Classroom guide to Robert Xavier Rodriguez's biographical opera

**FRIDA**

Presented by Michigan Opera Theatre and Macomb Center for the Performing Arts in three locations around Metropolitan Detroit

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**THE PERFORMANCES**

Macomb Center for the Performing Arts, Clinton Township:
March 6 @ 11 AM (Student and Senior Dress Rehearsal—$10 with student ID),
March 7 @ 7:30 PM, March 8 @ 2:30 PM

Berman Center for the Performing Arts, West Bloomfield:
March 21 @ 7:30 PM, March 22 @ 2:30 PM

Detroit Film Theatre, DIA:
March 26 @ 3 PM (Student and Senior Dress Rehearsal—$10 with student ID), March 28 @ 7:30 PM

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**THE COLORFUL DETAILS**

- Opera in two acts, based on the life of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo (1907-1954)
- Set in various locations in Mexico City and New York City, 1923-1954
- Premiered in 1991 at the Plays and Players Theater in Philadelphia, PA as part of the American Music Theater Festival
- Book and original conception by Hilary Blecher (b. 19.. in South Africa), lyrics and monologues by Migdalia Cruz (b. 1958 in the Bronx, NY)
- Music by Robert Xavier Rodriguez (b. 1946 in San Antonio, TX)—his 7th opera
- Sung in English and Spanish with projected English supertitles
- Running time ca. 100 minutes

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FLOWER CHILD:
A portrait of Frida taken in 1939 by Nickolas Murray, Hungarian-born American photographer and one of Frida’s lovers.

The watermelons at the top of the page are from Frida’s final painting, titled Viva la vida [Long live life], completed July 1954, shortly before her death.
THE STORY OF FRIDA (THE PERSON & THE OPERA)

(Adapted from Oxford University Press and theartstory.org)

Frida Kahlo (Magdalena Carmen Frieda Kahlo y Calderón) was born in Coyoacán, a town on the outskirts of Mexico City. Her father, Wilhelm Kahlo, a photographer, was German and had moved to Mexico at a young age; her mother, Matilde Calderón y González, was of mixed Spanish and indigenous Mexican ancestry. They raised Frida and her five sisters in a strict, religious household.

Frida began to paint while recovering in bed from a bus accident in 1925 that left her seriously disabled. Although she made a partial recovery, she was never able to bear a child, and she underwent some 32 operations before her death in 1954. Her life’s work of ca. 200 paintings, mostly self-portraits, deals directly with her battle to survive. Small-scale, fantasy, and a primitivistic style help to distance the viewer from the horrific subject-matter of such paintings as *Henry Ford Hospital* (painted in Detroit, 1932), in which she depicts herself bleeding after a miscarriage. However, she does not shy away from her deep sorrow and vulnerability.

Kahlo’s art was greatly affected by the enthusiasm and support of Diego Rivera, to whom she showed her work in 1929 and to whom she was married in the same year. She shared his Communism and began to espouse his belief in “Mexicanidad,” a passionate identification with indigenous roots that inspired many Mexican painters of the post-revolutionary years. In subsequent years she drew on Mexican popular art as her chief source, attracted by its fantasy, naïveté, and fascination with violence and death; and began to dress in traditional Oaxacan garments. She rejected the label “Surrealist,” contending that she painted not dreams but her own reality.

The artist would also suffer heartbreak at the hands of her philandering husband, though she, too, indulged in extramarital affairs, with both men and women (including, it is reported, Leon Trotsky, whom she housed after his exile; Mexican singer Chavela Vargas; and American painter Georgia O’Keefe). Kahlo and Rivera divorced in 1939 and were remarried in 1940, though they continued living fairly separate lives.

Kahlo’s health deteriorated rapidly in her last years. In 1953, Kahlo’s gangrenous right leg was amputated at the knee. Her last work is a still life of watermelon. Eight days before she died, possibly by suicide, she wrote her name, and the date and place of execution (1954, Coyoacán) on the melon’s red pulp, along with the title, *VIVA LA VIDA*, in large capital letters.
THE CAST OF CHARACTERS (AND SINGERS)

Frida Kahlo
- Colombian soprano Catalina Cuervo

Diego Rivera
- Mexican-American bass-baritone Ricardo Herrera

The ensemble includes other singers who each take on several characters, including such real-life figures as: Wilhelm “Guillermo” Kahlo, Frida’s father; Cristina Kahlo, Frida’s younger sister, with whom Diego has an affair; Henry Ford; Clara Ford; Lupe Marin, Diego’s wife before his marriage to Frida; Leon Trotsky; Natalia Trotsky; American businessman Nelson Rockefeller; American actor Edward G. Robinson; etc.

The musicians providing the accompaniment are members of the Michigan Opera Theatre Orchestra. American conductor Suzanne Mallare Acton (also Assistant Music Director of Michigan Opera Theatre) and Argentine stage director José Maria Conde lead the artistic staff.
A LIFE OF AGONY AND POETRY, ON THE STAGE

On the design of this brand-new production by Michigan Opera Theatre, and how it visualizes themes from Frida Kahlo’s life and art.

A stone’s throw from where the opera Frida will soon play throughout metropolitan Detroit, its eponymous heroine painted a work that marked a new path for her, one of unusual symbols and unrelenting self-reflection—one that would lead to her being considered among the world’s great artists. The piece’s title is familiar to Detroit audiences, whether or not they are familiar with the work of Frida Kahlo. It is called Henry Ford Hospital, and depicts her 1932 miscarriage suffered there while her husband Diego Rivera labored to complete the Detroit Industry murals at the Institute of Arts. Henry Ford Hospital shows her weeping on a hospital bed, the smokestacks of the faraway River Rouge Plant rising starkly behind her, and her naked form connected by red thread to a collage of floating images, the emblems of her suffering and her survival: the baby that might have been, a snail curling from its shell, a bright purple orchid. Diego said of the work, “Never before had a woman put such agonized poetry on canvas as Frida did at this time in Detroit.”

SUFFERING AND THE CITY: Frida Kahlo’s Henry Ford Hospital (1932), painted while living in Detroit and recovering from a miscarriage suffered at that medical institution.

Agony and poetry. Frida united both in her extraordinary life, one characterized by the extremes of physical pain, bodily injury, and heartbreak, and on the other hand, the splendors of artistic creation, of indulgence in sensual pleasures, of romantic love. Michigan Opera Theatre resident designer Monika Essen unites them in her creation of sets, costumes, and props for this opera. We see on the set, in images inspired by Frida’s artwork, detached parts of the famous artist’s body: her breast bound by an orthopedic corset, an eye, her lips. “With these images, I’m breaking apart her persona as she was broken,” said Essen. But along with the agony, the designer gives us poetry: “Then we also have organic elements that she surrounded herself with—beautiful, lush greenery, a butterfly. That butterfly was very important to me, because for Frida it was a symbol of rebirth, rejuvenation, regeneration.”
These distinct parts are anchored by a heart in the center of the set, its arteries and veins spreading outward as if to unite the other elements, rather like the red thread in *Henry Ford Hospital*. Essen explained, “Frida painted a lot hearts in her imagery, sometimes on top of her, sometimes apart from her, sometimes things connected to her by ribbons. In this case, I’m not using ribbons, but the veins of the heart.” She added, “Everything is going from the world, to her, and out into the universe. If you look at the set, it has a forced perspective. It brings you into the center and then up. She did that through her paintings—she took herself, her soul, and put it out into the universe for all to see.”

Essen gained many of her insights into the woman and her work while on a “pilgrimage,” as she calls it, to Mexico City, undertaken to gather inspiration and materials for the design. She met Oaxacan embroiderers who would provide some of the distinctive shawls and dresses worn in the opera, in the traditional style that Frida favored. She was greeted with excitement in the marketplace, where men and women professed to her an impassioned love of “their” Frida. And she explored the Casa Azul [blue house], the Mexico City home where Frida came into the world and left it, now a museum dedicated to her memory.

Seeing the home proved invaluable to Essen, who “photographed everything” she saw there, commenting, “Frida spread beauty around her. That’s one of the things I like most about her. The Casa Azul is so beautiful. Everything is vibrant, painted in yellows and blues and pinks and reds. I think it’s because she was cooped up so often there, she had to surround herself with beautiful things or she would go stir crazy. In her bedroom, where she spent so much time, she had a mirror up above to help her paint, but she also decorated it, and painted sayings and butterflies all over it. I appreciate that about her—because I do it in my life, too. I surround myself with beauty just like that. I think that’s necessary in life.”

Even herself Frida covered in beauty. Enduring many surgeries as a result of a devastating bus accident she survived in her adolescence, she had over her lifetime been fitted with countless body casts. But, said Essen, “She didn’t give up. When she was stuck in bed, not only would she paint canvases, but also her casts! And they were quite beautiful. She would paint butterflies on them, too. I thought it was such sweet imagery.”

After being interviewed for this article, Essen had to leave for a two-and-a-half-hour “casting session” with the star soprano, Catalina Cuervo. In a typical opera, this might have meant she was going to hear her croon a couple arias and judge the singer’s appropriateness for the role. But *Frida* is no typical opera! This appointment was to cast Cuervo’s *body*, to cover her with plaster and fit her with an orthopedic cast, which Essen would later paint in Frida’s style.

And the people applying the bandages? Medical professionals from Henry Ford Hospital. The veins of one undying heart connect past and present, life and art.
**Discussion questions:**
If you were to design a set for the opera *Frida*, what would be the chief elements of your stage picture? Would you draw more from Frida’s art or from the actual Mexico and New York City of her time? Would your design lean toward the realist or the abstract?

Have you ever made a journey to a specific location to gain artistic inspiration for a project? What did you find there? How did it impact your work?

What creative person do you admire, whether a performing, literary, or visual artist? What is it about their art that you find interesting or moving?

Think of an occasion on which you have experienced pain, emotional or physical. Has it had a lasting effect on you? Has the event had both negative and positive impacts on your life and character?

**FRIDA ON FILM**

- A clip from the 2002 film *Frida*, directed by American director Julie Taymor and starring Mexican actress Salma Hayek in the title role and English actor Alfred Molina as Diego. In this clip, in an incident taken from Frida’s own life, she finds an ingenious way to both follow her doctor’s orders to stay in bed and yet also appear at the first exhibition of her art in her own country. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzP8koR-USw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzP8koR-USw)
- *The Fabric of Frida*, a short documentary on Michigan Opera Theatre resident designer Monika Essen’s trip to Mexico City to gain inspiration and purchase materials for her design of *Frida*’s sets, costumes, and props. Produced by Apiary: A Media Production Hive. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Whflug6ROPI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Whflug6ROPI)
- Archival footage of Frida sketching and relaxing in the Detroit Institute of Arts as Diego works on his famous *Detroit Industry* murals there, 1932-1933. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmbLAUM-jWQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmbLAUM-jWQ)
- In a press conference to announce this production, held at the Macomb Center for the Performing Arts in 2014, Catalina Cuervo sings excerpts from the final scene of the opera, which takes place in Frida’s hospital bed. Diego returns and proposes marriage to her a second time. She agrees, but not before proclaiming her independence: “The Frida you see before you on our second wedding day. Not Raphael’s Madonna or Da Vinci’s flirting Mona Lisa, I am a woman as seen by a woman. Frida as seen by Frida herself. Not as a man designs me, nor as a man desires me, but as I desire to be! That’s all I ever wanted!” Catalina then fast-forwards through the score to perform Frida’s final words from the opera, as she embraces death: “La Pelona [death], my oldest companion, together at last! Viva la vida…alegria…y Diego [Long live life…happiness…and Diego].” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kXaH8mX9Zak](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kXaH8mX9Zak)
THE MANY FACES OF FRIDA

Frida said of herself, “Pinto autorretratos porque estoy mucho tiempo sola. Me pinto a mí misma, porque soy a quien mejor conozco” [I paint self-portraits because I am alone very often. I paint myself, because I am the subject I know best].

Discussion questions:
Examine the following self-portraits of Frida, painted at various stages of her life. What artistic qualities unite them? What motifs recur throughout them? How does Frida’s style appear to have changed over time? Which of the portraits do you prefer? What are the advantages and disadvantages of the art of self-portraiture?

Activity:
Try executing a portrait of yourself in the manner of Frida. Take this to mean whatever you want: make visually manifest in the painting a theme from your life or personality; take inspiration from history or a national folk art in your style; exaggerate certain physical attributes or distort them for emotional effect; etc.

Top row, from left: Self-Portrait (1930), Self-Portrait on the Borderline Between Mexico and the United States (1932, painted in Detroit), The Two Fridas (1939).
Bottom row: Self-Portrait (1940), Self-Portrait as a Tehuana (1943), The Little Deer (1946).