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*Dramatic Publishing*

# FOOD FOR THE DEAD



## LA PINTA

**Two One-Act Plays**

**by**

**JOSEFINA LOPEZ**



**Dramatic Publishing**

Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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# **FOOD FOR THE DEAD**

**FOOD FOR THE DEAD**

is dedicated to my father Rosendo Z. López,  
my little brother Fernando, Guillermo Reyes,  
Eduardo Machado, Jorge Huerta,  
Luis Valdez, and Phillip Esparza

## Playwright's Notes - Food for the Dead

My father and my brothers used to tease my little brother because he didn't want to play sports. My father would often say that if one of his sons ever turned out to be a homosexual he would rather die than live with the shame. Then I began to wonder what would happen if one day my little brother came home and announced he way gay. I thought, "All hell would break loose!"

So there came the idea for *Food for the Dead*. I wrote it when I was 19 while I was at New York University studying dramatic writing. At that time I felt very alienated. I was the only Latina in my writing class and I felt like no one understood where I was coming from. I was experiencing so much cultural shock that I wanted to write something that celebrated my culture. Also, I had a friend who was Latino, gay and a playwright, but he wouldn't write about being gay and neither would a couple of other Latino gay playwrights I also knew.

So I attempted to write about it. Since I'm not gay and didn't do enough research I ended up making a lot of innocent mistakes and some of the actors from the University of California, San Diego production were offended. At one meeting with the actors I was given so many notes and complaints that I told my mentor Jorge Huerta, "I'm not going to write anymore." He encouraged me not to give up and I tried my best to do a rewrite, address the comments and improve the play. I like this play. It was fun to write it, but very painful to rewrite it and I finally decided to let it be as it is.

Josefina López  
Los Angeles  
April 3, 1996

*FOOD FOR THE DEAD* was first presented by El Teatro Campesino in San Juan Bautista, California, on October 20, 1989. The play was directed by Amy Gonzalez with set design by Joe Cardinali and light design by Lisa Larice. The cast was as follows:

CANDELA	.....	Amelia Schumacher
JOSE	.....	Andres Gutierrez
ROSARIO	.....	Francine Torres
GLORIA	.....	Barbara Jitner
JESUS	.....	Martin Goldin
FERNANDO	.....	Juan Angel
RUBEN	.....	Ernesto Ravetto
SARA	.....	Rosa Maria Escalante

## **Acknowledgements**

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# FOOD FOR THE DEAD

A One-Act Play  
For 4 Women and 4 Men

## CHARACTERS

CANDELA .....late 40s, the mother of four children  
JOSE ..... late 20s, the oldest son  
ROSARIO ..... late 20s, the oldest daughter  
GLORIA .....early 20s, the youngest daughter  
JESUS ..... early 20s, the youngest son  
FERNANDO ..... late 20s, Jesus' Anglo lover  
RUBEN .....early 50's, Candela's deceased husband  
SARA ..... late 50s, Candela's comadre (friend)

## SETTING:

Candela's dining room in Montebello, California.

## TIME:

Halloween night.

**NOTE:** Words in Spanish are in bold print. You will find a glossary and Spanish terms in the back of the play.

## FOOD FOR THE DEAD

*AT RISE: The stage is dark. Lights fade in a little to reveal the figure of a WOMAN wearing a black shawl over her head, we cannot see her face. The WOMAN enters from the offstage kitchen carrying a plate with food. She places the plate on a small altar. She lights the candles on the bottom of the altar, and more light reveals that it is an altar in memory of her dead husband RUBEN. The altar contains a black and white portrait of him as well as personal belongings and other religious ornaments. The WOMAN kneels and begins to pray. She then does the sign of the cross and says "Amen." The lights fade in fully and the WOMAN takes off her shawl. She is CANDELA. She adjusts her sexy dress and looks at her watch. She walks toward the table and begins to set it. CANDELA places six plates then she stops to look at the sixth plate. She retrieves it, and a few seconds later puts it back. CANDELA looks at her watch again then goes to the mirror and looks at herself. She exercises her mouth and says the vowels out loud.*

CANDELA. The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.  
Hello. How do you do? I'm fine, thank you. You like my dress? Yes. It's from the Jacklyn Smith Collection. *(The doorbell rings. She runs to the door and opens it.)*

KIDS *(offstage)*. Trick-or-treat!!!!

CANDELA. ¡Ayyy! *(She gets a bowl of candy next to the door and distributes it.)* Oh, how cute! Here's for you. A

nice chocolate bar. And for you...What are you supposed to be? (*Awaits an answer.*) A giant condom?! Oh, well, here's for you...What? You don't want it?...You want a chocolate bar just like your little brother? All right...(*She gives him a chocolate. She gets more candy and is about to give it away.*) You want a chocolate too just like your best friend? But I don't have any more chocolate bars...I don't...No, I'm not lying...Your costume is just as cute... Look. (*She sticks out the bowl to show him. The KIDS begin to pull on the bowl.*) I can't give you all the candy! (*They continue to pull on the bowl until all the candy flies out from her bowl and hits her face. She kicks the door shut.*) ¡Dios mio, que esquinces! (*CANDELA picks up the candy. She goes to the mirror and straightens herself. The doorbell rings again. She rushes to the door excitedly.*)

KIDS. Trick-or-treat!!!!!! (*CANDELA grabs the bowl of candy and tosses it out the door.*)

CANDELA. ¡Bolo! (*CANDELA shuts the door. She goes off-stage to the kitchen to check on the food. The doorbell rings. She runs again, but then she looks at the empty bowl.*) Who is it?

JOSE (*off*). Jose!

(*CANDELA quickly opens the door to JOSE.*)

JOSE. ¡Madre!

CANDELA. ¡Hijo! (*They hug and kiss on both cheeks.*)  
Come in. Come in. *Esta es tu casa.*

JOSE. Oh, the food smells great! (*He heads for the kitchen.*)

CANDELA. Of course. I made it.

JOSE (*stops and notices the altar*). And that?

CANDELA. It's a little altar for your Papá...I got so embarrassed putting it around his grave, especially with all the

food I cooked for him. So I brought it here. There was this nosy **gringa** who asked me when Ruben was going to come out from the world beyond to eat dinner. I told her, "The same time your dead husband comes to smell your flowers." I shut her up. But I thought it would look better here at least for tonight.

JOSE. You used to put it by his grave? I never knew that.

CANDELA. Yes. I've been doing it for eight years. This is my ninth year and my last. Tonight will be the end of my **novenario**. Because I am going to say good-bye to Ruben and hello to the new me!

JOSE. So what's for dinner?

CANDELA. It seems the only thing the men in this family ever think about is food.

JOSE. I'm sorry, **Amá**. I'm really excited for you, that you're experiencing your freedom and all that, I'm all for it. I mean it. I'm modern, I understand. It's just that I haven't had a decent meal for months. My wife can't cook for beans. I wish she'd quit her job at the clinic and stay home so that she can learn how to cook like you.

CANDELA. So where are Martha and the boys? Why didn't you bring them?

JOSE. Ah...They're fine. I told them it was a small, private family dinner...

CANDELA. And Martha didn't mind? Oh, it's all right. They can come. Let me go call them and invite them over. I haven't seen my grandchildren since...*(CANDELA walks to the phone.)*

JOSE. No!...Don't call them. They're not home...Martha took the kids trick-or-treating by now.

CANDELA. That's too bad.

JOSE. It's all right. The boys wanted to go trick-or-treating instead. **Amá**, I want this night to be special for you.

CANDELA. So do I...Except...

JOSE. What?

CANDELA. Do you think Jesus is coming?

JOSE. **Amá**, he left...I'm sort of hoping he won't come. All he'll do is get you upset.

CANDELA. **Bueno**, come to the kitchen with me and I'll give you a **probadita** of my **tamales**. (*They walk toward the kitchen, then the doorbell rings.*) I'll be right there.

(*CANDELA opens the door. Her two daughters, ROSARIO, very much a Huppy, (Hispanic Young Urban Professional) and GLORIA, very mellow and somewhat of a hippie, enter.*)

ROSARIO. **¡Amá!** How nice you look! You look like you could be my sister.

CANDELA. **¿De veras?** Oh, flattery will get you anywhere with me. (*GLORIA and CANDELA hug and kiss on both cheeks.*)

GLORIA. Ma, you look so beautiful and thin. And you're wearing make-up!

CANDELA. **Sí**, I became good friends with the Avon lady.

ROSARIO. What have you done to the house? It looks so different. It looks so, so, clean. Don't you think so, Gloria?

CANDELA. I've been doing repairs on it myself. And it's clean because there's no one here to make a mess...**Pero digname**, how are both of you doing? Gloria how is UCLA?

GLORIA. School's fine. 'Cept I've got this totally uncool professor who doesn't understand why I want to be a Transcendental Psychologist. And it's a drag living in the dorms. Ma, I need to get my own space.

CANDELA. But can you afford it?

GLORIA. I could if I got a roommate...

ROSARIO. I just started working at this firm owned by Elizabeth Taylor's divorce lawyer. It's a big deal to be working for them.

CANDELA. What exactly do you do?

ROSARIO. **Amá**, I've told you, I'm a divorce lawyer.

CANDELA. They have specialized lawyers for that?

ROSARIO. Oh, yes! There is a large demand for divorce lawyers. I handle the divorces for our Hispanic clients. It's an advantage to speak Spanish where I work. It's too bad people don't think before they get married. Too bad for them, but good for me. But it is emotionally draining. Especially when there are kids involved. Poor children get separated...(She gets over-emotional.) But I'm making big bucks, oh, yeah. Those seven years of college are really starting to pay off. *(The doorbell rings. "Trick-or-Treat" is heard outside.)*

CANDELA. **Bueno, bueno, pasense.**

GLORIA. Wo, Ma! What's that?

CANDELA. It's an altar for your **Papá**.

*(CANDELA goes to answer the door. ROSARIO and GLORIA take off their jackets and make themselves at home. JOSE comes out of the kitchen and they all catch up on the latest. )*

VOICES. Trick-or-treat!!!

CANDELA. I'm sorry! No more candy!

VOICES. Trick-or-treat!!!

CANDELA. No candy!

VOICES. No candy?!

JESUS *(offstage)*. ¡**Mamá!**

CANDELA. Jesus, is that you?!

*(JESUS hugs CANDELA and kisses her on both cheeks. Immediately after they finish kissing, FERNANDO enters.)*

CANDELA. Jesus, who is this?

JESUS. **Mamá**, this is my best friend Fernando.

CANDELA. Your best friend? Oh. Nice to meet you, Fernando. **Mi casa es su casa.**

FERNANDO. What did you say?

CANDELA. **Mi casa es su...** You don't speak Spanish?

FERNANDO. No, I'm afraid I'm American and only know one language. But Jesse is teaching me some Spanish...

**"Muchas gracias," "mucho gusto," "mucho macho."**  
*(They laugh.)*

CANDELA. Well, make yourself at home.

FERNANDO. **Gracias.**

CANDELA. Everyone, look who is here!

ALL. Jesus!! *(CANDELA exits to the kitchen. GLORIA runs up to JESUS. They hug.)*

GLORIA. What a surprise! What a trip to see my little brother. I was so worried about you. I didn't think you would show up.

JESUS. I wouldn't miss it for anything...Everyone, I want you to meet my best friend Fernando.

GLORIA. Your best friend? Oh, right. It's a real pleasure to meet you, Fernando. Welcome to our family gathering.

FERNANDO. **Gracias.**

ROSARIO. So, Jesus, how was New York? Was it fun being a starving artist? Was it as romantic as you imagined it to be?

JESUS. Yes and no. It was very romantic, but I hate being poor. I've decided to come back to California. Maybe I'll go back to school and get a job like you, dear sister.

ROSARIO. You're finally coming to your senses, little brother...Did you all see my new BMW parked outside? I've only been out of college a year and...

JESUS. Was that your BMW outside? Oh, my God! I think one of the little trick-or-treaters was stealing your hub caps...

ROSARIO. Why, Jesus, didn't you know? BMWs don't have hub caps. (*ROSARIO walks away triumphantly*). You haven't changed.

JESUS. Neither have you.

JOSE (*extending his hand*). Hello, Jesus. I thought you had broken all ties with this family. You changed your mind. I wonder why.

JESUS. It's nice to see you again, big brother. Why do you think I came back?

JOSE. You ran out of money?

JESUS. You don't know me as well as you think.

JOSE (*whispering*). Why did you bring your friend here? This is only for family. You know how much this means to **Mamá**.

JESUS. I know what I'm doing. Fernando is my friend.

(*CANDELA enters from kitchen with food.*)

CANDELA. Okay, everyone, take your seats at the table so we can begin our dinner. (*ALL sit around the table in their designated seats. FERNANDO is left standing, waiting to be seated.*) Oh, I'm sorry...(CANDELA looks around for a chair.) Ah...Sit...Sit, right over there.

JOSE. But that's **Papá's** chair.

FERNANDO (*to JESUS*). I thought your father was dead?

JESUS. He is.



FERNANDO (*suddenly realizing*). Oh, oh, oh. Forgive me.

Ah...I'll just sit over here close to Jesse...

JOSE. Jesse? You mean Jesus?

CANDELA. No. You can sit there. It's fine. You're our guest.

FERNANDO. I don't want to interfere...

JOSE (*muttering*). You already have.

CANDELA. No. I insist. I don't want you to think that Mexicans are unfriendly people.

FERNANDO. Oh, I understand, but I really don't want to get in the way of any primitive rituals you're about to perform.

ROSARIO. Primitive rituals?

CANDELA. No problem. I insist.

FERNANDO. Only if it's no problem.

CANDELA. Sit down! (*FERNANDO falls into a chair.*) Let's begin.

GLORIA. I'm so glad that we're all here together. I've been so busy with my studies that I have not even called.

CANDELA. I've been busy with my studies too. I missed you all. This house is too big for me. I think it's haunted. Sometimes at night I swear I can hear everybody's voice. It's as if the walls have absorbed each one of you and I hear all the laughter and the crying...And sometimes I can hear your father's voice. (*ALL look toward the altar.*)

FERNANDO. Spooky! Maybe you should move.

CANDELA. Oh, no. This house is finally mine. I just made the last payment on the house last week.

ROSARIO. That's great, **Amá**. Maybe you can sell it and move to a better neighborhood.

CANDELA. But all of my **comadres** live around here.

FERNANDO (*notices the altar*). What is that?

CANDELA. Oh, don't you know?

FERNANDO. Well, it sort of looks like an Aztec pyramid or something, pardon my ignorance...Ahh, it's an altar!

CANDELA. It's a Mexican custom for the "Day of the Dead."

FERNANDO. How curious!

JOSE. **Amá**, let's begin.

CANDELA. Who wants to say the prayer?

JESUS. **Mamá**, you say it, **como siempre**.

CANDELA. All right...*(They bow their heads, except for FERNANDO. CANDELA is about to begin. She notices FERNANDO.)* Is something wrong?

FERNANDO. Oh, please go right ahead. Don't mind me.

ROSARIO. You don't believe in prayer?

GLORIA. What religion do you practice?

JOSE. Are you an atheist?

FERNANDO. No. I'm agnostic...Please. I don't want to keep interfering. Go right ahead.

CANDELA. **Bueno.** *(She bows her head to begin prayer.)*  
**Padre nuestro que estás en los cielos te damos las gracias por ésta comida...** *(JESUS coughs, hinting for her to continue in English.)* Ah...And we ask that you bless this food that we are about to eat...*(JOSE coughs hinting for her to continue in Spanish.)* **Tambien te pidemos que nos cuides de todo lo malo y de la tentacion...** *(JESUS coughs again.)* Please take care of my husband wherever he may be. Forgive us for our sins...*(JOSE coughs again.)* **Tambien te damos las gracias por darnos la salud para poder estar aquí como una familia...***(JESUS coughs.)* Please give us peace...*(JOSE coughs.)*...y **armonia.** *(GLORIA coughs to show her disapproval of JOSE's cough.)* Give us...*(Pretty soon everyone is coughing, even FERNANDO. They fade out CANDELA' praying. She fi-*

nally gives up.) **¡Amen!** *(They stop coughing and try to continue as if nothing happened.)*

JOSE. Let's eat. I'm hungry.

ROSARIO. What did you make for us?

CANDELA. You know, the usual.

ROSARIO. I'm so hungry I could eat my briefcase. I miss your cooking so much, **Amá**. Where I live you can only get tortillas in the frozen section.

CANDELA. You really like my food?

JOSE. I love it! It's greasy and salty, and very bad for you.  
Can we eat now?! *(He doesn't wait to be served.)*

GLORIA. Ma, you should open a Mexican restaurant.

CANDELA. You really think so?

FERNANDO. Definitely! You should open it in New York.  
There are so many yuppies making a big fuss over the pseudo-Mexican restaurants.

JOSE. I especially like your **tamales**.

GLORIA. Did you make any sugar ones with raisins?

FERNANDO. What are **ta-ma-les**? *(ALL stop for a second and stare at him.)*

ROSARIO. You don't know what **tamales** are?

CANDELA. **Pues denlo uno**, give him one.

GLORIA. Jesus has never taken you to a Mexican restaurant?

FERNANDO. I'm afraid I've been an ignorant American for so many years...

JESUS. Don't be so hard on yourself.

FERNANDO. Yes, I have been, but I'm trying not to be...  
That's why I'm so happy I met Jesse...*(They pass the tamales to ROSARIO. She serves him one. All eyes are on him, awaiting his reaction.)* Oh, no.

ALL. What?!

FERNANDO. It has meat in it.

GLORIA. You're a vegetarian?