

Cinematic 'Casa' recalls 'Frida'

Lepage's production houses glorious images, shown from a distance

Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic

Saturday, May 10, 2003



La Casa Azul: Drama.

By Sophie Faucher. Directed by Robert Lepage.



Patric Saucier and Sophie Faucher play Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo.

Leave it to Robert Lepage to create a title sequence of breathtaking beauty.

After a brief, dramatically lit opening monologue, the title credits for "La Casa Azul" begin to roll, superimposed on a stunningly simple, geometric spiral design on a field of Aztec blue, with the glowing, iconic figure of Frida Kahlo rising from her wheelchair in one corner of the frame and a heroic, portly Diego Rivera, perched on a high ladder, seemingly caught painting the scene.

Then again, leave it to the great French Canadian artist to create such an essentially cinematic effect in a blend of live actors, vivid projections and pinpoint perfect lighting effects. "Casa Azul," a kind of staged biopic of Kahlo's life that opened Thursday at Zellerbach Playhouse for a mere four-day run -- as part of Cal Performances' Celebracion de las Culturas de Iberoamerica -- features images that recall the luminous visual magic of his brilliant "the far side of the moon" two years ago.

But "Casa," named for Kahlo's beloved home, falls short of Lepage's "moon" in dramatic impact and awesome aesthetic effect. That's partly because this is Lepage working as the director of someone else's work -- the script is by Montreal actress Sophie Faucher, drawing heavily on Kahlo's writings and presented here in Neil Bartlett's translation for the show's English-language premiere last fall at London's Lyric Hammersmith Theatre. (The Berkeley run is the opening of an American tour that goes next to Davis and Los Angeles.)



Frida Kahlo (Sophie Faucher, left) gets a visit from Death (Lise Roy)

It's also partly because "Casa" lacks Lepage's presence as a performer, which was so beguiling in the multiple roles he portrayed in "moon." Faucher plays Kahlo with offhandedly natural but riveting intensity. Patric Saucier is a commanding, engagingly tender, gently comic and maddeningly macho Rivera. Bald, beautiful Lise

Roy is superb as everybody else from Kahlo's sister and the meddlesome figure of Death to a courtly, intrigued Leon Trotsky. Lepage's unique mercurial mimetic brilliance, however, is not on display.

More problematic, though, is the cinematic nature of "Casa" -- both because of the distancing effect of watching actors work primarily behind a scrim for 95 unbroken minutes and because of an accident of timing. Though Faucher and Lepage's production predates the movie, it's arrived here too soon after Julie Taymor's "Frida," a film as creatively theatrical as the play is cinematic.

"Casa" tells the same story using much the same framework -- a long flashback just before Kahlo's death -- and focusing on most of the same key episodes: the schoolgirl's approach to the famous muralist; the horrific streetcar accident; the romance with Rivera, his incessant infidelities and her bisexual liaisons; the affair with Trotsky; the destruction of Rivera's Rockefeller Center mural, etc. (Faucher's script, at least, pays more attention to Kahlo and Rivera's time in San Francisco.)

Like Taymor, Lepage excels at creating an evocative blend of his own visual aesthetic with Kahlo's -- and, at times, Rivera's -- with the help of Jacques Collin's expert projections on a deceptively simple set (by Carl Fillion) awash in the rich blues of Sonoyo Nishikawa's lights. Produced by Lepage's Ex Machina company, "Casa" is often exhilarating in its rich combinations of visual imagery with eloquent silences, pulsating strings excerpted from works by Arvo Part or stirring folk songs by Lucha Morena, Tomas Ponce Reyes and Tita Ruffo.

Faucher and Saucier are delightful in the now overly familiar first meeting of the artists. Lepage achieves an extraordinary effect in a sensual bathtub seduction that segues into Faucher's gut-wrenching account of the streetcar accident. A grueling midlife back operation is brilliantly depicted as akin to a crucifixion with imagery from Kahlo's paintings (including Veronique Borboen's wonderfully rich costumes), then wryly played off Rivera's subjection to a gynecological-like procedure.

The acting is strong, but the pacing at times seems slow and some of the transitions are as awkward as others are magical. The amount of action staged behind the scrim begins to become wearing, lessening the emotional connection with the performers. More problematic, though, is the degree to which Kahlo's life, its key moments and even some of her quotations are becoming overly familiar. One more such show, my wife observed as we left this "Casa," and the audience will start shouting the lines before the actors deliver them, in what could become the art-crowd intellectuals' version of a "Rocky Horror Picture Show."

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This article appeared on page **D - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

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