



PROJECT MUSE®

---

*Where We Belong* by Madeline Sayet (review)

Robin Alfrend Kello

Theatre Journal, Volume 74, Number 1, March 2022, pp. 98-100 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2022.0014>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/852153>

In this run, the performance instantly brought forth the tensions between US Latino culture and Mexican theatre culture simply in the way languages were used, where tensions of class, migration, identity, and access to education are reflected in the performances of language fluency, so that Spanish, English, or Spanglish are often used to enact discrimination or exclusion. An English version of the play is perhaps the only way many Latino performers who may not be fluent in Spanish will have the possibility of fully performing the text. And yet, in Mexico City, an English version without Spanish subtitles runs the risk of alienating spectators. When the performers spoke briefly in Spanish or during the longer English-spoken monologues, I wondered how much of this was being understood by the audience members or how it was being received, given the complicated language politics involved. It is hard enough being confronted with the shadows of our shared complicity, and when done in a language that many associate with cultural imperialism, resistance to the message increases.

The strong performances and the symbolic quality of many scenes forcefully transmitted the play's message, yet surely Spanish subtitles would have improved the experience and perhaps made the audience more receptive to it. Still, the performers remained present, connected, and generous in their deliveries; they were moving, even in the most Brechtian of moments. And the show's subject matter is very familiar to Mexican audiences. Everyone in Mexico City knows about the women of Juárez, about the atrocity of their murders, and of the impunities in a system that continues to protect the perpetrators. This is not a work of fiction, and most Mexican audiences will have enough factual and emotional context to fill in any language gaps.

The play is a call to our complicity in systems of violence, and as a border play brought to Mexico City—the core of a centralized country that rarely pays attention to what happens beyond its city limits—the production opportunely adds its voice to a pressing conversation that other artists and activists in Mexico (and abroad) have been engaging in for decades. Twenty years after Michaus debuted this play in Mexico City (she was present at the performance and spoke at the end), the list of deceased and disappeared women in Ciudad Juárez continues to grow and the dark pits of impunity continue to deepen. Among the new layers of chaos and fear that the pandemic has exacerbated in a country already fraught with indifference and uncertainty, Teatro Travieso's pass through Mexico City came as a necessary reminder of an ongoing fight for justice that must not be left by the wayside.

**MARTHA HERRERA-LASSO GONZÁLEZ**  
Mexico City

#### **WHERE WE BELONG.** By Madeline Sayet.

Directed by Mei Ann Teo. Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, in Association with the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C. Streamed June 14–July 11, 2021.

I write this review from the ancestral and unceded homelands of the Tongva people, a place now known as Los Angeles, California. A pro forma acknowledgment of that sort has become common before academic and theatre events in North America, and often the show or the talk must go on, with little more to be said about past or present mechanisms of dispossession and cultural genocide. Rarely is there more than a moment of pause to consider legacies of settler colonialism and erasure, for audiences to question their English inheritance. As a scholar living in California, it is worth reflecting why I write about Shakespeare with his language rather than that of the Tongva or the Catawba who lived on the piece of earth where I was born, and how traditions of canonical drama can serve to excise the stories and people who do not fit into a readymade cultural script. *Where We Belong*, by Mohegan playwright, director, actor, and scholar Madeline Sayet, not only demands a critical interrogation of Shakespeare, Indigeneity, the violence of borders, and the costs of exclusion, but asks how theatre might become a site of historical recuperation and collective care.

In an extended autobiographic monologue that shifts back and forth in time and varies widely in tone, Sayet narrates the story of how she became a bird. True to her Mohegan name of Acokayis, or Blackbird, the playwright left the Mohegans, or Wolf People, taking flight across the world to direct plays, present lectures, and pursue a doctorate in England. *Where We Belong* navigates among her experience of studying Shakespeare in a nation by turns oblivious to or proud of its imperial legacy, vignettes of Mohegans who traveled from their land (now called Connecticut) to England before her, and a personal journey of vocation. That path



Madeline Sayet in *Where We Belong*. (Photo: Jon Burkland/Zanni Productions.)



Madeline Sayet in *Where We Belong*. (Photo: Jon Burklund/Zanni Productions.)

finally leads to stories that cannot be found in the plays of Shakespeare, who could never know how his rich and expansive language would be weaponized as a tool of assimilation and emblem of white European supremacy in the centuries following his death. Refusing to be “the Native American in front of the word Shakespeare,” Sayet shapes *Where We Belong* with the imperative to decenter the early modern English playwright who is so canonized as to be erroneously deemed universal. Toward the end of her dramatic monologue, she says “I need to work with living people again” and decides to return to North America.

First performed before a live audience at Shakespeare’s Globe in London in 2018, the current iteration of *Where We Belong* is stylishly filmed by Mei Ann Teo, whose camera mirrors Sayet’s emotional state as it follows her various journeys. The visual movement is mostly fluid and unobtrusive, moving from close-ups to wide shots as Sayet narrates her story on a set that consists only of a trail of soil snaking its way across a bare stage and blue LED lights that descend to mark both literal and metaphorical borders. Moments of particular intensity are heightened by quick cuts, as the lights suddenly shift into a staccato strobe. In a scene both structurally and thematically central to the play, Sayet recounts the rush of inspiration and optimism she felt when directing a production of *The Tempest* that restored Caliban’s language by giving him a Mohegan voice. The mood shifts as she narrates the disheartening realization that scholars and

audiences would respond by pushing her to be a Native representative of Shakespeare’s greatness, reducing the complex variation of Indigenous cultures to serve a narrow, preconceived bardolatry. As a voice from a loudspeaker asks her repeatedly about Caliban, Sayet crouches close to the ground and rapidly recites the lines of his freedom song: “Ban-Ban-Caliban.” Minutes later, a more composed Sayet straightforwardly tells us, “We are so much more than the fucking *Tempest*. Than what Shakespeare could imagine us to be. He never met us. Never heard our stories. Our language.”

The reclamation of language and history as medicine propels the final scenes of the show. Stretching her story across temporal and geographical borders as she walks along the path of earth onstage, Sayet continually returns to the opposition of Mohegan and colonial worldviews. The scene “Indians in Boxes” places her stunned and stilled within the sharp angles and harsh lighting of squares composed of LED bulbs. Invited to the British Museum for her opinion of the Native American exhibition, Sayet finds herself in a labyrinth of “sacred relations,” where not just objects, but human remains are treated as mere things to be discarded or shoddily presented as the spoils of empire. As she shifts between the upper-crust English accent of the academic who is giving her the tour and her own voice, which cracks with anger, shock, and sorrow, Sayet presents the British Museum as a monument to cultural erasure and an institution that refuses to acknowledge the life in the artifacts and the people

behind them. Sayet reminds us of those people and the countless languages lost, as English, Shakespeare's tongue, came to occupy North America.

Standing in direct contrast to the British Museum is the Tantaquidgeon Indian Museum in Uncasville, Connecticut, established by Sayet's aunt, Medicine Woman Gladys Tantaquidgeon. More of a lodge than solely a repository of Mohegan culture, the museum is a space to protect stories and lives; Sayet recalls that "it was warm and dusty and always smelled like good medicine."

*Where We Belong* illustrates that the playhouse also is a gathering space, an assembly of the living, in which the reclamation and transformation of stories and histories and acknowledgment in service of healing might take place. Structured around the harm done by borders, the play concludes by moving from past and present colonial violence into a future of response and responsibility, where theatre itself, as a living site of belonging and social repair might stage acts of cultural recovery. Sayet sings the final lines of the play in Mohegan: "*wigomun wig-womun wami skeetumpak, oh hai, oh hai heyuh heyuh weyuh hey.*" Those words voice a song of welcome.

**ROBIN ALFRIEND KELLO**

*University of California, Los Angeles*

**THE PASSION OF MARY CARDWELL DAWSON.** By Sandra Seaton. Music selections from the repertory of the National Negro Opera Company and original music composed by Carlos Simon. Directed by Kimille Howard. The Glimmerglass Festival, Andrew J. Martin-Weber Lawn Stage, Cooperstown, New York. August 5, 2021.

In the program for *The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson*, playwright Sandra Seaton highlighted our culture's practice of leaving certain people's histories and contributions "unrecorded." Through this seventy-minute, one-act play with music set in a Jim Crow-era rehearsal room in 1943, Seaton sought to recognize the impact of Madame Dawson who, as founder and artistic director of the groundbreaking National Negro Opera Company (NNOC), challenged discriminatory assumptions regarding race, gender roles, and the contributions of Black Americans to the arts. As imagined by Seaton and portrayed by acclaimed mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves, *The Passion of Mary Caldwell Dawson* shows Dawson using the hours before the premier of the NNOC production of *Carmen* that she was directing to fine-tune moments within the opera with the three

NNOC members cast as Carmen, Don José, and Micaëla. Simultaneously, Dawson battles external threats to this performance (and NNOC's existence) and confronts these performers' challenges to her leadership. Throughout the play, Dawson employs narratives from her life—not to self-aggrandize, but to inspire creativity or champion freedom and equality. In doing so, Seaton transforms Dawson's history into a compelling appeal to share in her struggles.

Early on, Seaton establishes Dawson's penchant for storytelling. After entering Kimille Howard's production singing snippets from *La Traviata* referencing "freedom and joy," Dawson settled into the rehearsal room, then turned to address the audience directly. She told one story of an early childhood memory involving the spark of her love of opera, and another about experiencing discrimination when, at age 30, she finally could study opera at the New England Conservatory of Music. Dawson's onstage phone call to a performance venue's bigoted manager led into storytelling about her current challenges. We learned that for *Carmen*, she booked a floating stage on a barge anchored along the Potomac River as the site of NNOC's performance to ensure that its "multi-hued" audience could sit intermingled along the bank. With thunderstorms threatening *Carmen's* opening performance that night, Dawson needed to renegotiate that afternoon an aberrant musicians' union contract stipulating that NNOC pay musicians hired for *Carmen*, irrespective of cancellations, which it could not afford. Breaking the contract meant ruining NNOC, since no union musicians would then play for it going forward. More immediately, however, Dawson hoped to negotiate by phone with that manager the last-minute rental of his indoor venue to host *Carmen* that evening. Unfortunately, he wanted NNOC to comply with his segregated-seating policy, which



Denyce Graves (Madame Mary Cardwell Dawson) and Mia Athey (Phoebe) in *The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson*. (Photo: Karli Cadell/The Glimmerglass Festival).