to this production, which became the presentation of an Ideal Frida that is not "real", so as to present this conflict between the death and promised release that is longed for and the urge to fill all that is with the color of life.

If the dynamism of this conflict is Frida's legacy, then it is a worthy legacy indeed, and transcends as such all the pain that went before. Rather than think about an innocent lamb led to slaughter time and again, I would rather consider the fiery rebel, as portrayed by Faucher, facing a mirror frame and shouting in face of Death, "Oh fuck you, Death! Just fuck you! Fuck you!"



Chronicle / Kim Komenich

Perhaps the most meek of us should take heed to this: What is remembered is the defiance, and not the surrender.



In no particular order:

Lighting: Sonoyo Nishikawa  
Set Design: Carl Fillion  
Diego Riviera: Patric Saucier  
Death and Leon Trotsky: Lise Roy

Video projection: Jacques Collins  
Director: Robert Lepage  
Frida Kahlo: Sophie Faucher