



# GALA's Señorita y Madame: The Secret War of Elizabeth Arden and Helena Rubinstein (review)

February 9, 2016 by [Rosalind Lacy](https://dctheatrescene.com/author/rosalind-lacy/) (<https://dctheatrescene.com/author/rosalind-lacy/>)

Venezuelan playwright Gustavo Ott thrusts us into a 1960's press conference. Two iconic feminists, obsessed with eternal youth, anti-ageing makeover creams and Marketing, with a capital M, are near the end of their lives.

From the 1920's to the 1960s, in Europe and America, Helena Rubinstein and Elizabeth Arden become known as international competitors. How did they become the world's wealthiest women, without inherited title or marriages-of-convenience?

We are invited to their informal press conferences on a spot-lighted area upstage center. In scene one, a reporter (Cecilia De Feo) interviews Helena Rubinstein, played with classy dignity by Ana Verónica Muñoz, who has eerie feelings about her identity. Is she real or a myth? She mysteriously wants no questions about "the other one," the competitor who could obliterate her. In scene two, we meet the enemy: Elizabeth Arden, depicted with fierce passion by Luz Nicolás, the Meryl Streep of the GALA, who seems to have no doubts about who she is. A cameraman (an actor named Manuex) hovers nearby videotaping highpoint close-ups, projected upstage center for us. An unasked question lingers. Why are we watching? Why are we so fixated with these two women?



(l-r) Ana Verónica Muñoz as Helena Rubenstein and Luz Nicolás as Elizabeth Arden in *Señorita y Madame* at GALA Hispanic Theatre (Photo: Rose Campiglia)

*Señorita Y Madame* is a dark comedy, in that there are painful moments of revelation recurring beneath the riotous humor. As in Ott's other plays, produced at the GALA: *Your Molotov Kisses* (2008), *Mummy in the Closet: The Return of Eva Peron* (in 2009), and *Divorciadas, Evangelicas y Vegetarianas* (2011), cruelty needing exposure lurks beneath a calm surface in modern life.

A gorgeous color coordinated set, replete with elegant parquet floors, magnetize us. (Set design by Christopher Annas-Lee) Stage right is dominated by the pastels of Rubinstein's European salons. Whereas stage left is dominated by a bright red door, for Elizabeth Arden's New York salons. Broken cracks in the walls, covered with wrinkled, creamy beige wallpaper, reveal smears of red and gold underneath the cutaways.. The surrealistic scenic design represents the thin veneer of beauty peeling away. In Act I stage-right, cracks are covered with framed posters advertising Rubinstein's make-up products. Stage-left walls display Elizabeth Arden's framed pictures of race horses. (Arden claimed to much prefer horses to men. They never let her down. Her horse Jet Pilot won the Kentucky Derby in 1947.) As the play progresses into Act II, all framed pictures are removed and holes in the walls expose deterioration and aging.

Rubinstein, who is 89, dressed in a creamy white suit, tells how, as a young woman, she rebelled against her Polish Jewish farm life in Krakow. Rubinstein's greatest fear was to become what her family looked like— Jewish peasants. After a brief stint in medical school, she emigrates from Poland to Australia to escape an arranged marriage. Once relocated, Helena markets Krakow Cream, a skin cream, from her mother, Augusta, (Lorena Sabogal,) who rubbed it on Helena and her sister, Manka (Thais Menéndez,) before bedtime every night, telling them “Women rule through love,” and “....beauty makes us powerful.” Helena improves the cream with Australian tree bark

essences and renames it VALAZE. She markets it as a secret recipe from an Hungarian actress, and becomes a millionaire at 18. Rubinstein's motto is "Work and Power;" not love, make beauty. Beauty treatments help women make the best of nature's gifts.

Elizabeth Arden, 79, sidles in upstage center through the red door, dressed in a vivid red, seductive clingy dress, with matching shiny red shoes. (costumes by Robert Croghan). Originally named Florence Nightingale Graham, this farm girl, who claims to be born "well-to-do" in Canada, is a nurse who gives massages in hospitals. She finds a skin cream that helps healing. So she relocates to New York, and by paying the rent and outwitting salon-owner, Elizabeth Hubbard, (Lorena Sabogal,) Graham takes over a Fifth Avenue beauty salon. She also acquires the name Elizabeth, pricks a finger and paints her front door blood-red for fearlessness.

In a glowing acting moment, Nicolás, who edges her voice with a harsh rasp, talks directly to us from the stage apron as Elizabeth. From her mother's favorite British poet, Alfred Tennyson, Elizabeth finds Arden in the poem, "Enoch Arden," about an altruistic, fearless sailor. Arden becomes her surname and identity. The brand name, Elizabeth Arden is born, to market VENETIAN CREAM, to compete with Rubinstein's VALAZE.

Director Consuelo Trum effectively brings into focus the central battle. Who has the better formula? How do you reverse crepe-paper, wrinkled skin and achieve eternal beauty?



(l-r) Ana Verónica Muñoz as Helena Rubenstein and Luz Nicolás as Elizabeth Arden in *Señorita y Madame* at GALA Hispanic Theatre (Photo: Stan Weinstein)

Competitive warfare breaks out between the two cosmetic marketers. Who has the best skin care products and salons at the end of WW I, when Rubinstein plans to open her first New York salon on 49th Street and drive Arden, “the other one,” out of business? Trum directs her actors to use the furniture as battering rams, as the two female giants yell insults, hurl slogans and slam chairs against each other. It’s unreal, even grotesque, and hysterically funny. At this point, it’s hard to differentiate what’s real and what’s myth.

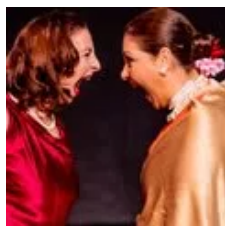
Nicolás projects a totally convincing, overbearing, explosive Elizabeth Arden, who is not only snooty and temperamental, but also a ruthless, pioneering entrepreneur. When Arden is starting out in New York, make-up and creams were associated with prostitutes. She succeeds in changing the public’s view by making beauty respectable through marketing. She travels to Europe and buys samples of Helena’s creams to analyze and make better. But she is on a head-on collision course with Rubinstein.

The two women are at war. Who has the lighter textured skin cream? Whose smells the best? Who puts out the best mascara? When locked into a battle over the war paint, Arden throws tantrums and throws herself bodily across her desk, an exaggerated gesture, outrageously funny. It’s a theatrical way to convey a basic tenet of free enterprise: how competition inspires creativity and progress. Essentially, this is what the play is all about.

Muñoz delivers a glowing performance as Helena Rubinstein – equally ruthless, but wielding manipulative rather than explosive power. She gets back at her provincial mom and pop in Poland by hiring her sisters off the farm to come to Paris to sell Valaze cream.

Carlos Castillo shines as he impersonates multiple characters, such as Rubinstein’s husbands, Titus, whom she divorces, and Lewis, her second husband, and Charles Revlon, among others. Lorena Sabogal also double plays roles such as Rubinstein’s mother, Augusta, and Elizabeth Hubbard, Arden’s first business partner.

But there is a dark side to Ott’s exploration of identity, recognition, beauty and power. Success in making money is also blinding. Sad minor-keyed string-instrumental music is piped in that foreshadows what happens when anti-Semitism turns into genocidal murder in Nazi Germany. (composition and sound design: Claudia Aponte and Stefanos Mavridis,) Making money blinds both women to the barbarism taking place around them.



## SEÑORITA Y MADAME:

### The Secret War of Elizabeth Arden and Helena Rubinstein



*February 4 – 28, 2016*

GALA Hispanic Theatre

3333 14th Street, NW

Washington, DC 20010

2 hours with 1 intermission

Thursdays thru Sundays

Tickets: \$38 – \$42

#### Details

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There is an intense realization in Act II. The Germans invade Poland on September 1, and the remainder of the Rubinstein family disappears. “Of the 60,000 Jews that lived in my hometown, only 1,200 survived,” Helena tells an F.B.I agent and us. For Rubinstein, the Jews were “other people...the ones who prayed, went to synagogue, spoke Yiddish, .....” She never felt she was Jewish until the Nazis transformed Krakow, her home town, that become a ghetto and ultimately the home for extermination camps, Auschwitz and Birkenau. Helena realizes she had never lost her deep identity, her Jewish heritage. It’s a powerful moment for Muñoz , underplayed with restrained sorrow, a cry of pain.

Underneath the glitz and glamour, lies the cruelty. At the end, the aging rivals face each other in wheel chairs. Allegedly the two superstar entrepreneurs never met in real life, according to Ott, although there was a rumor that they did. If they did meet, the insults would stop and we would see that there is a fine line between what you hate and what you admire. It makes good theatre that builds up to Helena’s and Elizabeth’s final confrontation with the audience.

This is a fascinating theatrical journey, worth seeing. Little nuggets, new insights, edgy secrets from the lives of famous authors, like Colette and D.H. Lawrence are dropped along the way. But I was left asking myself. What is myth and what is real? What seems most real is that Rubinstein and Arden made significant contributions to gender equality and feminism movements worldwide.

**Señorita Y Madame: The Secret War of Elizabeth Arden & Helena Rubinstein** by Gustavo Ott with English Translation by Heather McKay. Directed by Consuelo Trum . Featuring Ana Verónica Muñoz, as Helena Rubinstein, Luz Nicolás, as Elizabeth Arden, Carlos Castillo, Cecilia De Feo, Manuex, Thais Menéndez, Lorena Sabogal. Scenic Design: Christopher Annas-Lee . Lighting Design: Mary Keegan . Costume Design: Robert Croghan . Composition and Sound Design: Claudia Aponte and Stefanos Mavridis . Properties Design: Brian Gillick . Stage Manager: Lynda Bruce-Lewis . Production Manager: Ártemis López . Technical Director, Reuben Rosenthal . Producer: Hugo Medrano for GALA Hispanic Theatre. Reviewed by Rosalind Lacy..

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**About Rosalind Lacy**



Rosalind Lacy MacLennan, who hails from Los Angeles, has enjoyed writing for DCTheatreScene since 2006. A 20-year journalism veteran, with newspapers such as the Pittsburgh-Post Gazette, the Butler Eagle in Pennsylvania, the Suburban Newspapers of Northern New Jersey, Rosalind won a MD-DC press award for the Montgomery Journal in 1999. Since Rosalind's heady days training and performing professionally in summer stock out of New York City, Rosalind has taught drama in high school, directed and acted in community theaters, and is the proud mother of three young adults. Still an avid theater nut, Rosalind is a former board member of [www.Footlightsdc.org](http://www.Footlightsdc.org), and an aficionada of Spanish theater.

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