

Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera: A love story

A biographical play by

Tony Broadwick

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[email:tonybroadwick@gmail.com; phone: (+1) 956 407 9643]

SCENE I: Time -1954

MUSIC

A bed is placed stage left. A chair and a small table are positioned close to it. There are a jug of water, two bottles of medicine and a basket with fruit on the table. Some wilted flowers are in a clear glass vase that has no water in it. A pale and sick looking FRIDA KAHLO is in bed. She is writing in a diary. She folds the book and puts it aside. She takes some pills from a bottle and takes them with a drink of water. She closes her eyes.

DIEGO RIVERA, an overweight man in his early fifties enters the stage. He walks to the bed. Takes the diary. Reads for a moment. Holding the diary close to his chest he walks to the edge of the stage and addresses the audience.

DIEGO: My wife, Frida, died today. *(pause)* The doctors are going to say she died of complications from some fancy medical condition *(shaking his head)* but I tell you something. She was too strong a person to be defeated by any disease. Hell, a bus ran over her. Broke half the bones in her body. A metal rod pierced through her pelvis. That didn't kill her. She spent months in hospitals undergoing surgeries, thirty surgeries! Those didn't kill her. *(pause)* She was married to me – twice. That nearly killed me, but it didn't kill her. She didn't want to die in the autumn and be a part of the season when everything is dying. She didn't want to die in the spring and be a contradiction to nature. She chose to go in the blaze of summer. Yes, listen to this. She wrote in her diary: "This is the time. I hope the exit is joyful— and I hope never to return— Frida" *(pause)* You can draw your own conclusion, but as far as I'm concerned, she made a decision. *(walking to the table and picking up the bottle of pills)* She was in control. And when the time was right, she said, "I accept." What she did is not accepting defeat. It's heroic. *(pause)* There's a tradition in Japan. It's called *hara-kiri*.

A most honorable way to go. It takes real guts to look death in the eye and shake hands with it and say, I accept....That was my Frida, always the fighter. Never the quitter. (*DIEGO walks to the bed. Puts the book down and pulls a white sheet across her face.*)

(The bed is carried out, leaving a table and a chair on the stage.)

Lights go down.

SCENE II: Time - 1944

MUSIC

When lights come back on, DIEGO is sitting in the chair. He touches the dead flowers in the vase. Bottles of medicine and the fruit basket are no longer on the table.

DIEGO: I brought these to her. The last thing she said to me was ...

(FRIDA enters. She is wearing her hair short. She's dressed in a two-piece suit – pants and a jacket. She looks weak but angry)

FRIDA: You fat pig! You have the balls to bring me flowers! Take them back to your bitch, your Cristina.

DIEGO: She's your little sister!

FRIDA: For me, she's dead. She's your little whore. How dare you come to see me? You think I'll take you back because of these flowers?

DIEGO: You paint flowers all the time...

FRIDA: I paint flowers so they will not die.

DIEGO: Believe me, my Paloma, she meant nothing. She was just a fuck, it meant nothing. *(pause)* I put more emotions in a handshake.

FRIDA: *(throwing the flowers at him - one at a time)* How dare you speak to me that way about my sister! How could you do it?

DIEGO: I couldn't have you. She was the closest thing to you. Don't you see? I was longing for you.

FRIDA: You're a pig. All men are pigs. Only difference is some are little pigs, some are big pigs, like you, a big fat pig!

DIEGO: You didn't mind sleeping with me when I was married to Lupe Marin.

FRIDA: You were not married to my sister. And I was in love with you.

DIEGO: What's the difference? Love justifies your actions, not mine?

FRIDA: Yes! You men never understand anything. Yes, I made love with you because I loved you. Did you make love to my sister because you loved her? No. Because if you do, marry her. You have my blessings. Do you love her? Do you?

DIEGO: No, but I like her. She reminds me of you.

FRIDA: Then you should have come back to me. We are living next door to one another.

DIEGO: We are not living together. We are separated again.

FRIDA: There have been two great accidents in my life. One was the bus, the other was you. Diego, you were by far the worst.

DIEGO: That hurts.

FRIDA: You don't know what hurt is... Why did I marry you in the first place? I must have been blind. What did I see in you?

DIEGO: Do you want me to show you to refresh your memory? (*gesturing towards the wall*) Or shall I make you a painting?

FRIDA: (*throwing a small handkerchief at him*) Don't flatter yourself. Here, paint your picture in this.

DIEGO: (*no longer angry*) You kill me.

FRIDA: (*laughing out loud*) I wish I could say the same about you. But the doctors are killing me. Are we going to work or are we going to waste time talking about meaningless ... fucks?

DIEGO: Work, work, work. Yes, work. Would you like some wine?

FRIDA: Wine does not mix with pain and work. Give me some cognac.

DIEGO: Brandy. A taste you acquired in Paris ... from Josephine Baker.

FRIDA: No, brandy, I liked before I met her. From her I acquired a rather new taste. New for me, not so new for you.

DIEGO: (*offering her a drink*) I did not mind your encounters with Josephine Baker and her other girlfriends.

FRIDA: For that you can kiss me ... on this side of the face. If you remember, this skin was removed from my ass.

DIEGO: I loved kissing it when it was there, I love kissing it when it's here. (*kisses her*) What do the two doctors from East Europe say?

FRIDA: They say it's going to take time. Which means it's going to cost a lot of money. I thought communism was about human dignity and not about money. Not so.

DIEGO: I told you so. A week after I met Trotsky, I knew they were all phony. Trotsky, Lenin, Stalin, all of them, turning around Karl Marx's words to their political advantage.

FRIDA: You thought Trotsky was the messiah. He walked on water. He could perform miracles.

DIEGO: I think he was your revenge fuck. Don't talk about him and his philosophy. It was all bogus.

FRIDA: His miracle was not phony or bogus.

DIEGO: I don't want to talk about it. (*pause*) Don't ever talk about him or about your Japanese architect friend, Isamu Noguchi.

FRIDA: You're forgetting Heinz Berggruen, your personal secretary.

DIEGO: No, I have not forgotten him. But I have the good taste to not bring him up. This is one thing I cannot forgive.

FRIDA: You cannot forgive! Who's asking for your forgiveness? I was attracted to Trotsky's ideas, his words. And his wife seemed clueless. He was an oddity.

DIEGO: I don't want to discuss it. One marvels at oddities, one stares at oddities. One does not go to bed with oddities.

FRIDA: *(smiling)* It meant nothing. It was just a fuck. Okay, more than once, but still it meant nothing. *(pause)* It was like a firm handshake.

DIEGO: More than once and it meant nothing? What do you think I am? A fool?

FRIDA: What do you think I have been ... all my life? A fool? What did my sister mean to you? It was more than once, no? Did she mean nothing? What about you and me before we were married? Nothing? And what about that little girl you used to screw in your studio when I first saw you? Nothing? It seems that all your life amounts to a series of big fat NOTHINGS. *(She storms out of the room.)*

Lights go down.

SCENE III: Time - 1927

MUSIC

DIEGO: The first paintings I saw by her, I knew, she had potential. She lacked discipline, but she had talent. *(pause)* I had to take her by the hand and guide her, cultivate her. But, how to attract her? How to get her attention? *(pause)* I planted myself in places where she could see me. I left easy to find tracks. I let her discover where my studio was. She used to spy on me. I thought she was spying on me to learn my technique of painting. That was not it. She spied on me with my models, you know, not just painting but making love with them. I knew she was watching. I let her. It kept her interested in me. *(pause)* She knew I was married and had children. It didn't bother her. My models didn't bother her. That's how I knew that she was an artist at heart. Dedicated to art and not concerned with trivial things like marriage, family, or my afternoon flings. Soon after we got married, she made a dual claim. She said, "I was born a bitch; I was born a painter." The world came to know her as a great painter; I got to know both her claims were true.... I say it in the nicest possible way. She has left a space here in my heart that will never be filled. I will always miss her. For me, if you love someone once, you love them forever. Even if you can't stand them, you still love them. Loved her, I did. Desired her? you bet. I had dreams about her that would make most people blush. *(pause)* She was pure like the first flowers in the spring; she was like the smell of earth with the first few drops of rain after a long dry spell. *(as if speaking to someone off stage)*

DIEGO: The only reason I seduced you was because I thought you were a virgin.

FRIDA: *(off stage) Don't flatter yourself; I would have still been a virgin after you seduced me.*

DIEGO: I don't think she needed to get married. I felt that I needed to marry her. Make her my wife. Both times. I made her happy, but I also caused her pain. I asked her, not too long before she died, if she had gotten over me. She said she was still forgetting me.

(DIEGO exits)

(Lights go down)

SCENE IV : Time 1929

MUSIC

(DIEGO enters. He is carrying a big tray of food. He puts the tray on the table and goes out. A moment later he returns with more food. He brings wine glasses and wine. He arranges the food and sets the table. FRIDA enters. She is wearing a bridal dress.)

DIEGO: Let's eat. It's been a long exhausting day. You must be very tired.

FRIDA: Why can't the couple that's getting married also be sitting down, when everyone else is?

DIEGO: And how would you rather have it?

FRIDA: Why couldn't the couple be sitting down?

DIEGO: Why not lying down? After all that's the purpose...

FRIDA: Now, you're catching my drift. *(pause)* Standing around is hard for me. My neck hurts, my back hurts. Pain. I'm used to pain. As far as I can remember, life has been painful. All one can do is to find new hurt to forget the old pain.

DIEGO: I was looking at some of your work and I see the woman you paint again and again, she is in pain. Very surrealistic.

FRIDA: You also think I'm a Surrealist. Everybody else thinks so too. But I'm not. I don't paint dreams; I paint my own reality.

DIEGO: I'm going to make you very happy. Always. With my love, I'm going to make you forget your pain.

FRIDA: Good, Diego. I started to drink to drown my pain, but the damned thing learned how to swim. (*tasting the food and nodding her head in approval*)
For a cook, you're not a bad painter.

DIEGO: I'm glad you like it.

FRIDA: Diego, this is our wedding night. You were gone for three hours!
Where have you been? Playing cards? Drinking with the boys?

DIEGO: I went upstairs.

FRIDA: What's upstairs?

DIEGO: My ex-wife, Lupe Marin, lives there with my children. One of the children is running a fever.

FRIDA: You went to your ex-wife on our wedding night? What kind of an animal are you?

DIEGO: My child is sick. What did you want me to do? Abandon my family?

FRIDA: I am your family!

DIEGO: So is she ... the mother of my children. She's going to treat you like family. Lupe has sent the food. She prepared it for us. For you.

FRIDA: This is an outrage and an insult.

DIEGO: She said she'll teach you to prepare the soup the way I like it.

FRIDA: I want to go home. Take me back to my mother's house. I can't live like this.

DIEGO: Okay, tomorrow morning, I'll take you to your mother's house. (*begins to eat*) Eat now, get some rest. We'll do whatever you want to do in the morning. Eat!

FRIDA: I will not eat this poison. What is this? Cilantro? Hope it kills you.

DIEGO: Look at me! (*pointing to his big stomach*) Look what this food has done to me. Does it look like it's killing me?

FRIDA: You really like this?

DIEGO: I love it.

LUPE MARIN (off stage): If you wanna keep him you better learn to cook with cilantro. I'll teach you.

(FRIDA gets up and goes off stage.)

DIEGO: She learned to make the menudo. They became good friends.

Sometimes they even plotted against me. My ex-wife would cover all the pots in the kitchen and not cook anything. Frida would lock me out of the bedroom. That's how you suffer when you love too many people. I loved them both. Do you think it's impossible to love more than one person? If you have a big heart, a generous heart, yes, you can. You pay the price, but you can. And if you love two people, can you turn your back on one of them? Frida understood it. She accepted it. I accepted it too when she had affairs with other people. Sometimes I got mad, but I loved her too much to stay angry for long. We were born for each other.

(Tango Music erupts. FRIDA and LUPE enter. They dance a passionate dance and exit.)

SCENE V: Time - 1933

MUSIC

DIEGO: She loved to sing and dance. If she was not a painter, she would have been a singer and a poet. She wrote beautiful things in her diary. She channeled the pain of her crippling accident and our tumultuous marriage into her work. She underwent more than 30 operations ... on her neck, her back, her leg. She was constantly in pain. But she kept painting. Lying in bed, all plastered up, when she could only see her left foot, she painted her left foot. When she was able to see more of herself, she painted herself. She once told me that she painted herself so often because she was so often alone and because she was the subject she knew best. There was another thing she knew very well. Pain. Both physical pain, and emotional pain. I have to admit, I caused some of her emotional pain. *(pause)* Her last operation, she lost her foot. It had developed gangrene. They had to cut it off to keep her alive. It had to go. She was brave; she got over it and wrote in her diary, let me read it to you, *(picks up the book and reads from it)* "Feet, what do I need you for when I have wings to fly?" The doctors told her to stay in bed and rest. She wanted to go to the reception at her show. She hired people to carry her bed onto a truck and brought to the exhibition. The doctors were furious at her. "I told you to stay in bed," the doctor yelled at her. And she said, "I am in bed. Can't you see?"

(FRIDA enters)

FRIDA: It's typical of men. They want you in bed, at least as long as they are in the room. They don't care what you do when they're not there. I have learned to ignore them and their advice - doctors or no doctors. After my accident, they didn't want me to read. It was bad for my eyes. They didn't want me to walk; it was bad for my leg. They didn't want me to sit up and write; it was bad for my back. What was I supposed to do? Stop living in order to survive? I might as well be dead. They say that at the end of one's life one regrets the things one has done. I don't want to regret the things I *didn't* do. I'd rather be sorry for having done something than be sorry for not having done something. Most people think that's strange. I used to think I was the strangest person in the world but then I thought there are so many people in the world, there must be someone just like me who feels bizarre and flawed in the same ways I do. I would imagine her, and imagine that she must be out there thinking of me too. Well, I hope that you out there know that, yes, it's true. I'm here, and I'm just as strange as you, and I'm thinking about you. (*turning to DIEGO*) Diego, I'm moving out. I'm unhappy and I'm making you unhappy. I have no right to inflict my unhappiness on you.

DIEGO: What did I do now?

FRIDA: You did nothing new or unusual. I can't deal with the people and the greed that drives these people in this country.

DIEGO: I'm getting commissions; you're getting commissions. We are making more money than ever before. What's the problem?

FRIDA: Every time I'm asked to do a woman's portrait, I'm asked to be "kind" to the lady. Remove the wrinkles, take out the grey, and make her look like a 19 years old girl with big tits. I'm being paid to paint cows!

DIEGO: They have a different standard of beauty.

FRIDA: No, they have an unrealistic sense of reality. It is as if they have their heads up their asses. I can't work or paint here anymore. I feel suffocated. I don't want to paint pretty pictures and sell America to the Americans. I don't see life as something pretty. I've seen thousands of people in terrible misery. I dislike the "high society" here and feel a rage against all these fat cats... I want to go back home.

DIEGO: Go back home to nothing! To living like a hungry mouse?

FRIDA: I was happy.

DIEGO: We were poor!

FRIDA: We are communists! We're supposed to be poor.

DIEGO: No, Frida, in America, you can be a rich communist.

FRIDA: Not me. I'm happy when I'm poor and miserable. Make me happy, Diego. Take me home. I can't compromise my principles anymore. I can't sell myself like this.

DIEGO: Stop accepting commissions. Don't paint anymore Hollywood cows with big tits. Paint your flowers. Paint flat chested women. Be poor and unhappy. I'm making enough money for both of us.

FRIDA: I was never unhappy being poor. I don't need expensive wines and caviar. I don't need jewels and fancy clothes. Give me a flower and I'll put it in my hair. I'll be happy. Diego, let's go back.

DIEGO: I can't. I'm in the middle of a project. I can't leave. We have taken the money and spent it.

FRIDA: Then, I'll go back alone and wait for you.

DIEGO: Do you trust me?

FRIDA: No. But I don't need to trust you. You'll do whatever you wish to do with me here, or without me.

DIEGO: When will you leave?

FRIDA: Yesterday.

(FRIDA *exits.*)

DIEGO: I'm a free man again! (*pause*) Free, but without her, meant nothing. No matter how much wine, no matter how many models, I felt incomplete without her. I had made her a promise that I was going to be loyal to her. I felt I had betrayed her by staying in the United States. She had said that she was not for sale. I realized that neither was I. (*pause*) I went back. To her. To be with her. And to be miserable (*pause*) hell, misery comes with love; it's a part of life.

(DIEGO *exits.*)

(Lights go down)

SCENE VI: Time - 1927

MUSIC

(DIEGO enters with a small painting under his arm. FRIDA follows him.)

FRIDA: Diego.... Mr. Rivera!

DIEGO: Yes? Wait, (*pretending not to recognize her*) I know you from somewhere. Yes, you're the girl that used to spy on me when I made love with Monique, the model.

FRIDA: You made love with every model.

DIEGO: They were all beautiful.

FRIDA: No not all. Some were real skinny; some were fat.

DIEGO: They were my models. I owed it to them. They expected it.

FRIDA: Expected it? All of them? Why, you conceited little man!

DIEGO: Who are you?

FRIDA: I am Magdalena Carmen Frieda Kahlo y Calderón.

DIEGO: I'm impressed. Now go away.

FRIDA: You must have been impressed. Or else....

DIEGO: Go away, why are you following me?

FRIDA: I wanted to ask you about that painting. But it doesn't matter now.

DIEGO: What about it? I bought it.

FRIDA: I know. Why?

DIEGO: What's it to you?

FRIDA: Just curious.

DIEGO: It's the most original thing I've seen in years.

FRIDA: Yes?

DIEGO: I also know you painted it. (*pause*) Yes, I am impressed. Happy now?

FRIDA: How impressed? I mean how much impressed?

DIEGO: I paid 100 pesos for it. You're good. But you should know that paintings on canvas with a frame around are a thing of the past. Art has freed itself from the confines of a frame.

FRIDA: And where is it going?

DIEGO: To ordinary people. (*pause*) Away from the galleries and museums. On the walls of a train station, the ceilings of the city hall. The outside walls of that tall building in Chicago, Sears tower.

FRIDA: Art on the outside of a building?

DIEGO: Yes. Why not the outside of a train or a bus?

FRIDA: I always suspected it. You're crazy. Not just sex-crazy, but *loco total*.

DIEGO: Art has to be freed so that ordinary people can see it, enjoy it. Art isn't only for the rich pigs.

FRIDA: Also for the poor pigs.

DIEGO: Yes.

FRIDA: You're a communist.

DIEGO: You make it sound as if it's a bad thing. (*pause*) All the important writers are communists; why not the painters?

FRIDA: I could like you, you fat pig.

DIEGO: Don't worry your little head. You're too skinny for me.

FRIDA: Even if I were your model?

DIEGO: You want to model for me?

FRIDA: No, I'm all scarred up. You wouldn't want to see me. A bad accident.

DIEGO: I'd like to see your scars. I'll show you mine.

FRIDA: You have scars?

DIEGO: Of course. I'm married.

FRIDA: How could she, your wife, stand it? With what you do with all the other women.

DIEGO: She's still with me ... as my best friend, and it's because of what I do for her.

FRIDA: A conceited pig.... What are you going to do with that painting? Where are you going to hang it?

DIEGO: In my bathroom. I will study it every morning. I spend a long time in bathrooms. Nursing my hangovers and throwing up.

FRIDA: I have a remedy for hangovers.

DIEGO: Tell me.

FRIDA: I have to be there to administer it.

DIEGO: Are you proposing to me?

FRIDA: No. I wanted you to tell me what you think of my paintings. You already did.

DIEGO: You're good, but you have a long way to go.

FRIDA: And you're just the man to take me there? Right?

DIEGO: No, I have no time for the novice, the inexperienced.

FRIDA: I see, you only want the novice and the inexperienced as your models, so you can seduce them.

DIEGO: Do I seduce them? Never. They give themselves to me. You've seen that with your own eyes. I know... You want to learn to paint, go to an art school.

FRIDA: I don't have to learn to paint. You've bought my work. I want to show you more.

DIEGO: You've got talent. (*pause*) Are you inviting me to your house?

FRIDA: To show you my work. As a fellow artist.

DIEGO: OK.

FRIDA: Only as a friend.

DIEGO: Not as a lover?

FRIDA: No. Only as a friend. I'll show you my work. I'll offer you some Tequila and food. I'll listen to your advice. But I will not make love to you.

DIEGO: I'm not interested in making love to you. Because if we did that *(pause)* you'd probably want me to be true to you. I'm incapable of being faithful.

FRIDA: A convenient handicap. Did your doctor tell you that?

DIEGO: No, I know myself. I know what I like, and I like women.

FRIDA: What about your wife? Your family?

DIEGO: Family is not built around being true or being faithful; it's based on loyalty. I'm loyal to my wife. Always.

FRIDA: Will you be loyal to me?

DIEGO: All my life. I can promise you loyalty.

FRIDA: Good, then it's settled. *(pause)* You promise?

DIEGO: I promise to look at your work. Share some tequila with you and offer you my ... opinion. I will not make love with you. I solemnly swear and promise.

FRIDA: I accept! Good, now, you pick me up, take me to the bedroom, and show me how you're going to keep that promise.

DIEGO: *(picking her up in his arms)* It would be a pleasure.

(In his arms, she offers him her lips. They kiss and he carries her off stage.)

Curtain.