

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Dulce Maria Solis

As a little girl, I watched my mother, Chela, take and accept verbal and domestic abuse. Intuitively, I knew that what people were doing to her and what she was accepting as normal could not be healthy. My reaction was to feel hate toward my mother and the people who were abusing her. While I hid behind a smile (a trait inherited from my mother), I yearned to tell someone, anyone. But the potential someones and anyones surrounding us could not be counted on to help, so I bottled all up, waiting for the right chance to speak about it.

Fast forward to the year 2002. I was one semester from completing my baccalaureate in theater, and I needed a culminating project. Here was the opportunity for me to write about what I had longed to express since I was a little girl. I was going to do it. I was going to write a play about the “Finito Period” of our lives: The six years of abuse my mother and I endured under my brother and sister’s father. I was going to craft bullet point questions and interview my mother about this period, write the story, feel my catharsis, and move on.

However, as it turned out, my mother’s intrinsic psyche, plus the many years of abuse she had endured, created a persona that was difficult to interview in the methodical manner I initially envisioned. For one, she had a tendency to dismiss tragedies as unimportant, frequently bursting into laughter or digressing to avoid the subjects that threatened her sense of self or otherwise risked making her feel traumatized. She lacked the ability to answer the kind of questions that forced her to defend her actions or hold other people

responsible. I also discovered that my mother could not grasp concepts of aspirations or personal fulfillment. She could not fathom questions like, “What did you want to be when you grow up?” or “Now that you are free from Finito, what do you want to do with your life?”

It soon became apparent that in order for me to understand and make sense of how my mother ended up at the “Finito Period” of our lives, I was going to have to forego the traditional interview style. Instead, I would have to find a way to encourage my mother to talk freely about her childhood leading up to the “Finito Period.” Better to press record on the tape player and connect the dots later.

At the end of our one-month interview, the change in tactics turned out to be a blessing in disguise. By interviewing Chela about her life in chronological order and in a low-pressure atmosphere, I discovered ancestors—people I didn’t even know existed. I also learned that some of the people I had adored were people that actually hurt my mom; she had protected me from this knowledge so that I could have a sense of family and community.

I had no idea that in asking my mother to fill in the blanks of her life, I would learn to love the woman I grew up hating. That this woman, who I always thought of as horrifically meek and docile, had actually protected me from so very much, all so that I could have a better life. Only in getting to know my mother’s life trajectory and her own rationalizations—in her words and from her point of view—was I able to fully understand the actions she took in response to the events in her life. Only then was I able to see that my mother did the best she could with the person she was raised to be and the life circumstances in which she found herself.

My artistic process formed *CHELA*, which chronicles the same trajectory of discovery documented by my interviews. Monologue by monologue, it is a story that reveals the makings of a domestic violence victim and survivor, told in the same mode of discourse in which my mother recounted her story. Digressions, laughter in the face of tragedy, dramatizations of triviality, all convey a complex journey of emotions. It is through the bipolarity of tragedy and comedy that the audience learns victims of domestic violence are survivors who have many layers and facets, and at the root, it is often lack of resources, education, and money that makes people fall prey to their abusers.

When I first started to write *CHELA*, it did not come from a place of wanting to understand my mother. Rather, it came from a very self-centered place of wanting to regurgitate the pain that had fermented inside me over the years so I could feel better. I had no idea that the interview process and the obstacles it presented would allow me to see my mother holistically and draw us closer. And I definitely did not know that in my hands I had a story, one that not only needed to be told but also expressed on a public stage to help others.

Production History

CHELA has toured widely and been featured at the New York Fringe Festival (2012) and the Hollywood Fringe Festival (2011). The play received its Los Angeles Premiere at the Frida Kahlo Theater (October 2008) as a bilingual production and its first English language production at Casa 0101 (February 2010) with productions at MECA (Multicultural Education Through Counseling and the Arts) in Houston, Texas (April 2010), the Santa Monica Playhouse (October 2010), and the Ion Theatre in San Diego (June 2011). *CHELA* has also been performed for college audiences at California State University, San Marcos. A film version of the story is currently underway.