

PERFORMANCE REVIEW: The Staging of Violence Against and Amongst Chicanas in *Digging Up the Dirt* by Cherríe Moraga (2010)

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Digging Up the Dirt. By Cherríe Moraga. Directed by Cherríe Moraga and Adelina Anthony. *Breath of Fire Latina Theater Ensemble*, Santa Ana, California. July 30–August 29, 2010.

Much of the critical force of Cherríe Moraga's plays follows from their unabashed engagement with questions about cultural citizenship: How do we define family, community, and nation? How do our lived performances of community run counter to juridical and other hegemonic definitions of citizenship? Who ultimately gets defined as insiders and outsiders, authorized and undocumented? How do we accept or expand these definitions on the various stages in which we find ourselves cast by accident or design? Moraga's recently premiered dramatic work, which she co-directs with Adelina Anthony, brilliantly adds to the potent vocabulary she has developed elsewhere in her writing to discuss issues of cultural citizenship: making familia from scratch, loving in the war years, touching the wound in order to heal, queer Aztlán, the danger lies in ranking the oppressions. The play's title, *Digging Up the Dirt*, carries the idiomatic meaning signaling an expedition to discover a salacious story about others; but it also signals a greater and more complex journey born from poking away at the feelings of horror, disgust, and shame that we initially interpret as provoked by others, but are actually grounded in our own affective histories.

Notably, Moraga begins the work with her playwright's notes: "My own story, with its own tragedias, is in here too (twisted as it is) to make a case for how hard it is, and how hard we do, love one another." *Digging Up the Dirt* thus continues Moraga's project of working from the personal as a springboard for her critical examination of struggle. (Those well versed in Moraga's writing will see the distinct imprint of this methodology, her commitment to deliver criticism as "an act of love.") At its core, *Digging Up the Dirt* offers a profound exploration of violence against and amongst Chicanas. How do we hurt one another, deliberately and unintentionally, physically and emotionally? When our wounds remain unexamined, how do we pass them on to those we love—our mothers, lovers, and friends (family in blood and from scratch) as well as our political sisters in struggle? How and when do we become enemies and allies, friends and lovers, jailers and liberators?

Digging Up the Dirt is loosely structured around well-publicized facts related to the murder of cross-over Latin music artist Sirena Cantante. The play weaves together two parallel stories: the murder of Sirena by Josefa, her devoted female personal assistant and most adoring fan; and the murder of mestiza lesbian artist Amada by her son, Heyoka. Amada's surviving lover, Poet, visits Josefa in prison, ostensibly to record her story but more so to work through her own trauma. Poet accuses Josefa of being a self-loathing lesbian (Josefa refuses to embrace both the word or the identity category). Josefa provides Poet with a screen onto which she can project her feelings of anger, frustration, outrage, and grief. Poet is haunted by her lover's death, having left Amada "much too soon to get the real loving done," and for perhaps unknowingly contributing to the climate surrounding her son's killing, which Heyoka confesses wasn't because his mother was a lesbian, but because, in his eyes, she was a "lesbian first." (In post-play discussion, Moraga observed that scenes of familial and intercultural violence are important because they powerfully remind us that we are internally colonized.)

The trajectory of the play moves from Poet's incarnation as a circus ringmaster calling the audience into a position of witnessing the spectacle of the play, to the play's final dramatic landing point about the healing powers of digging up the dirt and the need to create rituals through which we acknowledge and embrace that very dirt. It is significant that Moraga includes among her list of characters, "Las Pervertidas: the audience, or perverts, watching this escandaló." Throughout her writing, Moraga has shown how those at the margins constitute our greatest critical visionaries. By addressing her audience as "pervertidas," Moraga invites us to embrace and inhabit the margins as the most important zone for engagement in cultural critique because, in her words, "It is the people who are outside who are forced to talk about things." Indeed, Moraga consistently stages conversations between the characters in spaces that represent the margins: prison, courtroom, funeral, trailer home, motel room.

Through these spaces the play grapples with some urgent questions: How do women of color negotiate their various identities and the demands placed upon them by both others and themselves? How to be at once an artist, poet, lover, mother, activist, and advocate? Significantly, Moraga writes each character as inhabiting more than one role: The actor who plays Josefa also adopts the persona of a bearded lady; the actors who play the prison guards also play Sirena's security staff, an expert court witness, and a cop; the actor who plays Poet's five year old son Chavo also plays Sirena, a cop, press photographer, and judge; at times, Heyoka wears a mask, which effectively visually renders his schizophrenia. Poet's character is by definition multidimensional: her presence permeates all of the events that unfold throughout this play, and we see the many ways she shapes events as well as the various ways she is impacted by them.

The narrative and visual details that permeate the play make clear how Josefa and Poet are tethered together in a shared history of trauma, both cast as

“freaks” within dominant cultural paradigms. Visual artist Celia Herrera Rodriguez conceptualized the set and costume design images, which draw from the artwork of José Guadalupe Posada, Mexican carpas, and vintage American circus, carnival, and freak show posters. Xaime Castillas’s sound design evocatively illustrates the emotional tensions of the play and hinges together key scenes to create an aural through line. Karyn Diana Lawrence’s lighting design should also be noted for the subtle and effective ways it visually signals transitions and underscores vital plot points. An example of the attentive vision the designers bring to the play is the climactic scene when Josefa describes her killing of Sirena. Traumatic memory is never linear or immediately cogent. To illustrate this, Moraga shows Josefa’s unburdening of events taking place through recollections of the past and confrontations with the present with the visuals and sound design aiding the punctuation of each scene’s emotional signal points. Virginia Grise brings a marked level of sensitivity to her portrait of Josefa that enables us to clearly see the rich complexity of the character Moraga has drawn. In her role as the play’s ringmaster and Josefa’s confidant, muse (and at times, an alter ego), Adelina Anthony delivers a deft performance and provides co-direction that brilliantly spotlights the humor and the pathos that charges this play. In the opening night post-play discussion with the audience, Moraga emphasized the crucial role casting played in developing this work. Moraga’s writing is incredibly strong; and the superb cast cements this play as a landmark work that clarifies Moraga’s stature as one of our most important contemporary playwrights. Cheryl Umaña plays Amada with utter grace and nuance, which serves to thwart any facile reading of this mother character as a martyr. Anthony Rodrigo Castillo plays Heyoka with a level of attentiveness and care that ensures audiences do not reduce this murderer character to a mere villain. Brenda Banda’s playful portrait of young Chavo provides a delightful dose of humor and facilitates the necessary moments of levity that help audiences to remain



Hold Me, Adelina Anthony and Cheryl Umaña in Digging Up the Dirt.
Photo by Anna Rodil.

fully emotionally present with the work throughout. D’Lo’s and Melissa Hidalgo’s engaging performances as multiple supporting characters, from prison guards to concert security staff, also wonderfully add to the play’s gravitas and provide the needed counter-balance. Spaces of production are always important to the public pedagogy performed by a work. Notably, Breath of Fire Latina Theater Ensemble is a grassroots theater company located in the heart of Santa Ana, whose city is 80 percent Latina/o, the largest demographic within the state of California. The production values of this play were outstanding and extremely high, involving many professionally accomplished voices, from the cast to the designers and production staff.

Moraga’s play implores, we have to dig up the dirt thrown our way, but we also have to remember that dirt constitutes not just burial ground, but homeland. To dig up the dirt is to create new foundations. Fundamentally, *Digging Up the Dirt* is about the ways we must see ourselves as intimately bound in history as, in the end, primas, two faces like theater, sutured together through histories of love and violence. We are all definitively bound together in the tragedy of neoconservative times. And, as Moraga, affirms within this play, “I choose the darker stories because tragedy teaches harder and better than happy.”