

[| go to Arts Mixtape index](#) | [| go to entry page](#) | [| go to other departments](#) |



New York Theatre WireSM

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Georgia Clark

Through Her Eyes

A boisterous Brechtian tale traces a mythic "earth journey" of a Native woman, exploding stereotypes with a searing wit.

"Red Mother"

La MaMa E.T.C. (First Floor Theatre)
74A East Fourth Street, New York City

May 27 - June 6, 2010

Thursdays - Saturdays 8:00 pm; Sundays 2:30 pm

Tix: \$18 general admission. More info: (212) 475-7710, lamama.org

"Red Mother," featuring the co-founder of Obie-award-winning Spiderwoman Theater collective, Muriel Miguel, is the tale of Belle, an old Native woman who, with her horse Blue Fred, travels across what was once the people's land. Inspired by "Mother Courage," this one-woman show weaves Brechtian themes with Kuna demon tales and traditional stories with a contemporary soundscape. Featuring multimedia projections, fabric hangings, and music, "Red Mother" is a unique expression of the Native American community, told from a woman's perspective. We spoke to the Off-Broadway veteran about what led her to create this bold new work.



Muriel Miguel in production shot from a laboratory production of "Red Mother" from The Heart of the City Festival in Vancouver in 2006. Photo by Tim Matheson.

Q. How and why did you come to create this new work?

A. Eight years ago, I was working in Canada at the Banff Centre. We were doing a project about justice and using Brecht's plays as a starting point for Native people to see how justice worked in a Eurocentric way and to interpret the idea from a Native point of view. I was doing "Mother Courage," and the director was from the Berliner Ensemble in Germany. She had no idea about Native people. I came in one day in this very bright skirt and she said, "Oh that's too bright you can't wear that. This is war, darling, this is war." I said, "Did you ever see an Indian fight?" We paint everything. We paint our shirts, our vest, our face, our horses. Afterwards I told people how discouraging it was. People said, "You should do "Mother Courage" from the point of view of an old Native lady." And I thought, 'Well, yeah.' It's been over 500 years, and we're still talking about racism and how Native people feel and how we're regarded. I started to put one thing upon the other, layer it in my way of thinking about it.

Q. Can you describe this storyweaving technique?

A. You have to understand stories and the passing on in the Native oral tradition. The first circle is the circle where, as a young child, you hear stories from under the kitchen table; how Uncle Joe met Aunt Lizzie or what scandals happened in the family. Those stories connect the next circle of immediate people outside of your family. That's where many of the creation stories are; stories of how did a tribe happen, how did that nation happen, how did the robin breast turn red. The third circle is how that whole group of people interact with another group of people. For instance, another nation. And then how does all these tribes interconnect and interact with the next circle. The last circle is how do we, as Native people, see the world, that outside circle, and how does the world see us. There are so many circles, so many ripples and it's so layered. When we talk about storyweaving, we're talking about a really thick tapestry of stories and how one thing affects another thing.

Q. Can you describe what "Red Mother" is about in your own words?

A. I started by thinking about women are on the fringe and who are not considered heroes: prostitutes, addicts, drunks. Even women like that passed something onto us. Otherwise, a lot of people wouldn't know who they were. That's a strong part of us. I also started thinking about the demon stories of the Kuna. Demon stories were used to keep kids in line and always have a lesson in them. They're passed down orally. The medicine people, the chiefs, sit in hammocks and they tell the stories. It was layered into wanting to do a "Mother Courage" my own way, as I see it. Thinking of the Indian wars and the massacres and the battles, it's overwhelming. How do you layer in all the sounds of these different nations and different chiefs? I started to collect all those names to give our scrolling of the wall of the dead like Vietnam and the Holocaust and even 9/11. I wanted to honor all of this history from the point of view of a Native person.

Q. What's it like being directed by your daughter?

A. It's fun. We run on the same idea, and we have the same values in theater. She's bossy and a bully and so am I. When she comes up with crazy ideas, I just go with it and see where it leads.



Muriel Miguel takes stage with a painted face in "Red Mother." A gigantic quilt forms the play's backdrop.

Q. What or who is inspiring you right now?

A. I'm tired of reacting. I want to do positive work. I want a Native theater space. In NYC, the Native people are quite vocal! Native people here have to be active. We need a theater space that's ours that we own, that's what's inspiring me now.



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