

# review: frida kahlo plays at robert wilson's center

It's not often that we East Enders have an opportunity to experience the kind of provocative theatre that was on view last Sunday afternoon at Robert Wilson's Watermill Center. Not that we don't have experimental theatre, similar to either off or off-off Broadway productions. Simply stated, while experimentation is nevertheless somewhat unusual here, where plots may be non-linear (not straight-forward) and performances may occupy alternative spaces, there's

still a lot which distinguishes the play in question, *frida@chiapas.net*, written by Maria Pessino and

Ellen Frank. The plot alone gives it a most uncommon thrust: the imaginary relationship between controversial Mexican artist Frida Kahlo who died in 1954 and real-life contemporary leader of the insurgent Mexican Zapatista army, Subcomandante Marcos.

First, the play's unique style of "magic realism."

Performed outside in the round, with audience



Actors Don Williams and John Monteleone

members sitting on all four sides, the spatial configuration may have been disorienting (magical) to the uninitiated. Even so, Ms. Pessino's staging seemed to fit the natural environment, and perhaps such blocking helped advance one of the themes as well. (Seeing the action from different vantage points, depending on where one sits, allows multiple perspectives of the controversial subject matter.)

Costuming was also special. In keeping with the style of "magic realism" which marked Frida Kahlo's art, it was both abstract and real: for example, black stripes painted on the body and steel tubing adorned by some actors signified the abstract, mythical aspects, while black pants and top worn by the hero, Subcomandante Marcos, seemed perfectly appropriate (real).

The play's narrative structure also appeared unique, keeping with the experimental nature of magic realism – both non-linear (with no direct cause and effect relationships) and realistic. (It's difficult to say with certainty that the play is written partly in a non-linear fashion, because we only saw excerpts which did follow a chronological and realistic arrangement.)

Yet the language itself, taken from from Ms. Kahlo's Diaries, Marcos' Communiqués and Ms. Frank's *Pequod*, among others, was poetic – giving a lyrical, non-linear effect to the dialogue. Taking a more substantial look at the dialogue may reveal magic realism's contradictory approach as well. Marcos' Communiqués derived from the Internet may have, in fact, been somewhat non-poetic: down-to-earth and straight-forward.

Second, the play's theme is equally unusual and experimental. Ms. Kahlo and Marcos' relationship ("an alliance of paintbrush and gun") not only has bite and passion, but their story suggests the universality of the human condition, according to the play's authors, Ms. Pessino and Ms. Frank. Moreover, an identification with both protagonists means an identification with an outsider, the "underdog" – which brings empowerment to the audience as it might have to Ms. Kahlo and Marcos.

In many ways, the authors' real collaboration mirrors the protagonists' imaginary one. Ms. Pessino recalls that "Words just flowed out of us. Whether it was Ellen or me, whomever said a line or a word, we felt free to say whatever we wanted; it would make us laugh and sometimes we would cry." Ms. Frank echoed her creative partner's sentiments: "We couldn't have written this without each other."

It's apparent that writing the play has created two sets of soul mates: one set being earth-bound (the authors) and one set unreal (the protagonists). But both are equally magical.

–Marion Wolberg Weiss

Contact Oddfellows Production for more information about the upcoming play at the Robert Wilson Art Center. 267-2471.