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Dramatic Publishing

la ofrenda

(the offering)

The background is a painting of white laundry hanging on a line. Several butterflies are scattered throughout the scene: one orange monarch in the upper right, one orange monarch on the left side of the line, one orange monarch in the center, one blue monarch on the right side, one yellow and black butterfly in the lower right, and one orange monarch in the lower left. The sky is a pale blue with soft clouds, and the bottom of the image shows green foliage.

Drama by José Casas

la ofrenda



(the offering)

Drama. By José Casas.

Cast: 2m., 1w. [Casting Latino/a actors is strongly encouraged.] Alex Smith, a young boy who has recently lost both his parents in the tragedy of 9/11, is forced to move to Los Angeles to live with his only living relative, his grandmother: a strong-willed Chicana named Marta Torres. Both Alex and Marta struggle to navigate their feelings after this loss. Alex must deal with starting a new life in a strange place as well as being immersed in a culture he knows virtually nothing about. Marta must not only try to get her grandson to talk about his feelings but also come to terms with her resentment for her deceased daughter for not raising her grandson with a knowledge of the Chicana/o culture, as well as her resentment for her deceased son-in-law; in her mind, by taking her daughter across the country to New York, he is to blame for her death. At a certain point, a homeboy calavera named Califas shows up to offer Alex a shoulder to lean on as well as some tough love. Califas is a mythical figure meant to serve as Alex's conscience, but he is also the person who must help Alex come to terms with the fact that his parents are, indeed, dead. As the story progresses and the rift between grandson and grandmother widens, the tension boils to a point where Alex's emotional release has a devastating effect on his grandmother and on the altar she has created for the Mexican holiday, Dia de los Muertos. Ultimately, Alex and Marta acknowledge, for the first time, their mutual love for each other and come to the understanding that their journey as a family is just beginning. It is a journey with no easy answers, but they are both willing to try to find their way... together. *Area staging. Approximate running time: 70 minutes.*



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la ofrenda (the offering)

by
josé casas



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la ofrenda (the offering)

ISBN: 1-58342-339-7

this play
is dedicated to
José Cruz González
my mentor
my colleague
and
my friend

IMPORTANT BILLING AND CREDIT REQUIREMENTS

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la ofrenda (the offering)
was a winner of the
2005 IRT Waldo M. and Grace C. Bonderman
Playwriting for Youth National Symposium
and was featured in a rehearsed reading at
the Indiana Repertory Theatre, Indianapolis.

The artistic team that assisted
in the development of this play
included:

Emily Petkewich - Director
Richard Roberts - Dramaturg
Jeff Querin - Assistant Dramaturg
Pat Sanchez - Team Assistant

“Children sweeten labors,
but they make misfortunes more bitter.
They increase the cares of life,
but they mitigate the remembrance of death.”

— Frances Bacon

la ofrenda (the offering) begins on the tragic day of 9/11 when a young boy, alex smith, loses his parents. he must now live with his only living relative, his grandmother, a strong-willed chicana named marta torres. as they begin their journey together, marta struggles to help her grandson accept their new life together while, at the same time, refusing to deal with her own mourning. during this struggle, a homeboy calavera/skeleton named califas comes from the afterlife to help alex deal with the issue by being “a shoulder to lean on” as well as serving out some tough love. as the action progresses, marta begins preparing her altar to her (deceased) loved ones for dia de los muertos. hoping to use this ritual as a way to connect with alex, marta prays for a change. however, emotions erupt when marta places a picture belonging to alex on the altar. alex, unable to deal with the pain, destroys the altar. the excerpt that follows describes the aftermath of the incident.

scene 14

(alex is sitting on his bed. marta is next to her destroyed ofrenda. they are both praying. an old picture of marta holding alex as a newborn is projected on the clothes-line. note: the dialogue in this scene is staggered; one on top of the other.)

alex. god—

marta. —dios santo—

alex. —are you listening—

marta. —i need your guidance—

alex. —what’s going to happen to us—

marta. —now more than anytime—

alex. —if things get worse—

marta. —turns his back—

alex. —stops loving me—

marta. —what to do, what to say—

alex. —i don't want her to think—
marta. —mi alejandro—
alex. —i don't love her—
marta. —mi vida. my life—
alex. —because i do—
marta. —my link to mija—
alex. —she's all i got—
marta. —lo quiero. i love him with all my heart—
alex. —and, dad—
marta. —jason—
alex. —i promise you i—
marta. —please forgive me. i—
alex. —am never ever ever—
marta. —going to—
alex. —forget you—
marta. —blame you—
alex. —you and me, dad—
marta. —put you—
alex. —yankees forever—
marta. —in the middle of everything—
alex. —but, i keep having the same bad dream—
marta. —what happened to our familia that morning—
alex. —i keep thinking that—
marta. —it was just our imaginations—
alex. —that you and mom are—
marta. —fooling us and that you two are—
alex. —going to walk through the door—
marta. —hiding the pain—
alex. —and that we would be—
marta. —living together as—
alex. —one big happy family again—
marta. —una familia unida—

alex. —like we used to be—

marta. —a family united as one—

alex. —mommy—

marta. —estrella— (*extended beat.*)

alex & marta. i miss you.

(scene fades to black.)

scene 15

(alex is sleeping. he is clutching his yankees lunchbox. califas is writing on the “scribble” wall. the low hum of traffic can be heard in the background. after a few moments, it is apparent that alex is in the midst of a nightmare. he wakes up in a cold sweat; beat. he composes himself a bit; noticing califas at the same time.)

alex. what are you doing?

califas. ...

alex. i don't blame you. i wouldn't talk to me either.

califas. why is that, little man?

alex. you know why.

califas. simon.

alex. i'm sorry.

califas. you're talkin to the wrong person, homey.

alex (*beat*). maybe...i'm the bad person.

califas. chale, little vato...no need to go drama queen.

you're only human, sabes?

alex. ...

califas. you're a chavalito...just a kid.

alex. still. (*extended beat. alex gets up from the bed and crosses to califas. he stands by him.*) you're taking up the entire wall.

califas. not much...considerin the size of the project.

alex (*begins to read off a few names*). judith jones. michael ivory. scott powell. kip taylor...el, el, elk—

califas. elkin yuen.

alex. oh. (*beat.*) califas...what is this?

califas. a list.

alex. what kind of list?

califas. a list that lists names.

alex. there must be a couple of hundr—

califas. a couple of thousand...names.

alex. who are they?

califas. they're players in the box score of life, my man.

alex. i don't get it.

califas. just names, ese...nothing special.

alex. why bother?

califas. my thoughts exactly. (*califas turns toward alex and hands him the pen.*)

alex. what do you want me to do with this?

califas. complete the list.

alex. but...it looks finished.

califas. looks can be deceiving, que no?

alex. why me?

califas. because it's about your heritage...your warrior aztec blood...the blood runnin through your veins... through the veins of your abuelita. the blood you share.

alex. you're not making any sense.

califas (*sternly*). it's your responsibility...your time to start livin the rest of your life, carnalito. (*beat.*) but, you can't do that until you finish the list.

alex. i still don't get—

califas. the list! it's missin two names and your parents aren't around to sign on the dotted line, homey.

(alex ponders these words; beat. he walks up to the wall and begins to run his hand down the wall; touching it gently.)

alex *(defeated)*. i can't, califas.

califas. sorry to hear that, vato.

(alex attempts to hand califas the pen back, but califas does not accept.)

alex *(quietly pleading)*. please...don't make me do it.

califas. if you don't want to sign it...fine. who am i to say anything. i don't care either way.

alex *(angrily)*. but...i do! *(extended beat.)*

califas. then, prove it, little man.

(extended beat. alex slowly inches up to the wall. he takes a deep breath and slowly begins writing. a picture of the wall is projected on the clothesline.)

alex *(to himself; subdued)*. jason erik smith. *(beat.)* estrella torres-smith. *(the projection of the list fades away.)*

califas. your parents were proud of you...i'm proud of you, ese.

alex. when will it stop hurting?

califas. it never will...but, it gets better.

alex. better?

califas. yeah.

alex. how soon?

califas. ain't no timeline for something like that.

alex. i wish it would stop hurting right now.

califas. simon, ese. lo siento, but life unfolds in its own way...you'll know when you know.

alex. know what?

califas. the answers to your questions.

alex. which questions?

califas. the ones—

alex (*solemnly*). that matter.

califas (*beat; proudly*). simon, carnalito...i think you're startin to get the hang of it.

(califas starts to exit. he crosses to the window. alex crosses to him and then stops; extended beat. alex stands there not saying a word, but knowing he doesn't have to.)

califas (*tenderly*). you're the man of the house now. take care of your abuelita. entiendes, mendez?

(alex nods; beat. califas extends out his hand. califas slowly and respectfully shows alex the chicano hand-shake, then disappears.)

scene 16

(marta is sweeping up the living room. the virgen de guadalupe is projected on the clothesline. after a few moments, alex enters cautiously.)

alex. grandma?

marta. ...

alex. abuelita?

(marta is surprised by alex. she turns around and smiles at him; extended beat.)

marta. you wouldn't mind helping an old lady...would you?

(alex nods his head; beat. he crosses next to marta. they both discard items into a plastic bag for a few moments without saying one word to each other.)

alex. i'm sorry.

(extended beat. the image of the virgen fades away.)

marta. alex...grown-ups sometimes have trouble talk—
(beat; apologetic.) about your papa. it was just that—
(marta crosses to another area of the living room to pick up something; partly out of guilt.)

alex *(cautiously)*. you can call me alejandro... i mean,
could you call me alex once in a while? i kinda like that
name, too.

marta. okay, mijo...i'll do that.

alex. grandma?

marta. yes?

alex. what are we going to do?

marta. i'm not sure.

alex. i'm confused.

marta. that's all right, alejandro. at least, we'll be confused together...que no? (*alex nods his head; extended beat.*)

today is the second day of november.

alex. day of the dead.

marta (*beat*). we must rebuild this ofrenda...make it even better.

alex. okay.

marta. thank you for reminding me, mijo.

alex. about what, grandma?

marta. that sometimes i need to talk, too.

alex. grandma?

marta. que, mi angelito?

alex. i remember.

marta. que, mi angelito?

alex. i remember one thing about when i was really young...your hugs. how warm they were...they're just like mom's hugs.

marta. you mean that, mijo?

alex (*nods his head; beat*). what next, grandma?

marta. we survive, mijo...can't ask for anything more.

alex. grandma...what if i forget?

marta. no, mijo...impossible. your parents are part of you forever. they are your protectors now...your angels. (*extended beat.*)

alex. mom and dad are safe now...aren't they?

marta. si, mijo...they are at peace.

(marta opens her arms. alex dives into them. it is the first time alex has allowed marta to touch him. marta embraces her grandson as the stage goes dark except for a lone spotlight which is focused on alex and marta; extended beat.)

alex. grandma?

marta. yes?

alex (*on the verge of tears*). i can still miss my mom and
dad...right?

marta (*tenderly*). always, mijo.

(alex, in his grandmother's embrace, begins to sob loudly. it is the first time he has cried for his parents. marta is trying to keep her composure but, after a few moments, she begins sobbing alongside her grandson. lights fade to black and in the darkness, their crying can be heard as it slowly fades into silence.)

end of play