

STUDY GUIDE



frida

... a self-portrait

UAC
union arts center

written & performed by
vanessa severo

directed by
joanie schultz

june 6 - 28

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Portland Center Stage, Photo by Owen Carey



Who's Who



Vanessa Severo
Playwright & Performer

Develops the story, characters and dialogue, creating the entire dramatic world from scratch.

Brings to life the lines from the script through movement and distinct character choices

Responsible for the overall artistic vision of the production, guiding a cohesive look to the visual elements and helping to craft the emotional beats of the narrative arc.

Joanie Schultz
Director



Jacqueline Penrod
Scenic Designer

Designs the lighting elements that contribute to the atmosphere and mood of the play.

Designs the visual environment for the production. Transforming a theatre space to evoke a certain time and or place.

Designs the visual identity of a character through what clothes they wear, how they accessorize, and how their hair/wig is styled.

Rachael Cady
Lighting Designer

Katherine Davis
Costume Designer

Janine Vanderhoff
Stage Manager

Supports the director and actors while managing technical aspects from rehearsal through the final performance.

Writes original music that enhances the emotional impact of a production.

Designs the soundscape and sound effects for a full audio experience.

Thomas Dixon
Sound Designer & Original Music

ARTIST, ACTIVIST, ICON:



Photo by Nickolas Muray, 1940

Born **Magdalena Frida Carmen Kahlo Calderón** in Coyoacán, Mexico City, 1907, Frida spent much of her life in a bright blue house built by her father, known as Casa Azul. When she was six years old, she became sick with polio, which affected her right leg and caused lasting health problems.



Casa Azul (The Blue House),

Her life changed forever in 1925, when she was seriously injured in a bus accident sustaining 11 fractures in her spine, arms, and legs. She was also pierced through the abdomen by a metal handrail. Frida was bed-ridden for months, and doctors thought she would never walk again.

During her recovery, she began painting using a special easel that allowed her to work while lying down. This is when Frida created **Self Portrait in a Velvet Dress**, her first major work.

She would use this easel and other modified versions throughout her life, suffering over 30 operations and multiple periods of confinement.

"I paint self-portraits because I am so often alone, because I am the person I know best"



Frida painting in bed, 1950s

But Frida did recover, and joined the Communist party, where she met the famed Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera, 10 years her senior. This relationship was profoundly influential on her identity and art.

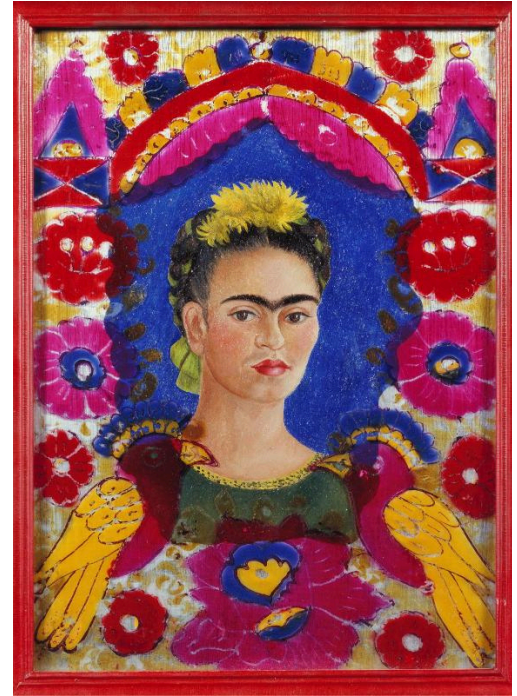
At his encouragement, she began dressing in the traditional Mexican costume, particularly from the Tehuana region, characterized by floral headdresses, a floral huipil (embroidered blouse), and a long floral skirt. This was part of a national movement to reclaim pre-colonial Mexican culture.

Frida's artwork shows both physical pain and emotional experiences, using symbols from Mexican history and culture.

Despite constant health problems, Frida became an important voice in Mexican art. She exhibited her work in New York and Europe and was the **first woman** to have a painting (**The Frame**) purchased by the Louvre Museum for around \$1,000 USD in 1938.

Today, Frida Kahlo is celebrated around the world—not just as an artist, but as a symbol of creativity, resilience, and pride in cultural identity. Her work reminds us that art can come from real life, real pain, and real courage—and still speak powerfully to people everywhere.

“There have been two great accidents in my life. One was the tram, the other was Diego. Diego was by far the worst.”



The Frame, 1938



El sueño (La cama), 1940

In November 2025, Frida Kahlo's **El sueño (La cama)** sold for US \$54.7 million at Sotheby's New York.

The woman whose obituary dismissed her as “Diego Rivera's wife” now holds the record for both the **highest sale at auction of a woman** and of a Latin American artist.

Jul 6, 1907 - July 13, 1954



REFERENCED PAINTINGS

In *Frida...A Self Portrait*, Vanessa Severo has chosen to reference a few of Frida Kahlo's paintings, and subtly bring them to life on stage. Here are the paintings you should look and listen for throughout this powerful story.



Los Que el Agua Me Dio (*What the Water Gave Me*), 1938

Lo Que el Agua Me Dio was featured in Frida Kahlo's first solo exhibit at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York City in November 1938.

Referencing traditional and ancient iconography, mythology and symbolism, eroticism and botany, scenes are depicted on the legs of the artist herself (as signified by her wounded right foot) submerged in bath water.



Las dos Fridas (*The Two Fridas*), 1939

Las dos Fridas depicts Frida's two different personalities. Frida later expressed this represented her desperation and loneliness with the separation from Diego.



**Portland Center Stage,
Photo by Owen Carey**



La Columna Rota (*The Broken Column*), 1944

La Columna Rota was painted shortly after Frida received spinal surgery to correct on-going problems caused by the serious traffic accident when she was 18 years old.

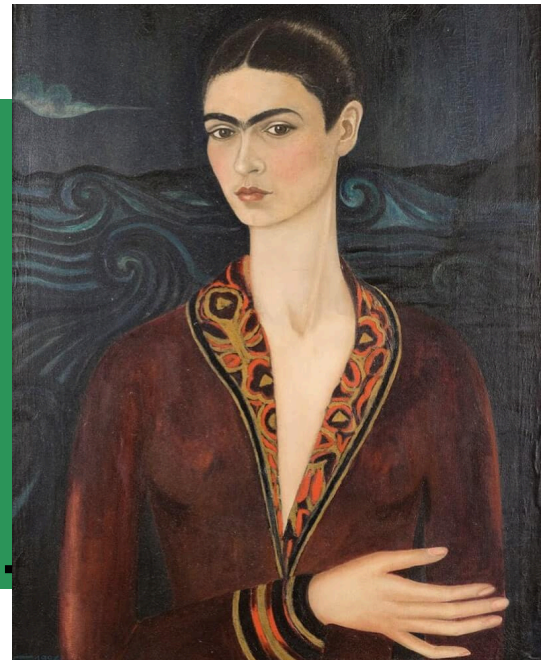


**KCRP,
Photo by Corey Weaver**



**KCRP,
Photo by Corey Weaver**

Autorretrato Con Traje de Terciopelo was a painting used by Frida as a token of love to regain the affection from her lover.



**Autorretrato Con Traje de Terciopelo
(*Self-portrait in a Velvet Dress*), 1926**



Frida and Diego, 1931

Frida y Diego Rivera was painted two years after they were married, but is widely considered their wedding portrait.



**Portland Center Stage,
Photo by Owen Carey**



KCRep,
Photo by Corey Weaver

Recuerdo (El Corazón) is Frida expressing her misery and resentment over the affair that happened two years prior (1935) between Diego Rivera and Cristina.



Recuerdo (El Corazón)
(*Memory, the Heart*), 1937



Autorretrato con Pelo Corto
(*Self Portrait with Cropped Hair*), 1940

Autorretrato con Pelo Corto was painted following her divorce. Frida wears an oversized men's suit, which looks like one of Diego's. She has also cut off her long hair, which Diego was very attracted to.



KCRep,
Photo by Corey Weaver



Tips on How to View a Painting...

Slow Down, Get Close, Take a Seat

Take your time, relax, and look at the painting for as long as you are able. Stay for half an hour if you can. Reflect on what happens as the colors shift and reveal underlying tones. Let your eyes sink into the image and give yourself permission to let your field of vision refocus.

Resist the Plaque

Most art is created to be enjoyed on an intuited level. Artists tend to create by seeking out what feels right, and the viewer can gain a better understanding of the piece by using a similar approach.

Take in the Composition

Consider the manner in which the visual elements of the artwork are arranged, is there a certain harmony or flow? Some artwork seeks a balance, while others are more off-kilter. Speculating on the composition is a wonderful way to unmask feelings and meaning within the work.

In Goethe's advice: "Thinking is more interesting than knowing, but less interesting than looking."

TEHUANA DRESS

The Tehuana dress originated among indigenous Zapotec women on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the narrowest stretch of Mexico, south of Mexico City. This region was able to survive against Spanish colonialism with few evolutions, making it a living piece of cultural heritage. After the Mexican Revolution, it became symbolic of the unity and resilience of the Mexican people.

Frida crafted her appearance with intent, signaling her allegiance to Mexico, her pride in that heritage, and the rejection of Eurocentric ideals.



Floral Headdress

REBOZA: Long handwoven piece of fabric, usually with embroidery or complicated finger-woven fringe, similar to a shawl.



HUIPIL: A loose fitting blouse with elaborate embroidery motifs on the necklines, sleeve openings and hem.

SKIRT: long with embroidery, embellishments and gathered tiers.

RETABLOS & EX-VOTOS

If you ever see a Frida Kahlo painting in person, you may be surprised - most of her works only range from 16"x11" to 20"x24" (with some notable exceptions - Two Fridas is 68"x68") and are painted on thin metal or wood. She was largely influenced by the popular Mexican art of retablos.

Small devotional paintings called retablos (pictures of saints) or ex-votos (personal narratives & tribulations presented alongside saints as an offering) were a large part of the folk art tradition of Mexico. Created for home alters, Retablero artists (usually self-taught) used bright colors and ornamentation and painted on thin metal sheets or wood. These paintings emerged as a means to depict authentic accounts of the events, hopes and struggles of local Mexican communities.

Frida's home was filled with retablos collected over her lifetime. The influence on her work can be seen in the intimate scale and story-telling, and echoes of Catholic symbolism, but the religious figures are often replaced with Frida herself. Her paintings do not bring the comfort of deliverance, but rather the physical and emotional pain she could not escape.



Traditional Retablo, circa 1925-1961

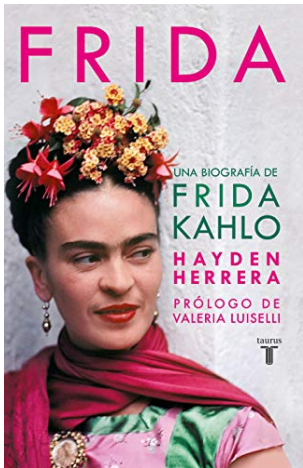
"They were selling oranges and tomatoes when suddenly some very fierce dogs attacked and bit them, and they were terrified. They entrusted their lives to the Holy Child of Atocha and are grateful because three months have passed and they haven't gotten rabies."



Self Portrait with Long Hair, 1947

"Here I painted myself, Frida Kahlo, with my reflection in the mirror. I am 37 years old and this is July, 1947. In Coyoacan, Mexico, the place where I was born."

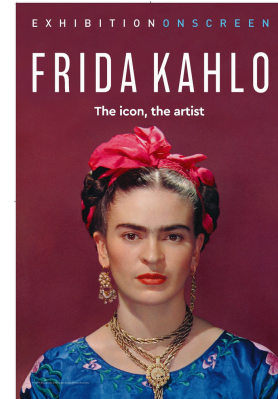
To Learn More...



Frida Kahlo: a Biography
by Hayden Herrera



Museo Frida Kahlo
museofridakahlo.org



*Exhibition on
Screen:
Frida Kahlo*
streaming on
Kanopy



Frida Kahlo: A Painter by Accident

Frida Kahlo's 1925 accident was a turning point that transformed her life, leading her to make painting a symbol of resilience

artsandculture.google.com



El último sueño de Frida y Diego
(The Last Dream of Frida and Diego)
Coming to Seattle Opera January 2027

union arts center

The names you know. The stages you love. The art that brings us together. ACT and Seattle Shakespeare have come together as Union Arts Center, keeping our community connected, our artists supported, and our stories alive.

OUR MISSION

Local artists creating theatre for everyone.

OUR VISION

Connecting theatre & community. Enlivening downtown Seattle. **A thriving artistic home.**