

## *MARIELA IN THE DESERT*

By

Karen Zacarías

Premiere of present draft:

The Denver Center, April 1-May 15, 2010, Bruce Sevy, Director

Original World Premiere:

The Goodman Theatre, Chicago, IL. January –Feb 2005, Henry Godinez, Director

Commissioned by South Coast Repertory Company

SETTING:

Mexico, 1951

A rustic ranch in the Northern Mexican desert region: no running water, kerosene lamps and candles)

The set: time and place should be fluid. The desert is present...it bleeds into the house.

### CHARACTERS

MARIELA: A wry, beautiful, strong, woman who used to paint. Age: 40-45

JOSE: Her husband. A famous artist. Age: 50-60

OLIVA Jose's pious older sister. Age: 50-65.

BLANCA: Mariel's and Jose's talented and vulnerable daughter. Age: 21  
(Also plays Blanca as a child)

CARLOS: The son who has disappeared. Blanca's younger brother

ADAM: Jewish-American Art History Professor teaching in Mexico City. Blanca's lover. Age: 35-45

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ACT I

(One single painting-- with a large violent slit down its' middle --faces upstage.)

Focus on JOSE, MARIELA's husband, in a bed. MARIELA enters, removes her black shawl, hands it to OLIVA, her sister-in-law. OLIVA hands her a pan of water. OLIVA exits. MARIELA faces the bed where her husband JOSE is lying. MARIELA prepares to bathe and dress her husband. She traces his face with the wash cloth).

JOSE

Damn that's cold.

MARIELA

The doctor said that cold water-

JOSE

Damn the doctors. They themselves should have to do everything they prescribe for the patient. Keeps them honest.

MARIELA

Our daughter is coming home.

JOSE

(Beat) So you wrote the telegram?

MARIELA

I paid an exorbitant fee. The man said that it would reach Blanca in Mexico City today.

JOSE

You were gone all day.

MARIELA

The closest telegraph is far away. And the roads are cracked and ragged. On the way back, the driver had to stop and help push a poor cow out of the way.

JOSE

You left me all alone.

MARIELA

Oliva is here.

JOSE

My sister doesn't count. You were gone so long the sun must be setting. What color is the sky?

MARIELA

A thin line of crimson-a smear of dirty rose. A winter sky.

JOSE

The desert is God's canvas.

MARIELA

That always sounds prettier than it feels.

JOSE

Anything new in town?

MARIELA

The telegraph office has a brand new black and white sign, with the new higher prices in bright red. But a large glob of paint ran amuck...so most of the numbers are smeared and illegible.

JOSE

You could say it's a sign of progress.

MARIELA

Or you can say: it's just a sign.

JOSE

(Beat) You think Blanca will come this time?

MARIELA

Yes. I do.

JOSE

(Pause) What did you write?

MARIELA

I was persuasive.

JOSE

Did you tell her I was very sick?

MARIELA

Somewhat. Can I bathe you?

JOSE

Did you tell her that I am slowly going blind? That I have trouble walking? That I have to lie in this God-forsaken bed most of the day? –No bath! I am not getting clean for nothing.

MARIELA

I told her you were dead.

JOSE

What?

MARIELA

I told Blanca you were dead.

JOSE

Mariela!

MARIELA

Yes. Dead.

JOSE

A little premature, don't you think?

MARIELA

I wrote that I would wait to bury you until she came.

JOSE

Why in the world would you write something like that?

MARIELA

She's ignored all our entreaties to come home. But the death of her father might get her attention.

JOSE

You shouldn't frighten her like that.

MARIELA

On the contrary, my love. Think of how of happy she'll be to see you alive.

JOSE

What did you write?

MARIELA

(Pulls out a copy of the telegram)

Blanca, my dearest daughter. STOP  
All is well here. STOP  
Except your father is dead. STOP  
Come home. STOP  
I won't bury him without you. STOP  
Hurry. It's hot. END

JOSE

My God!

MARIELA

Blanca needs to see you. She will hate herself if she doesn't see you before you die.

JOSE

Why not just tell her that I'm very sick?

MARIELA

Jose, you've been sick for so long, it doesn't feel like news. Now let me bathe you.

JOSE

Fine. Don't overdo the soap. It makes me itch.

MARIELA

Then scratch, old man.

JOSE

If you hadn't driven her away...

MARIELA

I didn't drive her away; I sent her to school in Mexico City.

JOSE

She was fifteen years old! Alone and unprotected in the big city.

MARIELA

My cousins took very good care of her.

JOSE

She was grieving. Carlos had just died.

MARIELA

It was the right thing to do. She needed to be with people her own age.

JOSE

She was learning more here with us.

MARIELA

Stuck here in the middle of paradise? Miles away from other children? She came home every summer, every Christmas.

JOSE

Something happened. It's been two years since we've seen her.

MARIELA

She started attending the university. That's what happened.

JOSE

I haven't seen my baby girl in two years.

MARIELA

Your baby girl is twenty-one years old.

JOSE

(Stops her) You should have never sent her away.

MARIELA

She's coming home tonight. Let me finish bathing you.

JOSE

Why would the doctor prescribe cold water? It's archaic and barbaric.

MARIELA

Maybe it's exactly what you need.

JOSE

Mariela, I'm not dead.

MARIELA

But all good things come to those who wait

JOSE

I have dined with important men! My paintings hang in the Governor's house. Diego Rivera borrowed money from me. Orozco drank -

JOSE & MARIELA (Unison)

Liquor from my flask.

JOSE

Dammit, it's true. And I could make love to you three times a night!

(She pulls out the insulin and the syringe)

MARIELA

It's time for your insulin shot. (Looks at the bottle)

JOSE

You aren't listening to me.

MARIELA

Yes, I am. Three times a night. Now, turn over.

JOSE

Take your hands off me.

MARIELA

You heard the doctor, if you don't take your insulin, your blood will get thick and slow, your heart will stop pumping. And then, Jose, you really will be dead.  
(PAUSE)

JOSE

Why do you hate me?

MARIELA

I don't hate you.

JOSE

Our lives are not all my fault.

MARIELA

I never said that.

JOSE

You don't have to say anything. (Beat) I'm thirsty.

(Mariela pours Jose a glass of water from a pitcher)

MARIELA

You're always thirsty.

JOSE.

The gardenia is getting brittle. It needs watering. Water the flower. It's beautiful.

MARIELA

But I also need to finish washing you and clean out the latrine.

JOSE

Dirt, shit or flowers. Choose wisely.

MARIELA

I have things I have to do.

JOSE

Stay! Talk to me. (Pause) Bathe me.

MARIELA

All right. Now be quiet for a while.

(Silence. She bathes him, tenderly)

JOSE

Will you miss me after I'm gone?

MARIELA

No. (Beat) Yes.

(The bath is over)

JOSE

So how do I look?

MARIELA

(Pause. Really Looks.) Pale and flushed..

JOSE

That bad?

MARIELA

There are thick grooves of gray in your cheeks. And your eyes are so dark and bright. To capture you on canvas right now ...

JOSE

You wouldn't dare.

MARIELA

No, I wouldn't. (Beat) Now, what do you want for dinner?

JOSE

I should have been castrated the day I laid eyes on you.



MARIELA

Does that mean you're not hungry?

JOSE

Carrot soup, chicken-&-rice, and flan.

MARIELA

No.

JOSE

I want flan!

MARIELA

Jose, you are dying of diabetes.

JOSE

Fuck the Doctor. Fuck you. I want flan.

MARIELA

First your insulin. Now.

JOSE

If I get my flan.

MARIELA

I'll see what I can do.

(MARIELA has a small glass jar. She extracts insulin into the syringe. She gives JOSE his shot; he flinches)

JOSE

You like doing that, don't you?

MARIELA

Helping you?

JOSE

Hurting me.

MARIELA

Helping...hurting...no difference sometimes.

JOSE

Mariela?

MARIELA  
What?

JOSE  
You think Blanca will come?  
(MARIELA kisses his forehead)

MARIELA  
Clean the latrine.

JOSE  
What?

MARIELA  
That's what I choose to do. (MARIELA exits).

(OLIVA's portrait)

OLIVA  
When I was a girl, my mother said, "You are a lady, destined for fine things." I had dresses of silk. I knew how to waltz. I dreamt of my large house---of an elegant husband--of children of my own. Now, I live in a dark dress at the edge of the world in a parched house that my brother owns. Forever unmarried. Forever childless. My hands are empty. My heart is idle. I have nothing of my own.

(Lights shift)

MARIELA  
Jose wants flan.

OLIVA  
Mariela, we can't give him that! The doctor said we can't... The sugar alone will...

MARIELA  
He wants flan.

OLIVA  
His blood will turn to molasses He can't have it.

MARIELA  
Ah, so this is your decision.

OLIVA  
He's my baby brother.

MARIELA

Then you tell the baby you aren't going to serve him.

OLIVA

(Pause) Maybe, I'll just take him a little slice.

MARIELA

Fine.