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# San Diego Free Press

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## Moxie Theatre's 'The Madres': The Women's "Performance" during the Dirty War

JUNE 6, 2018 BY YUKO KURAHASHI

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The Moxie  
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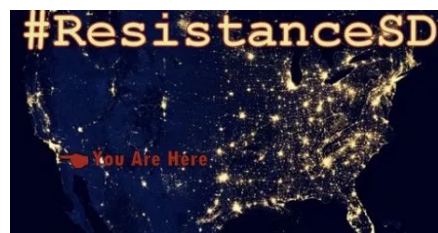


*María González as Josefina and Sandra Ruiz as Carolina  
in the Moxie Theatre production of 'The Madres'. Photo:  
Darren Scott*

*Madres* presents a "slice of life" of those affected by the Dirty War (1976-1983) — a seven-year campaign by the Argentine government which led to the kidnapping and murder of over 30,000 people under the direction of General Jorge Rafael Videla.

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During the Dirty War, demonstrations began on April 30, 1977, in Buenos Aires when 14 mothers assembled in the Plaza de Mayo (a square built to celebrate the beginning of the Argentine republic on May 25, 1810) to petition for information on the fate of their “disappeared” children. These demonstrations — which some historians call political “performance” — grew during the Videla regime and drew international attention.

All of the demonstrators wore white shawls embroidered with the names of the disappeared. Their demonstration became more choreographed over time as the participants increased in number. Today the Mothers continue marching in the Plaza de Mayo every Thursday.

The play is written by Stephanie Alison Walker and co-directed by Maria Patrice Amon and Jennifer Eve Thorn. Walker uses the weekly demonstration as the background of her drama, which is set in October 1978 in the apartment of Josefina (the grandmother) and Carolina (the mother) in Buenos Aires. Both of the women anxiously await information about Belén, Carolina’s daughter, who was taken by the police for interrogation three months before and has “disappeared” since.

During the course of the play, the audience witnesses the two women’s “performances” for personal survival and their hope to save Belén. Josefina and Carolina carefully respond to two (unwelcomed) visitors: Diego, a soldier stationed at the Navy Mechanics School (known as La Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada — ESMA — one of the most infamous clandestine detainment centers during the Dirty War) and Padre Juan, a priest working at the ESMA.

Each scene begins with Josefina performing a domestic chore like sewing, ironing, dusting, and vacuuming. María González’s Josefina suppresses her emotions inside these domestic routines. González, as Josefina, uses her domesticity to obtain information about Belén from Juan and Diego, while constantly offering them *mate* (tea), medialunas (croissants) and empanadas.

In contrast to Josefina, headstrong Carolina played by Sandra Ruiz portrays the mother of the young pregnant woman who has been kidnapped by the government. These two women with different personalities and tactics come up with a plan to bring back Belén from the detention center. Their joint scheme is to stage a baby

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shower, a special occasion in which the disappeared, though escorted, often “reappear.”

In Act II, Walker's *The Madres* portrays this “family/friend gathering” in which Belén (Laura Jimenez) is brought in, escorted by Diego. In this almost surrealistic—it is too tragic to be real—scene, Jimenez, as Belén, demonstrates, through her subtle shifts of posture and expression, the young detainee's pain, fear (for her unborn baby), and love.

The male characters in *The Madres* represent the collaborators/accomplices of the Videla regime. John Padilla, as Padre Juan who used to work for the poor but now for the regime at the ESMA, portrays a defeated and shamed man of the cross who tries to do “his best.” Markuz Rodriguez, as a young soldier and a son of an old family friend, represents many of the young men who joined the regime and participated in the kidnappings, tortures, and killings. Rodriguez's Diego desperately tries to justify his action by regurgitating the government propaganda. Diego's recitation of General Videla's words “One becomes a terrorist not only by killing with a weapon but also by encouraging others through ideas that go against our Western and Christian civilization” is absurd yet chilling because of its striking relevancy to the political and cultural climate today.

The set design illustrates Josephina and Carolina's modest apartment realistically. The back panel has one main door and two exits to different areas of the apartment. The far sides of the panel (with two vents) are worn out (Julie Lorenz, scenic charge artist), suggesting the “age” of this apartment. The stage is split between a living rooms and a dining area, which is adjacent to an off stage kitchen. The living room consists of a sofa, an armchair, a chest of drawers, a coffee table, a book case, and a lamp and the dining area is furnished with a small table and three chairs. The back wall is decorated with a number of Catholic icons, ornaments, and paintings.

The apartment is the sacred and only sanctuary for Josefina. Walker's dramaturgy underscores how Josefina is transformed, during the play, and eventually leaves this sanctuary to join other “madres” in the Plaza de Mayo.

The women's costumes are chosen to emphasize their different personalities. Josefina wears softer colors — light blue, lavender, and pink — while Carolina wears deep red, brown and black. In the

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climatic baby shower scene where Belén appears, the women's costumes are "unified" with a red tone, that suggests blood, the maternal instinct and love, and ironically the color of the "Casa Rosada," (Argentina's equivalent of our White House) located in the Plaza de Mayo.

Lighting throughout the play changes in tone and intensity to signal shifts in the atmosphere and the passing of time, while chimes between scenes intensifies the atmosphere of uncertainty.

Thorn and Amon's direction underscores the women's losses and pains on the one hand and yet their strength and tenacity on the other. *The Madres* shows how women who are expected only to be good wives and mothers can empower themselves (in this play, it is referred as "marianismo"). Josefina's action at the end of the play — wearing a scarf made of a nappy prepared for her granddaughter's baby — symbolizes the women's politicization.

*The Madres* at [Moxie Theatre](#) is playing through June 10, 2018.

Play Slideshow



Sandra Ruiz as Carolina in the Moxie Theatre production of 'The Madres'. Photo: Darren Scott

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