



Posted: Thurs., Jun. 5, 2003, 6:19pm PT

La Casa Azul

(Zellerbach Playhouse, Berkeley; 471 seats; \$52) A Cal Performances presentation of a stage work in one act, directed by Robert Lepage, text by Sophie Faucher based on the writings of Frida Kahlo, English translation by Neil Bartlett.

With: Sophie Faucher, Lise Roy, Patric Saucier.

By [DENNIS HARVEY](#)

It's always possible that a good artist will shape something new out of familiar terrain. But that does not occur with French Canadian theater auteur Robert Lepage's latest play-cum-spectacle "La Casa Azul." When dramatizing the life of the most overexposed dead woman in current Western art (Frida Kahlo), then setting it to the 20th century music most overexposed in all media during the last two decades (Estonian composer Arvo Part's four pieces collected on the disc "Tabula Rasa"), that's a lot of overexposure to overcome.

Lepage can't be blamed for everyone else jumping on the Kahlo bandwagon before him: His playwright and actor Sophie Faucher has apparently been fascinated with the Mexican artist for years, penning a half-hour radio play drawn from the subject's writings before approaching the

director with an idea to expand and stage it. Still, by now it would take a very imaginative approach to avoid *deja vu* given Julie Taymor's recent film and all the other recent Kahlo-inspired efforts.

Which is precisely what is lacking here. As live phantasmagoria based on Kahlo's own heavily symbolic, autobiographical, surreal canvases, "La Casa Azul" is sometimes technically ingenious. (Lepage's black-backdrop tableaux also looked a tad forlorn on the large Zellerbach stage, which only occasionally is truly filled by rear film projections.)

Faucher herself plays Kahlo from her youthful mentorship under demanding fellow artist/future mate Diego Rivera (the mountainous Patric Saucier) to the famous deathbed on which her agonized body at last gave up in 1954, at age 47. In between are all the familiar crescendos: The crippling streetcar accident, friendship with Trotsky, controversial trips to the U.S., bisexual affairs, break with womanizing Rivera when he seduces her sister, degenerative medical conditions, et al.

Lepage's multimedia visual ideas here tend to be clever yet heavy-handed: An easel turns into an operating table, a canopied bed into a crucifix, Kahlo herself into a battered pinata uncomfortably dangled by her head. Strangely, the most fertile images here -- and the closest in essence to Kahlo's own -- are two sequences excised from Mae West films.

The first is West's classic number as slide-projected *objet d'art* (transformed into butterfly, spider, Statue of Liberty) in 1934's "Belle of the '90s," used to backdrop Frida and Diego's unhappy trip northward. Another is from the more obscure 1943 pic "The Heat's On" and features not West but a boogie woogie trumpeter fingering his instrument with a macabre hand puppet.

Stuck either striking poses or declaiming famous quotes, Faucher and Saucier deliver performances that are game but broad; same goes for Lise Roy, who plays various

figures when not cast as a bald, M.C.-style Miss Muerte mouthing words of deadly portent. Abetting Part's undeniably brilliant but wildly overused (in film, dance and theater since the late '80s) pieces, Mexican folk songs sometimes liven up the audio component.

"La Casa Azul" is a redundancy that provides only pale reflection of Kahlo's enduringly potent art and proves a waste of Lepage's wizardry.

Sets, Carl Poirier; lighting, Sonoyo Nishikawa; costumes, Veronique Borboen; props, Sylvia Courbron; makeup and hair, Angelo Barsetti; wigs, Rachel Tremblay; projected images, Jacques Collin; assistant director, Normand Poirier. Opened, reviewed May 8, 2003. Closed May 11. Running time: 1 HOUR, 20 MIN.

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