



THE GROUP (LEFT TO RIGHT, NANCY RODRIGUEZ, VIVIS, SABINA ZUNIGA VARELA, JAHNANGEL JIMENEZ, LAKIN VALDEZ) REENACTS THE ARDUOUS CROSSING OF THE DESERT FROM MEXICO TO THE UNITED STATES.

PHOTO BY JENNY GRAHAM

MOJADA: A MEDEA IN LOS ANGELES

In the Angus Bowmer Theatre through July 6

As the lights come up on Luis Alfaro's moving little play *Mojada*, Jason and Medea — pay heed to those mythical names — are living in a tiny stucco house in Boyle Heights, a Mexican-American neighborhood of Los Angeles. A severe agoraphobe, she's a stay-at-home mom raising their son, Acan, and slaving seven days a week at her sewing machine to help make ends meet. Medea's world, once clearly expansive, now ends at the garden fence.

Jason — it's pronounced Hah-SOHN in this part of town — has a good job working for Armida, a local developer, also from Mexico, who is on her way to creating a real estate empire by housing all those immigrants who keep arriving in L.A. Jason is pulled each day out into the larger world by money and work and Armida's flashy, hard-edged charms.

Overseeing the young couple's increasingly estranged life is Tita, the elderly indigenous healer who has taken care of Medea since she was a girl in Mexico. In this echo of a Greek tragedy, Tita serves as a wry chorus to the simultaneously unreeling stories of brutal violence that overtook Jason and Medea as they trekked north to the United States, and of its horrifying aftermath in the collapse of their relationship.

Mojada — you can translate the word as “wetback” — surprised me in ways I'm still trying to figure out. It's no mystery that things are going to end badly for any couple named Jason and Medea (especially for any of their children). But the route by which Alfaro takes us to that bloody ending is as rich — in character, story and irony — as the delicious mole Tita serves up for dinner.

Juliette Carrillo, who did 2014's *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* at the festival, directs this production simply and well. Acting is excellent across the board. Sabina Zuniga Varela gives us a sweetly shy Medea, whose reticence masks the stomach-turning violence she quietly endured while crossing the border. Lakin Valdez is affable as Jason, who becomes trapped in his relationship with Armida, played to platform-heeled perfection by OSF veteran Vilma Silva.

The young Acan is played charmingly by Jahnangel Jimenez, a fifth-grader at nearby Talent Elementary School.

And VIVIS — that's how the program credits the actor more generally known as Vivis Colombetti, who has film credits from *Patch Adams* and *Paranormal Activity 2* to *Ouija*, besides her theater work — is quietly spectacular as the dryly mystical and sardonic Tita, a role not far removed from a wise Shakespearean fool.

The story is played out on a simple, effective set by Christopher Acebo, who also did costume design. Dominating the stage is Jason and Medea's little house, which stands up all a-kilter, like a tree about to fall.

Mojada runs for just an hour and a half, with no intermission. With a bit of racy sex and intense descriptions of off-stage violence, the play may not be suitable for younger children.

JULIUS CAESAR

In the Angus Bowmer Theatre through Oct. 29

With the Trump presidency hovering over America like a storm cloud, what better time could there be for a new production of *Julius Caesar*? The new president has been widely, if not always accurately, compared to the Roman consul, who was assassinated by a conspiracy of

other Roman leaders in 44 B.C., leading to the collapse of the republic and the rise of the emperors.

Shakespeare's flawed play — the main character dies half-way through, causing a big shift in dramatic pace — about Caesar kicked off this year's festival on Friday night of opening weekend to a nearly full house in the Angus Bowmer Theatre. Directed by Shana Cooper, it went for obvious effects, sometimes substituting muscular dance routines for the subtleties of the text, but saw good performances nevertheless from a nicely understated Armando Durán as Caesar and from Danforth Comins and Rodney Gardiner as Brutus and Cassius respectively.

The real star of this uneven show, though, is the remarkable set by Sibyl Wickersheimer. A guest artist at the festival for four years, she is known for making amazing worlds from prosaic materials. Her set for *Julius Caesar* looks like it grew out of a shopping spree at Home Depot, with walls of broken corrugated cardboard panels accented by a few fluorescent shop lights and acres of seamless white paper.

As the play opens, Caesar and his family inhabit a fractured cardboard world that looks like the inside of a shipping carton badly mishandled by UPS. The aging despot is increasingly vain; his insecurity has begun to strip the Roman republic of civil liberties and civility itself.

Into this political chasm step Cassius and Brutus, who hatch the plot to kill Caesar on the Ides of March and save Rome.

Julius Caesar has given us endless familiar lines, from “*Et tu, Brute?*” uttered by the dying Caesar to his treasonous friend Brutus, to “I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him,” delivered with wonderful irony by Marc Antony, played here with great conviction by Jordan Barbour.

Caesar's death, of course, solves nothing, and only serves, as Antony says, to “let slip the dogs of war.” The