

PARtake: The Journal of Performance as Research
Volume 3, Issue 1 – Spring 2020
ISSN: 2472-0860



Performance Review of Frida... A Self Portrait

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Kansas City Repertory Theatre, Kansas City, MO

April 19 through May 19, 2019

Writer/Performer: Vanessa Severo

Director: Joanie Schultz

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“Do you see a Frida Kahlo in me?” asks playwright and actor Vanessa Severo in the first line of her one-woman show, *Frida... A Self Portrait*, presented as part of Kansas City Repertory Theatre’s OriginKC New Works Festival. This seems an odd introduction to a play ostensibly about the artist; however, this performance goes beyond a biographical drama of Kahlo’s life. Kahlo created paintings that defy generic conventions simultaneously operating as self-portraits, symbolic still lifes, and expressionistic landscapes. Likewise, Severo uses the painter’s life and work as inspiration to interrogate the medium of the self-portrait. Who and what is actually represented in Kahlo’s art? How can this challenge to traditional representation be embodied on stage? And, ultimately, whose “self” is seen in the portrait of the artist when viewed from a historical, geographic, and cultural distance? Through the clever manipulation of costumes and props, the incorporation of movement and dance, and the orchestration of simple but effective tableaux, writer/performer Severo defies generic convention, creating a work that melds form and content to explore how Kahlo’s identity as a Latina, proto-feminist, and person with disabilities created a legacy and opportunity for women artists today.

The stage transforms into an enormous bed based on Kahlo’s 1940 work “The Dream (The Bed).” The four posters and canopy are magnified to encompass the entire stage but, contrary to Kahlo’s painting, all the elements of this “bed” are painted in shades of blue, a reference to Kahlo’s Mexico City home, Casa Azul, preserved to this day as the Museo Frida Kahlo. At the beginning of the performance, costumes litter the floor in three horizontal planes downstage, center, and up. As Severo takes the stage, the clotheslines rise creating a palimpsest of memory through which Kahlo’s life is retold. Throughout the show, the garments hung on the clothesline transform into different characters. Severo opens a book she carries and extracts a makeup brush with which she paints the artist’s iconic eyebrows across her own. The setting and props remind us of women’s subjugated loci in Kahlo’s time: the bedroom, the makeup table, the washroom, the laundry. This

visual imagery creates the landscape of Kahlo's life and represents the oppressions she faced as a woman and resisted through her work as an artist.



Photo by Cory Weaver

Severo uses movement and props throughout the performance to interpret Kahlo's story. The former combines Brechtian *gestus* with rigorous, physical choreography, the latter manifests as a puppet-like manipulation of garments transforming herself into a panoply of characters. The first gesture of the play is a languid wiping of the forehead with the back of her right hand, which takes us to Kahlo's bed circa 1954 towards the end of her life. Severo stands behind a blanket and pillow hanging from the first clothesline, transfiguring Kahlo's bedridden posture into a perspective we can view from the audience much like a two-dimensional painting. Kahlo is being interviewed by a reporter (personified by a lone spotlight on the stage floor) from a U.S. architectural magazine about Casa Azul. This framing device provides justification for why Kahlo speaks mostly in English and allows her to reflect on significant moments of her life through the symbol of her home.



Photo by Cory Weaver

One of the most metamorphic events in Kahlo's life was a bus accident that permanently debilitated her with chronic pain. Severo embodies this incident by moving to the first clothesline and grabbing it to bounce up and down to signify the motion of a moving bus. Suddenly, the music stops. She yanks the clothesline down, representing the crash. Removing a dress from the line identical to the one she wears, she drapes it on the ground, then pulls three red ribbons from the midsection to demonstrate the injuries inflicted by the accident. The visual imagery connotes Kahlo's painting, "Henry Ford Hospital (The Flying Bed)" (1932). After this scene, the dress representing the artist's maimed body is hung from a clothesline and Severo personifies a number of male characters connected to the accident. First, she dons a uniform coat representing the bus driver who explicates the details of the tragedy. Then, she puts on a lab coat becoming a surgeon delineating the extent of Kahlo's injuries to student doctors, oblivious to the personal and psychological ramifications his diagnoses may have on Kahlo. Finally, she stands behind a suit with her arms through the sleeves embodying Kahlo's German father, who insisted she perform a series of rigorous physical exercises to rehabilitate her body. Severo steps from behind the suit and enacts these movements as Kahlo demonstrating

extreme, visceral pain. It is no coincidence that the characters describing and commanding Kahlo's physical predicament and rehabilitation are men. Their patriarchal dominance over the young girl's body reflects a social message that much of Kahlo's later work would represent. Severo omits Kahlo's voice and perspective throughout this sequence highlighting Kahlo's lack of control as a patient and as a woman, both of which become significant themes in her artistic output.

While the first scene explores Kahlo's isolation as a young woman and a person with disabilities, the next vignette explores her relationship with Diego Rivera, a successful artist and her future husband. She approaches a tan suit hanging on the second clothesline to ask his opinion of her painting, represented by an empty picture frame through which the actress poses to illustrate a self-portrait. Severo bounces between the two personae by stepping into Rivera's coat or stepping back to play Kahlo. Instead of commenting on the artists' work, Rivera asks Kahlo to return the next day wearing something "more traditional." In the following scene, Kahlo soliloquies about her excitement of capturing an audience with this successful painter and decides to wear her grandmother's style of clothing reflected in Kahlo's 1937 painting "Memory, the heart." In the following scene, Diego asks Kahlo to sit for him, but the performer struggles with the expectation that a woman should only be the object of art, rather than the creator demonstrating a break between the Kahlo on stage and the writer/performer who portrays her. Severo/Kahlo resists Diego's objectification by taking the bouquet of flowers he placed in her hands and rips each blossom from the stem, placing them in her hair, thus creating the iconic image that Kahlo cultivated in her self-portraits. In this defiant act, the flowers in her hair resist the traditional representation of beauty or femininity and stand as resistance to the patriarchal dominance and challenge to the objectification of women in art.

In one of the most moving scenes of the performance, Severo explores the fact that Kahlo's injuries made it dangerous and nearly impossible for her to have children. Hanging from the second clothesline are four infant outfits in innocent white. Without words, Severo removes one of the baby's outfits and looks at it with the love and excitement of an expecting mother. After she lays it across her womb, she suddenly starts to writhe with pain. Eventually, the pain overtakes the elation, and the actress crumples and drops the white dress at the side of the stage; she goes through the same motions and emotions with

another baby dress pulled from the clothesline, but with the same results. She goes through this motion again... and again, each time expressing a more distanced disposition, an understanding and acceptance of the loss. This visceral performance connects with the theme of agency reminding us of the limited control a woman in Mexico with disabilities would have had over her own life in her time.

While Kahlo's body and gender may have been confined by social strictures, her sexuality was not. In the next section, Rivera's infamous infidelity inspires a choreographed movement sequence. When Kahlo seeks comfort from her miscarriages in the folds of Rivera's suit, one of Severo's arms reaches through the sleeve to fondle a dress hanging on the clothesline. Realizing his perfidy, Severo grabs another dress from the clothesline and hangs it from her own arm, expressing Kahlo's well-documented bisexuality. Severo dances seductively with the dress, while her attention toward the suit representing Rivera expresses defiance and resilience. Suddenly, this moment is interrupted and we are transported back to the "present" where Kahlo (circa 1954) reclines against a bedpost and explains the definition of the Portuguese word, *saudade*, which she defines as "the deepest longing for emotion, for someone or something that is now gone, but might return in the distant future." Is this the character Frida Kahlo reflecting on her life choices in lieu of Rivera's infidelity? Is this the actress Severo reminiscing about Kahlo's work and cultural influence? Or is this a loftier question about the role and significance of female artists in patriarchal culture?

The penultimate scene of the play references Kahlo's painting, "The Two Fridas" (1939) with costumes hanging on the upstage clothesline: a white dress stage right and the "traditional" outfit she wore to meet Rivera stage left. The aortic connection between the two is represented with red ribbons that drape down to Severo wrapped around her wrists. The dualism between the "pure" white dress versus the colorful traditional garment is complicated by the third image of the actor in a contemporary power suit, the modern female businesswoman/artist who is at once both Frida Kahlo in her independent years and the actor/writer Severo. A paintbrush in her hand, Severo problematizes the "phallic" genius of creation embodying the object/subject divide. Severo seems like a marionette controlled by the bodiless apparitions, but she holds the paintbrush and addresses the audience, not as Kahlo, but as an artist in her own right.

Suddenly, the performance transitions to a story from Severo's childhood about a time her mother was angry at her father – an association across time and space – but connected by the complications of Latina agency. The point is that Severo's mother also had limited agency due to societal and cultural constrictions but found ways of exerting control in her life and relationships. The reenactment of this memory from the author's perspective distills the theme of this performance: in a Self-Portrait, whose life is on display? What do we see when viewing Kahlo's work? Is it only an expression of her own experiences, or is the nature of the self-portrait a medium through which we are forced to analyze our own lives and perspectives?

Kahlo became synonymous with the expressionistic self-portrait, a presentation of the body as the medium long before feminist performance artists such as Carolee Schneeman, Marina Abramović, and Karen Finley would elevate the aesthetic to entirely new forms. Severo's performance connects the dots between the visual artwork of Frida Kahlo with the performative traditions of these feminist artists into her own life as a contemporary author/performer. Severo transliterates Frida Kahlo's biography and artistic oeuvre into a contemporary contemplation of feminist art and performance through the medium of theatre.