



MOTHER ROAD: FIDEL GOMEZ (CHORUS), CEDRIC LAMAR (CHORUS), TONY SANCHO (MARTÍN JODES), CARO ZELLER (CHORUS), ARMANDO DURÁN (CHORUS)
PHOTO BY JENNY GRAHAM

in the 1980s, and irony has been made irrelevant by the election of Donald Trump. *Hairspray* might once have been provocative; now it's a sweet nostalgia piece — but for all that, a lot of fun. Go see it and enjoy.

MOTHER ROAD

Angus Bowmer Theatre through Oct. 26

Playwright Octavio Solis, who lives outside Ashland, got the idea for this play — which made its world premiere in the Bowmer Theatre on March 10 — when he was invited by the National Steinbeck Center on a trip exploring the original Route 66.

That route — the “mother road” of the play’s title — is the blue highway followed by hundreds of thousands of migrants fleeing the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma to California in the 1930s. It’s also the route followed by the Joad family in John Steinbeck’s novel *The Grapes of Wrath*.

In an interview last month, Solis said the idea for his play didn’t fully form until well after the trip.

“I knew it was going to do something, but I had no idea what it was going to be. I didn’t even imagine that it would be a play, because the National Steinbeck Center doesn’t have a stage.”

Sometime later he met a young Latino artist at the Arvin Migrant Center near Bakersfield, California. “And he said, the thing that really landed with me is, he said, ‘I am the new Tom Joad. And we are the new Okies.’”

At that moment Solis knew he had a play. “I had no idea it was going to be as big a play as it was as I wrote, but I should have realized it, because *The Grapes of Wrath* is an epic.”

At the end of Steinbeck’s novel, Tom Joad apparently kills a cop and disappears into the night, after giving a famous farewell to his mother, Ma Joad.

In *Mother Road*, Solis imagines what happens next: Joad flees to Mexico, where he settles in and raises a family.

As the play opens, the hardscrabble William Joad (Mark Murphey), a distant Joad cousin who still owns a 2,000-acre ranch in Oklahoma, is trying to track down a Joad descendant — any descendant — to whom he can leave his property when he dies, soon, of liver cancer.

To his surprise — OK, shock, actually — his lawyer finds an heir: Martin Tomas Jodes (Tony Sancho), a quick-tempered 30-something farmworker in California who is the only remaining descendant of the Joad line.

The two men, white cracker Okie and brown-skinned Mexican, meet, clash and finally agree to drive to Oklahoma in Martin’s battered Dodge pickup named Cesar, following the old Route 66, to get Martin installed in his new life as a land baron.

The journey is played out on a simple set by Christopher Acebo and relies heavily on video projections by Kaitlyn Pietras.

Solis’ play, directed by Rauch in his final season at OSF, is a great concept that falls a little flat in execution. *Mother Road* is very much a story with a moral, so much so that half the time you’re watching you feel like you’re in church. The ensemble opens the play with what can only be described as a liturgical tone, which is cemented when the traveling duo eventually encounters crazy James (Cedric Lamar), a reference to the Christ-like failed minister Jim Casy of the Steinbeck novel.

Somehow that underlying churchy tone causes everything to bog, as characters explain their own and each others’ motivations, in case you didn’t get it. All ends happily and a little too predictably, with a speech in which Martin says, essentially, that we are all Mexicans, obliquely echoing those eloquent last words from Tom Joad to his mother before he disappears.

“I’ll be ever’where — wherever you look. Wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Wherever they’s a cop beatin’ up a guy, I’ll be there....”


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