



# EL ÚLTIMO SUEÑO DE FRIDA Y DIEGO

(THE LAST DREAM OF FRIDA AND DIEGO)

STUDY GUIDE | MAY 2024



## INSIDE THE OPERA

The Work/Creative Team .....	3
Cast .....	4
Who's Who .....	5
The Story of <i>El Ultimo Sueno de Frida y Diego</i> .....	6
Conductor's Note .....	8
Director's Note .....	10
Composer's Note .....	12
Librettist's Note .....	13
Understanding the World of the Opera .....	14
Día de los Muertos .....	15

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES ..... 16

Classroom Activites: Lesson One.....	16
Classroom Activites: Lesson Two .....	17
Classroom Activites: Lesson Three .....	18

## GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION ..... 19

## OPERA 101

What is a Working Dress Rehearsal? .....	20
Who Are the People Behind the Tables? .....	21
Behind the Scenes - Jobs at the Opera House .....	22
The Language of Opera .....	24
Guide to the Voice Parts and Families of the Orchestra .....	27
About Opera Omaha .....	28

## REFERENCES and ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Omaha Public Library Frida y Diego Resource List - [www.operaomaha.org/OPL](http://www.operaomaha.org/OPL)

# THE WORK

## *El último sueño de Frida y Diego*

Music by Gabriela Lena Frank

Libretto by Nilo Cruz

Performed in Spanish with Spanish and English supertitles

May 3 and 5, 2024, Orpheum Theater, Slosburg Hall | Omaha, Nebraska

First performance: San Diego Opera, October 29, 2022

# CREATIVE TEAM



Gabriela Lena Frank\*  
**COMPOSER**



Nilo Cruz\*  
**LIBRETTIST**



Ilyich Rivas\*  
**CONDUCTOR**



Lorena Maza\*  
**DIRECTOR**



Eloise Kazan\*  
**COSTUME DESIGNER**



Jorge Ballina\*  
**SCENIC DESIGNER**



Victor Zapatero\*  
**LIGHTING DESIGNER**



Ronell Oliveri  
**WIGS & HAIR DESIGNER**



Ali Pohanka\*  
**MAKE UP DESIGNER**

\*Opera Omaha debut

## CAST



Stephanie Sanchez\*  
**FRIDA KAHLO**



Levi Hernandez  
**DIEGO RIVERA**



Laura León\*  
**CATARINA**



César Aguilar\*  
**LEONARDO**

\*Opera Omaha debut

## WHO'S WHO

CHARACTER	VOICE TYPE	DESCRIPTION
Frida Kahlo (FREE-dah Kah-low)	Mezzo-Soprano	Famed artist and cultural icon who has died some years prior and is allowed to return to the land of the living on Dia de los Muertos to convince Diego to pass into the afterlife.
Diego Rivera (Dee-AY-go ree-VEH-rah)	Baritone	Artist and partner of Frida. Their relationship was famously tumultuous. We see Diego as an old man looking for love and redemption.
Catrina (Cah-TREE-nah)	Soprano	Catrina is one of the most recognizable figures in Mexican culture. She functions as "The Keeper of the Dead" a sort of go between the living world and afterlife.
Leonardo (Lee-oh-NARH-do)	Countertenor	A young actor also living in the Land of the Dead who acts as a muse for Frida imploring her to return to the Land of the Living and repaint herself in a new image.

# THE STORY OF *EL ÚLTIMO SUEÑO DE FRIDA Y DIEGO*

## ACT I

Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), November 2, 1957. The year of Diego Rivera's death and three years after the death of his wife, painter Frida Kahlo. Diego Rivera visits a cemetery where villagers have gathered for the annual ritual to honor departed loved ones and summon them to return from the underworld. A few villagers recognize the famous painter and dare to approach. They joke affectionately and then explain their ritual, emphasizing that it's faith in your soul that brings back the dead. As the villagers depart, Diego calls out to Frida, revealing his fears and loneliness and imploring her to return to him. Diego's reverie is interrupted by an old woman selling flowers. After Diego leaves, the old woman reveals herself as La Catrina, Keeper of the Dead.

In Mictlán, the Aztec underworld, Catrina summons Frida to arise and return to visit Diego. Frida defies the powerful Catrina, refusing to believe that Diego has called her. Catrina insists that Frida return to accompany her dying husband on his journey to the underworld.

Frida, having found release in death from both her mercurial relationship and lifelong agonizing physical pain, questions why she would return to the world of the living. She prefers her refuge of darkness and silence. Other departed souls playfully implore Frida to return to Diego, but Frida refuses.

As the other departed prepare for their return, changing into clothing for the land of the living, they again try to convince Frida to join them, but she declines. Catrina arrives to gather those who have been summoned, chasing off a young man trying to sneak back to the living world after failing to return to the underworld on time the previous year.

Frida notices a young actor, Leonardo, practicing his impersonation of Greta Garbo. He wants to go back as Garbo to please a fan of the actress who waits every year hoping for a visit from his long unseen (and assumed departed) idol.

A fellow artistic spirit, Leonardo opens Frida to the idea of

returning to the world for herself, her art and the chance to paint a "new Frida" without pain or anguish. He dresses her in her trademark clothes, adorning her hair with ribbons and flowers. Catrina returns, calling out the names of those who have been summoned, and readies them for their return. She calls on Frida, who continues to protest. Catrina notices Leonardo in his Garbo costume and forbids his ruse as Greta Garbo has not yet died. Frida pleads for him, and Catrina relents.

At the last minute, Frida decides she will return to the world of the living. Catrina allows it, but not before laying out the rules: the visit is 24 hours only, and there is to be no touching the living: "A caress can cost you the memory of pain." As Diego continues to summon Frida from above, she and the other departed souls begin their return.

## ACT II

In the world of the living, Diego is without inspiration. He is unable to paint, unable to embrace his mortality and tormented by the absence of Frida. Suddenly, she appears to him. Diego's pleas have been answered and Frida is again in the world of the living.

Frida and Diego find themselves together in Alameda Park, strolling among living and departed souls together. Frida is overjoyed to be without pain and part of the vibrant life around her. Diego pleads for an embrace which Frida cannot give.

A passing beggarwoman is a reminder of the darker world around them. Diego feels the presence of death and is reminded of his own mortality. The two artists mourn the state of the city and its broken but beautiful past.

Frida finds Leonardo and learns that he has visited Greta Garbo's admirer, fulfilling the man's fantasy of meeting the movie star and providing the departed actor with a successful performance. Diego leads Frida back to her beloved home, Casa Azul where she must confront the realities of her past life and the limitations of her return. Leonardo encourages Frida to paint, Diego begs her to

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# THE STORY OF *EL ÚLTIMO SUEÑO DE FRIDA Y DIEGO* (CONT.)

embrace him, and Catrina reminds that her time is limited and she must not touch the living. Frida tries to paint but, no longer having a reflection in the physical world, she cannot summon her primary subject – her own image. Diego comforts Frida, and asks her forgiveness for their difficult past. Suddenly she embraces him and, as Catrina warned, is racked by the returning pain of her living existence. Diego lovingly encourages her to paint as a distraction. Images of herself that Frida created throughout her life appear, beckoning her into a world of art. Diego and Frida are surrounded by a timeless world of blue.

As dawn breaks, Frida and Diego cling to their hope of staying together, but it is time for Frida to return to the underworld. As Leonardo bids a final farewell to the world of the living, Catrina gathers the departed souls for their return to Mictlán. She is angry to notice Frida's absence but keeps her procession moving.

Alone, Frida and Diego recognize that they cannot live forever in a dream world of art. With a final hope of being together with Frida forever, Diego pleads for the gods of the underworld to call him back with her. Catrina appears and Diego tells her his time has come. Catrina reminds him only Mictlantecuhtli (God of the underworld) can decide his time. Frida begs her to help and Diego's journey begins. As they approach the underworld, Catrina calls out to Mictlantecuhtli who appears and brings Diego into the world of the departed.

As the departed souls welcome them, Frida and Diego whisper to one another, united for eternity in the underworld.

# CONDUCTOR'S NOTE



## ILYICH RIVAS, CONDUCTOR

Gabriela Lena Frank weaves the beautifully delicate fabric of her opera with a needle dipped in the 20th century's harmonic landscape. This choice resonates powerfully with the subject of our story, as if we travelled in time with her to meet Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. Avoiding a common tendency in contemporary opera to have historical figures serve as canvases upon which the composer can experiment style and form, Frank invests her creative forces into an acute character study of Frida and Diego. Hence all the magical dimension of Mexican folklore in the opera becomes not a far away fairyland, but as believable a realm as their Casa Azul.

One of the distinctive pillars of 20th century harmony is any chord that is built on intervals of fourths, fifths, tritones, and consequently seconds, in opposition to the traditional thirds and sixths. Schoenberg, who introduced these chords (in the beginning of his *Opus 9*), exploits their technical and lyrical potential, opening the door to the viennese expressionism of the 1920s & 30s. Towards the middle of the century they caught on different usages around the world, be it lyrically in Bartok's *Bluebeard's Castle*, galloping forward in the finale of his *Dance Suite*, or exploited for their bare sonority by Villa-Lobos, in his *Choros*, bringing to life the vast territorial expanses of the Brazilian plains. A thrilling example lies in Alberto Ginastera's *Estancia*, where the composer injects these chords into a virtual stampede of the whole orchestra. Frank, by contrast, applies them gently against a backdrop of more traditional minor chords, resulting in the eeriness that shrouds the scene from the beginning of *El último sueño de Frida y Diego*, at dawn, on the Mexican Day of the Dead. These harmonies seep through the forlorn phrases of the chorus, engulfing the stage in a requiem Mass of sorts, where it's the dead themselves who chant their condition. The chorus dissipates into a shallow orchestral texture that quietly reiterates a motive upon which Diego will yearn for his Friduchita and Frida damn the day she met Diego. A series of rhapsodic woodwind solos linger on, recalling the transitions between songs in Luciano Berio's *Folk Songs*, where a change of key is reached by a meandering line passed along from instrument to instrument, like a rivulet that guides us gently to a new scene. However there's an agony implicit in the constant semitone trills of flute, clarinet, and oboe, which will soon loom over the orchestral coloration of Frida's part. This brings to mind the ominous and meditative flute solos in the first movement of Shostakovich's *6th Symphony*. They were conceived the moment Shostakovich happened upon a Zen flautist who was touring the Soviet Union in 1937 (curiously the same year Trotsky would leave Stalin's Russia for Mexico and encounter Diego and Frida!).

In Benjamin Britten's *Albert Herring*, the libretto, adapted by Eric Crozier from a Maupassant story, remains colloquial throughout, allowing the vocal lines themselves to give a strong colour and intonation to the characters' expressions, rather than a florid text. This is what Nilo Cruz and Frank achieve so exceptionally with the Spanish language, in an approach which I feel does great justice to the compatibility of Spanish with the operatic voice and diction. In *Albert Herring*, Britten uses a simple major triad when introducing his protagonist, allowing Herring's full name to

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## CONDUCTOR'S NOTE (CONT.)

be cleanly announced and musically emboldened, before the character even says a word. The Vicar enunciates Albert Herring's full name for the first time over an E major triad, dividing the two syllables of Herring amongst D sharp and E natural. And so, in our opera Diego Rivera is greeted by one of the villagers on an F sharp major chord, which Frank briefly alternates with its chromatic neighbour, an F major chord, making the word Rivera pivot between both (from C natural to C sharp), as if Diego's identity were vast enough to occupy two keys. A further jump to A minor takes place once Diego projects his first line, the same key in which Frida will say her first words as well, giving an atavistic unity to the characters despite their profound differences. Therefore Britten's introductory device is transformed by Frank into a vector through which she sketches a strong and portentous first impression of Diego Rivera, immediately tying him to Frida.

Now Frida, what a role! Her melodic line is permanently fractured by asymmetrical rhythms, strangely mechanical at times, which give tangibility to her pain, to her lopsided wounds, to her trauma and rancor towards Diego. The complex interval leaps in her melody bring to mind Alban Berg's expressionist *Lulu*, only without the extremes of register, as if Frida's lack of comfort within the melodic contour were a permanent trait of hers, of her troubled being, rather than a product of the composer's psychoanalytic portrait. Her only respite is in the soothing presence of Leonardo, the young dead actor who persuades her to return to the world of the living. This gentle countertenor role (male singer who often sings in falsetto, although the term can also include tenors who use their chest voices in extraordinarily high registers), renders homage to a voice-type mostly forgotten in the history of opera from its heyday in the 16th century, when women were not allowed to sing in church liturgy, all the way up until it was revived the mid-20th century by, most notably, Alfred Deller, for whom Britten wrote the role of Oberon in his *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The timbre of Oberon's falsetto merges with the Celesta (keyboard instrument with small bells instead of strings) and glockenspiel. Frank too chooses to highlight the countertenor's inimitable timbre (pairing it with vibraphone), rather than, as is often the case, opting for the potential virtuosity in a powerful chested voice, like Orff does with his roasting swan in the "Olim lacus colueram" of his *Carmina Burana*, whilst the male chorus roars and salivates over his blazing flesh. In fact this type of ritualistic exchange between chorus and a main character, which one finds in Stravinsky's *Les Noces*, is given new form by Frank when Catrina, our coloratura soprano, and Mictlan's guardian of the dead, summons Frida from the underground. The chorus obsessively repeats Catrina's incantations, lured under her spell, in a Stravinskian mixed-meter above a jagged, syncopated orchestra.

I deeply admire composers who don't allow themselves to be clipped by an exclusive school or tendency, but whose musical talent yearns for any fruits that can be picked from the work of their precursors. Not only does one learn infinitely more about a new piece when detecting its allusions and sources of inspiration, but in turn, one rediscovers its precursors as new light is shed on aspects of their composition. As artists, Frida and Diego most certainly achieve this, and so does Gabriela Lena Frank.

## DIRECTOR'S NOTE



### LORENA MAZA, DIRECTOR

Frida and Diego created some of the most fascinating works of art in the 20th Century. Frida Kahlo is one of very few artists whose work is immediately recognizable. Diego is the father of Mexican Muralism, the first artistic movement the Americas gave to the world. They were extraordinary artists with extraordinary lives and a tragic love story. These two Mexican artists transcend in every aspect of their lives. They were unique, provocative, intense, and amazing artists. Frida and Diego created a whole universe for themselves with their art, their passions, their houses, their love affairs, their art collections, the way they dressed, their social and political ideals, and their love for each other. Everything in their lives was connected and truly represented who they were. Art and life were the same. They shared everything important to them, especially their love for Mexico and its indigenous past, popular art and of course their social and political ideals. They both painted Mexico's visual identity at its core. Frida and Diego helped us remember who we were and created a vision of how we wanted to be. All they created came together in a multidimensional, multicultural universe that translated into a unique, personal, breathtaking art. They live on because of that uniqueness. Their universe is profoundly appealing because we can recognize ourselves in their passion, their pain, and the beauty of what they created.

These two characters have many dimensions; they exist as icons, as artists, as a couple, and as individual human beings. But they also belong to the imagination. *The Last Dream of Frida and Diego* allows us to imagine them again, recreate part of that universe, and witness a last encounter. This story has all the ingredients for an opera. Love, betrayal, pain, art, death, politics, sex, gender, diversity, and disability. Nilo Cruz's story is as multilayered and multidimensional, as its characters. It's a journey from the underworld and back; it's about passion for art and finding identity through art; it's about forgiveness and surrender. Finally, this story is also a dream, Diego's and Frida's dream of a last encounter with each other and with art. It happens on los Días de Muertos and Diego's last day on earth. The context is enormous and couldn't be more dramatic. Our challenge in this production is to create a unique universe that conveys the main symbols, gestures and imagery of their iconography and their lives, in a very symbolic and depurated style, avoiding textual reproductions and the usual interpretation of Mexican folklore cliché or massive media exploitation of Frida's and Diego's life and image. We wanted to create our own vision of this particular and beautiful story.

The whole creative team of *The Last Dream of Frida and Diego* represents eight or nine different cultures, nationalities and artistic sensibilities. I'm a Mexican stage director directing the opera of a Peruvian-American-Estonian composer with a Cuban-American librettist, depicting two cultural icons that represent so many different communities. Well, this is what the world looks like now.

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## DIRECTOR'S NOTE (CONT.)

Not only do we live in a globalized world, but we live in a multicultural one; all the American continent is a melting pot. We are all Mestizos in a sense.

I believe projects like this one can help advance diversity and inclusion, helping us understand our different cultures and shared humanity. We can genuinely connect through music and art, discovering and celebrating our differences with respect, and recognizing ourselves in others. We must embrace diversity and inclusion to live peacefully and prosper. I hope this opera can help bring communities closer and welcome new audiences to the opera. I hope that Mexicans and Americans feel proud of such a rich and distinctive heritage that belongs to all of us.

## COMPOSER'S NOTE



GABRIELA LENA FRANK, COMPOSER

## FRIDA AND DIEGO AND ME

Mexican-born painters Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera within a fantastical landscape inspired by el Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) is the premise of this new opera that I've been privileged to compose. In some ways, I've been living with these two iconic artists, especially Frida, from my youth growing up in the 1970s in Berkeley, California. Before I could read, I found Frida in the pages of an art book in my mother's home library, the only woman in a multi-volume set of "great artists." My mother pointed out how Frida was small, brown and creative like us; moreover, of thick brow, disabled and a daughter of both Europe and Latin America like me. Images of her paintings danced in my dreams for years, both the joyful and the haunting, and as I matured and understood more of Frida's very human biography, she took on a heroic status for me. It has also been remarkable for me to watch how Frida's popularity soared in recent decades, her story and artistic legacy clearly touching a cultural nerve. With this libretto by my longtime collaborator, Nilo Cruz, I've been able to lose myself in the imagined story exploring Frida's tumultuous love affair, even beyond life itself with Diego. In honoring the wonderful narrative, including the surprising appearance of other principal characters such as Catrina, the Keeper of the Souls, with immense power over the souls of the underworld, and Leonardo, a young actor in the underworld, my task has been to create colorful and characterful music befitting multiple planes of existence—the world of the living, the world of the dead and, briefly, an especially poignant world of Art. Through these three planes, we witness how Diego, at the end of his life, and Frida, deceased for several years, gradually move towards reunion, reconciling through a recognition of their shared past and a hoped-for shared future. Throughout their journey, the chorus provides a rich array of underworld spirits and living villagers as participants and commentators; the orchestration ranges from chamber to full ensemble, a mixture of races and cultures, migrations and indigenous people, from Alaska to Patagonia. We are all Mestizos in a sense.

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## LIBRETTIST'S NOTE



## NILO CRUZ, LIBRETTIST

The challenge I faced when I was chosen to write the libretto of this opera was that both Frida and Diego were painters who were natural story tellers; they were chroniclers of time, history, and their personal lives. The question in my mind was always, how do I represent these two artists in an innovative way? Diego Rivera would examine the vestige of antiquity through the prism of his murals. In his frescos, which capture the imprint of time, Rivera always reminds us that there is nothing that cannot be recorded through the vividness of his brushstrokes. As with Diego, the paintbrush of anguish of Frida Kahlo also depicts those things that cannot pass as unseen: human pain and suffering. What became more significant to me, as I studied their lives, was that these two artists painted each other despite their ups and downs in their tempestuous relationship as husband and wife. Frida was obsessed with painting Diego's face between her eyebrows, as if he was always in her thoughts. Diego painted Frida as his muse in several of his frescoes. But it was Frida's painting *The Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth (Mexico), Myself, Diego, and Señor Xolotl* that gave me the idea of setting the opera during the Day of the Dead, Mexico. In this painting, Frida holds a naked Diego Rivera whose forehead contains a third eye, and next to them is Xolotl, considered to be a soul-guide for the dead. In this piece, it almost seems as if Frida is carrying a dying Diego to the infra-world. Diego Rivera's famous mural *Dream of a Sunday afternoon in the Alameda Central* was also inspirational. This work of art, which features Frida standing next to characters from other epochs, depicts how people from different moments in history were brought together by Diego on a Sunday afternoon. Through this artistic concept, I played with time by mixing reality and fiction to bring Frida and Diego back to the world in a fantastical fiesta of color, music and sound, since it was Rivera's desire to have his ashes mixed with Kahlo's when he was at the end of his life.

# UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD OF THE OPERA

*El último sueño de Frida y Diego* is a dramatic story in every sense. It's a journey to the underworld and back, it's a tragic love story, it's about pain and artistic identity, it's about the celebration of life, death, and art. All this occurs within three dramatic spaces.

## MICTLÁN

Mictlán is the underworld of Aztec mythology. According to their ancient mythology, when someone died, they had to go through a journey of nine levels to arrive at Mictlán. The process, which lasted for four years, was full of obstacles. It is ruled by King Mictlantecuhtli ("Lord of the Underworld") and his wife, Mictecacihuatl ("Lady of the Underworld")

The world of the dead, Mictlán, finds its threshold in the cemetery in Día de los Muertos. These worlds, in the opera, share a specific color, orange, the color of cempasuchil, the flower and light, the candles and offerings. This world is very ancient and ritual and mysterious.



*El último sueño de Frida y Diego*. San Diego Opera, 2022. Photo: Karli Cadel.

## LA CASA AZUL

La Casa Azul is Frida's world. It was her childhood home and where she lived after her father's death. It is located in Mexico City and is attached to La Casa Estudio the house Frida and Deigo lived and worked in together.



La Casa Azul

In the opera, La Casa Azul represents the world of the living, Needless to say, it's all blue, Frida's favorite color. It's a specific blue, azul añil (cobalt blue) a pre-Columbian color.

## THE WORLDS CREATED IN THEIR ART

This is the abstract world of the opera, a unique universe that conveys the main symbols and ritual gestures and imagery of their iconography.

Frida's painting is an artform that springs from her womanhood, she gives poetry to her tragic destiny and turns it into art. Art comes from her immobility, loneliness, and pain. Frida's self-portraits are the main aesthetic in the opera, yet this is complicated by the fact that the Frida in the opera no longer exists in the world of the living, so she can't see herself.

While Diego tended to paint in magnitude (great murals), Frida was more intimate, she went deeper, she painted herself. While he narrates the history of a nation, she narrates her own life: the contrast of the agony of her body that, at the same time, is drenched in beauty because it can reflect the essence of her and her personality.



*Sueño de una tarde dominical en la Alameda Central* (Dream of a Sunday Afternoon at Alameda Central Park), Diego Rivera. 1947.

# DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS

The first problem that arises when talking about this celebration in a foreign context is that it should not be understood as “Mexican Halloween,” there is a cultural sensitivity that is often lost outside the Mexican context.

During the Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) the lives of loved ones who have passed away are honored. It is a deeply personal and meaningful occasion, during which families come together to celebrate the fact that death is a natural part of life and that family members who have died are never really gone. Offerings that pay homage to the deceased are installed in homes and offerings are made to them in cemeteries.

In the United States context, perhaps due to the dates and thematic elements of the events, some associate Día de los Muertos with Halloween, even though the occasions have separate origins and meanings. While death is a central theme of both Halloween and Día de los Muertos, the way the two celebrations approach the subject is very different. In contrast to the macabre nature of Halloween, those who celebrate Día de los Muertos do so in a respectful way to remember and honor the deceased. It is a way of coming to terms with our mortality and finding peace.



*El último sueño de Frida y Diego*. San Diego Opera, 2022. Photo: Karli Cadel.

For Frida, this notion of death extends to her own way of dealing with mortality. Her paintings demonstrate this. For example, in *Cuatro Habitantes de México* (1938) one can find two very important figures, the Judas and the skeleton. Diego and Frida collected Judas's, a papier-mâché figure symbolizing Judas Iscariot stuffed with fireworks this is exploded in local plazas in front of cheerful spectators during Easter holy week celebrations. Frida found more humor than menace in the

character of Judas, explaining that it served as a pretext for joy, fun, and irresponsibility without having anything to do with religion. The skeleton is the large version of what Mexican children usually carry and play with on Día de los Muertos. It symbolizes, as she herself described, “Death: something very happy, a joke.”

This is the central context for *El último sueño de Frida y Diego*.

- Diego's last day on earth is intertwined with Día de Muertos.
- He is afraid to die. Diego is an atheist, he needs something or someone to hold on to, to guide him on his journey to the underworld, to Mictlán.
- He calls on Frida, on the very day the dead come back and visit us.
- This duality with Death and Frida that Diego seeks is embodied in his mural *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park*. We see Diego's self-portrait as a child holding the hand of La Catrina (Death)

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

## LESSON ONE: (ANYTIME): SELF(IE) PORTRAIT

**Overview:** Before there were camera phones, Frida Kahlo was the queen of selfies. Of the 143 paintings that she produced in her lifetime, 55 of them were self-portraits. Many of these depicted the way Frida felt about herself or the trials and tribulations that she had been through. Frida also played with the various ways her looks changed over the years or how the public seemed to see her. In this way, Frida took the self-portrait and made it less about a reflection in the mirror and more about what was underneath.

**Lesson:** Create your own self(ie) portrait channeling the wisdom of Frida Kahlo to produce something that balances both physical appearance and inner character. Create a more rounded view of yourself and be able to share that view with your classmates.

**Materials needed:** Camera, printer, markers/colored pencils.

- To get started, look at these self-portraits by Frida Kahlo and discuss what stands out. What do they think Frida was trying to say about herself? What choices did she make in the imagery, color, setting, and overall mood of the paintings?



*Me and my parrots.* Frida Kahlo (1941).



*The Wounded Deer (The Little Deer).* Frida Kahlo (1946).



*Self portrait as a Tehuana.* Frida Kahlo (1943).

- Create a list of physical traits that make you unique.
  - What traits do you like about yourself?
  - What traits do you wish were different?
  - What traits do you think make you unique?
- What are some things that make you happy?
  - Think of an object that you've had for a long time.
  - Think of an article of clothing or outfit that makes you happy.
  - Think of a place that you've enjoyed or a place where you spend a lot of time.
- What are some things you love?
  - Picture a person that you care a lot about.
  - Picture a pet or an animal that is your favorite.
  - Picture your best friend and what you recognize most about them.
- Now take these lists and create a self(ie) portrait. Take a selfie and print them out (this can be done ahead) and manually edit them with markers or collages to add in as many details as you can. They can be obvious examples like Frida's famous self portrait of her as a deer or then can be more subtle odes to some of the things you are more private about. Emphasize features you like or that you like are unique and let the audience into things that you feel deeply about.
- Share your self(ie) portraits with the class and explain as many of the details that you've added as possible.



# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

## LESSON TWO (Before the show): Biography and Geography

**Overview:** Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera were both very well-traveled, but also firmly rooted in Mexican culture. Much of their personal identity and therefore their artistic identity centered around the joys and struggles they had living in Mexico. They tied themselves to the place they were born, despite their reservations about the government, religious practices, and treatment of the working class. They used these reservations as inspiration for their art and grappled with them in this way. In many ways their geography defined their biography.

**Lesson:** Research and write a biography about a member of your family and the history of where they've lived.

1. Read these brief biographies on Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera and answer the following questions:
  - What did you find most interesting about their lives?
  - How did their birthplace impact who they became?
  - What stood out to you as some of their major accomplishments?
  - What challenges did they overcome?
  - How did they embrace their culture and heritage?
  - Who were some of the influences on their life?
2. Now take these questions home and prepare a brief biography on a family member or loved one. Make sure you get as much information as possible, especially about where they were born and where they have lived and how it has shaped them. Ask about their culture and heritage and how it affected their upbringing. Try to learn something new about your subject.
3. Share the biographies with the class and make a map of all the places mentioned in the biographies to see how our loved ones have grown up, moved around, and traveled. Discuss how different the biographies are and why we think that might be regardless of if the subjects grew in a different part of the city, state, or country.

FRIDA KAHLO BIOGRAPHY

DIEGO RIVERA BIOGRAPHY

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

## LESSON THREE (After the show): Ekphrastic Poetry

**Overview:** Art is never made without influences from the world around us. Sometimes artists are so moved by different artwork that they create their own interpretation in a different medium. This is known as ekphrasis. *El Último Sueño de Frida y Deigo* is, in part, an Ekphrastic opera based on the paintings of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera

**Lesson:** Write an ekphrastic poem based on scenes or images that moved you from the show. This lesson works best after you have seen the opera, but can also be done by exploring examples of artwork by Frida and Diego and responding to them.

1. To get started, brainstorm a list of things about the opera that stand out to you.
  - What scene do you remember most from the show?
  - What emotions did it make you feel?
  - What colors most stand out when you think of this scene?
  - What did this scene mean to you?
  - Can you relate to this scene personally?
  - How would you have changed this scene if you had written it?
2. Use this list to write an ekphrastic poem reinterpreting the opera and its themes through their own viewpoint. Use the list for inspiration to either encapsulate the whole of the opera or to focus on a very specific moment that you connected with.

# GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

## Before you go:

*El Ultimo Sueno de Frida y Deigo* takes place on Día de los Muertos or The Day of The Dead, one of the most well-known, but perhaps misunderstood holidays in North America.

- What do you know about Día de los Muertos?
- Why is it important to understand the cultural celebrations of those around us?
- Can you think of a holiday or family tradition that you celebrate that might be important to you, but not to other people you know?

Frida was plagued in life by misfortune. She contracted polio as a child, and as a teenager she was injured in a bus accident which left her hospitalized and with lifelong pain and medical issues. It was during her hospital stay that she started painting.

- Can you think of other examples in other art forms where personal struggle leads to inspiring works?
- Why do you think so much art is influenced by the pain or tragedy of the artist?
- Have you ever tried to process your own struggles through artistic expression?

This opera centers on a fictional story of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, two of the most famous and influential Mexican artists of the 20th century.

- What do you know about Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera before seeing the opera?
- Do you know any of their art?
- Can you identify any influences they have on art and culture? n?

## After the show:

This opera is very new in opera terms. Written by a living composer, Gabriela Lena Frank and librettist, Nilo Cruz, the opera debuted in 2022 at San Diego Opera, and has only been produced by three other opera companies before Opera Omaha. It's also based on the lives of real people, and while the story itself is fictional, their characters did exist.

- Why do you think these characters were important to explore and this story was important to tell?
- What did you learn about Frida and Diego through the course of the opera?
- How did the Opera use renditions of the artists' work to help explore the plot?
- How did the music help tell the story or the opera? Is there music you connect with specific emotions?

In the opera, the color orange represents the underworld. This is taken from the Cempasuchil or Mexican Marigold which is a traditional flower used to celebrate Día de los Muertos. The land of the living is represented by Azul Añil or cobalt blue which was Frida's favorite color and the name given to her longtime home, now museum, La Casa Azul.

- How did the colors set the tone for what you were seeing throughout the opera?
- What colors do you associate with emotions portrayed such as love, fear, pain, and peace?
- Why do you think the colors were so specific and prevalent throughout the show?
- How is the opera's presentation of the underworld visually and musically different than the presentation of the world of the living?

## Thinking about your opera experience.

- What did you expect to experience with this opera? How was your experience similar or different than your expectations? What would you like to see or hear again?
- Is there are job or role in the opera field that you might be interested in? What skills do you think you need for that job?

# WHAT IS A WORKING DRESS REHEARSAL?

Whether an opera is an original Opera Omaha production, a co-production with one or more companies, a rental from another company, or a revival or remount of an Opera Omaha production, each production must be adjusted for the Orpheum Theater stage. While each department works independently to learn and produce their aspect of the show, it takes tremendous coordination and expense to run through the show with everyone involved.

The final working dress rehearsal is the last time all the elements of the production are brought together before the opening night performance, and the final opportunity for the staff and cast to make adjustments to the on-stage performances, orchestration, sets, costumes, lighting and other technical aspects of the opera. When you attend a dress rehearsal you will see some of the artistic, production, and administrative staff stationed behind computers and other equipment in the seats in front of the orchestra. Occasionally they may stop the performance to give notes to the singers, coordinate with the orchestra conductor, or address a staging or technical concern.

Another characteristic of a working dress rehearsal is that singers sometimes “mark” portions of their vocal parts. This means the singer may not sing out completely through the entire rehearsal. This could be because he or she wants to preserve his/her voice for opening night. In most cases, however, if the dress rehearsal is open to the public, the singers treat the occasion as a performance for the audience present.

On the day of the dress rehearsal, the staff sits in the theater and monitors the performance. Each department is responsible for specific aspects of the production, but there are basic skills that are important for everyone:

## TIME MANAGEMENT

Planning well and using time efficiently to accomplish one's goals

## A STRONG WORK ETHIC

The desire to work hard and do well in one's job

## LIFELONG LEARNING

Continued study in one's chosen field

## CREATIVE THINKING

The ability to solve problems as they arise

# WHO ARE THE PEOPLE WORKING BEHIND THE TABLES?

## ARTISTIC STAFF

This could be the producing director, the director of production and the artistic planning staff. They act in a supervisory role, in case something goes wrong and a problem needs to be solved.

## STAGE DIRECTOR AND ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

The stage director is responsible for the dramatic interpretation of the opera. They will give notes to the assistant director about anything that needs to be changed and will refer to the notes in communicating with the performers.

## PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER

The production stage manager communicates all the cues throughout the production including lighting changes, the movement of set pieces, and when the performers enter the stage.

## TECHNICAL STAFF

The technical director and their staff supervise the physical elements on stage, such as sets, lights, sound, communications, and video.

## LIGHTING DESIGNER AND ASSISTANT LIGHTING DESIGNER

As with the directors, the lighting designer oversees the lights and gives notes to the assistant lighting designer, who is also communicating with the follow spot operators.

## COSTUME STAFF

The costume director and wardrobe assistants are present to make any last-minute costume adjustments.

## MUSIC STAFF

Because the conductor is working and cannot tell how the orchestra sounds from outside the orchestra pit, one or more music assistants are seated in the theater to monitor the sound and balance from within the house.

## EFFECTS AND ANIMATION

If the production has special visual effects, there will be staff to oversee those elements as well.

# BEHIND THE SCENES – JOBS AT THE OPERA HOUSE

Opera is one of the most popular forms of art in the world and is growing in popularity in the United States—particularly among young people. The combination of spectacle, music, and drama continues to thrill audiences. Opera is truly an international art form. While each company has its own orchestra and chorus, or group of singers, opera companies all over the world share opera productions (the sets and costumes of opera), and singers travel all over to sing the roles that made them famous. But there is more to opera than famous singers, orchestra, and spectacle. Many people work hard behind the scenes to make each opera performance happen. Opera companies employ administrators and production personnel who are responsible for the productions you see. You might wish to explore careers in the arts. Here are some professions at an opera company that might interest you.

## CONDUCTOR

Opera companies may have their own resident conductor or may invite guest conductors to conduct specific operas. Conductors are accomplished and highly trained musicians, who often play several instruments and must be able to read music with the fluency of their native language. Not every conductor wants to conduct opera; conducting for the voice is a highly specialized skill. Conductors also specialize in different kinds of music; some conductors are known for early music, others specialize in composers, like Mozart or Rossini, while some are skilled in conducting contemporary or new music. The conductor may have an assistant who accompanies in rehearsals. A chorus master works with the chorus, conducting them in rehearsals and supervises them while they learn the music.

## STAGE DIRECTOR

The director is responsible for the overall concept of the production, for the performers' interpretations of their roles, and for moving the action on the stage. Directors are usually hired for a specific production, and like conductors, they specialize in different styles. Opera directors often work internationally. The director often works with an assistant who, among other duties, takes staging notes during rehearsals.

## SET DESIGNER

The set designer works closely with the director to create the look of the opera. The director determines where and when the opera will take place (many directors choose to update operas in a more recent time), and the designer will sketch the locations. They might do this after extensive research. A set designer must know a great deal about construction and materials, for the set must be created to be lightweight, sturdy, and practical. They must also know about light, for the colors for the set must work with the lights illuminating the stage.

## COSTUME DESIGNER

The costume designer works closely with both the director and set designer to create the costumes for every character in the opera. The costume designer will draw their ideas for each character. Costume constructors build (or sew) the costumes. Some characters change their costumes many times—a young girl in Act One may be portrayed as an old woman in Act Three—and the designer must develop specific details, down to the kind of fabric to be used, for each costume.

## LIGHTING DESIGNER

The lighting designer must be knowledgeable about electricity, color, and theater techniques to create a design that will work for the opera. A lighting designer must be a good draftsman, for they will draw the "light plot," a rendering of every light to be used and its placement in the theater. The lighting designer creates mood, atmosphere, and locale through the clever use of light and color.

## TECHNICAL DIRECTOR

The technical director oversees all the technical aspects of the company's production. They work with the designers and with the stage crew to make sure the sets, props, and lights are effective and work together.

## COSTUME DIRECTOR

The costume director supervises all aspects of costumes working with the costume designer to make sure all requests are met. They also supervise construction of costumes or arrange to buy or rent costumes the company doesn't make, make sure all the costumes fit the singers, and supervises the wardrobe staff who ensure the costumes are kept clean and in good condition.

## PRODUCTION MANAGER

The production manager supervises all other aspects of the production, including the stage management staff (see below), wig, make-up, rehearsal schedules, and more.

## STAGE MANAGER

Stage managers are responsible for "calling" the show; during the rehearsals and performances, they tell the person who controls the lights when to change them; they tell the person who opens and closes the curtains when to do their job; they tell the performers when to enter and exit stage. They are the boss of the production during performances. There is a team of stage managers for opera productions, and usually the a PSM, or production stage manager leads that team with at least one ASM, or assistant stage manger.

## WIG AND MAKE-UP MASTER

Just like in the movies, opera singers wear make-up on stage. Sometimes the make-up is elaborate (a young singer must be made-up to look old, for example) and sometimes it is simple. In order for the singers' faces to be seen under bright lights and in a large auditorium, all must wear make-up. Wigs are often used, even when the singers' own hair will look fine, because it is easier for the wig master to set the wig than it is to set the singer's own hair.

## ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF

Opera companies are usually headed by a General Director as well as a Managing Director who oversees marketing and fundraising. Other members of the staff include the Producing Director and Artistic Director who cast singers in their roles and negotiate with their agents, the Marketing Director who is in charge of advertising, public relations, and selling tickets, the Development Director who is in charge of raising money (operas are very expensive to produce—ticket sales cover less than half of the what it actually costs!), the Finance Director who oversees budgets and money, and the Engagement Programs Director who is in charge of programs for schools and the community.

# THE LANGUAGE OF OPERA

Acoustics	The science of sound; the qualities of sound in an enclosed space.
Act	Main sections of a play or opera.
Aria	A song for solo voice in an opera used to express feelings or comment on the story.
Baritone	The middle male voice; often cast as kings, priests, and villains. This voice type is higher than a bass but lower than a tenor.
Bass	The lowest male voice; often cast as comic roles and older men.
Bel Canto	A genre and style of opera most popular in the early 19th century that has long flowing melodies and lots of vocal embellishment.
Bravo	Italian meaning “well done”; opera tradition calls for the audience to shout “bravo!” at the end of an excellent performance.
Choreography	A dance or the making of a dance; some operas include dance sequences.
Chorus	A group of singers usually divided into sections of sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses; the opera chorus often represents the general community, who comments on the story and sometimes voices the thoughts, fears and suspicions of the audience.
Composer	The person who writes the music of an opera or other musical compositions.
Conductor	As the musical director of the opera, the conductor leads both the orchestra and the singers.
Contralto	The lowest female singing voice.
Cover	A replacement for a singer in case of illness; an understudy.
Crescendo	Meaning “growing,” used as a musical direction to indicate that the music is to get gradually louder.
Director	The person responsible for the dramatic interpretation of opera.
Duet	A song for two voices.
Dynamics	The degree of loudness and softness in music.
Ensemble	A French word that means “together”; a group performing together.
Finale	The ending segment of an act or scene, often very lively.
Forte (f)	Italian for “strong” or “loud.” An indication to perform at a loud volume, but not as loudly as fortissimo.
Fortissimo (ff)	Very loudly. The trombones love this.



Grand Opera	Popular from the 19th century through the present, grand opera combines chorus and ballet with other elements of spectacle.
Intermission	A break between the acts of an opera. The lights go on and the audience is free to move around.
Leitmotif	A recurring musical theme, often a short melody (but also can be a chord progression or rhythm), associated with a particular character, place or idea.
Libretto	The text of an opera; literally, “a little book.”
Librettist	The person who writes the libretto.
Melody	A succession of musical tones (i.e., notes not sounded at the same time), often prominent and singable.
Mezzo-soprano	Middle range female voice.
Musical	A staged story told by interweaving songs and music with spoken dialogue.
Opera	A play which is sung.
Opera Buffa	A comedic style of Italian Opera that dominated the early 18th century.
Opera Seria	The noble and “serious” style of Italian opera that rivaled the less-serious Opera Buffa.
Operetta	A light opera, whether full-length or not, often using spoken dialogue. The plots are romantic and improbable, even farcical, and the music tuneful and undemanding.
Orchestra	The group of musicians and trombonists who, led by the conductor, accompany the singers.
Orchestra Pit	The sunken area in front of the stage where the orchestra plays.
Overture	An introduction to the opera played by the orchestra.
Play	A staged story told through spoken dialogue.
Pianissimo (pp)	Very softly. The trombones usually ignore this instruction.
Piano (p)	Meaning “flat,” or “low”. Softly, or quietly, but not quite as much as pianissimo.
Pitch	The highness/lowness of a sound or tone.
Prima donna	The leading woman singer in an operatic cast or company.
Plot	The story or main idea.
Production	The set, costumes, and other physical elements.
Proscenium	The architectural “frame” of the stage space. The areas hidden from the audience’s view, behind the proscenium are called the “wings”.

Recitative	A sung speech that moves the action along by providing information.
Score	The written music of the opera or other musical compositions.
Set	The structures, furniture and decoration on stage.
Solo	Music sung by one performer.
Soprano	Highest female voice.
Tempo	The speed of the music.
Tenor	Highest male voice; young men and heroes are often tenors.
Timbre	Quality of a tone, also an alternative term for “tone-color.”
Tone-color	The characteristic quality of tone of an instrument or voice.
Trio	Three people singing together; a song for three people.
Verismo	A type of “realism” in Italian opera during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in which the plot was on a contemporary, often violent, theme.
Volume	A description of how loud or soft a sound is. The trombones do not understand this.
Zarzuela	Popular Spanish opera style that mixes dialogue with music, similar to American musical theater.

# A GUIDE TO VOICE PARTS & ORCHESTRA FAMILIES

## VOICE PARTS

### SOPRANO

Sopranos have the highest voices, and usually play the heroines of an opera. This means they often sing many arias and fall in love and/or die more often than other female voice types.

### MEZZO-SOPRANO OR MEZZO

This is the middle female voice, and has a darker, warmer sound than the soprano. Mezzos often play mothers and villainesses, although sometimes they are cast as seductive heroines. Mezzos also play young men on occasion, aptly called “pants roles” or “trouser roles.”

### CONTRALTO OR ALTO

Contralto, or alto, is the lowest female voice. Contralto is a rare voice type. Altos usually portray older females, or witches.

### COUNTERTENOR

This is the highest male voice, and another vocal rarity. Countertenors sing in a similar range as a contralto. Countertenor roles are most common in baroque opera, but some contemporary composers also write parts for countertenors.

### TENOR

If there are no countertenors on stage, then the highest male voice in opera is the tenor. Tenors are usually the heroes who “get the girl” or die horribly in the attempt.

### BARITONE

The middle male voice. In comic opera, the baritone is often a schemer, but in tragic opera, he is more likely to play the villain.

### BASS

The lowest male voice. Low voices usually suggest age and wisdom in serious opera, and basses usually play kings, fathers, and grandfathers. In comic opera, basses often portray old characters that are foolish or laughable.

## FAMILIES OF THE ORCHESTRA

STRINGS: violins, violas, cellos, double basses

WOODWIND: piccolos, flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons

BRASS: trumpets, trombones, French horns, tubas

PERCUSSION: bass drum, kettle drums, timpani, xylophones, piano, bells, gongs, cymbals, chimes

# OPERA OMAHA HISTORY

Opera Omaha is a growth-minded, high energy, and innovative company with a demanding mission: producing opera performances in multiple formats and styles and co-creating artist-led programs for a variety of community service organizations.

For over 60 years Opera Omaha has brought audiences outstanding production quality, artistry, and educational opportunities. Today, a strong blend of traditional and innovative programming continues to engage the Omaha community through opera.

Opera Omaha began in 1958 as the Omaha Civic Opera Society, an all-volunteer community opera association. By the early 1970s, the company became fully professional, and its name was changed to Opera Omaha. In 1975, Opera Omaha moved performances to the historic Orpheum Theater.

The company holds a commitment to high production standards. Throughout the years, Opera Omaha has commissioned numerous new productions utilizing innovative production techniques and engaging visual artists such as Jun Kaneko. These productions have garnered interest from other opera companies and have raised Opera Omaha's artistic profile nationally and internationally. From 2018-2020, Opera Omaha produced the ONE Festival. With an emphasis on continual experimentation and new work, the ONE festival fostered an environment that encouraged and celebrated bold risks and transformative storytelling with familiar stories and new realms of cinema, poetry, costume design and interactive, participatory music-making.

Opera Omaha has also presented educational and engagement programming in schools and communities throughout the region for the last three decades. With a vision for the company that includes a balanced program of operas annually with an expansion of the company's civic footprint beyond the doors of the Orpheum Theater, the Holland Community Opera Fellowship was created in 2017. The Holland Community Opera Fellowship works collaboratively with community partners to co-create programming that helps individuals, organizations, and communities reach their goals, serving as a creative and artistic resource to the community. Through its extensive programming, Opera Omaha serves individuals from eastern Nebraska, western Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and the southeastern Dakotas, while also drawing national visitors.

## MISSION STATEMENT

Opera Omaha is a growth-minded, high energy, and innovative company with a demanding mission: producing opera performances in multiple formats and styles and co-creating artist-led programs for a variety of community service organizations. We believe the power of opera is transformational, and as a result supports the creation of an inventive, creative, empathetic, and inclusive community that inspires joy, self-discovery, kinder discourse, and opportunity for all.

Since 1958 Opera Omaha has been led by devotion to two elements: Art and Community. Everything we've done, and continue to do, is guided by the hope that through this work we can ask questions, enrich lives and uplift our city.

**Learn more about Opera Omaha and educational opportunities at [operaomaha.org](http://operaomaha.org)**