

Kahlo comes to life in evocative, if not provocative, 'Casa Azul'

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UNFURROW that unibrow and relax. The life and legacy of celebrated Mexican artist Frida Kahlo are treated with great dignity and respect in "La Casa Azul" ("The Blue House"), a theatrical biography by French Canadian writer/actress Sophie Faucher and revered avant garde director Robert Lepage.

This is only the second time Bay Area audiences have seen the work of Quebec native Lepage, who has staged everything from a seven-hour epic about the 20th century to Peter Gabriel's "Secret World" tour. He made his local debut two years ago in the widely praised solo piece "the far side of the moon," and his next big project is Cirque du Soleil's new Las Vegas show.

He returns to the Bay Area with his visually stunning look into the life of Kahlo, a work that began as a 30-minute radio play by Faucher. The 90-minute stage adaptation, with English translation by Neil Bartlett, had its premiere at London's Lyric Hammersmith last year, and its United States premiere Thursday at Berkeley's Zellerbach Playhouse under the auspices of Cal Performances.

If the show, which ends its four-day run Sunday, seems familiar, it's only because another acclaimed theater visionary beat Lepage to the Kahlo punch.

Julie Taymor, the director who made wildlife dance in "The Lion King," released her film "Frida" last year, and star Salma Hayek nabbed an Oscar nomination for best actress in the juicy role of Kahlo.

The film does a better job of telling Kahlo's life story on an emotional level, but "La Casa Azul" is a far more evocative visual feast.

Based on the writings of Kahlo, mainly from her color-saturated diaries, the play takes place behind a scrim roughly the size of a large movie screen. The scrim catches Sonoyo Nishikawa's lights beautifully and gives the three actors behind it an otherworldly quality not unlike figures in a painting.

The scrim also serves to hold Jacques Collin's video imagery, which ranges from enormous Diego Rivera murals to Mae West movies to a thrilling eclipse of the sun.

In telling the story of Kahlo's life, Lepage gets some strong support from set designer Carl Fillion. As Frida (Faucher) luxuriates in a bathtub after her first sexual experience with the older Rivera (Patric Saucier), she tells him the story of how she was seriously injured when a bus rammed into the tram on which she was riding.

As Kahlo talks, the bathtub spins around and lifts until she is on her back, the water seemingly frozen in place. When Kahlo describes her horrific injuries, a menacing red light begins to glow from within the depths of the tub.

Later, as Kahlo is plagued by persistent health problems, her easel becomes an operating table and her beleaguered body is hoisted above the stage and used as a piata.

Faucher brings a passion to the role of Kahlo that Saucier lacks almost entirely in his portrayal of Rivera. While he has the girth of the great muralist, he displays little of the man's fire.

In a number of smaller roles, including Death and Leon Trotsky, Lise Roy has a marvelous chameleon-like quality that allows her to disappear into each character.

As both a writer and an actress, Faucher has a tendency to give in to her melodramatic urges. Several long monologues begin well and, with the help of striking visual elements and recorded music by Estonian composer Arvo Part, create a languid, sometimes erotic mood. But then they go on too long, and audience rapture devolves into fidgeting.

The resilient spirit of Kahlo, a brilliant artist beset by injury, illness and her husband's infidelities, comes through, especially in some of the writing. "I took my tears," she says, "and turned them into paintings."

Although the images it allows are beautiful, the use of the scrim keeps the actors and the action at too much of a distance. "La Casa Azul," a work of art about passion, pain and the spark of creation, never breaks through its canvas. This is a surprisingly polite re-telling of the Kahlo story, and while it honors the artist with its arresting visual palette, there's more provocative drama, introspection and creative inspiration in an actual Kahlo painting.

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