

Frida K.

by Gloria Montero

an NAC English Theatre/Go Diva Productions Inc. (Los Angeles)/
Citadel Theatre (Edmonton) coproduction

Study Guide

**THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE ENGLISH THEATRE
PROGRAMMES FOR STUDENT AUDIENCES
2006-2007 SEASON**

**Peter Hinton
Artistic Director, English Theatre**



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This Study Guide was written and researched by **Jim McNabb** for the National Arts Centre, English Theatre, November 2006. It may be used solely for educational purposes.

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About This Guide

This study guide is formatted in easy-to-copy single pages. They may be used separately or in any combination that works for your classes. The two colour pages found at the end of the Guide are intended for display in the classroom but may also be copied for distribution.

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About the Play (page 1 of 2) (see Activity #1)

SETTING The play takes place in Frida Kahlo's home "The Blue House" in Mexico City, in particular, her bedroom/studio containing her four-poster bed, a wardrobe, dressing table and easel as well as various symbolic items such as a skeleton, a watermelon and metal corsets. The time is April 13, 1953, the day of the opening of her solo art exhibition.



The Blue House, now the
Frida Kahlo Museum

PLOT SYNOPSIS *Frida K.* is a one-woman play portraying Mexican artist Frida Kahlo during one important afternoon of her life. Frida Kahlo, 46 years old, ill and close to death, prepares for the opening in Mexico City of the only solo exhibition of her paintings during her lifetime in Mexico. Her husband, renowned muralist Diego Rivera, is waiting for her at the gallery, along with friends, government officials, political comrades, and the scandal hungry press. Uncertain and apprehensive about how both she and the show will be received, Frida attempts to rationalize her work and her reasons for painting. She associates the pain that has plagued her – a bout with polio as a child and the accident that crippled her as a teenager – with the suffering of her father, Wilhelm, an epileptic Jew forced to emigrate to Mexico. Anguish adds a devastating edge to the wit that colors the turbulent love relationships, the politics, and the art that are Frida's world. The Mexican Revolution, marriage to the great Rivera, an affair with Leon Trotsky, the surrealist painters, 20th century America, the baby she could never carry to term, are all brutally assessed as Frida's passionate harangue becomes a celebration of life itself and of her mastery of her own destiny.

STYLE Like her paintings, the style of the production often takes on a surreal quality. In her mind, Frida travels to her childhood and the course of her marriage to finally arrive at this day in her life. Voices from the past come from her wardrobe, wall panels revolve to reveal memories, elements of her paintings emerge from her dressing table and the blue wardrobe moves about the room as if alive.

THEMES

Watch for themes like:

The indomitable spirit overcomes all adversities
Passion drives an artist
The past lives with us daily

About the Play (page 2 of 2)

WHAT CRITICS HAVE SAID:

" Allegra Fulton ferociously inhabits Kahlo's skin. Directed with a sure hand by Peter Hinton, all aspects of the production work to illuminate Kahlo's psyche...One of the most extraordinary performances on the New York Stage." - The Village Voice, November 25, 1997

" Allegra Fulton plays the almost mythic Kahlo with a bitter sweetness that makes her seem to be just about the strongest woman who ever lived. Montero's frank script and Peter Hinton's tight direction winds Kahlo's agonizing life around itself like the elaborate braids on her head." - Time Out New York, November 20-27, 1997

"The strength of Montero's play and the hugely charismatic performance by Allegra Fulton is that neither has chosen a one-sided approach. Their Frida is complex, haunted, nasty, grasping, hurting, passionate and above all immensely alive. Fulton give us a vital, glowing performance that spares us nothing." - Variety, November 4-10, 1996

"A production of surpassing beauty and accomplished artistry." - Ottawa Citizen, November 22, 1996

"Montero's script is full of life and hope...finding poetry in Frida's ongoing dance with death. Fulton, in one of the strongest performances of the year, is infinitely watchable...Bonnie Beecher's dynamic lighting scores the emotional and temporal changes in the piece maximizing the dramatic impact of Fulton's astonishing presence."- XTRA Magazine, Toronto, November 24, 1995

"Fulton's performance is a gem...an entirely convincing and sympathetic portrait of a fierce, fascinating and independent woman." - The Toronto Star, July 6, 1994

PRODUCTION HISTORY of FRIDA K.

- 1994 – Runaway hit of the Toronto Fringe Festival
- 1995 – First full production at Tarragon Theatre, Toronto
- 1996 – Production at Main Stage of Tarragon Theatre; tours to The Great Canadian Theatre Company in Ottawa and Grand Theatre in London, ON.
- 1997 – Tour to Mexico City, Vancouver, Calgary, New York City
- 2007 – Remount of production by NAC and Citadel Theatre (Edmonton) to mark centenary of Frida Kahlo's birth. International interest is already being shown in this touring production.

Who Helped Put the Production Together? (page 1 of 2) (see Activity #10)

The Creative Team

Director:	Peter HINTON
Playwright:	Gloria MONTERO
Set/Costume Design:	Ken GARNHUM
Lighting Design:	Bonnie BEECHER
Sound Design:	Troy SLOCUM
Assistant Director:	Diane D'Aquila
Stage Manager:	Brian Scott
Assistant Stage Manager:	Helen Himsl

Starring:

Allegra FULTON as Frida Kahlo

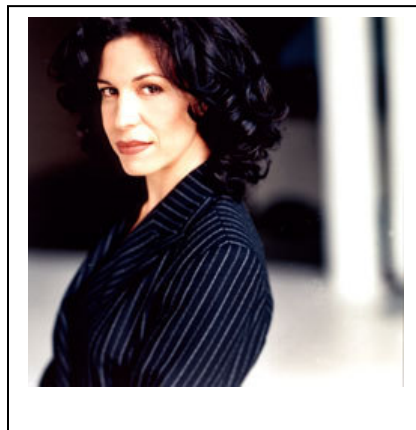
Allegra Fulton (Actor) is one of Canada's most celebrated actors. Born to two writers, her childhood years were shared between her birthplace in Toronto, Barcelona and Sydney, Australia. She began working professionally at age 11 and her career has included Europe, the US and Canada, garnering numerous awards and extensive critical praise.

Onstage, Allegra has received glowing reviews in everything from classical to contemporary work. Her triumphant North American tour of *Frida K.*, a one-woman tour de force about the life of Frida Kahlo (written by the actress' mother, Gloria Montero, as a birthday gift) has won universal praise. She was invited to play in Frida's own Mexico City by the Mexican and Canadian consulates and there received unanimous acclaim. In Toronto, the huge critical success helped to quickly sell out three runs and won Allegra the distinguished Dora Mavor Moore Award for Best Actress. Other theatre work includes leading roles in major theatres in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Death and the Maiden*, *Miss Julie*, *The Stone Angel*, *Nocturnal Emissions* (Dora nomination for outstanding performance), *The Comedy of Errors*, *Lysistrata*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*.

In her extensive film and television career, she has been a regular on the Showtime series *Street Time*, the CTV series *The Associates*, and the celebrated French series *Tabou*. Her recent work includes the CBS movie *Riding the Bus with My Sister*, the ABC movie *Celeste in the City*, and a Gemini-nominated turn on the Global series *Blue Murder*.

Allegra's voice can be heard in many animated series in both Canada and the US, and in many TV voice-overs. She has been the signature voice of TMN, CBC television, and the independent movie channel MFEST.

Ms. Fulton now lives in Los Angeles with her husband Shawn Doyle and son Rhys.



Who Helped Put the Production Together? (page 2 of 2)

Gloria Montero (writer) grew up in a family of Spanish immigrants in Australia's North Queensland. After beginning to work in radio and theatre, she moved to Canada where she continued her career as novelist and scriptwriter, broadcaster and producer of radio and film documentaries. Following the success of her book *The Immigrants* she was invited to act as consultant on Immigrant Women to the Multicultural Department of the Secretary of State, Government of Canada. In 1978 she and writer/documentary filmmaker David Fulton moved to Barcelona where they have made their home ever since. In Spain she has reported for CBC's "The Arts Report" and written poetry and novels including a cycle of prose poems based on her travels in Eastern Europe days after the Chernobyl disaster, called *Letters to Janez Somewhere in Ex Yugoslavia*. These poems were then part of an artistic collaboration with painter Pere Salinas and shown in several prestigious galleries in Barcelona. She has two novels, *The Villa Marini* and *Punto de Fuga*. In addition to *Frida K.*, her new play *Baggage* received its premiere in Adelaide, Australia in March 2004 as part of the city's Festival of the Arts. Montero's latest play, *It Takes Two*, is now being considered for production in Spain and the Czech Republic.



Peter Hinton (Director and Artistic Director of NAC English Theatre) is one of English Canada's most respected directors, playwrights and dramaturges. In his 20-year career, he has been an integral part of the Canadian theatre landscape, working as an Associate Artist of the Stratford Festival of Canada, Associate Director and Dramaturge at Theatre Passe Muraille, Associate Director and Head of the New Play Development Program at the Canadian Stage Company in Toronto, Artistic Director and Dramaturge of The Playwrights Theatre Centre in Vancouver, and Dramaturge in Residence at Playwrights' Workshop Montreal. He is passionate about Canadian theatre, and is proud to have developed new works by John Mighton, Guillermo Verdecchia, Marie Clements, Larry Tremblay, Blake Brooker, Normand Churette, Maristella Roca, Allen Cole and Greg MacArthur to name a few. An accomplished playwright, Mr. Hinton's trilogy of three full length plays entitled *The Swanne* premiered at the Stratford Festival of Canada to great critical and audience acclaim. A respected teacher, Mr. Hinton has taught play creation for actors at the Ryerson Theatre School and playwriting and period study at The National Theatre School of Canada.



Frida Kahlo – (page 1 of 3) (see Activities #1 and #5)

HER LIFE



Frida and Diego, 1940

Frida Kahlo's life (1907- 1954) was one marked by extreme suffering, extreme heroism, and extreme genius. Stricken with polio as a child, then nearly crippled in a bus accident at the age of 18, Kahlo defied the odds, not only by learning to walk again (twice), but by taking the world by storm with her unique artistic vision.

Frida Kahlo was born July 6, 1907 near Mexico City. However, she always claimed to be born in the year of the Mexican Revolution, 1910, in order to link her own birth to that of modern Mexico. It was just one of the many half-truths Kahlo told about her life, some say, in order to create a myth through which she would always be remembered.

The desire to be remembered was always a central theme of Kahlo's art, as reflected in the many self-portraits she painted (the images for which she is best known).

Once she embroidered a pillow for her husband, the muralist Diego Rivera, which read, "Remember me, my love."

Kahlo's obsession with mortality is no mystery, as illness, severe pain and the threat of death repeatedly imposed themselves on her young life. At age six, Kahlo contracted polio and had to spend nine months confined to her room. During that time, she created an imaginary friend who would later be reflected in a painting called "The Two Fridas". Explaining the painting in her diary she wrote, *"I experienced intensely an imaginary friendship with a little girl more or less the same age as me ... I followed her in all her movements and while she danced, I told her my secret problems."*

Once over the polio, Kahlo seemed determined to live life to the fullest. She became a tomboy at school and the leader of a group of rebellious youngsters (mostly boys) who pulled endless pranks at the National Preparatory School they attended.

In 1925, Kahlo suffered another tragedy when the school bus on which she was riding collided with a streetcar. A metal pole pierced her body, leaving her with multiple injuries, including a broken spinal column. During a long recuperation, Kahlo discovered her love for painting. Using a lap easel her mother gave her and a mirror she'd had hung in the canopy above her bed, Kahlo produced some of her earliest self-portraits.

Miraculously Kahlo regained the ability to walk, though she would be tortured by pain and fatigue throughout her life and would undergo more than 30 operations for her injuries. *"I never lost my spirit,"* she once said, *"I always spent my time painting."*

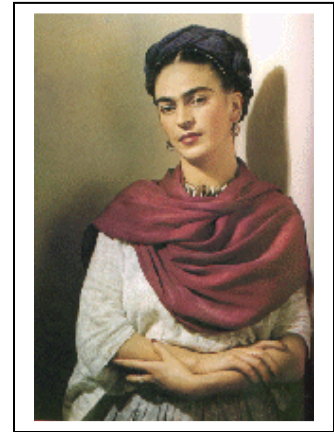
After her recovery, Kahlo took up with a group of Mexican artists who introduced her to well-known Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera. Rivera immediately recognized her talent and encouraged her to continue painting. At his suggestion, Kahlo also began wearing

Frida Kahlo – (page 2 of 3)

HER LIFE – (continued)

traditional Mexican clothing, which consisted of long, colorful dresses and exotic jewelry. In August of 1929, Rivera and Kahlo married, but their 25-year union would prove to be a stormy one marred by numerous affairs on both their parts. Beautiful, intelligent, and immensely talented, Kahlo was considered one of the most desirable women of her day. She was romantically linked with movie stars, artists, and politicians of many nationalities – both male and female, many of whom came to visit her at the casa azul -- the blue house -- in Coyoacan.

All over the world people loved Kahlo and her work. She was praised by French surrealist André Breton, and wined and dined by Picasso when she visited Paris. During her life she had three exhibitions: one in New York in 1938, one in Paris in 1939, and finally one in Mexico City in 1953. But by that time, Kahlo's injuries were catching up to her. Her health was so bad doctors advised her not to attend. But Kahlo would not be dissuaded. Minutes after the exhibition started, a wail of sirens filled the air and an ambulance arrived. Frida Kahlo was wheeled out on a stretcher and placed in the center of the gallery where she held court all evening.



The pain of Kahlo's complex marriage was often reflected in her paintings, such as one entitled, "Frida y Diego". Although the couple did divorce in 1939, they reunited in less than a year. For all their troubles, they remained one another's greatest loves and greatest fans.

That same year Kahlo suffered another blow. Her right leg had to be amputated below the knee due to a gangrene infection. On July 13, 1954, at the age of 47, Frida Kahlo died. The cause was never officially determined. The last entry in Kahlo's diary read, *"I hope the leaving is joyful and I hope never to return."*

Little known outside of the art world until the 1990s, Frida Kahlo has recently become a cultural icon. Numerous books and articles have been written about her. She has been the subject of three documentaries, and a feature film about her life was released October 25, 2002. For a woman who wished to be remembered, it seems, her wish has come true.

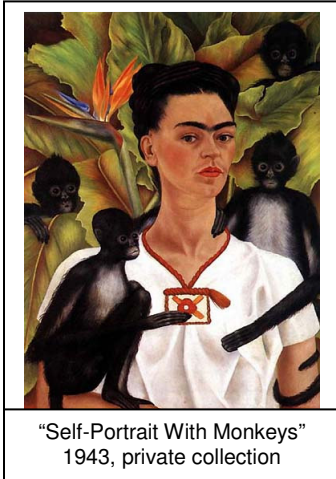
written by **Jennifer Beck** for "My Hero" website. <http://www.myhero.com/myhero/>
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"There is no art more exclusively feminine...only too willing to play at being absolutely pure and absolutely pernicious. Frida Kahlo's work is like a ribbon around a bomb." - André Breton, the father of French surrealism.

"I don't paint dreams. It's my reality I paint." – Frida Kahlo

Frida Kahlo – (page 3 of 3) (see Activity #11)

HER ART



"Self-Portrait With Monkeys"
1943, private collection

Kahlo primarily depicted her personal experience; some say her body of work is actually her biography. A large portion of her art work is composed of self-portraits. She often focused on the painful aspects of her life, using startling imagery to convey her meaning. The turbulence of her marriage is shown in the weeping and physically injured self-portraits she painted when she felt rejected by Rivera. She portrayed her physical disintegration, the result of the bus accident, in such works as "The Broken Column" (1944, Collection of Dolores Olmedo Foundation, Mexico City), in which she wears a metal brace and her body is open to reveal a crumbling pillar in place of her spine. Her sorrow over her inability to bear children is revealed in paintings such as "Henry Ford Hospital" (1932, Collection of Dolores Olmedo Foundation), in which objects that include a baby, a pelvic bone, and a machine hover around a hospital bed where she lies having a miscarriage.

Her many self-portraits emphasize her facial hair and mono-brow, proud features of her Mexican heritage. She also includes symbolic objects, favourite pets and native plants.

Although her style is unique we can see several influences in her paintings. Like Rivera's work, Kahlo adopted the use of broad, simplified color areas and a deliberately naïve style in her paintings. Also like Rivera, she wanted her paintings to affirm her Mexican identity, and she frequently used devices and subject matter from Mexican folk art. She imitated the style of the Mexican religious art called *retablo* or *ex voto*. These small naïve pieces, often painted on tin, were used in homes behind a small altar and often depicted a saint or miraculous healing or rescue. They frequently used words to describe the event, a feature repeatedly seen in Kahlo's paintings. The impact of her work is enhanced by techniques such as the inclusion of fantastic elements, a free use of space, and the juxtaposition of incongruous objects.

During her own lifetime Frida owed much of her renown as a painter to the fact that she was married to Diego Rivera. After years in his shadow, she is now even more famous than her husband. By the early 1980s his social realist murals began to look outdated, and Kahlo was being rediscovered. Her portrayal of her own physical and emotional pain spoke to a new generation of feminists and to those more concerned with personal feeling than grand ideologies.

"I paint my own reality. The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to, and I paint whatever passes through my head without any other consideration." – Frida Kahlo

"Frida is the only example in the history of art of an artist who tore open her chest and heart to reveal the biological truth of her feelings." - Diego Rivera

"My painting carries with it the message of pain ... Painting completed my life ... I believe that work is the best thing." – Frida Kahlo

References, People and Events Mentioned in the Play – (page 1 of 4)
(see Activity #4)

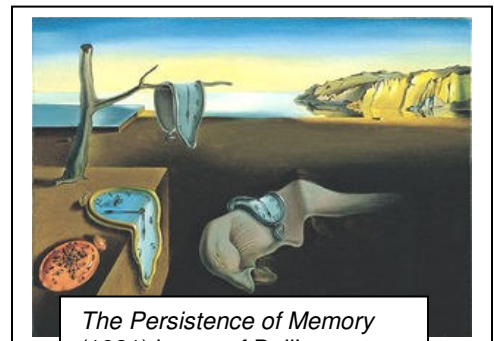
A Quiz -- Match the Definitions on pages 9-11
with the People, Terms, and Events referred to in the play *Frida K.*

- | | | | |
|---|-----|------------------------|-----|
| A. Abelard and Heloise,
Dante and Beatrice | () | L. Mexican Revolution | () |
| B. Amazon | () | M. Pablo Picasso | () |
| C. Champs-Élysées | () | N. Pancho Villa | () |
| D. Chiapas, Yucatan, Tehuana | () | O. Pre-Columbian | () |
| E. Emiliano Zapata | () | P. Polio/Poliomyelitis | () |
| F. Fascism | () | Q. Quasimodo | () |
| G. Karl Marx | () | R. Salvador Dali | () |
| H. Leon Trotsky | () | S. Spanish Civil War | () |
| I. The Louvre | () | T. Surrealism | () |
| J. Marcel Duchamp | () | U. Venustiano Carranza | () |
| K. Mayan frescos | () | V. Virgin of Guadalupe | () |

The terms and people mentioned above can be researched on
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page

References, People and Events Mentioned in the Play (page 2 of 4) (see Activity #4)

1. This period of radical reform in Mexico beginning with a call to arms on July 7, 1910 resulted in the overthrow of the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz and the installation of a democratic government. Díaz had created a capitalistic country heavily associated with United States in which much of the land was in the hands of rich landowners. The revolution began with violent military conflict to oust the rulers but later became a civil war as warring factions vied for control. When peace eventually came in the early 1920s, Mexico had a new constitution and the people had a feeling of empowerment and pride in their culture.
2. One of the principal leaders of the Mexican Revolution. He and his cavalry working in the northern regions of Mexico attacked rich landowners and redistributed land to the peasants.
3. One of the leaders of the Mexican Revolution based in the south. He helped the peasant class take back their land and regain Mexico as their own nation.
4. He was one of the leaders of the Mexican Revolution and ultimately became President of Mexico after the overthrow of dictator Porfirio Díaz. During his administration the current constitution of Mexico was drafted, an independent judiciary was formed, as was greater decentralization of power, and land reform under the communal system.
5. Famous pairs of lovers: the former, a French philosopher of the 12th century and his secret lover, and the latter, the Italian writer of *The Divine Comedy* and his secret and unrequited love.
6. (1887- 1968) A very influential French (and later American) artist associated with the Dadaist and Surrealist movement whose influence on post-World War II art helped shape modern taste in the Western art world.
7. (1904-1989) A Spanish painter and one of the 20th century's most important artists is best known for his bizarre surreal images and landscapes. His eccentric behaviour often drew more attention than his art work.



The Persistence of Memory (1931) is one of Dalí's most famous works.

References, People and Events Mentioned in the Play – (page 3 of 4)
(see Activity #4)

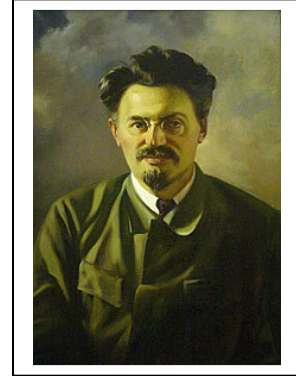
8. This movement in the early part of the 20th century, whether in philosophy or the arts, tried to express the truth of our existence through statements from our unconscious mind as in an imaginative dream state. Symbols or distorted scenic elements were used to remove the observer from reality.
9. (1881-1973) One of the most important artists of the 20th century, this Spanish painter and sculptor was a founder of the Cubist style. He produced over 100 thousand paintings, prints and sculptures.
10. A former royal palace in Paris, France, this is the largest and most famous art galleries and museums in the world, housing such works as *The Mona Lisa* and *Venus de Milo*.
11. A fashionable avenue in Paris lined with ornate buildings, cafés and tourist sites.
12. The physically deformed hero of Victor Hugo's novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.
13. The very popular 16th century image of the Virgin Mary housed in the Basilica of Guadalupe which became the religious symbol of the Mexican Revolution.
14. The term used to refer to the cultures of the Americas in the era before significant European influence, that is, the era before Christopher Columbus landed in 1492. The term is used especially often referring to the great indigenous civilizations of the Americas, such as those of Mesoamerica (the Aztec and Maya) and the Andes (Inca, Moche and Chibcha).
15. Colourful murals made by the indigenous Mayan culture of the Ninth century on the interiors of stone temples in the Chiapas region of Mexico depicting warriors and battle scenes.
16. States in the southern part of Mexico.



References, People and Events Mentioned in the Play – (page 4 of 4)
(see Activity #4)

17. A devastating viral disease which could lead to muscle paralysis or death. The disease was largely eliminated from the Western Hemisphere by the late part of the 20th century due to the Salk vaccine. Frida suffered from this at age six which resulted in a permanent limp.
18. A conflict lasting from 1936 to 1939 in which the “Nationalists” led by General Francisco Franco (representing a wealthy, conservative faction in favour of a centralist government) defeated the “Republicans” of the Second Spanish Republic (who favoured a more socialist, liberal democratic government).
19. A right-wing, authoritative, totalitarian political system where power rests with a few; often a militaristic state with a dictator at the head. Examples are Italy under Mussolini, Germany under Hitler, and similar other regimes in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s.

20. This great Russian revolutionary had been expelled from the U.S.S.R. by Stalin in 1929 and sentenced to death, in absentia, by a Soviet court in 1937. After nine years of exile in Norway, he and his wife found asylum in Mexico, thanks to Diego Rivera's help. They lived in Kahlo's house for two years (during which time he and Frida had an affair), before he was assassinated by a Stalinist agent who stabbed him with an ice pick.



21. (1818-1883) An immensely influential philosopher, political economist and social revolutionary whose ideas often formed the basis for the class struggles, workers movements and political revolutions of the late 19th century and early 20th century. His principle works were *The Communist Manifesto* and *Das Kapital*.
22. A legendary member of a mythical nation of tall, strong, aggressive women.

English Translation of Spanish Phrases Heard in the Play –

(page 1 of 2) (see Activity #7)

!Que vergüenza! – *What a shame!*

¡Hijo de la chingada madre! – *Son of a *##@%*+*

Cielito – *Darling*

Amorcita de mi vida – *love of my life*

La fantasma – *the spook/ghost*

Mis doctorcitos – *my dear little doctors*

Cariño – *loved one/darling*

Mamita mia, que se han alzado – *Momma, how they have come up in the world!*

El de la mula torda – *The one with a dapple gray mule*

Es mi marido – *He is my husband*

Los Mejicanos – *the Mexicans*

¡Está bien! – *All right*

Mi compañero Alex – *my buddy/companion Alex*

Divertido y guapo – *fun and handsome*

Mi queridísimo Alex – *my most precious/darling Alex*

Necesitas ayuda? – *Do you need help?*

Ya es tarde – *It's already late*

Tienes que irte – *You have to go.*

Por el amor de Dios – *for the love of God*

English Translation of Spanish Phrases Heard in the Play –
(page 2 of 2)

Déjame en paz – *leave me in peace/leave me alone*

Estoy vistiéndome – *I'm getting dressed*

Como quieres – *As you wish.*

Pero aquí estoy si no puedes sola – *But I'll stay here if you cannot do it alone.*

¡Cabrona, es de la chingada aguantarte! – *Bastard! I can't f__ stand you!*

Lass nicht dich halten (German) – *Don't let anything stop you.*

Alles was du vorstellst (German) – *Everything that you can imagine*

Fuero ... ¡no es ningún espectáculo! – *Get out! It's not a show!*

Que tontería! – *What nonsense!*

Toda dulzura – *All sweetness.*

Mira, la pobre bailarina – *Look, the poor ballerina.*

Mírala, está muerta – *Look at her, she is dead.*

Te están esperando. – *You are expected.*

Es muy tarde – *it's very late*

Por qué tanta prisa? – *Why are you in such a hurry?*

Ya voy – *I'm off.*

Pelona – *baldy (a reference to the Judas figure of Death)*

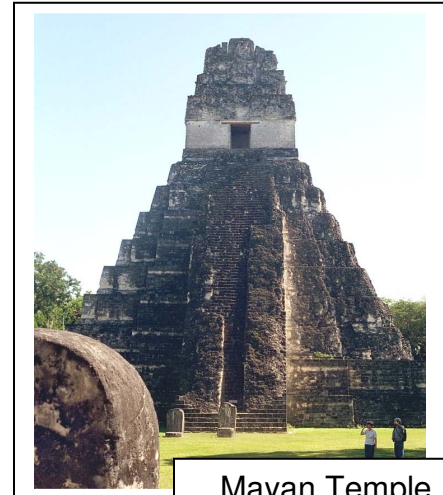
¿Cómo te atreves? – *How dare you?*

Calla te digo – *I'm telling you to shut up.*

Al menos – *at least*

A Brief History of Mexico and its Indigenous People

Mexico has a long and rich history. Around 1500 BCE great civilizations began to form. For over three thousand years, until the Spanish Conquest in 1521, the Olmec (the predominant civilization between 1200 – 400 BCE in south central Mexico), Maya (reaching their peak between 250 – 900 CE in southern Mexico), Teotihuacán (the principal power in central Mexico from 300 BCE – 700 CE), Toltec (dominating central and northern Mexico between the 10th and 12th centuries), and Aztec (from 1300 – 1500 CE) ruled over the lands and peoples of what is now Mexico. These groups lived in regions stretching from the Rio Grande borderlands in the north to Guatemala in the south. They raised crops such as corn, beans, squash, tomatoes, cacao, chili peppers and cotton – valuable products that were then introduced into Europe by returning explorers. Ancient peoples traded with surrounding areas for jade, obsidian, and metals. Important technologies were pottery, weaving, and stone-working. As early as the Sixth century BCE, the people of this region created and used a 260-day ritual calendar. Around 150 CE the Maya developed an advanced form of hieroglyphic writing. At its height in 500 CE, the city of Teotihuacán was the largest and perhaps most advanced city in the world.



Mayan Temple

In 1519 the Spaniard Hernando Cortes sailed to Mexico with his army seeking gold and other riches. Cortes defeated Moctezuma, the king of the great Aztec empire, and for the next 300 years Mexico was ruled by Spain. Over time, marriage between the Spanish and native populations created a new ethnic group called *mestizo*. The Spanish influenced much of the culture in Mexico and introduced the Catholic religion to the Native populations. During this time, horses were introduced and many other European technologies were brought to Mexico. Mexico fought for its independence from Spain and won in 1821. About 60 Indian groups with their own indigenous languages – people like the Tarahumaras tribe of the Chihuahua State - still live in Mexico today, more than 450 years after the Spanish conquest.

The Mexican revolution took place in 1910, almost 100 years after Mexico won its independence from Spain. The goal of the revolution, which occurred because of a serious conflict between rich and poor, was to overthrow the dictator Porfirio Díaz. Under his rule, a small group of people controlled most of the country's power and wealth, while the majority of the population worked in poverty. The revolution was fought and won by Mexican peasants.

The 1920s and 1930s have often been described as Mexico's renaissance. During this time the government and the general population took a new interest in the arts and culture of Mexico. The next four decades saw an impressive economic growth and strengthening of the government due to assumption of mineral rights and nationalization of the oil industry and banks. In 1994 Mexico became a full member of NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement joining Canada and the United States in a large and prosperous economic bloc.

Diego Rivera – Frida's Famous Husband (see Activity #5)



Diego Rivera (1886-1957) was a Mexican "social realist" muralist painter and is considered one of the greatest artists of the 20th century. He was best known for paintings that depicted Mexican life and society and the history of the Mexican people. For as much as he was famous for his artistic talent, though, he was also well-known for his revolutionary political beliefs along with his anti-church sentiments.

Rivera was born to a family of modest means in Guanajuato, Mexico in 1886, but they soon moved to Mexico City. Rivera became interested in art and painting at a very early age, enrolled in an art academy, and by 1906, had his first exhibition at the school's annual show, presenting 26 of his works and establishing himself as a painter at the young age of 20. In 1907, Rivera received a grant to travel and study in Europe and he spent time in Spain, France and England. In Paris he was greatly influenced by post-modernist and cubist styles of painting, and he became well known as a Cubist painter.

Rivera had always been interested in military and political issues. While he was in Europe World War I broke out, as did the Mexican Revolution. Although he was torn between an invitation to go to Russia and the need for his help in Mexico, he became a revolutionary and returned to Mexico. He eventually became instrumental in establishing a trade union and became joined the Mexican Communist Party.

He continued to create art, becoming involved in the 1920s with the new Mexican muralist movement. He began to experiment with fresco painting on large walls and developed his own classic style using large, simplified figures and bold colors. A good part of his murals and art capture significant moments in Mexican history through images of the earth, farmers and laborers, and popular characters. He aimed to symbolically depict Mexican society and thought after the country's 1910 revolution. During the 1930s and 1940s Rivera visited United States with his third wife, Frida Kahlo, and there painted a number of large murals. One of his most controversial works, "Man at the Crossroads", was meant for Radio City in the Rockefeller Center in New York. The unfinished work was rejected and destroyed because one of the figures depicted in it was Lenin, the first leader of the Soviet Union. Furious about this treatment, Rivera returned to Mexico, made some alterations to the design, and installed the work in Mexico City under the name of "Man, Controller of the Universe". Throughout his life Rivera, the artist and idealist, wanted to bring his passionate beliefs to the common man.



"Man, Controller of the Universe"
<http://www.fbuch.com/diego.htm>

An Excerpt from *Frida K.* (see Activity #6)

FRIDA: I know what I need out of life, though God only knows for how much longer. *Mis doctorcitos ... esos jijos medicos míos ...* (my little doctors...those dear physicians of mine) ... They love me madly ... they use my body like their own private playground! Bone transplants, bone removals. Now they say they're gonna amputate .. cut off the whole damn leg. Ahh – what the hell! I might as well go the whole hog ... (*picking up the bottle of brandy and holding it aloft*) Peg-leg Frida, the great gammy queen herself!
(Pause)

I wish I was tall and strong like an Amazon. Size is important in how people see you. Think of the CIA and the Yankee marines and what they do to little governments they don't like. If a country's big you can't just go in and squash it like that ... at least, not so easily.

People, too, are harder to destroy when they're big. Like Diego. Everything's big about him – his body, his painting, his desire to live...

(Frida suffers another spasm of pain. With difficulty she manages to wheel herself to her medicines where she prepares a syringe. Lifting up her skirt she injects it into her thigh.)

Diego? (*Pause*) I gotta leave. It's getting late. Diego'll be waiting for me at the gallery. He says everybody's gonna be there and I gotta look my best ... like a real pretty little *Mejicana* (Mexican woman).

(Getting out of her wheelchair FRIDA sits the skeleton in her place. Taking a flower from her hair, she sticks it in the skeleton's eye. Then she opens the wardrobe where an embroidered Tehuana dress is hanging. FRIDA puts on the dress. This is the last step in her ceremony and she must take her time.)

(Muttering as she puts on her skirt) Al menos (At least), this'll hide the stains. No one'll know what the hell's under here!

They'll all be there with their goddamn cameras and their notebooks trying to work out if I'm alive or dead, wondering what Diego sees in me ... why he's stayed with me all these years.

When Diego divorced me I painted 'the two Fridas' ... the Mexican Frida he loved and the other Frida inside me he couldn't seem to love at all. I wanted to tear the heart out of that Frida Diego didn't want. I tried to, God knows I tried every way I could to kill her off. But she wouldn't die. She kept right on there inside me, yelling her obscene truths, demanding to be heard! She's the one who suffers inside me. Without her I don't exist at all. It's her life I paint.

Suggested Movies/Books/Websites (see Activity #9)

Movies



Frida (2002) screenplay by Clancy Sigal and directed by Julie Taymor, starring Salma Hayek and Alfred Molina. This film chronicles the life of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera as the young couple take the art world by storm. From her passionate and turbulent relationship with her teacher and husband Diego to her illicit affair with revolutionary Leon Trotsky to her romantic entanglements with women, Frida Kahlo lived a bold and uncompromising life as a political, artistic and sexual revolutionary. Available in most video stores.

The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo (2004) This is a documentary which tells Kahlo's story as a woman, as an artist, and as a symbol of women's rights and Latin progress. The film is narrated by actress Rita Moreno, while singer Lila Downs provides the voice of Kahlo. An artist whose life was as bold and startling as her work, Frida Kahlo battled physical infirmity and a male-dominated art establishment to become one of the most acclaimed and influential painters of her generation. Kahlo also had a passionate interest in politics with her leftist views informed by the Mexican Revolution; she was an outspoken advocate of Communism and a powerful symbol of the progressive movement throughout her life.

Cradle Will Rock (1999) written and directed by Tim Robbins and starring a host of notable actors. This is a drama about theatre life in the 1930s during the times of the Great Depression, the Red Scare (communism), fascism, and the rise of unions. The principal plot involves Orson Welles' attempts to stage a musical called "Cradle Will Rock" about workers trying to survive in a power-hungry world, but a secondary plot looks at artist and pro-communist Diego Rivera's conflict with then-mayor Nelson Rockefeller over his design for a mural.

Books



Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo (1983) by Hayden Herrera; Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc. . Written by an art historian this biography combines extensive research, Frida's own letters, and analyses of Frida's paintings to illuminate Frida Kahlo's life story, her importance as an artist, and her ultimate triumph over tragedy. This book was the basis for the screenplay by Clancy Sigal's 2002 movie.

Frida Kahlo: The Paintings (2002) by Hayden Herrera; Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc. This is a beautifully produced book filled with large colour plates and photographs of Kahlo, Diego Rivera and their friends, and gives a thorough analysis of Kahlo's life and art.

Websites



http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/kahlo_frida.html An extensive source of material on her life and art with many images of many of her paintings.

<http://www.ocaiw.com/catalog/index.php?lang=en&catalog=pitt&author=464>
A source of a huge number of images of Frida's artwork. A must!

Activities (page 1 of 3)

Before Seeing the Play (page 1 of 2):

1. A Reading Assignment.

Distribute copies of pages 1-2 of the Study Guide, “About the Play”. The students should read beforehand the brief synopsis and comments on the play so as to be better prepared to understand the world of Frida Kahlo. The brief description of Frida Kahlo’s life and art found on pages 5–7 would also be very helpful.

2. A Visual Art Project.

Have the students choose two of their favorite possessions and make a still-life drawing of them, by looking at them very carefully. Now have them draw a self-portrait by looking in a mirror, looking carefully at the exact shape of the eyes, nose, and mouth. Have them draw what they see, not what they think or remember what they look like. Now have them do a combination drawing of the self-portrait with the important possessions, either cutting out the objects and collaging them onto the self-portrait, or drawing the objects again on the self-portrait.

3. A Research and Visual Art Project on Mexican Folk art and Mexican Religious art.

Have the students look at the websites <http://www.mexicanretablos.com/> and http://hearstmuseum.berkeley.edu/outreach/pdfs/mexican_folk_art.pdf and others that can be found in a Google search. Have them copy by hand several designs and features. Then, using coloured pencils try to reproduce the hues. On another page have them tell and illustrate a Mexican folk story or myth that they came across in their research. (try <http://www.g-world.org/magictales/> , <http://www.sacred-texts.com/nam/mmp/mmp2.htm> or http://www.mexconnect.com/mex_/history/historyindex.html)

4. A quiz on terms used in *Frida K*.

The students’ enjoyment of the play will be enhanced if they are more familiar with the people and events mentioned by Frida. If the students have access to computers, distribute the quiz found on pages 8-11 and have them match the terms on page 8 with the definition on pages 9-11 which suits it best. The students can look up the terms on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page [The answers are: A5, B22, C11, D16, E3, F19, G21, H20, I10, J6, K15, L1, M9, N2, O14, P17, Q12, R7, S18, T8, U4, V13.]

5. Biography Project.

Have the students read the biographies of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera found on pages 5-6, and 15 of this Study Guide. Have the students discuss if they have read other biographies. What kind of information does one find in biographies? What kind of people have biographies written about them? Have them mention several people whom they are aware have biographies. How is a biography different from a fictional story about someone? Have students research both Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera on the internet and add at least five more facts about each than are found in this Study Guide’s biographies.

Activities (page 2 of 3)

Before Seeing the Play (page 2 of 2):

6. A Scene Study Activity.

The excerpt from *Frida K* (page 16) can be used as a monologue for study. Another interesting way of approaching it could be to divide it into sections for two actors to perform – the weak Frida and the strong Frida, or the masculine Frida and the feminine Frida. Frida Kahlo seemed to have many personalities co-existing within her.

7. A Spanish Language Activity.

For those students interested in foreign languages, give them copies of pages 12-13 (“English Translation of Spanish Phrases Heard in the Play”) and have them practice saying the Spanish phrases aloud until they are familiar with them. Caution: some of the language Frida uses is not found in polite society!

8. Any trip to the theatre should also involve the students being made aware of proper theatre etiquette while at the NAC. A handout is available on page 21. Please photocopy this page and distribute to students.

Activities (page 3 of 3)

After Seeing the Play

9. The teacher could conduct a class discussion on the following topics:

- Style of acting chosen for this play;
- Themes explored – what was it about?
- Effect of having only one actor in the play;
- Production aspects:
 - Costumes – how well did they define time period, character, mood?
 - Set – how well did it define location, theme? what mood did it convey? what abstract ideas did it evoke? what effect does its non-specific style have on the viewer?
 - Lighting – did the realistic/non-realistic nature of lighting express anything; what special effects were used?
- Relevance of this material set in 1953 Mexico to today's audiences.

10. Write a Play Review.

While the play is still fresh in their minds, give students the assignment of writing a review of the production of *Frida K.*. Have them read reviews of other plays in *The Ottawa Citizen* or *Xpress* to give them an idea of the standard approach to theatrical criticism. A suggested outline for writing a review can also be found online on page 12 of the Study Guide for "*The Vaudevilles*" of Chekhov found in the NAC website <http://www.artsalive.ca/en/eth/activities/>. Another excellent guide to writing a review can be found on the Theatre Ontario website http://theatreontario.org/content/play_reviews.htm. Students may have received programs at the matinée, or may refer to page 3 of this Study Guide (Who Helped Put the Production Together?) for the correct information about the production in their reviews. The areas the review should cover, in general and more specifically when merited, are: all design elements (lighting, sound, set and costumes), the performance of the actor, the direction, the basic narrative, dialogue and the central theme(s) of the script.

11. A Psychological Analysis Project (to be done either before or after viewing the play).

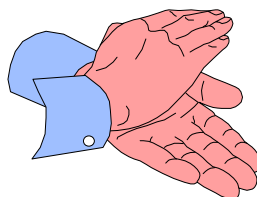
Many people say that Frida Kahlo's body of work is actually her autobiography. Have the students view either the movie *Frida* or the PBS production *The Life and Times of Frida Kahlo*. Based on the film, her biography pages from this Study Guide, and other resources about the artist have students generate a list of experiences Frida refers to in her work. The list should include the bus accident, the loss of her baby, her physical disabilities and pain, Diego Rivera, family, friends, romantic interests, travels, and her Mexican heritage. Have students use the websites mentioned on page 17 ("Suggested Movies/Books/Websites") and look at a series of Kahlo's paintings that reflect the experiences in her life. Now, taking on the role of "psychologist", have students analyze the paintings in small groups or individually. In their analysis, students should identify the work's subject; describe how Frida has represented the subject (with specific references to detail); note the time in her life when she created the piece; and determine what her feelings were when she painted the picture.



Theatre Etiquette

Please take a moment to prepare the students for their visit to the National Arts Centre by explaining good **Theatre Etiquette** which will enhance the enjoyment of the play by all audience members:

- 1.** *Frida K* will be performed in the Theatre of the NAC. Matinées at the NAC are for students and the general public. It is important for everyone to be quiet (no talking or rustling of materials) during the performance so others do not lose their immersion in the “world of the play”. Unlike movies, the actors in live theatre can hear disturbances in the audience and will give their best performances when they feel the positive involvement of the audience members. The appropriate way of showing approval for the actors’ performances is through laughter and applause. For the enjoyment of all, people who disturb others during the show may be asked to leave the Theatre.
- 2.** If you plan to make notes on the play for the purposes of writing a review, please do not try to write them during the play. This can be distracting for the actor. Wait until after the performance is finished to write your reflections, please.
- 3.** It is important that there be no electronic devices used in the Theatre so that the atmosphere of the play is not interrupted and others are not disturbed. **Cell phones, pagers and anything that beeps must be turned off.** Cameras and all other recording devices are not permitted in the Theatre.
- 4.** You will be seeing *Frida K.* in the Theatre of the NAC. Tickets with assigned seats will be distributed by your teacher and to avoid confusion it is important to sit in the designated seat. All even numbered seats are on the left side of the theatre and all odd numbered seats are on the right. This means that seats 10 and 12, for example, are actually side by side.
- 5.** Programs may or may not be distributed at this student matinée. Information on the artists who put this play together, however, can be found in this Study Guide for those who wish to use it in writing a review. Some programs can be made available to teachers if desired as a teaching aid to show how a program is put together.
- 6.** The play has a running time of 90 minutes with no intermission, so it is important to make a trip to the washroom before the show starts, as anyone leaving while the play is in progress may unfortunately not be allowed back into the Theatre.





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Allegra Fulton as Frida Kahlo in a production photo from 1995
(set and costume design by Ken Garnhum,
lighting design by Bonnie Beecher)