



Red Mother

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Reviewed for TheaterOnline.com By:
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Tim Matheson ©2010 Muriel Miguel in production shot from a laboratory production of "Red Mother" from The Heart of the City Festival in Vancouver in 2006.

When we think of a journey of the spirit, we usually think of enlightenment and wonder. In *Red Mother*, Muriel Miguel gives us a story where the spirit is flawed, but the journey is none the less rewarding. The one-woman show presented by La MaMa E.T.C. in association with Spiderwoman Theater, of which Miguel is co-founder, is based on Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage* and deals with the themes of motherhood and war through a Native American perspective. Using this lens, Miguel weaves together a story of loss and survival with a biting sense of irony and humor.

The play starts on a lighter tone with Miguel playing the wise-cracking Belle, telling us of her trials while humorously imparting how to smoke with one arm. Belle invites us to her wagon in another monologue where she hocks her wares. "Five bucks" is her refrain through out the play as red lights flash behind her signifying the war that is engulfing her. In between vignettes, video is also shown which lists massacres that Miguel collected regarding Native people.

Through half the play, Belle interacts with her horse named Blue Fred. Blue Fred acts as a confidant and friend as well as an opponent who questions the validity of Belle's stories. Inspired in part by Kuna demon tales, the stories that Belle tells Fred have a sense of myth about them. The audience is drawn in by the fun and whimsy these stories impart even when Miguel talks about lust. When Fred dies the play takes a turn down a darker path where the myths and legends go from a mother who lets her daughter get beaten to death by an employer so that she could have a little money to one that sells her daughter for the right price. This is the most powerful part of the show for, although the horse is playful and fun, the rest of the monologues are directed more toward the

audience, inviting them to attend and holding up a mirror to themselves while challenging their perceptions of right and wrong.



Throughout the whole play the words “survival” and “capitulate” ring. It is clear that Belle will do whatever it takes to survive. However, Miguel never seems to condemn Belle for any of her actions. Miguel pulls off this balance of criticism and empathy well as she approaches her characters with truthfulness and honesty. Although Belle can be harsh and sometimes cruel, Miguel’s heartiness and strength show that she has a certain feeling for the downtrodden women even if she disagrees with their actions. At one point she depicts a woman who lets her grandchildren get taken away because their mother is a drunk. Belle sees no profit in taking the children and thus lets them go. The

audience is not asked to condemn this woman but empathize with those in horrible situations and perhaps see a little of that woman in ourselves if we were in the same situation.

A large quilt forms the backdrop of the set, designed by Christine Plunkett, which is made in the style of a mola, a bright traditional cloth worn by Kuna women made in reverse appliqué. According to Miguel, the whole play is the mola coming to life. The layers of the play interweave seamlessly just like a mola. It is as if we are asked not to judge Belle for her want of profit, but to understand her through her personal layering, which includes her Native background and traditions as well as the sorrow of war and massacre. Interestingly, Miguel was directed by her daughter, Murielle Borst, adding another layer of perspective from another role that women play in their lifetimes.

The most successful parts of Red Mother are these stories of broken but strong women. When the show deviates from these stories, Miguel’s voice doesn’t seem as clear and sometimes it feels to be packing of so much into one. However, the power of Miguel’s performance is not to be understated. When she goes from laughing jubilantly to crying out in pain so effortlessly, the audience can’t help but connect to her stories. Her honesty

and directness is so mesmerizing that we can follow Belle's flawed justifications for her actions as she wraps herself in the world of her mola calling for survival until the end.

Venue: La Mama (first Floor Theater) : 74A E. 4th Street

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