

Red Mother



Pictured: Muriel Miguel in a scene from Red Mother (photo © Cathy Rocher)

nytheatre.com review

[Matt Roberson](#) · May 28, 2010

Red Mother, playing now at La MaMa and featuring Spiderwoman Theatre Collective founder Muriel Miguel, attempts to couple Brecht's *Mother Courage* with Native American themes and stories. It is a great opportunity to see Miguel in action, who for decades, along with her group, has worked to make room for the Native American voice in the greater American theatre. As a night of gripping, thought-provoking drama, however, *Red Mother* unfortunately fails to deliver.

As its title suggests, the solo work *Red Mother* offers the stage to Belle, a mother and Native American woman who is more than willing to tell her life and times to this captive audience. Using an old red wagon for transport, Belle moves throughout a land ravaged by constant war, selling bits of cheap jewelry and broken picture frames to troops stationed along her route. Along the way, we're presented with Belle's personal journey, which actor/writer Miguel expresses in a whirling blend of story, poetry, dance-like movements, and projected images. Out of these many, many elements, a picture of who Belle is attempts to emerge. She's poor, though not empty. Along with her junk and blue hobby horse Fred, Belle carries her memories. These real memories often get confused with her unreal dreams, but the story of herself and her people is firmly intact within Belle's consciousness. But Belle is no cultural hero, and certainly not the sage Mother Earth so often associated with Native American women. This subversion of common Native American stereotype is one success of the show. Belle is, however, a

survivor. As the war has killed most of her large family, Belle lives on, using the conflict to support her existence. But for any strength that may reside in Belle, we learn in the latter part of the performance that she's also been a pretty terrible mother, offering up her offspring for profit and personal security.

Even, however, with Miguel's unique approach to the narrative (called "storyweaving") of this incredibly theatrical and interesting character, *Red Mother* falls short of providing a full 65 minutes of engaging theatre. Part of the issue is that the torrent of theatrical techniques used in *Red Mother* fail to communicate a cohesive idea. Videos and projections mixed with dreamy, metaphorical dialogue can be powerful, unless clarity of purpose is absent. Unfortunately, this is the case with *Red Mother*. It is mostly intriguing to watch, and certainly some scenes are arresting and powerful. But in the end, what does it all really mean? Pacing is also a problem here. Throughout her performance, Miguel takes brief, but distinct, pauses between lines, slowing down the flow of this play. Whether the result of directorial choice or simply an off night, this constant stop and go gave certain parts of the work a sluggish quality.

The set, by Christine Plunkett, with its colorful but well-worn hanging cloths, could be a hippie compound at Burning Man or the home of a squatter. Beyond being a suitable backdrop for Belle's nomadic existence, the draping doubles as a screen for the unique and striking projections of Canadian-based Bear Witness, whose images add to *Red Mother* a needed jolt of energy when coupled with the loud, exciting score of Russell Wallace.

Spiderwoman Theatre founder Muriel Miguel is clearly a powerful, exciting performer and artist. Her presence, even in a difficult work such as this, is bold and fun to watch. However, in *Red Mother*, with its onslaught of theatrical devices and overall lack of clarity, Miguel, her talent, and this design team, never seem to get the show to move in the direction they'd like it to go.

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VENUE

[La MaMa](#)

OPENED

May 27, 2010

CLOSES

June 6, 2010

RUNNING TIME

1 hour, 5 minutes

No Intermission

CREATORS & ARTISTS**Written & Performed By**

Muriel Miguel

Director

Murielle Borst

Lighting

Don White

Sound

Russell Wallace

Projections

Bear Witness

Sets & Costumes

Christine Plunkett

Producer

Spiderwoman Theater

May 28, 2010

<http://www.nytheatre.com/nytheatre/showpage.php?t=redm9884>