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# Playwright Luis Valdez brings the sweep of history to ‘Adios Mama Carlota’



Lily Janiak | April 9, 2019 Updated: April 9, 2019, 4:51 pm



Will Springhorn Jr. as Maximilian and Allison F. Rich as Carlota in “Adios Mama Carlota” at San Jose Stage Company.

Photo: Josie Lepe, Special to The Chronicle

“I’ll give you another footnote.”

When Luis Valdez introduces his next anecdote that way, the inexperienced listener might imagine a fun fact, a tangent, a dead end coming up. Maybe he’d segue into a historical tidbit that he couldn’t quite wedge into his new play, “Adios Mama Carlota,” about the three years when Princess Charlotte of Belgium, also known as Carlota of Mexico, and her husband, Maximilian of Austria, served as empress and emperor of Mexico.

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Playwright Luis Valdez observes dress rehearsal of his “Adios Mama Carlota” at San Jose Stage Company.  
Photo: Josie Lepe, Special to The Chronicle

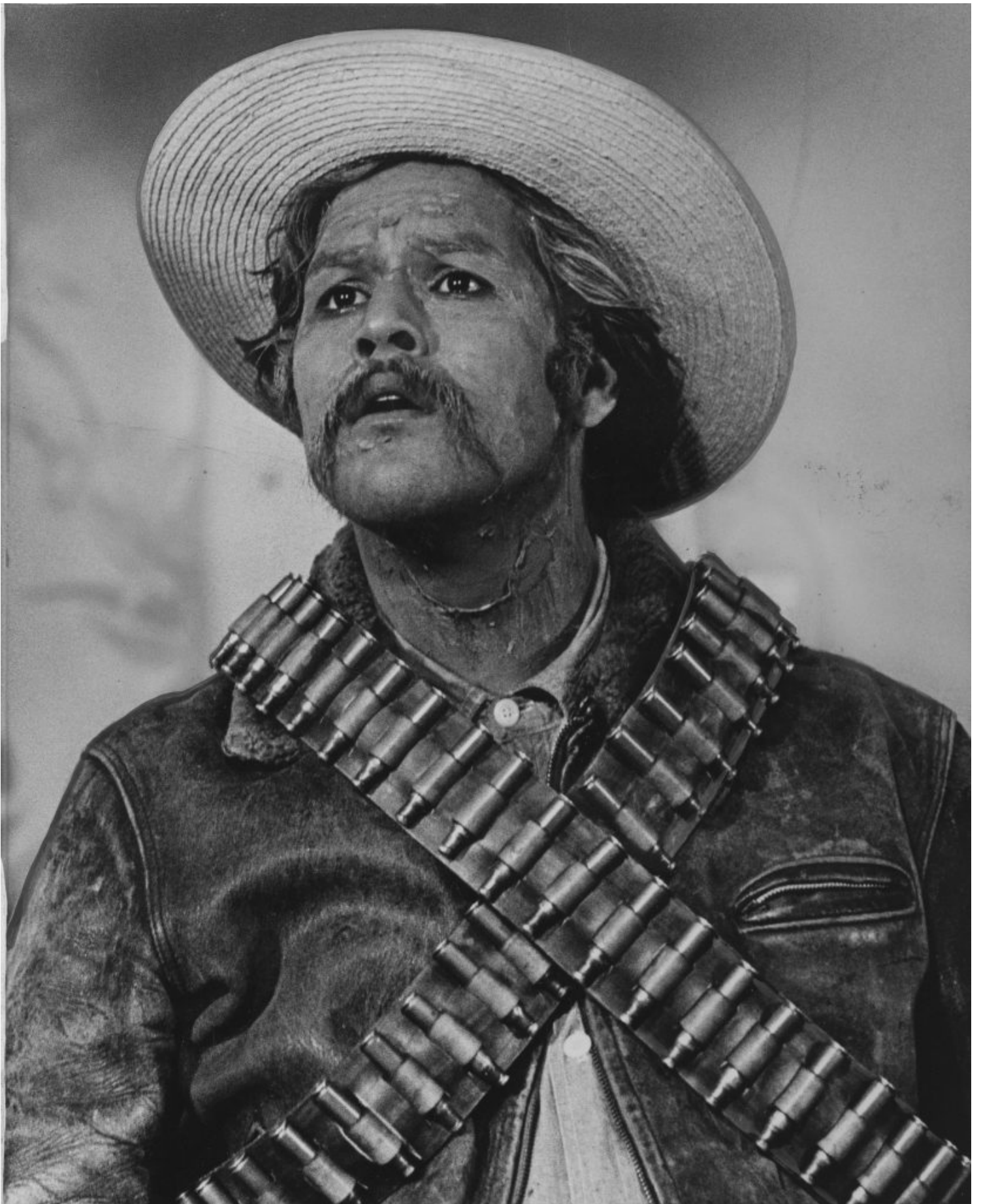
But Valdez’s mind doesn’t work in tidbits. It works in panoramas and great, sweeping arcs. In a flash, he leaps from France’s invasion of Mexico in 1861 to its invasion of Indochina to the Vietnam War and President John F. Kennedy’s reluctance to embroil the U.S. in it.

Or in the play, whose San Jose Stage Company and **El Teatro Campesino** world premiere opened Saturday, April 6, Valdez keeps zooming out from Empress Carlota herself (Allison F. Rich) to place her in a global context. The American Civil War and Lincoln's assassination were happening at the same time as her reign. Carlota's brother, Leopold II, commandeered her fortune to establish the Belgian Congo. Her first cousin was Queen Victoria.

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Luis Valdez performing in "The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa," a past production by El Teatro Campesino.  
Photo: George Ballis 1966,

Valdez's own career straddles multiple eras and worlds. In the 1960s, El Teatro Campesino, which he founded, brought agitprop theater right to agricultural fields, in the flatbeds of trucks, to empower oppressed Latino workers to unionize. Valdez worked alongside Cesar Chavez; El Teatro Campesino (which translates as "farmworkers' theater") remains a pillar of the Chicano movement. Valdez has also worked in Hollywood and on Broadway, most notably with "Zoot Suit" and "La Bamba." ETC has toured across the country and the globe from its home base in the San Benito County farming community of San Juan Bautista, which he calls "the lettuce capital of the world."

Speaking by phone in advance of "Adios Mama Carlota," Valdez says he loves history for its "interconnections," for its opportunities for storytelling. "We may think of historical figures as icons" or "statues, but in the final analysis they were human beings with the same travails that we all have. They were mortals, and they had physical maladies. They had love affairs. They ate and slept and drank, just like all the rest of us."



The show, which Valdez's son Kinan directs, succeeds most in that respect — in making faded stodgy portraits turn flesh, with all its pitfalls. In the play's envisioning, Maximilian (Will Springhorn Jr.) is a flatulent clump of indulgences — every errant impulse he has, he gives voice to; every urge to act, he instantly makes manifest. It's not quite that he doesn't love Carlota — their failure to produce an heir drives part of the plot. He reveres her savvy and finesse, qualities he knows he doesn't have and doesn't much care to. It's more that he can't hold a thought in his head, that he sees this whole emperor thing as a chance to feast on life's abundance. Springhorn makes him a likable mosquito — he sucks what he will out of everything, but he means no harm, and he gets so jazzed by his discoveries of native hummingbirds that you almost can't blame him.





Rich's Carlota has the severe eyes and brow of a silent film star, and she's clad in a cobwebbed gown reminiscent of Miss Havisham in "Great Expectations." Madeline Berger did the costumes, many of which suggest years of attic neglect, the pathetic nostalgia of trying to live in a decayed past. "Adios Mama Carlota" is framed as a memory play, with Carlota looking back on her brief years under the world's gaze — before Max started two-timing her with Conchita (Jessica Osegueda), before she left Mexico to beg Louis Napoleon for military backup, before she got labeled insane and locked up, likely in part to hide an illegitimate pregnancy.

Rich gives Carlota core-to-nerve-ending queenliness, the sort of hauteur that has never questioned itself and can't imagine doing so. Her empress has too much energy and ability for the role the world's allotted her, and she's always hunting for something worthy of her, a gaze and sophistication and self-possession that could match her own.



Jessica Osegueda as Conchita and Allison F. Rich as Carlota in “Adios Mama Carlota” at San Jose Stage Company.

Photo: Josie Lepe, Special to The Chronicle

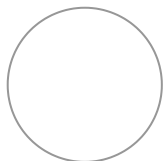
As edifying as all the history is in “Adios Mama Carlota,” Valdez tries to pack too much in. Unseen but dutifully recounted military encounters, in particular, stunt the show’s progress. The framing device clunks — it’s hard to imagine a blunter opening line than, “I am Maria Carlota Amelia Victoria Clementina Leopoldina, princess of Belgium.”

But “Adios Mama Carlota” also has the warmhearted appeal that’s characteristic of Valdez’s work, dating back to the *actos* he and ETC staged for migrant workers. There’s an openness, a silliness, an easygoing quality in his writing — for all its intellect and knowledge — that says, “Climb aboard; this theater is for you, no matter who you are.”



**“Adios Mama Carlota”:** Written by Luis Valdez. Directed by Kinan Valdez.

Through April 28. Two hours, 30 minutes. \$32-\$72. San Jose Stage Company, 490 S. First St., San Jose. 408-283-7142. [www.thestage.org](http://www.thestage.org)



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