

Luis Alfaro's *Mojada* Premieres at Victory Gardens Theater, Chicago

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During the dates July 12-August 11, 2013, Victory Gardens Theater of Chicago staged the world premiere of *Mojada* by Chicano playwright and performance artist Luis Alfaro. *Mojada*, based on Euripides' tragedy and set in the present-day Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago, completed the trilogy of Greek dramas recast in contemporary Latino/a barrios that Alfaro began over a decade ago.¹ The premiere of the play in Chicago, with a mostly local cast under the direction of Chay Yew, made for a dynamic performance and



Medea (Sandra Delgado) and Jason (Juan Francisco Villa). *Mojada*.
Victory Gardens Theater. Photo: Michael Brosilow. 2013.

spirited audience interaction both throughout the production and during a post-performance talk-back session as *Mojada* treated issues close to home in this city with the third largest Latino/a population in the US: migration, assimilation, intra-ethnic conflict, gender, tradition, and the effects of gentrification on Latino/a barrios.

As the title suggests, the play centers on Alfaró's Medea (*la mojada*), a humble seamstress who travels to the US from Mexico, following her husband Jason and his dreams of a better life. After Jason falls for his sexy Latina boss Armida at the construction company where he works, Medea kills her son Acan and Armida to keep Armida from stealing away her family. This storyline is framed with mystical elements, beginning with Tita, Medea's indigenous friend, crying out to the gods in Nahuatl and ending with Tita walking on rooftops flapping leaves like wings (evoking Medea's sun chariot escape in Euripides' version). Retrospective scenes of life in Michoacán, including Medea's killing of her abusive brother and a violent attack that Medea suffers during the perilous journey to the US, intercalate the narrative of life in Pilsen. Particularly impressive in Yew's production were the use of sound, such as the frequent L train rumbling on the tracks, the verisimilitude of the set design with its brick walls and dusty staircases evoking the Pilsen barrio, and the visual imagery created by projection designer Liviu Pasare to represent migration scenes.



Jason (Juan Francisco Villa), Medea (Sandra Delgado), Acan (Dylan Lainez), Tita (Socorro Santiago), Josefina (Charin Alvarez), and Soldier (Sandra Marquez). *Mojada*. Victory Gardens Theater. Photo: Michael Brosilow. 2013.



Medea (Sandra Delgado) and Jason (Juan Francisco Villa). *Mojada*.
Victory Gardens Theater. Photo: Michael Brosilow. 2013.

During the particular performance this reviewer attended, the play was met with an impassioned response by a diverse audience made up of a large number of local African-American and Latino/a youth in summer programs as well as many Anglo retirees. In the talk-back session with Arts Education Director Robert Cornelius and actor Juan Francisco Villa (Jason), spectators argued over the decisions Alfaro made in adapting the ancient play to a contemporary Latino/a context. Certain spectators (retirees) suggested that the play lacked sufficient fidelity to the original, particularly noting Medea's missing enchantress/priestess qualities, while others (students) interpreted these changes as strategic in depicting the iconic long-suffering woman in Mexican culture. Other themes such as identity, gender, economics, and intra-ethnic conflict came to the forefront. For this reviewer, the issue of gentrification in Latino/a neighborhoods such as Pilsen and Little Village was notable in the play's critique of former Mayor Daley and second- and third- generation Latinos/as like Armida who sell property to developers in these areas, thereby raising prices and driving out newer immigrants. As can be seen in the talk-back session, perhaps the greatest success of *Mojada* is the way its adaptation to a distinct US Latino/a context fosters dialogue on significant issues for Latinos/as in Chicago and other US cities. If there is a critique, it might be that the play gets at so many issues that a central theme becomes difficult to locate in the multiplicity. This may be a testament to the need and possibilities for additional plays on issues facing US Latinos/as. In sum, *Mojada* marks a successful last play in Alfaro's trilogy and a thought-provoking addition to US Latino/a theatre.

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Notes

¹ Alfaro's first play in the trilogy, *Electricidad*, in which the Electra myth is transposed to Los Angeles, premiered in 2004 at Borderlands Theatre, Tucson, Arizona, and later was staged at The Goodman Theatre in Chicago, Illinois. The second, *Oedipus El Rey*, based on Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and set in gang-infested South Central Los Angeles, premiered in 2012 at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco, California. It also was staged at the Victory Garden Theater in Chicago in 2012.