# WEARING HER EMOTIONS ON HER SLEEVE: COSTUMING FRIDA KAHLO'S SELF-PORTRAITS

A PROJECT REPORT

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Master of Fine Arts

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By

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ABSTRACT

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This project report focuses on Frida Kahlo's unique form of costume expression, as seen in her self-portraits. Through the examination of documents, texts, photographs, and artwork, it is apparent that in her self-portraits, Frida masked her persona behind a stoic self-image using costume, color, and symbolic imagery to unmask her inner turmoil. Frida's artwork and costume dissolved the distinction between her internal and external worlds; therefore, her personal and artistic identities are inseparable.

The American premiere of *Dreams of a Sunday Afternoon*, written by playwright Maritza Nuñez, was produced by the California Repertory Theatre at California State University, Long Beach, in February, 2004. My costume design for this production was the visual interpretation of Frida Kahlo's vast reservoir of symbolic imagery and inner turmoil as seen in her self-portraits.

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A special thank you to the following mentors for their guidance, support, wit, and enthusiasm, for without their dreams and caring, I would not have completed my journey: Barbara Matthews, Nancy Jo Smith, Michael Pacciorini, Joanne Gordon, Maritza Nuñez, Tom Cooke, the cast and crew of *Dreams of a Sunday Afternoon*, Lauren Kim, Cathy Staniewicz, Benjamin and Fania Baizer, Neil and Joanne Baizer, Maureen McGovern, and Frida Kahlo.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The very nature of an artist's self-portrait or bridge of intimate visual information imprints a connection to the world as a document that will last eternally. The artist will gaze into a mirrored counterpart, attempting to understand the reflection and record it into the perceived painted image. This creative language represents what the artist wants the viewer to see and believe. It can be composed of chronicling self-history, revealing deep personal secrets, or translating self-image into a preferred self-vision.

In her self-portraits, Frida Kahlo manipulated costume and symbolic imagery to transform her identity from a sickly, petite stature into a larger-than-life legend. Frida's self-portraits expressed the most intimate details of her life, thus unmasking her true identity and inner turmoil in contrast to the stoic image she projected. These masked, stoic images were surrounded with the symbolic ugliness of tragic events that caused her so much pain and suffering. Frida's visual statements were influenced by intense transformations due to a personal history of illness, tragedy, devotion to her husband Diego Rivera, and a strong affirmation of living. The use of costume in her self-portraits symbolically revealed the hidden emotional truths of her transformations.

From the time she was a child, clothes were an external language for Frida. When she married Diego, she chose a new identity that defined a positive self-image with her unique style of dress. She wore Mexican Tehuana dress primarily to please Diego, because he felt that the style was more sensual and pure than its western counterpart.[1] In doing so, Frida's costume also became the shield that freed her from the limits of her poor physical self-image and masked her visible deformity, therefore reinforcing her desired external persona.[2]

Clothing was as much a canvas for Frida's body as paint was for her art. Her choice of clothing was often reflective of her mood and a vehicle used to help express her feelings.[3] Throughout her life, she alternated between menswear, traditional Tehuana (apparel adapted from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Mexico), or contemporary dress as the purpose suited her. These transformations were often reflected symbolically in her artwork. The traditional Tehuana image, however, was the one Frida would use most often to express her desired illusion.

Fabric and color were two significant factors influencing this symbolic expression, as seen in her self-portraits (see Color Symbolism, appendix A). Frida would wear traditional dress made of brightly colored, hand-woven Mayan cloth. It

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[1]"Fashion Notes," *Time Magazine*, 3 May 1948, 33-34.

[2]Hayden Herrera, *Frida, a Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: HarperCollins, 1983), 109-12.

[3]Luis-Martín Lozano, ed., *Frida Kahlo* (New York: Bulfinch Press of Little, Brown, 2001), 13-17.

was not a coincidence to Frida that Mayan tradition held that the art of weaving was originated by Ixchel (Rainbow Lady), the goddess of childbirth and medicine.[4] Throughout Frida's life, she was plagued by illness and the fact that motherhood eluded her. The use of bold color in the Mayan weavings helped to externalize the emotion that she felt at being childless, as visualized in her mode of dress, as well as in her self-portraits.

I designed the costumes for the play *Dream's of a Sunday Afternoon* (see program, appendix B; and Costume Plot, appendix C) as symbolic of, but not an actual reproduction of, Frida's self-portraits or the people with whom she associated. When I began interpreting the words of the Maritza Nunez play[5] and Frida's inner thoughts (based on my research) into the creation of character costuming, I understood how a word or color could be translated by Frida's choice of dress into symbolic imagery (see appendix A). This costumed imagery, adapted into the play, would therefore help the audience to understand Frida Kahlo, the legend who symbolically wore her emotions on her sleeve.

## Background of Frida Kahlo

"You are here, intangible and you are the universe which I shape into the space of my room. Your absence springs trembling in the ticking of the clock, in the

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[4]Gerald McMaster, *Native Universe: Voices of Indian America* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institute, National Museum of the American Indian, 2004), 69.

[5]Maritza Nunez, *Dreams of a Sunday Afternoon: Dramatic Work in Four Acts*, trans. Charles Phillips Thomas (Helsinki: Suomen Naytelmakirjaijalitto-Finnish Dramatists Union, 1999).

pulse of light; you breathe through the mirror, from you to my hands, I caress your entire body, and I am with you for a minute and I am with myself for a moment."[6] Frida Kahlo wrote this passage in her diary as the continuing love letter to her husband, Diego Rivera. The words became thoughts of time passing in her life as she accepted physical and emotional suffering, while also expressing her feelings in the painted art form. Her creative language, as translated onto canvas, would not wither, make stale, or diminish her passion from within. Frida's self-portraits illuminated resistance to physical and emotional pain—the conscious renewing of a soul unmasked and vulnerable in scope. Frida Kahlo's background is the key to understanding the creation of her self-image: a dreamed illusion that would continue to flourish after her death.

Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo de Calderon was born on 6 July 1907 in the city of Coyoacan, Mexico. Her commitment to the Mexican population was always of primary importance. She confirmed this by changing her birth date to 1910 in order to coincide with the anniversary of the Mexican Revolution and by her incorporation of Mexican tradition into her style of art and dress. Frida's Tehuana costume became so much a part of her identity that she painted it as a self-representation, consciously omitting all of her actual physical characteristics.[7]

Stricken by polio in her early childhood, Frida sensed the constant presence of blackness, or fear of death. Left with one leg thinner than the other, she suffered

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[6]Frida Kahlo, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait* (New York: Abradale, 2001), 215.

[7]Herrera, *Frida, Biography*, 109-12.

childhood malice and ridicule, burdened by the nickname "Peg Leg." Guillermo, Frida's father and a noted photographer, encouraged her healing; *Liebe Frida,* as he called her, learned about the use of color, shape and artistic expression during the time they spent together.[8]

In 1925 a devastating bus accident left her body broken, bloody, and covered in gold powder thought lost by another passenger. Frida used this actual experience of unexplained gold dust covering her body as a metaphoric blanket symbolic of Divine intervention and, years later, would credit this event as a major turning point in her life: "Since the accident changed my path, and many other things, I was not permitted to fulfill the desires which the whole world considers normal, and nothing seems more natural than to paint what had not been fulfilled . . . my paintings are . . . the most frank expression of myself."[9]

Frida had no alternative but to lie bedridden and immobilized, wondering if she would ever walk again. With a mirrored canopy and special easel that her mother bought, Frida was encouraged to see and paint herself. This attempt to alleviate boredom was the beginning of her therapeutic and creative form of self-expression. Her injuries healed, but the damage done to her body left her in constant pain. Over the course of her life, she underwent many unsuccessful surgeries and medical procedures that required her to spend years in body casts. Her living pain was articulated into a

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[8]German language term of endearment.

[9]Frida Kahlo, as told to Antonio Rodriguez in the early 1930s, quoted in Herrera, *Frida, Biography*, 317.

poetically visible and emotional form of artistic expression, as seen in her masked self-image and surrounding symbolism in her self-portraits.

In 1925, to help support the family, Guillermo found Frida a job doing commercial engravings in the workshop of Fernando Fernandez. The detail in her artwork showed talent as she became more proficient at her craft and continued to paint her self-portraits. Through her relationship with American photographer Tina Modotti, Frida became a member of the Mexican artistic community. Diego was an active participant and began mentoring Frida. She joined the Young Communist League founded by Diego, and soon they began a tumultuous love affair that would last until her death.

Frida married Diego in 1929 despite his reputation as a womanizer. Frida's mother did not approve of the marriage and often referred to the couple as the aged elephant and the young dove.[10] Their marriage created a transformation in Frida's self-image. In addition to honoring her new husband, Frida's choice of wedding attire was also a rebellious attempt to slight her mother's belief in Catholicism. Frida changed the spelling of her first name (Frieda to Frida) and wore the apparel of the traditional Tehuana as her wedding dress, a gift from her Indian maid.[11] Her intent was to show that her vows were taken for Diego only, in comparison to a Catholic nun who would take her vows for Christ, as Frida's mother would have wished.

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[10]Frida Kahlo *My Dress Hangs There* (*allá cuegla my vestido*; 1933 painting), cited in Herrera, *Frida, Biography*, 109-12.

[11]Ibid., 109.

Frida's obsession with Diego allowed her to accept his many faults but also had a definite effect on her mental and physical condition, as seen in the symbolism of her self-portraits. She often suffered bouts of depression and intense physical pain while Diego focused on his craft or beautiful models. Frida lamented that she had suffered two accidents in her life: the streetcar accident and Diego Rivera.[12]

Throughout their marriage, Diego was commissioned to paint murals in the United States. Frida, the devoted wife, often accompanied him on his travels but continued to paint what was in her heart. She did not enjoy being uprooted from Mexico, for she felt that Diego was selling himself to the *gran caca* ("big shot").[13] In 1936, during Frida's visit to the United States, she was further traumatized after suffering a miscarriage in Detroit. As if that were not enough pain, Diego's New York mural portraying Lenin was censored and destroyed. Diego was infuriated enough for Frida to convince him to return to Mexico.

Frida was happy to be home, but Diego was not. He enjoyed the money and fame that he found in the United States and resented having to return to Mexico. Their marriage was further strained as Frida learned of Diego's affair with her sister Cristina.

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[12]*Frida Kahlo: The Ribbon That Ties the Bomb*, prod. Jesus Munoz, 60 min., Estudios Xystus, 2003, videocassette.

[13]Frida Kahlo, to Dr. Leo Eloesser, San Francisco, April 1931, quoted in Teresa Del Conte, *Frida Kahlo, La Pintora y El Mito* (Mexico City: Unam, 1922), 120; quoted in Luis-Martín Lozano, ed. *Frida Kahlo* (New York: Bulfinch Press of Little, Brown, 2001), 72, 76.

While staying at the Rivera's home, the exiled Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky had an affair with Frida, leading to Diego suing for divorce in 1940. Through her affairs and self-portraits, she reaffirmed her power of attraction, counteracting the pain of Diego's escapades, although her love for him never diminished.

During the year she was divorced from Diego, Frida met Surrealist Andre Breton when he came to Mexico to interview Leon Trotsky. Though Frida discounted Surrealism, Breton adored her "Legendary Indian Princess" mode of dress and artwork ("with spells on the tips of her fingers").[14] He encouraged her creativity and arranged for several exhibits of her work in the United States and Europe.

"I love Diego and no one else."[15] Finding more pain in being separated than being together, Frida and Diego remarried in San Francisco shortly before she was to undergo another major and risky operation in New York. The surgery was to leave her physically disabled for the balance of her life, yet not artistically incapacitated, as she continued to express her feelings in her self-portraits.

In 1953, Frida was given her first official Mexico gallery exhibit. In declining health, Frida was not expected to attend; however, she surprised everyone by arriving at the exhibit by ambulance, dressed in her traditional costume, resting upon her four-poster bed, and partied with her admirers until the early morning. Her last public

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[14]Andre Breton, preface to *Mexique*, exhibit catalog, Renou et Calle, Paris, 1939, quoted in Luis-Martín Lozano, ed., *Frida Kahlo* (New York: Bulfinch Press of Little, Brown, 2001), 140.

[15]Kahlo, *Diary*, 228.

appearance was in her wheelchair beside Diego at a political demonstration in 1954; seven days later, Frida died.

Curiosity and fascination surrounded Frida in death as they did in life. However, all who knew her agreed that her strong presence would continue to live in the legacy of her art.

# CHAPTER 2

## ARTISTIC EXPRESSION: FRIDA KAHLO'S SELF-PORTRAITS

The focus of Frida's self-portraits externalized her pain and suffering, including the emotional damage caused by Diego. She painted what she saw and felt. Her best subject was her reality: her own face, the temple of her broken body, the soul she had left.[1] The healing mechanism that she found through her self-portraits suppressed her tortured self-image. She eased the boundaries between art and her psyche by transferring negative into positive self-images on canvas. Famous Mexican painter and former student of Kahlo, Carlos Monsiváis, noted that

> her self-portraits, guided by a remarkable intuition, overflow with symbols that may or may not be explained and that last like hallucinations. She is severe when she is tender and tender when she is harsh, she paints herself calmly so as not to admit emotions without pretext, and she ridicules herself and the ideas that people have about her. Frida-the Lovely Lady Without Pity, even for herself—records her raison d'être et de souffrir, her heraldic motto, the strength and center of her frailties: the refusal to distinguish between dream and nightmare, foreboding and suffering. As in few cases, the work is the exorcise evoked by suffering and rage in order to relieve a body that harbors so much malignity, as in few cases, Frida's oeuvre translates inexpressible injury into visions of rebirth. Surviving tragedy is the first principle of resurrection.[2]

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[1]Carlo Fuentes, introduction to Frida Kahlo, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait* (New York: Abradale, 2001), 14.

[2]Carlos Monsiváis, introduction to *Frida Kahlo*, by Luis-Martín Lozano, ed. (New York: Bulfinch Press of Little, Brown, 2001), 14.

In her self-portraits, Frida masked her true persona, yet its essence was always painted larger than life. She used this masking to preserve privacy and personal dignity, yet the painted piercing glaze in her eyes left the observer feeling unmasked and vulnerable to the felt emotion or mood of her artwork.[3] Frida's self-portraits all depicted the same void of facial expression surrounded by a variety of realistic symbols: serenity, nature, tragedy, and emotional blackness. Her intent was not to create pity from the viewer; instead, she appealed for a sympathetic remembrance of her isolation and pain. Her paintings were full of vitality, vivid in color and depicting faith in the natural order—a triumphant affirmation of life, pleasure, fertility, eroticism, and sensuality.[4] Frida wanted to create a legend that would survive her death, allowing those who viewed her work to understand a lifetime of suffering. In a letter to musician Carlos Chavez (1939), Frida wrote about how she began to paint:

> I started to paint twelve years ago, during my convalescence from an accident which forced me to stay in bed for about a year. During these years I have always worked following the spontaneous impulse of my feelings. I have never followed any school or worked under anyone's influence, and I don't expect anything from my work except for the feeling of satisfaction I get from painting itself and from being able to express things I cannot express in any other form. I have done portraits, compositions of figures and painted things in which landscapes and still-lifes [*sic*] emerge above all. Without being driven by any kind of prejudice, I have managed to achieve a personal expression in my painting. For ten years my work has consisted in eliminating anything which didn't come from the inner lyrical motives which gave me the impulse to paint.
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> Seeing that my topics have always been my sensations, my moods and the deep relationships life has produced in me, I have often objectified all this in

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[3]Herrera, *Frida, Biography*, 2.

[4]Keto Von Waberer, introduction to *Frida Kahlo Masterpieces*, by Frida Kahlo, trans. Michael Robertson (New York: Norton, 1994), 14-15.

images of myself, which were as honest and real as I could make them in expressing what I was feeling through me and before me.[5]

## Frida's Image

From an early age, Frida was conscious of her appearance and the effect it had on others. Her flamboyant exterior self-image was constantly changing depending on her mood and, later, the state of Diego's attention. Frida often defied traditional standards by dressing in menswear or designing her own costumes. Her school notebooks were filled with self-images and design sketches that she thought of as an amusing pastime.[6] Frida developed her own unique style, blending traditional Tehuana, Mexican, and Guatemalan dress with pre-Columbian adornment as a way to please Diego and also to honor the people of her homeland while masking her crippled self-identity.

Hayden Herrera explains Frida's unique style:

> From the moment of their marriage, Frida and Diego began to play important roles in the theatrical scenario of each other's life. Wearing Tehuana costumes was part of Frida's self-creation as a legendary personality and the perfect companion and foil for Diego. Delicate, flamboyant, beautiful, she was the necessary ornament to her huge ugly husband—the peacock feather in his Stetson hat. Yet while she happily played the role of Indian maiden for Diego, hers was an authentic artifice. She did not change her personality merely to suit Diego's ideal. Rather she invented a highly individualistic personal style to dramatize the personality that was already there and that she knew Diego admired. In the end she

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[5]Frida Kahlo, to Carlos Chavez, 1939, quoted in Gloria Carmona, *Eistolario selectode Carlos Chávez*, trans. Hero Rodríguez Toro and Gloria Carmona (Mexico City: FCE, 1989), 287-88; quoted in Luis-Martín Lozano, ed., *Frida Kahlo* (New York: Bulfinch Press of Little, Brown, 2001), 191.

[6]Martha Zamora, *Frida Kahlo: The Brush of Anguish* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1990), 20.

was so extravagantly dashing that many people felt the peacock feather was more compelling (or more fetching) than the hat.[7]

Her perception of the traditional *huipil* (top) and skirt seemed to enhance her physical beauty while camouflaging her deformed body structure. Frida explained that her chosen costume adapted the dress of the matriarchal society from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. She was fascinated with the Mexican legend that stated that these women ran the markets, handled the money, and dominated the men. They were known to be brave, intelligent, sensual, and beautiful—all traits that Frida possessed yet believed she was lacking.

As part of her external image, Frida always adorned herself with pre-Columbian or artistic necklaces and dangle earrings given to her by Diego or devoted friends, including Pablo Picasso. Adding to her unique style, she combined antiquity with traditional Mexican silver rings and bracelets. Her hair was parted in the center, slicked back, and braided with bright ribbons and flowers, crowning her head while enhancing the winglike unibrow framing of her large eyes.

When traveling to foreign countries, she found her traditional dress being emulated wherever she went. While in Paris for her first major museum exhibition in January 1939, Frida was featured on the cover of *Paris Vogue* magazine. French couture designer Elsa Schiaparelli, inspired by Frida's unique style of dress, designed a gown called "Robe Madame Rivera," which started a new fashion trend.[8] The look

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[7]Herrera, *Frida, Biography*, 32.

[8]"Fashion Notes," 33-34.

became so popular that it was copied worldwide. In fact, while going through old family photographs, I came across a picture of my middle-class American parents dressed in the Frida/Diego style of the late 1930s (see figure 1, appendix D).

With traditional dress and the handcrafted jewelry of Mexico, Frida was able to identify with the tradition of female beauty and power in Mexico. This exterior image made her feel stronger and more feminine in spite of her poor self-perception and, at the same time, pleased Diego. In 1943, Guillermo Monroy, one of Frida's students at La Esmeralda, best described her stunning image:

> Her hands, placed one on top of the other, were elegant and bedecked with rings. Her beautifully manicured fingernails were long and lacquered with bright red polish. Her silky black hair was criss-crossed on top of her head in meticulous braids; beautifully decorated in the center with tiny bunches of magenta bougainvillaea. Her filigree earrings were two small suns made of gold. Smooth skin, firm and cool. Dark restless eyes seeing beyond earth and sky, black eyebrows joining to form the delicate wings of a bird. The freshest of smiles flowering on her red lips. At her throat she wore a necklace of fine intertwined gold chains with a charming and beautifully worked heart-shaped pendant encircled by a ring of stars. Her blouse was a traditional native huipil embroidered with red flowers on a yellow ground set off by a front panel of black, her full skirt decorated with small geometric shapes of gold and magenta. Resting softly on her shoulders was an elegant black rebozo (shawl), delicately fringed and sprinkled with shamrocks.[9]

On the contrary, Carlos Phillips Olmedo, curator of the Casa Azul Museum and son of Delores Olmedo, Frida's rival in Mexico for her art and also Diego's affections, does not have flattering childhood memories of Frida: "I just remember a lady that smelled bad and was in bad humor. I just remember saying hello. But I was only

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[9]Zamora, 95-96.

13. She and my mother were bohemians who dressed like Indian Peasants. Both were women of passion, formidable talent and no little ego."[10]

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[10]Reed Johnson, "The Two Houses of Kahlo," *Los Angeles Times*, 6 September 2004, Calendar sec., 5-7.

## CHAPTER 3

## COSTUME DESIGN FOR *DREAMS OF A SUNDAY AFTERNOON*

When designing the costumes for the play *Dreams of a Sunday Afternoon*, I became aware of how vital internal visualization is to the creative mind and the way that Frida used this process to help express her emotions on canvas. Unlike most people who can immediately comprehend what they are reading, the visual artist (myself included) must first create an inner visual image from the written word to understand it.[1] This process is similar to an inner dream language translated from the unconscious to conscious perspective, becoming tactile with shape and dimension expressed in the art form.

Foremost in my design process was the interpretation of Frida's visual dialogue adapted from her self-portraits. This symbolism was used as an emotional tie to her character but was not an actual reproduction of her art. Throughout the play, the aesthetic of costume design illustrated the characteristics of Frida's identity, as symbolically seen in her self-portraits and as interpreted from her diary.[2] Frida's passion for life, fear of dying, her obsessive passion for Diego, bisexual liaisons, and her

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[1]Jean Rosenthal, *The Magic of Light* (New York: Theatre Art Books, 1972), 39.

[2]Kahlo, *Diary*, 203-06.

portrayal of the Mexican traditional value system were integral parts of my costume design concept, challenging me to create a code easily translated to the audience (see symbolic translation of costume details in appendix A).

Playwright Maritza Nunez expressed this symbolism of Frida's artistic language in the script for *Dreams of a Sunday Afternoon.* Director Tom Cooke's vision brought this language to life on the stage. Maritza called *Dreams of a Sunday Afternoon* a labor of love. Her idea was to show Frida and the characters in her life as human beings first, with images and ideas created along their life's journey. She made it clear that the play was not a re-creation of Frida's life but rather an attempt to capture the essence of who Frida was, thus further supporting my design concept. The words are poetic and musical, alternating from realism to surrealism, with the use of symbolism in character action, set, props, costume and lighting.[3]

Tom Cooke envisioned the play as a dream with all the creative freedom and distortion that dreams afford. The staging was a collage of strong images, not an historical accounting but an understanding of the frustration, pain, exaltation, and transcendence of Frida's life. He opted to use several different actresses to portray the character "Other Frida" as a representation of various moods and poignant images of Frida's multiple alter egos. The physicality of each actress was as different and unique as it was to the image of Frida that they portrayed, with the following exceptions:

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[3]Playwright Maritza Nunez, interview by author, 15 February 2004, Long Beach, CA.

1. All of the actresses who portrayed Frida wore braids atop their heads representing her goddesslike self-image. Their wing-shaped unibrows illustrated the dove's love of freedom, and the huaraches on their feet honored Mexico's struggle for independence.

2. All the actresses wore hand-made papier-mâché masks void of facial expression, representing Frida's self portraits and recognizing the Mexican traditional celebration of the Day of the Dead.[4]

Actress Maria Mayenzet portrayed the larger-than-life Frida. Mystically lit imagery enhanced Maria's vision of largeness, power, and beauty of self, masking the actual Frida's disfigured petite stature and inferior self-image. Mayenzet's base costume consisted of the traditional camisole, bloomers, and long petticoat worn in Mexico by the Tehuana women. She wore this costume in act I, scene 4, to portray Frida's damaged self-image, the dream of a young "peg-leg" princess being taunted by her classmates. In this scene, Mayenzet symbolically smeared the blood of her broken heart onto a reflected mirror image (see figures 2 and 3, appendix D). This allowed the audience to look into the same mirror as if it were a self-portrait of Frida. Mayenzet also had the ability to change costumes without having to exit the stage, thus permitting for a quick transition of scenes.

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[4]Day of the Dead on 1 November is the annual Mexican celebration honoring and remembering the death of loved ones. For Frida, it was the fear of death or the pain of the dying process with which she lived all of her life.

Frida's Paris travel costume worn by Mayenzet in act I, scene 1, consisted of a brightly embroidered black satin *huipil* and traditional long skirt (symbolic of the mixed emotions at leaving Diego for any length of time; see figure 4, appendix D). This costume was adapted from the 1939 photo of Frida taken in Paris and emulated in the Schiaparelli collection.[5]

Act I, scene 3, the wedding segment, was based on Frida's 1931 portrait *Frida and Diego Rivera*. In the painting, the colors of the costumes switched the identities of Frida and Diego. This was her vision of their civil and emotional union. Based on the joke of affection that they shared, Frida often teased Diego, comparing him with a pot-bellied, egotistical green frog. Diego, in turn, referred to Frida as the passive gray dove. Symbolically represented in both the costuming for the self-portrait and the play was this emotional meshing of Frida life with Diego's. Color transformed Frida into Diego (he in the passive dove gray suit) and Diego into Frida (she in the frog green dress. For this scene in the play, Mayenzet's costume was a green (enigma and nonsense) cotton *huipil*; matching green traditional long skirt; and red (blood), hand-woven *serape* (shawl; see figures 5 and 6, appendix D).

Frida's 1939 painting *The Two Fridas* represents her duality as a result of her obsessive love for Diego. The dual identity of the two Fridas illustrated her unhappiness at being separated from Diego during their divorce. Frida explained that the Tehuana self-image depicted the woman that he loved, while the Victorian Frida

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[5]"Fashion Notes," 34.

personified the woman he no longer loved. For act IV, scene 1, I used this painting to incorporate the two styles of dress. Tehuana Frida was dressed in a turquoise (innocence) *huipil* trimmed with yellow (lovesick) and a long, light green skirt (distance). The Victorian wedding Frida wore a white (opposite of emotional blackness) top and skirt with small, red (blood)-embroidered roses (the life force dripping from Frida's veins). The costumes illustrated Frida's dual social identity with the blood that circulated between two exterior hearts (see figures 7 and 8, appendix D). The two Fridas' costumes and theatrical prop hearts were symbolic of her passion and emotional pain caused by her relationship with Rivera—Diego's blood inseparable from and within Frida's veins.[6] "My blood is the miracle that travels through the veins of the air, from my heart to yours."[7]

The final and most ironic scene in the play emulated the center panel of Diego's painting, *Dreams of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park* (1947-48; see figure 9, appendix D). Everyone he respected, admired, and loved; everything that was politically, historically, and socially important to him were symbolically represented within this painting. La Katrina (death), who holds the hand of the nine-year-old Diego, is the focal point of the mural, as well as this scene. The nurturing earth mother image of Frida stands behind the young, childlike Diego with her hand on his shoulder,

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[6]Herrera, *Frida, Biography*, 135.

[7]Kahlo, *Diary*, 215.

illustrating what would have been Frida's most fulfilling dream and, ironically, her most fulfilling self-portrait.

Mayenzet's costume for this scene was adapted from Frida's image in Diego's mural. He chose to paint Frida in a magenta (blood of the prickly pear) *rebozo* (shawl), white (purity)-embroidered *huipil*, and purple (royalty) skirt. The costumed painted image featured two butterflies (freedom and choice) in Frida's headdress and a pre-Columbian necklace of sharks' teeth around her neck (symbolic of Christ's wreath of thorns; see figure 10, appendix D). In an ironic twist, the image of Frida, as painted by Diego, showed her wearing the outfit in which Nickolas Murray (the celebrated photographer with whom she had an affair in1939 ) had photographed her.[8] To me, this was one of the most beautiful visions of Frida and Diego's acknowledgment of her equality to him.

In the final moments of Nunez's play, Frida dies in the comforting arms of her Tehuana other, a traditional and joyful version of the famous Pieta played by actress Kelly Ford. This costume of a white (purity) gauze *huipil*, flowing skirt, and lace-trimmed headdress was adapted from Frida's *Portrait as a Tehuana-Diego in My Thoughts* (1943; see figure 10, appendix D). This scene mirrored the final message in Kahlo's diary: "I hope the leaving is joyful—and I hope never to return. FRIDA."[9]

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[8]Herrera, *Frida, Biography*, 236, 268-69.

[9]Kahlo, *Diary*, 285.

The Symbolic Other (actors representing the multiple images of Frida's alter egos, as portrayed in her self-portraits) are the expression of repressed strong emotional reactions within her subconscious, as envisioned throughout the play. Petite actress Tannis Hanson portrayed the expression of Frida's strength and survival. In the painting *The Broken Column* (1944) on a barren desert background, her anguish is communicated with the use of nails stuck into her vulnerable face and nude body; her torso split down the middle resembling an earthquake fissure; a revealed, cracked Ionic spinal column, the steel corset holding her together and a bed sheet covering her lower extremities. Her masked and tearful gaze faces forward, as if challenging herself and the viewer to confront her intense will for survival.[10] Hanson's gold costume (reminiscent of Frida's gold dust-covered body from the trolley accident) combined a body-fitted unitard painted with the broken column imagery, midriff elastic banding (steel corset in the painting), face mask of sorrow with large crystal tears, and iridescent wrap skirt (hospital sheet). Her extreme jabbing pain was illustrated by large nails and red drips, representing sharp spikes and blood splatters (see figures 11 and 12, appendix D).

In 1940, Frida painted a self-portrait wearing a necklace of broken thorny vines, dangling a dead hummingbird at the center. The necklace is symbolic of suffering, similar in meaning to Christ's crown of thorns. Frida used this necklace to represent her broken heart while separated from Diego. The dead hummingbird symbolized

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[10]Hayden Herrera, *Frida Kahlo, the Paintings* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 180-82.

the quest for reuniting in love, hoping that someday Diego would return.[11] Actress Zoe Saba's costume included an adaptation of the thorn necklace and multicolored, flower-embroidered blue (innocence) *huipil* and skirt (see figure 13, appendix D).

In the dream sequence of act I, scene 10, actress Kelly Ford portrayed the amusement and frustration that Frida felt for the union of marriage combined with the deadly fear of leaving Diego while she went to Paris for a gallery show. Ford's costume consisted of a brightly colored, multistriped *huipil* and long skirt, along with flowing hair with paper flower headdress and bouquet (see figure 14, appendix D). The exaggerated size and bold colors symbolized Frida's confusion of Diego's fidelity and her loss of innocence, as portrayed in the still life painting *The Bride Frightened at Seeing Life Opened* (1943). Instead of painting her own self-portrait, Frida chose to use the image of a stereotypical bride doll, which she originally purchased in Paris to add to her curio collection, as a humorous commentary on the conformity of all brides looking alike.

In 1937, after a love affair with Leon Trotsky, Frida painted the *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Leon Trotsky (Between the Curtains)*. Throughout the play and emulating the painting, actress Lauren Thompson portrayed the coquettish Other Frida dressed in a bright red (martyrdom) *huipil*, orange (frivolity) skirt, and gold (fool's gold) shawl standing between two white (purity) curtains (see figure 15, appendix D). She was holding a bouquet of flowers and a letter that dedicated her affection to him

[11]Ibid., 142-44.

while honoring 7 November 1937, his birthday and the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution.

The symbolic masking of Frida's identity was the visual poem of her thoughts, as seen in her self-portraits and translated to the viewer, thereby unmasking or exposing her authentic self-image. The dream symbolism and images in the play (mirror, masks, paint, color, costume, and character) represented the relationship to Frida's self-portraits as a visual character study. Props were used to help the audience to understand the symbolism behind Frida's masked dreams and painted images. Traditional Mexican Day of the Dead masks and puppetry visually delineated Frida's hope of balancing her daily struggle between life and death. The large mirror that Frida carried across the stage hid any facial expression in her reflection but not the weight of her inner pain. Her tortured, fading lifeline was expressed by smearing her face and the mirror with red paint:

> I do not know what my joking dream thinks.
> The ink, the spot. the form. the color.
> I am a bird.
> I am everything, without more confusion.[12]

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[12]Penelope Rosemont, *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 145.

# CHAPTER 4

## CONCLUSION

In her self-portraits, Frida hid her identity through her masked facial expressions. Background imagery, mode of dress, and use of color communicated her innermost thoughts and feelings.

From the time she was a child, clothes were an external language for Frida. When she married Diego, she chose a new identity that defined a positive self-image with her unique style of dress. In doing so, Frida's costume became the shield that freed her from the limits of her poor physical self image by masking her deformed leg.[1] The clothing that Frida chose to use in her self-portraits was representative of various emotional transitions that occurred throughout her life. From my extensive research, a consistent pattern of dress and color symbolism emerged for me to define who Frida was internally, as opposed to the stoic mask she displayed.

The play's larger-than-life Frida had many costume changes, representing the transitions of the actual Frida's self-identity from insecurity to legendary status. Throughout the play, the Symbolic Other (multiple Frida images of her alter ego portrayed by different actresses) wore costumes that represented Frida's emotional identity of these transitions, as seen in her self- portraits. My costume designs for *Dreams of a*

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[1]Herrera, *Frida, Biography*, 109-112.

*Sunday Afternoon* illustrated Frida's multiple life transitions to the audience while enhancing the playwright's words and the director's concept with a visual interpretation of her emotional identity (see reviews of play in appendix E).

The impassive nature of Frida's imagery is the irony of her paintings. The blank stare and lack of expression on her face, as seen in her self-portraits, declared "Do not disturb my idealized self-vision of beauty." Her choice of costume and the objects surrounding her stoic self-image portrayed the horrific history and scenes of her inner turmoil. Therefore, Frida's artwork and style of dress dissolved the distinction between her internal and external worlds. Through the use of costume, Frida masked her poor physical self-image. While using her art as a healing energy, she expressed fear, hope, pain, and also what she felt was the absurdity of her life history. Frida's self- portraits and costume style portrayed the message that she wanted to share with humanity: what you see is not always what you get.

> Feet, what do I need them for
> If I have wings to fly.
> 1953.[2]

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[2]Kahlo, *Diary*, 274.

# APPENDICES

# APPENDIX A

# COLOR SYMBOLISM

## COLOR AND COSTUME SYMBOLIC DEFINITIONS

1. From the Frida Kahlo *Diary* on the consideration of symbolism created by the hues of a package of colored pencils:[1]

| | |
|---|---|
| Gold | point of infinity which always sees ahead<br>dream<br>tears<br>nerves—pleasure and pain<br>fool |
| Teal/pine | good, warm light<br>Diego's green eyes<br>miracle of the landscape<br>bad advertisements and good business |
| Blue/green | Germany |
| Marine Blue | strength<br>withered hair<br>madness<br>mystery |
| Turquoise | electricity<br>purity |
| Blue | distance<br>tenderness<br>tears<br>innocence<br>sinister |
| Blue/red | royal blood<br>fiery heat of pain |
| Blue/white | arctic ice<br>cold |
| Amarillo/yellow | ghosts<br>madness |

[1]Kahlo, *Diary*, 203-04, 210-11, 215.

| | |
|---|---|
| | sickness<br>fear |
| Canary yellow | buzzing<br>stoning<br>irritable |
| Soferino/magenta | blood of prickly pear<br>the brightest and oldest color |
| Brown | mole<br>leaves becoming earth<br>nature<br>sweet *xocoatl* (chocolate of ancient Mexico)<br>storm of blood that comes in through the mouth<br>illness |
| Red | heat of the earth<br>blood of the pomegranate<br>clay—formation and development<br>bleeding children<br>martyrdom<br>fingers of wind<br>the unknown<br>flower—female genitalia<br>veins—carriers of blood |
| Crimson | lack of concern for rational fact |
| Green/red | horrible<br>exaggerated distance by opposites |
| Orange | friviolity<br>security<br>warming rays of the sun<br>large<br>part of the sun and of happiness |
| Brown-black | love |
| Black | nothing<br>fallen soldier |

| | |
|---|---|
| | isolation<br>boldness |
| Black/red | women's productivity |
| Black/white | the universe |
| Gray | whiteness<br>road<br>silhouette<br>tenderness<br>ballad<br>gangrene |
| White | violent flash of lightening<br>dreadful<br>moonlit hailstones<br>graveyard<br>purity<br>graceful snowfall<br>airplane bubble |
| Ivory | the taste of almonds<br>the kiss of Diego |
| Deep tan | laughing<br>passion<br>searching |

2. From *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*[2]

| | |
|---|---|
| Green | warm and good light |
| Reddish purple | Aztec (*Tlapali*)[3]<br>old blood of prickly pear<br>the most alive and oldest |

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[2]Herrera, *Frida, Biography*, 284.

[3]Aztec word for color used in painting and drawing.

| | |
|---|---|
| Bright red | Frida's lips and blood |
| Brown | color of mole<br>color of the leaf that goes<br>Earth |
| Yellow | madness<br>sickness<br>fear<br>part of the sun and joy |
| Gold | holy, religious |
| Cobalt blue | electricity<br>purity<br>love |
| Black | nocturnal gloom (nothing is black, really *nothing*) |
| Leaf green | leaves<br>sadness<br>science<br>"all the phantoms wear suits of this color . . . or at least under-clothes" |
| Dark green | color of bad news and good business |
| Navy blue | distance<br>tenderness |
| Magenta | blood? Well, who knows! |
| Pink | lurid<br>Airless, oppressive |

3. From the play *Dream's of a Sunday Afternoon*:[4]

| | |
|---|---|
| Orange | the color of light and goodness |
| Soferino | magenta—the blood colored juice of the prickly pear |

[4]Nunez, prelude.

| | |
|---|---|
| Earth | brown—the color of coffee<br>mole<br>a leaf that flees in the wind |
| Yellow | craziness and sickness or sunshine and happiness |
| Steel blue | innocence |
| Aqua blue | distance |
| Green | science, Germany |
| Yellow/green | nonsense<br>enigma<br>ghosts |
| Black | nothing |

# APPENDIX B

# PROGRAM

# California Repertory Company

**Joanne Gordon**
Artistic Producing Director

**Eric Imley**
Managing Director

present

## *Dreams of a Sunday Afternoon*

by **Maritza Nuñez**

translation by **Charles Philip Thomas**

*February 20 - March 13*

Scenic Designer
**Simon Pastukh**

Costume Designer
**Gayle Baizer**

Sound Designer
**Mark Abel**

Lighting Designer
**George Cybulski**

Makeup & Hair Designer
**Barbara Matthews**

Technical Director
**W. Jeffrey Hickman**

Movement Coach
**Lee Eisler**

Vocal Coach
**Lynne Innerst**

Production Manager
**Patric Taylor**

Stage Manager
**Jenny Jacobs**

Director
**Thomas Cooke**

Original Music by Wesley Hunt

# APPENDIX C

## COSTUME PLOT FOR THE FRIDA CHARACTERS, BY ACTOR

## COSTUME PLOT FOR THE FRIDA CHARACTERS BY ACTOR[1]

1. Larger-Than-Life Frida: Maria Mayenzet

Act I, prelude, scenes 1-2

Base:
- White camisole
- White bloomers
- White petticoat
- Silver rings and bracelets
- Black unibrow, hair center part and back bun
- Tan huaraches

Under dress:
- Green *huipil*
- Long green skirt

Overdress:

- Embroidered black satin *huipil*
- Embroidered black satin long skirt
- Black shawl
- Clay necklace, gold hoop earrings
- Floral and black hair braid headband

For prelude only:
- Hand carry Day of the Dead mask

Transition to scene 3:

Remove:
- Overdress as scene 1

Act I, scene 3

Reveal:
- Green *huipil*
- Long green skirt

---

[1]Prepared by Gayle Susan Baizer.

Add:
Red shawl
Green clay necklace

Transition to scene 4:

Remove:
Green *huipil*
Green long skirt
Red shawl
Black hair braid
Green clay necklace

Act I, scene 4:

Reveal:
White camisole, petticoat
Long hair down
Smears self with red paint

Act I, scene 5:

Change to clean base and black over costume as Act I, scene 1

Act I, scenes 6-14; act II, scenes 1-5; act III, scenes 1-14

As act I, scene 1, with no green under dress

Act IV, scene 1:

All base as act I, scene 1
Yellow-trimmed turquoise *huipil*
Olive green long ruffled skirt
Plain black braided head band
Antique gold hoop earrings
Prop heart

Act IV, scene 2—Postlude:

White-embroidered *huipil*
Purple long skirt
Red shawl

Plum twist, butterfly-trimmed black braided head band
Antique silver dangle loop earrings

2. Thorn Necklace Frida: Zoe Saba

Act I, prelude, and all times other Thorn Necklace Frida appears:

Blue-embroidered *huipil*
Blue long skirt
White petticoat
Thorn/hummingbird necklace
Multicolor floral braided head dress
Hair with center part and back bun
Black unibrow
Tan *huaraches*

For Prelude only:
Day of the Dead mask

3. Gold Column Frida: Tannis Hanson

Act I, prelude, and all other times Gold Column Frida appears:

Painted column, spikes, elastic harnessed gold unitard
Snapped-on iridescent skirt wrapped to front side
Gold gloves
Gold *huaraches*
Black long wig
Gold-painted mask

For prelude only:
Hand carry Day of the Dead mask

4. Wedding Frida: Kelly Ford

Act I, scene 3:

Multistriped *huipil*
Multistriped long skirt
White petticoat with multistriped inset

Tan *huaraches*
Long black wig with large paper flowers
Paper floral bouquet

Act IV, scene 1:

White Victorian bodice with plastic chest attached
Rose-embroidered long white skirt—front closure
Black braided head dress
Center part, back bun, black wig
Black unibrow
Tan *huaraches*
Prop heart

Act IV, scene 10—Postlude:

White, thigh-length *huipil*
White long tiered skirt
Lace two-layer *huipil* around face
Black center-parted wig
Tan *huaraches*

# APPENDIX D

## DESIGN SKETCHES AND PRODUCTION STILLS

## (FIGURES 1-15)

FIGURE 1. 1930s family photo of Benjamin and Fania Baizer taken in Los Angeles.

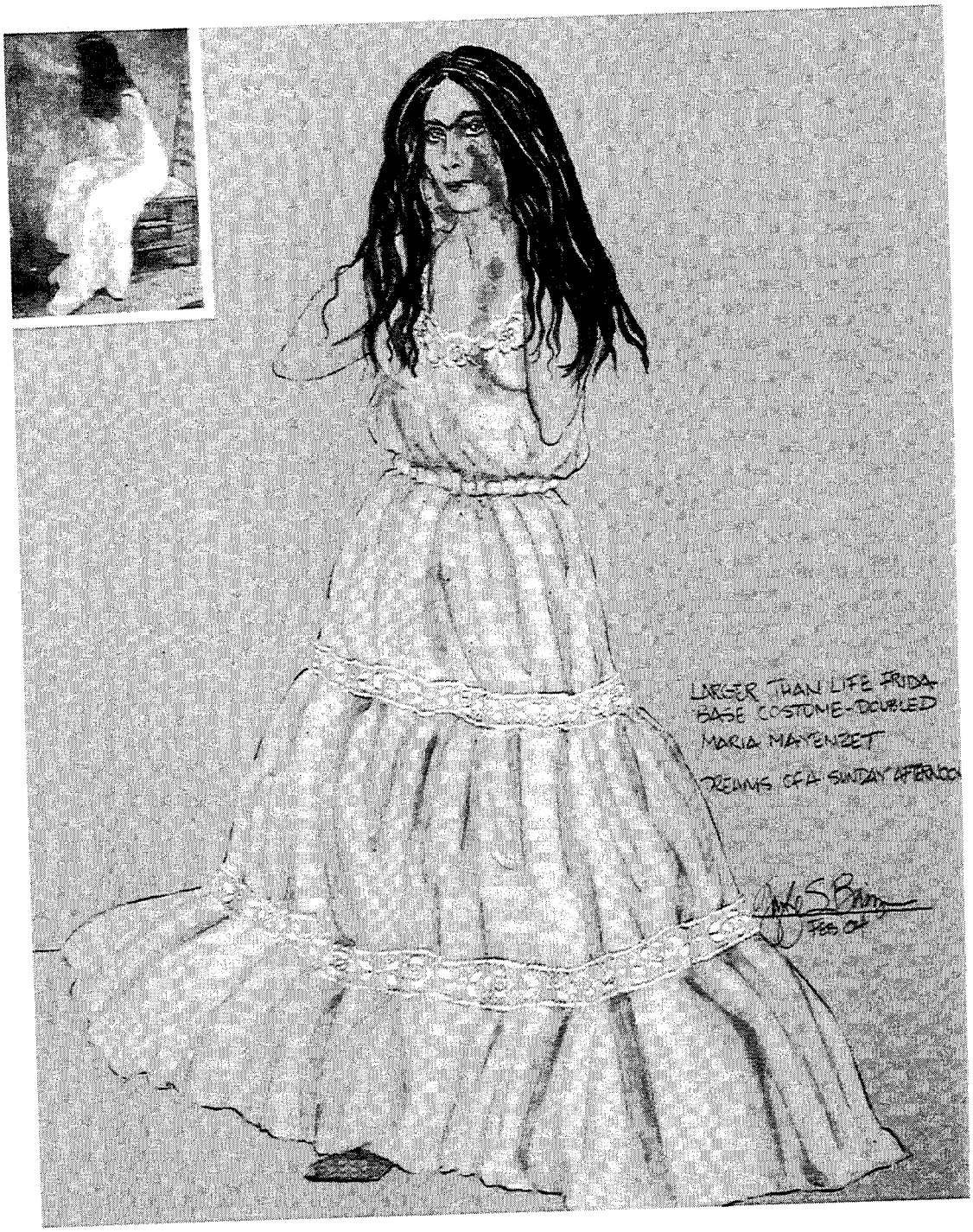



FIGURE 2. Costume sketch of Maria Mayenzet as Frida Kahlo: Base costume of traditional camisole, bloomers, and long petticoat. Drawing by Gayle Susan Baizer; photograph courtesy of Lauren Kim.

FIGURE 3. Maria Mayenzet as Frida Kahlo: Base costume of traditional camisole, bloomers, and long petticoat. Photograph courtesy of Lauren Kim.

FIGURE 4. Costume sketch of Maria Mayenzet as Frida Kahlo in travel costume: traditional black satin *huipil* and traditional long skirt, black rebozo, flower and braided hair ornament, and gold jewelry. Drawing by Gayle Susan Baizer; photograph courtesy of Lauren Kim.

FIGURE 5. Costume sketch of Maria Mayenzet as Frida Kahlo and Rory Cowan as Diego Rivera: The frog and dove wedding portrait. Drawing by Gayle Susan Baizer.

FIGURE 6. Maria Mayenzet as Frida Kahlo and Rory Cowan as Diego Rivera. Photograph courtesy of Lauren Kim.


FIGURE 7. Costume sketch: Maria Mayenzet as Tehuana Frida Kahlo and Kelly Ford as Victorian Frida in the image of the two Fridas. Drawing by Gayle Susan Baizer; photograph courtesy of Lauren Kim.

FIGURE 8. Maria Mayenzet as Tehuana Frida Kahlo and Kelly Ford as Victorian Frida in the image of the two Fridas. Photograph courtesy of Lauren Kim.

FIGURE 9. Full cast as Kahlo's painting *Dreams of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park.* Photograph courtesy of Lauren Kim.

FIGURE 10. Maria Mayenzet as final image of Frida Kahlo; Kelly Ford as La Pieta. Photograph courtesy of Lauren Kim.


FIGURE 11. Costume sketch of Tannis Hanson as the *Broken Column* Frida. Drawing by Gayle Susan Baizer; photograph courtesy of Lauren Kim.

FIGURE 12. Tannis Hanson as the *Broken Column* Frida. Photograph courtesy of Lauren Kim.

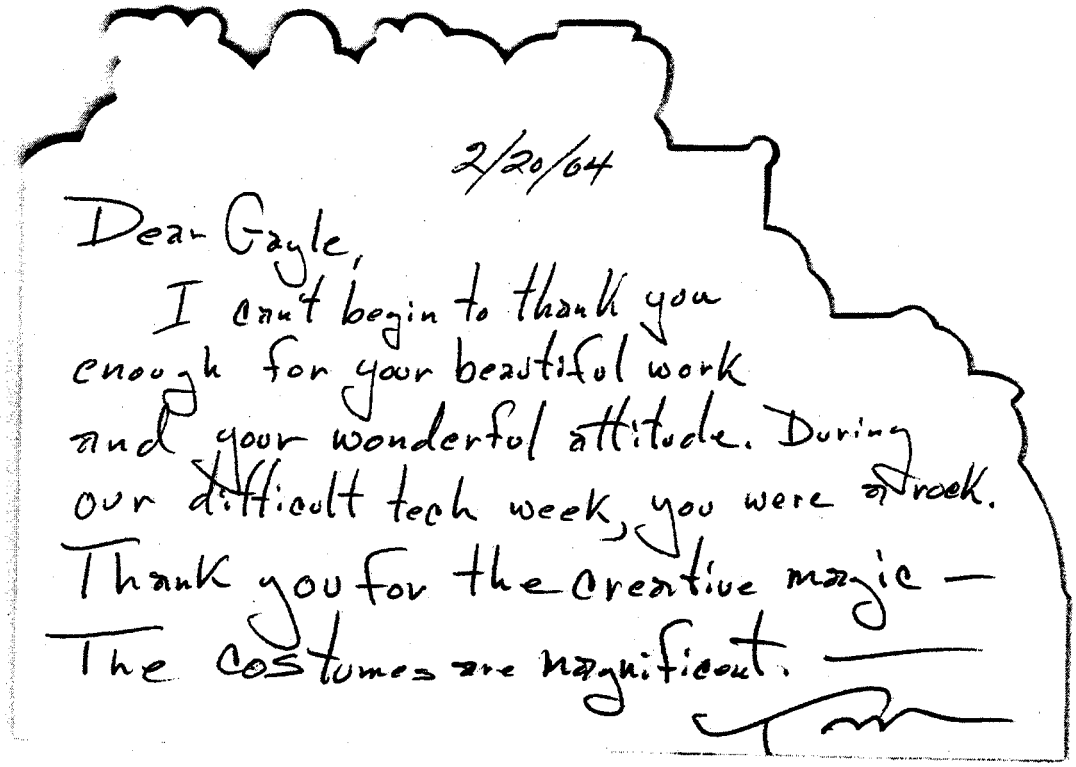
FIGURE 13. Costume sketch of Lauren Thompson as Trotsky tribute Frida, Kelly Ford as La Pieta, and Zoe Saba as thorn necklace Frida. Drawing by Gayle Susan Baizer.

FIGURE 14. Lauren Thompson as Trotsky tribute Frida, Kelly Ford as La Pieta, and Zoe Saba as thorn necklace Frida. Photograph courtesy of Lauren Kim.

FIGURE 15. Costume sketch of Kelly Ford as the frightened bride. Drawing by Gayle Susan Baizer.

# APPENDIX E

# REVIEWS



2/20/64

Dear Gayle,

I can't begin to thank you enough for your beautiful work and your wonderful attitude. During our difficult tech week, you were a rock. Thank you for the creative magic — The costumes are magnificent.

Tom

THANK YOU NOTE FROM DIRECTOR THOMAS COOKE

# Dreams of a Sunday Afternoon

## *Frieda Kahlo's Life as Dream*

An artist's worth is measured more by their long-term impact on the world as on the market price of their works. Mexican painter Frieda Kahlo, who's true canvas was her life, is thus, even posthumously, still growing in importance and joining "artistic-life" legends like Picasso, Dali,. Van Gogh, Modigliani,... Lautrec. Cal Rep's current Dreams Of a Sunday Afternoon by Peruvian-Finnish playwright, Maritza Nunez is an appropriately non-conformist play (with music) that's a viscerally stirring kaleidoscopic voyage through the life and "dreams" of fiery Frieda and her equally explosive/mercurial mate, famed muralist Diego Rivera.

Director Thomas Cooke adroitly allows for a freeform/free-flowing feel to the "dreamlike" piece, aided tremendously by the collective production values of George Cybulski's lighting, Mark Abel's sound, Gayle Baizer's costumes, Barbara Matthews' Makeup/Hairstyles --all essential to the production's impact. Scenic Designer Simon Pastukh, effectively combines a rather stark gray stage background, brought ever-changingly to life by movable/morphing props and pieces flowing through the chapters of Frieda and Diego's life. The result is a never motionless, never quite predictable relaying of the saga of Frieda, her bigger-than-life philandering lifelong love, Diego and their ideals.

Plentiful facts are conveyed--Frieda's polio-withered leg, horrible back-breaking bus accident, affairs between Diego and Frieda's sister---and brief divorce, Frieda and Liev Trotsky's tryst, Diego's New York mural idealistically-including Lenin, Frieda's surreally triumphant visit to Paris' art world, and more. Each life event seemingly floats by as if blown by the calm-then-blustering winds of these dedicatedly unconventional free spirits. Indeed, in both art and politics, the two greatest loves of Frieda and Diego(except for each other), it's made repetitively clear that they eschew labeling their artistic, political or life "styles" -- opting rather to say -- "the most important thing in life is for me to do -- what I want to do". Anarchists, Surrealists, Nihilists, Atheists, all-yet-none of these pigeonholes fit exactly. Through dialog, poetry, philosophy and music, these truths emerge. On the subject of music -- this element at first distracted me, as the performers are less gifted/polished in this dimension, yet I did became a convert to the view that this too, was elemental to Frieda/Diego's values of not letting imperfect pitch curtail expression.

Maria Mayenzet dazzles with a complex performance conveying a unique heroine. Seemingly able to turn on and off physical beauty as well as inner loving-kindness as needed to capture Frieda's multiple faces. Rory Cowan admirably creates Diego as strong, macho, seductive with the heart of a poet and philosopher as well as the lustful soul of an artist. Craig Fleming does a fascinating turn as Trotsky, mild in stature, but large in ideals, personal courage and worldviews. He's aided by Zoe Saba as a stress-weathered, long struggling "survivor" wife. Supporting actors play multiple roles effectively --other pivotal people in Frieda's life and dreams -- including alter-egos and symbolic essences. Kelly Ford, Thanis Hanson, Jason K. Martin, Lauren Thompson, Gary Grossman, Wesley Hunt and Gavin Hawk each are effective in sweeping us up in the feel, look and essence of these tumultuous characters, places and times.

Maritza Nunez has done a worthy job in creating her intimate version of Frieda Kahlo's dreamlike life. This energized version of the play makes up in charm and personal closeness what it can't match in the bold sweeping bigger-than-life strokes painted by the recent brilliant Academy Award nominated film. I can only think that Frieda's spirit would look down(or up) kindly on both retellings of her life.

***Dreams Of a Sunday Afternoon @ Edison Theatre 213 East Broadway, Long Beach Showtimes: Tues-Thur @ 7 p.m; Fri-Sat @ 8 p.m. +2 p.m. Matinee on Sat March 6 & 13. Closes: March 13. Tickets:$27-$55 CALL:562-432-1818.***

(From Joseph Sirota, "Dreams of a Sunday Afternoon: Frieda Kahlo's Life as Dream," review of *Dreams of a Sunday Afternoon* by Maritza Nunez (California Repertory Company, Long Beach, CA), *The View*, 8-21 March 2004, 7.)

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