

'She was a big, vulgar woman with missing teeth who drank, had an affair with Trotsky and gobbled up life'

Robert Lepage tells Lyn Gardner how he fell for Frida Kahlo



**Lyn Gardner**

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The Mexican painter Frida Kahlo suffered for her art and made art out of her suffering. As a child she was crippled by polio; as a teenager she was hit by a tram, which left her in a steel corset and permanent agony; and her marriage to the communist painter Diego Rivera, an inveterate womaniser, brought her as much pain as joy. But Kahlo was undaunted and defiant. In a series of extraordinary self-portraits, she turned her body into art, pouring all the hurt on to the canvases. "I took my tears and turned them into paintings," she declared.

Now the internationally acclaimed Canadian theatre director Robert Lepage and the actress and writer Sophie Faucher have taken Kahlo's paintings and turned them into theatre. La Casa Azul, which opened on Friday at London's Lyric Hammersmith, is no traditional bio-play. But that is just as you expect from Lepage, who has previously taken liberties and leaps of the imagination with the lives and work of figures as diverse as Jean Cocteau and Frank Lloyd Wright. Rather than simply reproduce the paintings and the life, Lepage and Faucher have drawn quotes from Kahlo's art and quirky, highly coloured diaries to get inside her mind.

Kahlo is currently the height of radical chic, and is likely to be

even more in vogue when Julie Taymor's movie *Frida*, starring Salma Hayek, opens next year. But it is hard not to feel that there is something distasteful and unhealthy about the way we like our artists - particularly if they are women - to suffer. Would there be half as much interest in Kahlo's paintings if her life had been half as colourful and tragic?

Lepage argues that Kahlo embodied for the Mexican people their own pain and suffering, and effectively turned herself into a flag. "I am interested in suffering, and in particular the Buddhist idea that in pain you can find beauty," he says. "Kahlo was the incarnation of the idea that out of pain can come positive energy, and I was intrigued by how it might be possible to show that on stage.

"We need our passion plays, whether they tell of the life of Jesus Christ or of Frida Kahlo, and this is very much a passion play. Her pain was the fuel for what she did. The pain and the art go together; you can't separate them. Though she suffered, it was a suffering that expressed itself in work that was sensual and alive. She was a person who had a huge appetite for life and was full of joy. She wasn't a fragile flower. She was a big, vulgar woman with missing teeth who smoked and drank, had affairs - including one with Trotsky - and gobbled up life."

*La Casa Azul* is something of a departure for Lepage, who is more famed for his devised work, such as the recent *The Far Side of the Moon*, than for his forays into classic texts (including a notorious mud-splattered *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the National). Like most of his work, *La Casa* was inspired by personal experiences and developed over a long period of time. What makes it unusual is that it started life as a script: a half-hour radio play that Faucher showed to Lepage.

"I'd already been interested in Kahlo and had been to Mexico," he says. "In Sophie's script I saw something that could be cracked open, that had a potential for development. I have been very keen to have collaborations. Writers have often come to me before, but too often their propositions were a closed circuit. There was no real room for me. With Sophie, I realised that we would be able to have a real collaboration, something that was 50/50, that allowed for a marriage of our different interests and of language and image. As my shows go this is very low-tech, but in the theatre, my low-tech is other people's hi-tech."

Another deciding factor for Lepage was the fact that Faucher also acts and would be playing Kahlo. "Writing is very much perceived as something distinct from performance. I don't see it like that. The real writing of a piece comes only when you are performing it. It is why I like theatre. In film and TV the image is locked forever, but in theatre there is constant change, each performance is part of the writing process. People are always saying to me, 'Please send me the script of your work,' and my answer is that what I do is very rarely published because when it's written down on paper, it just isn't very interesting."

La Casa Azul has not only a text but a translator: the Lyric's Neil Bartlett. "Did you know that the Italian word for translator is the same word as for traitor?" asks Lepage. "I think it's curious that we should see the translator as a traitor. It wasn't the case here. Having Neil work with us was like having another collaborator, and it helped clarify so much, it made us play."

The word "play" is crucial to Lepage's approach to his work. "I find it very strange when people say that they are trying to solve Uncle Vanya or find a solution for Henry V. Plays aren't puzzles, they are about playing. But so much theatre has become about

performing and acting rather than playing, which is a great pity because audiences are captivated by watching people play. After all, players is the name that was once given to actors.

"Playing is also a way to find out about the world. One of the things that I have learned over the years is that when I am interviewed and asked what a show is about, I can explain it to the interviewer. But when you perform it on stage, it should be about what you don't know. It is the gap between the two that makes it really interesting."

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