

**SOLO BUT NOT ALONE—ONE-WOMAN  
TEATRO AS TESTIMONIO: An Introduction to  
CHELA by Dulce Maria Solis**  
Tiffany Ana López

*CHELA* tells the story of a woman who narrates the evolution of her life, from her growing up years to adulthood, and her journey to survive multiple forms of violence and cultivate a life of presence and affirmation that includes a sexual sense of self. The performance of this solo play is made all the more powerful by the fact it is based on the playwright's interviews with her own mother. It began with Dulce Maria Solis's quest to understand the ways her mother, Chela, had passed on trauma to her daughter. Documenting Chela's testimonio allowed Solis to create a solo play; but it also enabled her to articulate the threads of her own testimonio about the wounds she carried as a daughter, wounds that unexamined had led her to harbor feelings of hate toward her mother.

Trauma theorists, such as Judith Herman in her landmark work *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), assert that one of the most psychologically painful and disruptive experiences for a daughter in the grips of struggling with family trauma is to feel unsupported by her mother. Trauma is defined as unspeakable acts that initially defy understanding and leave one struggling to comprehend their impact. The challenge in recounting events is to clearly discern their sequence and identify an event as having traumatic impact with a before and an aftermath. Traumatic events also leave one feeling she has been violently put under erasure and left without witnesses. Trauma narratives are typically characterized by stream of consciousness, repetition, truncated language, and overlapping memories. Testimonios are powerful

because they are precisely about returning to memory and frankly deploying personal narrative to multiple impacts for the purposes of documenting and healing. One-woman teatro is a powerful form of testimonio because the genre focuses on storytelling in a live venue with the performer enacting her coming into voice in front of an audience, thereby turning the theater into a space that both acknowledges and affirms the presence of witnesses and the act of witnessing. And just as Solis witnessed her own mother's testimonio and subsequently became more cognizant of her own, so do we as audiences of *CHELA*. Solis's strategic crafting of the show ushers us into a shared space of possibility, a critical practice of empathy driven by the reality that everyone has a mother.

Notably, Dulce Maria Solis is a virtuosic actor capable of creating diverse characters across gender, class, and ethnicity. She originally wrote and performed *CHELA* as a one-woman play with nearly sixteen characters in total. However, as she clarifies in her note about the characters, in staged productions she portrays seven of the sixteen characters and brings the remaining roles into the play through other forms of visual storytelling and design work, via multi-media and props. As a genre, testimony often incorporates multiple narrative forms. In *CHELA*, Solis also includes video within the production. These scenes represent Chela's memories brought to life and, in their cinema verité style, document domestic violence. They also capture the figure of the young daughter, Dulce-María, and her point of view as the child picks up the camera; we perceive the shock of trauma as the camera drops to the floor, and with the shift of the camera's gaze, our point of view becomes that of the child hiding under the bed and fearfully peering out to witness her mother being assaulted at the hands of her stepfather. Through the footage of domestic abuse captured on video, Chela's memories become tangible and our position of witnessing is made active.

In her goal to present the complexity of Chela's life story, Solis deploys comedy and incorporates media and props into the play. For example, in the scene where Chela attempts to seduce her second husband Jose Luis, Solis creatively casts him in the form of a life sized male rag doll. This humorously spotlights Chela's experience of sexual intercourse with a man who is sexually ignorant, inexperienced, and generally uninterested. Playing Chela, Solis acts out the scenario, laying the giant rag doll on top of her to demonstrate the husband's quick humping—fast fast fast and then slow slower—before Jose Luis abruptly climaxes and passes out asleep on top of Chela. No foreplay, no cuddling, nothing. The scene also emphasizes how Chela's actions fit into the trajectory of her life story; in a journey to heal from violence and trauma, one often searches for people and things to “prop up” the spirit. Chela comes to realize that being a survivor of sexual assault and domestic violence does not mean she is a person devoid of sexual needs or feelings. The scene with Jose Luis in the guise of a doll offers an important counterpart to the play's framing scenes that depict Chela engaging in a poignant act of sexual self-reclamation as she chooses Pancho as the man with whom she wants to have sex. Her pleasure is both verbally articulated and theatrically realized. Notably, the focus is not on what the man wants or what he is doing to Chela (though that is part of it), but rather more so on what Chela is doing and the actions she takes on behalf of herself by deliberately choosing her own lover.

It is significant that Solis writes characters, like Dr. Gusami and Zuki, whose personal energies are driven by an affirmative playful spirit. From the outset of the performance, Solis further enables channels of empathy by revealing that this is a true story. As a theater artist, Solis performs a dual narrative of testimonio, simultaneously unfolding both her mother's and her own story. In her artist's statement, the playwright speaks frankly about growing up hating her mother, and she affirms it was the project of interviewing her mother for this play that allowed her to gain a deeper awareness and understanding about

the events of violence that shaped her mother's life, and in turn her own. The project of constructing Chela's testimonio allowed Solis as a daughter to comprehend the life of her mother through a lens of empathy, one based on their shared identity as women navigating a patriarchal world in all its hazards of history. Significantly, like her daughter Dulce María, Chela grew up with a mother (represented by the play's figure of Angelita) who passed on her own wounds. *CHELA* is thus a prism reflecting generations of struggle. In this way, *CHELA* adds to Chicana discourse in its theorizing of mother-daughter relationships as foundational to understanding Chicana identity.