

Scottish International Storytelling Festival 2016: Reflecting Fridas

Ana Maria Lines had a problem; she wanted to tell the world about **Frida Kahlo**, but she had no idea where to begin. The celebrated Mexican artist, Communist, feminist and rebel was proving as hard to pin down in death as she had been in life;

‘I could not find a way to tell her story – then I realised I was trying to order a life that had no order, to shape a woman whose body was fragmented’.

Ana Maria had visited *La Casa Azul*, the Blue House in Mexico City where Frida’s life began and ended; she had even dressed up as Kahlo for a party (everyone thought she was Carmen Miranda...); she knew Kahlo’s life story inside out – but she didn’t know the woman. Then one night Ana Maria had a series of dreams, dreams in which Kahlo told her own story. It was a story of love, passion, suffering, and a long drawn out dance with death.

Frida Kahlo was born in 1907. She did not start painting seriously until she was gravely injured in a bus accident at the age of 18; having already suffered from polio as a young child, Kahlo’s health was now irretrievably damaged and she was to experience pain and illness for the rest of her life. In the accident a handrail had impaled her through her pelvis;

‘I lost my virginity in a bus accident...the handrail went in...like a sword’

It was when she first regained consciousness in hospital, Kahlo explained to Ana Maria, that **La Muerta** ‘a tall thin pale woman dressed in black’ came to her – but Kahlo was not ready. Instead she told *La Muerta* a story; if *La Muerta* liked it, she

was to leave Kahlo alone. This, the first of three 'stories within a story', was a charming fairy tale about a girl living above the clouds, who comes down to Earth to change people's lives.

During Kahlo's long recovery, her father Guillermo gave her a box of oil paints. A custom-made easel meant she could paint lying down;

'Painting became my battle for life'.

☒ In Ana Maria's next dream, she saw an elephant making love with a tiny dove, and Kahlo, now a grown woman dressed in indigenous costume, with flowers in her hair. Kahlo's many self-portraits (she painted fifty five, often incorporating symbolic portrayals of physical and psychological wounds) almost invariably show her wearing Mexican costume – and part of the reason she wore it was to please **Diego Rivera**, the man to whom she turned for advice on her paintings, and who became her lover; they married in 1929. Rivera was in many ways ☒ everything that Kahlo was not; middle-aged (she was 22, he 42), big, fat, ugly ('toad-like'), promiscuous, a parent of four children by three different women, and already a celebrated artist and a member of the Communist Party. Art and politics united them;

'We were two energetic and creative forces'

'Diego was everything; my child, my lover, my universe'

Their marriage was always unconventional; Kahlo learned to cook for Rivera by asking his ex-wife for instructions, she wore peasant clothes for him – but also to emphasize her ancestry, especially favouring the dress of women from a matriarchal society called Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Rivera had many affairs but so, increasingly, did Kahlo; Rivera, it seems, enjoyed her affairs with women, but was not so happy when she had them with men, one of whom was **Leon Trotsky**. Pain was Kahlo's constant companion; she poured the agony of her

childlessness into her art, beginning a series of masterpieces expressing feminism, endurance, love, cruelty and suffering. Rivera's affair with Kahlo's younger sister was one affair too many; she left him.

'Now I have hundreds of swords in my heart...I try to take them all out and place them in the paintings.'

☒ And now *La Muerta* appeared to Kahlo again – but again to no avail:

'After everything else, to consider dying for love was ridiculous'.

Cue another mini-story, one of dancers and butterflies, as Kahlo once again asks *La Muerta* to leave her alone.

Rivera and Kahlo reunited and remarried, but Kahlo had found a new independence; she travelled alone to the US to exhibit her work and **André Breton** invited her to Paris – although she rejected an invitation to join his Surrealist movement;

'I don't paint dreams, I paint my own reality'.

Kahlo's health was now in fast decline; one of her legs was ☒ amputated, Rivera was again unfaithful, she became depressed, was addicted to painkillers and attempted to take her own life. She received one more visit from *La Muerta*, and once more she told her a story – but now it was a story about an old lady and her very special caller. And this time the old lady was ready to go.

Frida Kahlo died in 1954. Rivera was devastated, and although he quickly remarried he died just three years after Kahlo.

Kahlo will always be an enigma, but in this absorbing and entertaining session Ana Maria Lines – armed only with a chair, a doll, a dress and some very high heels – brought vividly to life this intriguing woman, one for whom, despite all her troubles;

‘Nothing is worth more than laughter. It is strength to laugh and to abandon oneself, to be light. Tragedy is the most ridiculous thing.’

The Scottish International Storytelling Festival continues at the Scottish Storytelling Centre and other venues until 31st October 2016. The full programme may be seen [here](#).

Ana Maria Lines lives in the UK and works in schools, festivals, clubs, libraries and events. For more information and contact details visit her website [here](#).

