

# ‘Mariela in the Desert’ at GALA Hispanic Theatre

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Mia Cortez

**“There’s always something beautiful in the truth, even when it’s ugly.”**

After a standing ovation, many of us in the audience at Sunday’s showing of *Mariela en el Desierto* sat right back down to take a collective breath – feeling the aftershock of an unforgettable performance.



Roberto Colmenares (José) and Luz Nicolás (Mariela). Photo courtesy of GALA Hispanic Theatre.

*Mariela in the Desert*, GALA Hispanic Theatre’s third production of their 39th season, is a significant piece by D.C.-based award-winning playwright **Karen Zacarías**. One can say she wrote about the fine balance of love and creativity, but the intent of the piece is to deliver much more – and it does.

Abel López, GALA’s Producing Artistic Director, says he chose *Mariela* for its depth. He seeks “less action” and more “delving into the emotional psyche of the characters” in contemporary pieces such as this.

The spotlight is on the cast, and under López’s direction, the stage is their canvas. Scenic Designer Ruthmarie Tenorio recreates a stoic Mexican hacienda isolated in the vast desert of Northern Mexico. The cast, clad in Costume Designer Brian Shaw’s simple but impeccable authentic 1950’s attire, moves seamlessly through the airy rooms, gathering around in the

sitting room around a rustic wooden table or the majestic four-poster bed in which the ailing patriarch lays dying. But, with the exception of a few pivotal scenes, they symbolically avoid the abandoned artist's studio where a dozen paintings sit gathering dust.

Using few actions but weighty words, the talented Luz Nicolás delivers an explosive performance as the beautiful and tough Mariela. She and husband José (Roberto Colmenares) are aging Mexican artists, contemporaries of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo.

While it's implied that Mariela has enormous talent, she's a wife first and foremost. She hasn't picked up a paintbrush in the years since moving their family to the desert on José's artistic whim. Colmenares delivers a nearly too-convincing-for-comfort display of machismo almost entirely from the confines of his deathbed, and the interactions between husband and wife are touching at times, brittle at others. Renate Wallenberg makes her GALA debut as José's sister Oliva, a firecracker of an aunt who shares her brother's wit and obstinance.

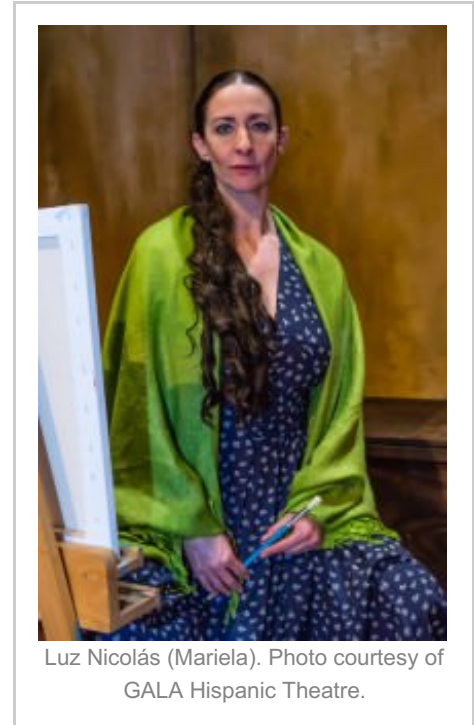
Time is turned back upon the arrival of their daughter Blanca, played by the lively and lovely Alina Collins Maldonado, and we learn of the family's misfortunes since leaving Mexico City. José's dream of a thriving artist commune where they would come to find inspiration in the desert sky – "God's canvas" – never came to fruition. Miguel Alejandro Amaguaña makes a brief but memorable appearance as their young son Carlos, who suffers a mysterious fate.

Lighting Designer Christopher Annas Lee breathes life into the omnipresent desert sky, and together with Sound Designer Brendon Vierra crafts a seamless transition from past to present.

Blanca, full of vigor and with a lovestruck American beau in tow (the charismatic Peter Pereyra), tells her mother of her experiences in the city, and the relationships she's forged. Although she mourns the traces of this life she left behind, Mariela is reluctant to let her daughter tread the path of an artist. At the same time, hearing that Blanca is beginning to stifle her own creativity shakes her to her motherly core.

*Mariela in the Desert* is a beautiful portrayal of traditional Latino culture and language, but its message defies classification. Without giving away the ending, this universal story of familial complexities unravels, building in intensity until the truth is revealed.

Running Time: 2 hours with a 15-minute intermission.



Luz Nicolás (Mariela). Photo courtesy of GALA Hispanic Theatre.

April 16  
thru May 10  
2015

**MARIELA EN EL DESIERTO**  
by Karen Zacarías  
In Spanish with English surtitles

**GALA**  
202-234-7174  
galatheatre.org

***Mariela en el Desierto*** plays through Sunday, May 10, 2015 at GALA Hispanic Theatre – 3333 14th Street NW, in Washington, DC. For tickets, call the box office at (202) 234-7174, or purchase them **online**.

**RATING:** ★★★★★