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Virtual Theatre

Edited by Sidia Fiorato

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GIOVANNA DI MARTINO*

Luis Alfaro, *The Greek Trilogy of Luis Alfaro*. Edited by Rosa Andújar. London: Methuen Drama series, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020, ISBN 978-1-3501-5540-4, pp. 304

Abstract

The much-acclaimed and award-winning *Griego* ('Greek') trilogy of Chicanx and Latinx performance artist, playwright, writer and social activist Luis Alfaro is published for the very first time in an edition by Rosa Andújar (King's College London) for the Methuen Drama series (Bloomsbury, 2020); the book has recently been awarded the 2020 London Hellenic Prize. Equipped with Andújar's excellent introduction to Alfaro's work generally and to each adaptation, plus a production history and interview with Alfaro, this book not only makes the scripts of three very successful plays available for the first time for everyone, but also presents a unique and fascinating way of engaging with the ancient Greek dramas of which Alfaro's plays are adaptations, something that Andújar repeatedly highlights in the introductions. These adaptations, Andújar comments, are already beginning to "chart a new course for the three most popular Greek figures [Electra, Oedipus, Medea] onto the US stage" (6).

KEYWORDS: : Luis Alfaro; Chicanx; Latinx Theatre; North American Urban Theatre; Greek Tragedy; Greek Tragedy Reception; Electra; Oedipus; Medea

It was around 2002 in Tucson (Arizona), and more precisely at the juvenile detention centre, where Luis Alfaro was conducting a poetry workshop: there he heard the story of a thirteen-year-old girl who had killed her mother because the mother "had put a hit on the dad, who was a drug dealer" (Alfaro and Carrillo 2016). On the same day, Alfaro recalls, he lingered at the bookshop of the Arizona Theatre Company and bought a copy of some ancient Greek plays for cheap, ten plays for ten dollars (Alfaro and Andújar 2020b). Amongst these was Sophocles' *Electra*, which contained a story of "revenge killing" that much resonated with the one he had just heard (Alfaro and Andújar 2020a, 282).

Thus began Alfaro's journey with, through and beyond the Greeks, which eventually led to his much-acclaimed *Griego* trilogy, recently edited by Rosa Andújar (King's College London) for Bloomsbury; the book has been awarded the 2020 London Hellenic Prize. Andújar provides a general introduction

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to Alfaro's work (1-12) as well as one to each play (20-3; 110-14; 180-6); a very detailed production history for each play (238-65); a helpful 'Glossary' to navigate through Alfaro's hybrid language (266-81); and a very useful 'Further Reading' section divided by topic (292-5). The book also contains Andújar's rather fascinating interview with Alfaro (282-91).

As we read in the production history (238-45), *Electricidad*, the first of the *Griego* trilogy and an adaptation of Sophocles' *Electra*, premiered in 2003 at the Borderlands Theatre in Tucson under the direction of Barclay Goldsmith; it was brought to Chicago (the Goodman Theatre) and LA (the Mark Taper Forum) in 2004 and 2005, respectively, and counts no less than sixteen other productions in a number of states across the US (Florida, Texas, New York, New Mexico, California).

After its premiere at the Getty Villa Auditorium (Malibu) in 2008, the second play of the trilogy, *Oedipus El Rey*, an adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, was brought to many other locations, including the following major cities: San Francisco (2010 and 2019), San Diego (2015), Washington DC (2011), Portland (2012), Dallas (2014), Chicago (2012), and New York (2017).

After a few productions of *Bruja* at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco and the Borderlands Theatre in Tucson in 2012 and 2013, respectively, this unconventional (to say the least) adaptation of Euripides' *Medea* was heavily altered and morphed into a new play, *Mojada*. *Mojada* has toured major US theatres since its premiere in 2013 at the Victory Gardens in Chicago; it was then adapted for the Getty Villa (Malibu, 2015) as *Mojada: A Medea in Los Angeles* and presented as *Mojada* again at the New York Public Theatre in 2019, with the roles of the Mexicans Josefina (Aegeus) and Armida (Creon) recast as Caribbean migrants – the former, now named Luisa, from Puerto Rico, and the latter, now Pilar, from Cuba – to reflect the different demographics of the city (183).

Yet, as Andújar details in her introduction, Alfaro is more than a playwright: the issues brought to life in his *Griego* trilogy breathe into the "different worlds" and "intersecting identities" that Alfaro embodies all at once as a Chicana, Latina, queer writer, performance artist, social activist, filmmaker, director, journalist, producer and associate professor (1). The breadth with which he has engaged with different underrepresented communities across the US seeps from the striking situations that give the characters of his adaptations breath and life, each character ingrained in the broader context of Chicana and Latina life and theatre in the US.

Electricidad (*Electra*) is based on that 13-year-old girl Alfaro met in Tucson, but she also represents the "old ways" of a "patriarchal gang culture" (20) that Clemencia (Clytemnestra) – a "feminist", glosses Alfaro (Alfaro and Andújar 2020b) – wants to eradicate from their *barrio* (neighbourhood), thus justifying her killing of Agamenón as a progressive act aimed at creating a better future for the other women.

On the one hand, Agamenón, 'El Auggie', incarnates the "old ways", the

cholo ways (46);¹ he is the protagonist of an archaic system of retributive justice: an “eye for an eye” (100), explains Electricidad – “you mess with me, I mess with you back” (46). On the other hand, Agamenón also provides comfort and protection. A chorus of *las vecinas* (the neighbours), who incessantly and rhythmically sweep the stage with their brooms and comment on what happens, provide the audience with the broader context into which we are to read the unfolding of events and the characters’ actions:

LA CONNIE What a *tristes*a.
 LA CUCA To lose someone.
 LA CARMEN A father.
 LA CONNIE *El rey*.
 LA CUCA Yes, the king.
 LA CARMEN Even if he was a *cholo*.
 LA CONNIE A warrior.
 LA CUCA A parolee.
 LA CARMEN Protected his family.
 LA CONNIE Protected his territory.
 LA CUCA And all of us.
 LA CARMEN But from what?
 LA CONNIE The elements, *mujer*.
 LA CUCA The city.
 LA CARMEN The other gangs.
 LA CONNIE The thieves.
 LA CUCA La *policia*.
 LA CARMEN And the politicians.
 LA CONNIE Thank *Dios* for *cholo* protection (34-35).

Both a protagonist of the “old ways” and a protector, Agamenón perfectly captures the hybrid and contrasting nature of *el barrio*, “a siloed yet sheltering space”, explains Andújar in her general introduction (6). Andújar helpfully charts the *barrio* of Alfaró’s plays onto Chicano historians’ formulation of it as both the “enforced” and “segregated” space to which Mexican people were confined in the 1920s in Southern California (6), as well as the “community-enabling *place*” into which it was reformulated in the 1960s (Raúl Villa qtd *ibid.*).

Abuela, Agamenón’s cheeky mother, who is trying to pound some sense into Electra, remarks upon this idea of the *barrio* as an “enforced” space from which she feels like there is no escape. After she has told Electra that her hus-

¹ For the term *cholo*, see Andújar’s entry in the Glossary: “Person(s) of Mexican descent who participates or identifies with a gang subculture, characteristic features of which include bandannas, tattoos, and white shirts for men as well as dramatic makeup and large hoop earrings for women” (269). See also James Diego Vigil’s own glossary entry in Melinda Powers’s chapter on Alfaró’s plays: “A Chicano street style of youth who are marginal to both Mexican and Anglo culture; also used historically for cultural marginals and racial hybrids in Mexico and some parts of Latin America” (qtd in Powers 2018, 58).

band and two children were killed in one way or another, Electra asks:

ELECTRICIDAD Then why do you stay?
 ABUELA The same reason we all do, young chola.
 Where do cholos go in a world that won't have us?
 This is the mundo we know. Good or bad.
 Es lo que es. (75)

The only character who seems to represent an alternative to the *cholo* system is Ifigenia, 'la Ifi', who joined a convent, which she describes as "just like jail, but with better food. / And silence" (54); she preaches "forgiveness" (54) and "unconditional love" to her older sister as the only way out of "prison" (80). "Unconditional love", la Ifi reveals, is "love beyond the *barrio*" (80), one that Electra can only see as a betrayal to her own history and identity.

Like Electricidad, the main character of *Oedipus El Rey* draws from a real story, one coming from Alfaro's direct engagement with the youth programme known as Homeboys Industries, particularly at the North Kern State Prison in Kern County (California), one of the places where the play is set (111, 119). "I started doing interviews with young men out of Homeboy Industries", explains Alfaro in an interview, and "there was an Oedipus there, who told me his story, and I thought, oh my God, this is the Oedipus!" (Alfaro and Carrillo 2016). "Oedipus is the 52 percent of young men in California, ages seventeen to twenty-four, who will get out of a state prison and go back at least once more in their lifetime", explains Alfaro (Alfaro and Andújar 2020a, 289). Andújar provides some interesting data in this regard in her introduction to the play, indicating the US as the country with the highest total number of inmates and the highest "imprisonment rate" (112). Oedipus, modelled on the (over?) confident Sophoclean character, wants to break off from history; he does not believe in the "old ways" of the *barrio* that Jocasta and her brother Creon live in after Laius' death:

JOCASTA Then what do you believe in?
 OEDIPUS I believe in myself.
 JOCASTA Well, you know what, don't run around telling that to the
 people here. We're border people. We've always been. It's
 who we are. We're the stuff underneath the cement. Do
 you get that?
 OEDIPUS Not really. (153)

Oedipus, the adopted son of a widowed Tiresias, and for whom "all [he] knows is behind bars" (158), wants a different future: he wants to be "the one", says one of the chorus members at the beginning of the play, "*el mero mero*" (boss), echoes another, as they prepare to not just tell, but also enact, the story of Oedipus (122). Oedipus wants a new "history", a different "past" (154), but Jocasta warns him: "We all got destiny. We all got a story that was written for us a long time ago. We're just characters in a book. We're already history and we just started living. Our story has already been told. We're fated" (153). Fate, "the

prison system” which seems to “dictate human destinies as powerfully and cruelly as any Greek god”, Andújar argues, is the “political and institutional power” which the play exposes as heavily limiting, if not annihilating altogether, the possibility that some people can change (112). *Oedipus El Rey* is a “story about the system”, a chorus member tells us at the beginning of the play, in which “choices . . . are made for you” (120).

With respect to *Mojada*, the name of the play itself is indicative of the issue that is at the heart of it: “Mojada”, “wetback”, is a “derogative term”, explains Alfaro, used to designate those crossing the US border from the Rio Grande river in the 1930s (290). *Mojada* tells the story of a migrant family from Mexico in search of a better future and their experience as undocumented migrants on US soil; it also offers a flashback scene in which the family’s *servienta* (servant) Tita, together with Hason (Jason) and Medea, enact their journey to California, from which it becomes apparent that Medea was raped by one of the soldiers at the border as the price of moving on. Medea’s crossing is yet another “true story that I was told one night in Chicago working with these Dreamers”;² in fact, Alfaro later learnt that “more than half of all the women who cross the Southern border from Mexico into the US . . . are sexually assaulted”. Medea is another “disturbing case” from the Latinx and Chicana communities which we are shown in vivid detail (Alfaro and Andújar 2020b).

But Medea is only one of the Mexican migrants that is given voice in the play: Josefina is from a humble background, with a husband working the fields far away from her whilst she sells *pan dulce* (sweet bread) on the streets, and Armida is a highborn migrant who now owns the business Hason works for. Aegeus and Creon are recast into female characters and along with Tita and Medea make up this “world of women” that has replaced the one of men in the original Euripidean drama (182). We are thus presented with a complex and diverse world of experiences of these Mexican women who are all trying to succeed in a new world – a world that is often (and with humour) criticised from their perspectives. Josefina subtly critiques the hypocrisy of attempting to make everyone feel like they are “treated the same, though they [this country] know not everyone is” (200), as well as the country’s work ethic, according to which a promotion, instead of meaning “less work and a few more *pesos*” (money), means “twice” the work and no social life (202).

Though hugely benefitting from her family’s money, Armida seems to have worked hard to adapt to, and make her way through, her new life: “She was the first immigrant, the first generation to come to the US and had to really deal with the kind of sexism in our culture”, Alfaro explains (Alfaro, Andújar 2020b). Thus, though she is indeed “horrible” in the way that she manipu-

² The term ‘Dreamers’ refers to those protected under the Deferred Action For Childhood Arrivals (DACA), a 2012 presidential directive enacted by Barack Obama, which permitted those “who had been brought to the US illegally as children to have access to study and work rights” (Walters 2017).

lates Hason into marrying her “for the business”, using the fact that Medea is not only an undocumented migrant but also not legally married to Hason, Armida has also contributed to creating a better world for the “next generation to come forward” (ibid.). Much like its Greek counterparts, there is not a straightforwardly recognisable ‘villain’ in Alfaro’s plays; each character is in fact made more complex by her/his own story, which is written into, and influenced by, a much complicated world of diverse experiences, feelings and identities.

Yet, as Andújar repeatedly flags, Alfaro’s adaptations are not just about transposing the Greek plots onto the “now” (ibid.) – and in this sense he goes ‘beyond’ the Greeks as was asserted at the beginning of this review. The ‘now’ is in fact part of a rich and ancient history and mapped onto the mythologies of the Chicana community that are written into these plays.

“The Greeks offer you structure . . . they offer you wonderful, compact stories”, said Alfaro in an interview in 2011 (qtd in Alfaro and Andújar 2020a, 4), which he then fills with the “old” and the “new” of the “intersecting identities” he embodies and the “different worlds” he inhabits. Andújar details these “worlds” as she places Alfaro’s plays into the long tradition of Chicana and Latina theatre, identifying in *El Teatro Campesino* (The Farm Workers’ Theatre) the major influence on his creative work, something that Alfaro himself concedes (286). It was a theatre which emerged out of the “1965 farmworker strike in Central California, demanding civil rights for Mexican-Americans” and whose founder, Luis Valdez, developed into the dramatic form of “the *mito* (‘myth’), a ritualised performance containing Native American elements, often invoking and even reviving the legends of the Aztec and Mayan civilizations”, but also “influenced by the Greco-Roman classical tradition” (8-9). It is this form of theatre, which addresses contemporary social issues as well as incorporates the history and mythologies of the Chicana community, that Alfaro draws from. “I take Aztlan,³ my spiritual home, everywhere I go” (Alfaro and Andújar 2020b). Alfaro’s choice of a hybrid language, Spanish and Spanish, also writes his plays into, and engages with, Latina identities and theatre tradition. “I take my *barrio* in my language”, and it is by “honour[ing] that language” that Alfaro attains his “own authenticity as a playwright” (Alfaro and Andújar 2020a, 282).

Mojada begins with Tita praying in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs – an ancient language that, Alfaro points out whilst speaking about adapting his

³ For the meanings and history of the term Chicano/Chicana, alternatively spelled Xicano, Chicano/a, Chicana@, Chicana, Xicana@, or Xicana, see Andújar’s introduction (7-12) and footnote 53 (14-15), where she reports the words of Chicana writer, feminist, activist and playwright Cherríe Moraga in an article published in 1992: “I call myself a Chicana writer. Not a Mexican-American, not a Hispanic writer, not a half-breed writer. Chicana is not the mere naming of one’s racial/cultural identity, but it is a politic, a politic that refuses integration into the US mainstream, a politic that recognises that our pueblo originates from, and remains with, those who work the land with their hands, as stated in ‘El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan’”.

Mojada to the audiences of New York's Public Theatre (291), is spoken by over 3500 Mexicans in New York. Tita comes from "a long line of *curanderas*, healers" (192), she explains to the audience at the start of the play, and has taught Medea everything she knows. Medea is this magical and "ancient" (232) character who is desperately holding onto the world she comes from and is trying to teach it to her son Acan. She can, and even suggests doing so at some point, put a curse on Armida, "*un mal de ojo*" (227); and she does eventually work her magic with the dress she sewed for Armida to put on so she would die, just like Euripides' Medea does for Creon's daughter. As Andújar argues in her introduction to the play (182), Alfaro's inscribing Medea into Native American cultures follows in the steps of a number of contemporary productions of Euripides' play, amongst which is Chicana playwright Cherríe Moraga's *Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* (US, 1995).

But references to Aztec culture are also present in *Oedipus El Rey*, in which the Sphinx is "a three-headed Azteca serpent" (170), and in *Electricidad*, in which an eager Electra recalls the history of the *cholo* myth to the dead body of her father (a very daunting, Aeschylean-like presence occupying the performance space for most of the play). "We were Aztecas, huh, *Papa?*" and "Coatlícue", the goddess of "human sacrifice", "made the first *cholo*" and then cut into four pieces one of her "four hundred daughters, *Coyolxauqui*" when she tried to challenge her power, and used the four pieces to create the "*cholo* world" (50). The story is deliberately told in a biblical-like manner, the same manner used by *las vecinas* when they trace the beginnings of *cholo*:

LA CARMEN In the beginning
 . . .
 LA CARMEN There was the cholo.
 LA CONNIE And the cholo was no myth

The *cholo* world is linked to Native American mythologies in a language that references the Christian tradition, one of Alfaro's "competing homelands" (10) because he was brought up by a Catholic father and a Pentecostal mother. "Religion is a big part of my development", Alfaro tells Andújar in the interview published as a coda to the edition of his plays. He continues: "Ritual has been the connective tissue between my own personal narrative and the theatre", it is where his "intersecting identities" and "different worlds" not only communicate with one another but also come together (288).

Thus, the Greeks not only provide the skeletal structure for telling very contemporary stories about these different worlds, but they allow these worlds' own history and mythologies to get across to those audiences who would not otherwise 'see' them performed on stage. Alfaro's versions of these ancient Greek plays not only represent a "door opener into the regional theatres" of the US (283), but also enable "Anglo-American audiences to access the plight of Chicana and Latina peoples" (6), whilst "community audiences" are hearing the stories of Electra, Oedipus, and Medea "for the first time" (282).

With his “episodic” adaptation technique (285) – a subdivision of the play into titled scenes – Alfaro gives the audience a sense of these different worlds, Chicanx, Latinx, Greek, coming together with their different temporalities and mythologies, whilst creating new stories out of them. As Andújar rightly notes, Alfaro’s plays have already begun “chart[ing] a new course for the three most popular Greek figures onto the US stage” (6).⁴

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⁴ See Hall, Macintosh, Taplin (2000), and Macintosh, Kenward, Wrobel (2016), amongst others, for Medea’s rich reception history; Foley (2012), Bosher, Macintosh, McConnell, Rankine (2015), Andújar, and Nikoloutsos (2020) for the reception of Greek drama in the Americas.