

"The best elements of musical theater and opera were on spectacular display in Michigan Opera Theater's staging of Robert Xavier Rodriguez's passionate 1991 opera *Frida*" — Opera News on MOT's 2015 staging

Michigan Opera Theatre presents Robert Xavier Rodríguez's *Frida* February 26 in Music Hall Detroit



Michigan Opera Theatre (MOT)'s first opera production of 2022, *Frida*, opens Saturday, February 26 at Music Hall in a revival of José Maria Condemi's 2015 production. *Frida* is a biographical opera covering Frida Kahlo's life from the age of 13 through her death, ranging from her youth in the era of the Mexican Revolution through a life-changing bus accident, her life with Diego Rivera—including their year in Detroit—and her successes as an artist,

revolutionary, and enduring icon. The production stars Colombian soprano Catalina Cuervo as Frida Kahlo, in a cast that also includes Ricardo Herrera as Diego Rivera; MOT Assistant Music Director Suzanne Mallare Acton conducts.

"Robert Rodríguez's bright and engaging look at the remarkable life of Frida Kahlo was one of MOT's biggest artistic successes in the last decade," Gary L. Wasserman Artistic Director Yuval Sharon said. "It makes for a great reason to revisit MOT's first home, the iconic Music Hall. Our season this year emphasizes everyday life and visions of reality, from Italian verismo to American realism. Frida is an example of an extraordinary woman who created her own distinct language for an indomitable vision of reality. From humble origins and despite crushing obstacles, Frida Kahlo forged an artistic identity that captured the world's imagination."

Frida had its company premiere with MOT in 2015 at the Macomb Center for the Performing Arts. The premiere performances were concurrent with the Detroit Institute of Arts's exhibition "Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in Detroit"—the first time in which Kahlo's paintings were exhibited locally. As a result of MOT's community and institutional outreach efforts, the opera became a crowd favorite, and *Opera News* noted that "The best elements of musical theater and opera were on spectacular display in Michigan Opera Theater's staging of Robert Xavier Rodríguez's passionate 1991 opera *Frida*."

MOT's performances of *Frida* highlight Kahlo's ties to Detroit, a city that had a profound effect on her life and art. While living in Detroit with Diego Rivera from 1932-33, Kahlo suffered a miscarriage that would have immense consequences on her work as an artist, beginning with a new work painted in the immediate aftermath: *Henry Ford Hospital*. The visceral and mystical painting draws from the ex-voto religious folk art, with a nude Kahlo, lying bleeding in a hospital bed, in the place of the venerated saint. Various mundane and metaphorical objects—including her own miscarried fetus, a skeletal pelvis, a flower, and a snail—emanate from her body, connected by red ribbons against the backdrop of industrial Detroit. The painting and Kahlo's time in Detroit marked a turning point in the artist's visual language, introducing the narrative voice and feminist themes that would come to define her most enduring work.

"Never before had a woman put such agonized poetry on canvas as Frida did at this time in Detroit," said Rivera, who invoked the painting while describing Kahlo as "the only artist in the history of art who tore open her chest and heart to reveal the biological truth of her feelings."

In composing *Frida*, Robert Xavier Rodríguez drew upon Kahlo's own blend of the folk traditions of the Mexican peasantry and the politics of the internationalist vanguard to create a unique musical language. "The music of *Frida* is in the Gershwin-Sondheim-Weill tradition of exploring the common ground between opera and musical theater," writes Rodríguez. "The score calls for mariachi-style orchestration—with prominent parts for accordion, guitar, violin, and trumpet—in which authentic Mexican folk songs and dances are interwoven with bits of tangos, colorations of zarzuela, ragtime, and jazz. Among the 'stolen' musical fragments developed in *Frida* are such strange musical bedfellows as two

traditional Mexican piñata songs ('Hora y fuego' and 'Al quebrar la piñata'), two narrative ballads ('La Maquinita' and 'Jesusita'), the Communist anthem ('L'Internationale'), Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony and Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. Spanish speakers might also listen for the rhythm of a familiar Mexican curse growling in the trombone as Lupe (Diego's former wife) insults Frida and Diego at their wedding."

In addition to his use of orchestration to illustrate her world and political views, Rodríguez's vocal writing emphasizes Kahlo's place as a unique presence in her time. "The demanding role of Frida requires not only extensive monologues, both spoken and sung, but also duets, trios, quartets, a quintet, sextet, and several larger ensembles, working up to an intricate nine-part samba finale," writes Rodríguez. "In a musical metaphor for Frida's unique persona, her vocal line is scored with its own characteristic rhythms: often in three-quarter time while the orchestra or the rest of the cast is in duple meter. Frida, thus, sings as she lived: against the tide from the very first note. "

Since making her role debut in MOT's 2015 production, Catalina Cuervo has made Frida one of her signature roles. "Frida was a very strong Mexican woman," says Cuervo, "and she knew who she was—not only that, but she didn't want anything to interfere in the way she was, and she wanted to show everyone: I'm Mexican, I'm proud, I'm different, and that's why I'm successful. I feel that the community here is so excited because Frida and Diego were such important people here in Michigan—for the museum, for the arts, for everything—that this is the right place to do this opera."

Frida is the first installment in MOT's "Coming Home" programming, which sees audiences return to the company's two historic homes—Music Hall and the Detroit Opera House—after a year of performances staged around Metro Detroit. MOT truly comes home on April 2, 2022, with the triumphant return to a newly-improved and more accessible Detroit Opera House for the first in-person opera performances in more than two years. This momentous occasion is marked by a new production of Giacomo Puccini's *La bohème*, led by Yuval Sharon and co-produced with Boston Lyric Opera and Spoleto Festival USA. In a historic first, Sharon and MOT extract hope from tragedy, life from death, and love from loneliness by staging Puccini's tragic opera in reverse order—starting with Act IV and ending with Act I.

MOT's 2021-22 season concludes in May, with Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Anthony Davis and librettist Thulani Davis's *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, in a new production led by Tony Award-nominee Robert O'Hara, conducted by Kazem Abdullah, and co-produced with Opera Omaha, Seattle Opera, and the Metropolitan Opera. *X* pairs Davis's distinctly American score with a libretto by Thulani Davis, together casting an unflinching look at one of the most unfairly maligned men in American history in all of his complexity.

Michigan Opera Theatre's 2021-22 season is a statement of principles of what opera can be: built on collaboration, a reflection of our real experiences, and a look at the familiar with fresh eyes. Using the strong groundwork cultivated since the company's 1971 founding by David DiChiera, MOT plots a distinct course for its next 50 years. Notably, soprano Christine Goerke has been named Associate Artistic Director for

three years, and Davóne Tines is Artist-in-Residence for the 2021-22 season. These affiliations are profound for the company, the community, and the artform.

FRIDA

Saturday, February 26, 2022 at 7:30 PM

Sunday, February 27, 2022 at 2:30 PM

Music Hall Detroit

Music by Robert Xavier Rodríguez
Lyrics and monologues by Migdalia Cruz
Book by Hilary Blecher
Directed by José Maria Condemi
Conducted by Suzanne Mallare Acton

with

Catalina Cuervo, Frida
Ricardo Herrera, Diego Rivera
Jennifer Cresswell, Nurse; Mrs. Ford
Leah Dexter, Dimas's Mother; Lupe
Clodagh Earls, Calavera
Brian Leduc, Mr. Ford
David Moan, Calavera; Edward G. Robinson
Jesús Vicente Murillo, Guillermo
Marlen Nahhas, Cristina Kahlo
Corey Roberts, Alejandro; Nicolas Murray
Diane Rae Schoff, Mrs. Rockefeller; Natalia
Jacob Surzyn, Mr. Rockefeller
Antona Yost, Calavera

and

Stephen Hanna, dancer
Tara Charvat, dancer (Eisenhower Dance Detroit Company)
Aine Dorman, dancer (Eisenhower Dance Detroit Company)
Maria Luisa Carillo, dancer (Ballet Folklorico Moyocoyani Izel)
Jaime Carillo, dancer (Ballet Folklorico Moyocoyani Izel)

Frida is presented with support from the Ford Motor Company Fund, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the DTE Energy Foundation.

Opera in Detroit is made possible with support from:

