

# BERKELEY VOICE

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## Scenes from the life of Frida Kahlo

Two Berkeley artists focus a new opera on the stormy relationship of Kahlo and Diego Rivera.

By Andrea Palmieri

On Feb. 12, Berkeley Opera for Women in the Arts presented *Frida and Her Diego*, an in-progress opera based on the life of painter Frida Kahlo and her relationship with her husband, Diego Rivera and muralist

drinking fete.

Scene two illustrated Frida's desire to be perfect in body for Diego Rivera and included a lamentation for their miscarried child — seen through the eyes of Frida on an hallucinatory opium trip. The repeated use of an oversized syringe was fabulous.

In her drug-induced escape she sought comfort and love in Diego, but found only pain and anger. In a scene that captured perhaps the most vulnerable point in Frida's life,

**Stirring performance, mezzo-soprano Juanita Ulloa brilliantly captured perhaps the most vulnerable point in Frida's life.**

**Ulloa grandly demonstrated the physical and psychological dimensions of Kahlo. Despite her non-Tehuana costume, Ulloa was made up to resemble the artist, from her mustached upper lip to her continuous thick black eyebrow. Ulloa's voice was both vibrant and demonic as she encompassed the roller coaster of Kahlo's emotions.**



Andrea Palmieri

Juanita Ulloa portrays Mexican painter Frida Kahlo

The main reason for the scope of this production was the volume of the singers' voices. The intensity of their gestures seemed to leap out and startle the 50 or so crammed into this cozy theater.

If you could distance yourself from the dramatic exaggerations taking place on the minuscule stage and place yourself in the balcony of the War Memorial Opera House, then the piece worked.

Audience and stage dimensions aside, *Frida and Her Diego* had much to admire. A meditation on pain and loss, the 17-1/2 minute compilation is rich in drama. Set in Kahlo's studio, the first scene displayed an orgy-like

Both Kahlo's infatuation and his indifference toward Kahlo in these scenes effectively reveal the essence of their complex relationship. Gomez, despite his limited part, enlivened the performance with a voice of powerful intensity and the massiveness of his appearance.

Rounding out the performance, singing on and eerily off-stage, were two angels, performed by soprano Jane Rateaver and bass-baritone John Rose. The angels weaved their way across the stage during Kahlo's periods of need and added harmonious grace to

the performance.

Although it was confusing to take these two heavy-duty scenes out of context, the music was both powerful and beautiful. Pianist-composer Skye Atman's skillful arrangement of moving melodic anger and flowing dance music exemplified great skill and command of her medium. A dedicated composer of theatrical music, Atman's repertoire

includes a children's opera.

The libretto was a bit harder to be enticed by. Her first attempt at opera, Judy Jones' libretto was a little awkward, primarily because it was in English. However, the two Spanish-speaking leads gave the performance a flavor of ethnicity.

On balance, though, after hearing two powerful scenes, I eagerly await the finished opera.