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Rewriting Greek Tragedies as Immigrant Stories
Daniel Pollack-Pelzner
The New York Times
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Luis Alfaro, whose latest play is an adaptation of “Medea,” appreciates such “primal” points of origin: “They get to the essence: why we hurt each other, this inability to forgive.”

Luis Alfaro at the Public Theater, where his play “Mojada” is in previews.
Erik Tanner for The New York Times

Luis Alfaro didn’t expect to find the heroine of a Greek tragedy at a juvenile hall in Tucson, Ariz.

As a traveling playwright teaching a workshop for teen felons in 1999, he met a promising student: a 13-year-old Mexican-American girl who, he learned, had killed her

mother for putting out a hit on her father, a drug dealer. Fascinated by her story, he went to the theater that night and spotted a deal in the lobby bookshop: 10 Greek plays for $10.

“The first play was ‘Electra,’ the story of a daughter who murders her mother for killing her father,” Mr. Alfaro recalled recently. “I went: ‘Oh my God! I have to adapt this play.’” “Electricidad: A Chicano Take on the Tragedy of ‘Electra’” updated Sophocles, beat for beat, to Mr. Alfaro’s native Los Angeles. The title character mourns her father, a slain kingpin, and plots revenge against her entrepreneurial mother, while a gossiping threesome of fatalistic “mujeres” serves as a Spanglish chorus.

Produced more than 30 times around the country, “Electricidad” inaugurated a Greek trilogy by Mr. Alfaro that treats Latino figures on the margins with mythic dignity. In 2017, “Oedipus el Rey” sold out the Public Theater. This month, the Public will present Mr. Alfaro’s latest, “Mojada,” a version of Euripides’ “Medea.”

“The Greeks are so primal,” Mr. Alfaro said. “They get to the essence: why we hurt each other, this inability to forgive.”

For the son of Chicano farm workers, retelling these primal stories fulfills a cultural mission. “How do I bring my community into the modern theater?” Mr. Alfaro, a MacArthur Fellow, asks. “How are we part of the classics, too?”

In Euripides’ play, Medea is an Eastern sorceress who falls in love with Jason, of Argonaut fame, and helps him nab her father’s Golden Fleece. She leaves her home to return with him to Greece, but when Jason dumps her for the daughter of a Corinthian king — 2,000-year-old spoiler alert! — Medea poisons his new bride and kills her own children before flying away in a celestial chariot.

Whether it’s considered xenophobic or sympathetic, misogynist or proto-feminist, “Medea” is “the oldest immigration story ever written,” according to Chay Yew, who is directing “Mojada” at the Public, where it opens on July 17. Six years ago, when they began working on the play, Mr. Yew encouraged Mr. Alfaro to gather stories from undocumented immigrants so he could ground Medea’s journey in contemporary America.

The Greek chorus in “Medea” reinforced this interpretation for Mr. Alfaro. “They say, ‘She’s soiling our land,’ and I thought: ‘Ah, this is an immigrant story about a woman in a country where she’s not wanted.’”

Sabina Zúñiga Varela and Benjamin Luis McCracken as mother and son in “Mojada.”
Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Mr. Alfaro’s version casts Medea (Sabina Zúñiga Varela) as a young indigenous seamstress from Michoacán who followed her beloved Jason on a harrowing passage across the border. (The sexual assault she suffered in the crossing came from an account Mr. Alfaro collected in his interviews.) Traumatized and undocumented in the United States, she clings to Nahuatl ritual, sewing from home while Jason ventures out for work.

When Pilar, a successful contractor — the Corinthian king and his daughter merged into a single formidable character — tempts Jason with more than employment, Medea

fears losing her husband and their young son, who's eager to ditch huaraches and Nahuatl prayers for new shoes and English-language conversation.

There's lyricism and humor, too, especially from Medea's tart servant Tita, and her daffy neighborhood friend, Luisa, who runs a churro cart. But keep an eye on the machete in the backyard.

The play's title evokes Medea's status as an outsider: "Mojada" is a Spanish-language slur addressed to newcomers who crossed the Rio Grande to enter the country.

Begging Pilar for mercy, Medea calls herself "una mojada" — a form of self-abasement, an echo of her Greek name, and, perhaps, a powerful reclamation of a legacy of discrimination.

Mr. Alfaro acknowledged that "mojada" is "a very hard word." Before the play premiered in Chicago in 2013, at Mr. Yew's [Victory Gardens Theater,] the title drew pushback from local Spanish-speakers. Mr. Alfaro had to present several scenes to elders in Pilsen, Chicago's major Latino neighborhood, to show he was exploring the people ostracized by the word, not perpetuating its derogatory history.

Juan Castano, left, as Oedipus and Sandra Delgado as Jocasta in Mr. Alfaro's "Oedipus el Rey."
Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Mr. Alfaro, 56, has long probed his community's sore spots. Growing up poor in the 1960s in the Pico-Union area of Los Angeles, near where he now teaches playwriting at the University of Southern California, he wrote an essay in fourth grade about a death he witnessed across the street: The victim was a man with a pool cue sticking out of his abdomen.

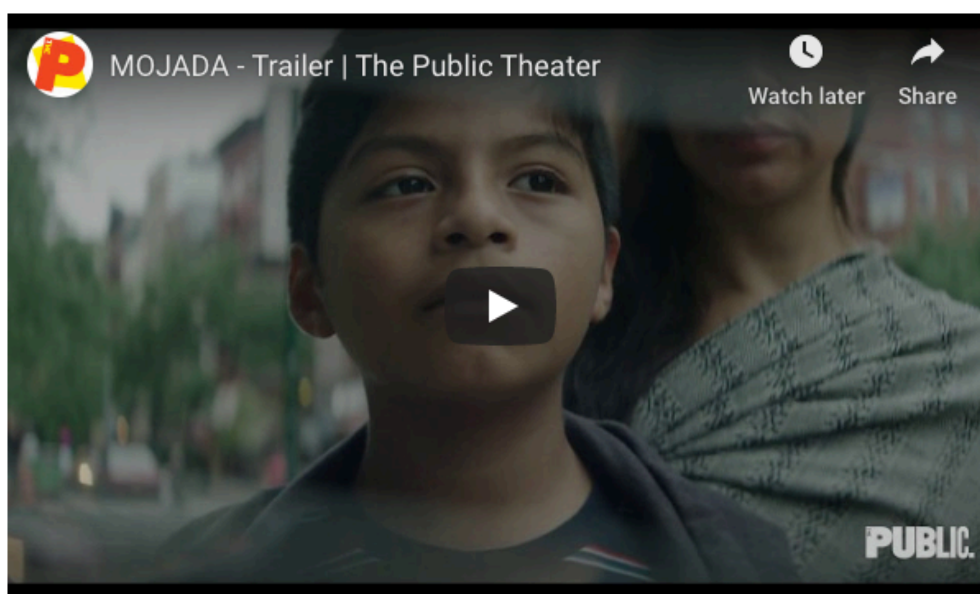
The principal suspended him for his choice of topic, but his father, a member of the United Farm Workers, stuck up for him. "We have to bring to light scenes that are in the dark," Mr. Alfaro remembers his saying.

Mr. Alfaro didn't encounter the stage, however, until he was arrested as a teenager and offered a choice between jail time and community service at a multicultural theater in the neighborhood. He chose the latter.

Careers as an AIDS and labor activist, a poet, and an avant-garde performance artist followed. Oskar Eustis, who now runs the Public, saw Mr. Alfaro do a one-man show in a black slip and roller skates at a New York club in the 1990s and recommended that he study with the renowned playwriting teacher María Irene Fornés at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. "She changed my life," Mr. Alfaro said.

Mr. Alfaro became a resident artist at the Taper, and, later, the first resident playwright at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. In between, he traveled around the country as what he called a "citizen-artist," making theater with vulnerable communities: older people in California, meth addicts in Oregon, gang members in Chicago.

He adapts his plays for the communities where they're being performed. "Mojada" was originally set in Pilsen; then, for a run at the Getty Villa, he changed the setting to Boyle Heights in Los Angeles. For the Public, Medea and Jason will arrive in Queens, home to one of the fastest-growing Mexican immigrant populations in the country.



Trailer for Mojada / Video by The Public Theater

Mr. Alfaro has also changed some characters' backgrounds to reflect New York's other Latino groups. Luisa, the churro vendor, now delivers a monologue about her escape from Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria.

"That's the beauty of what Luis does," Ms. Varela said. "He goes into the community and tells their story."

The play's ending has changed, too, in each incarnation. Though Mr. Alfaro won't reveal who dies at the Public, he sees Medea driven less by revenge than by a struggle between tradition and assimilation, haunted by the cost of coming to a country that exploits her labor but rejects her culture.

"He's given voice to the people we don't see, who've experienced trauma crossing over," Mr. Yew said. "People who are invisible, he makes visible."

A version of this article appears in print on July 14, 2019, Section AR, on Page 6 of the New York edition with the headline: Immigrant Tales Reimagined.

Correction: *July 16, 2019*
A previous version of this article misspelled the name of the churro vendor character in the play "Mojada." She is Luisa, not Louisa.