



MALA

BY
MELINDA LOPEZ



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.



MALA
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*This is for Kate, friend, mentor, and badass,
who showed me what honest is,
and for Nina, who taught me that I am not the story.*

The world premiere of MALA was produced by ArtsEmerson (David Dower and P. Carl, Co-Artistic Directors; David C. Howse, Executive Director), Boston, Massachusetts, in October 2016. It was directed by David Dower, the lighting design was by Scott Pinkney, the projection design was by Garrett Herzig, the sound design was by Arshan Gailus, the dramaturg was P. Carl, and the stage manager was Lizzy Gordon. It was performed by Melinda Lopez.

The ArtsEmerson production of MALA was subsequently presented at the Guthrie Theater (Joseph Haj, Artistic Director; Jennifer Bielsein, Managing Director), Minneapolis, Minnesota, in September 2017. It was directed by David Dower, the set design was by Kris Holmes, the lighting design was by Scott Pinkney, the projection design was by Ari Herzig, the sound design was by Arshan Gailus, and the stage managers were Deb Acquavella and Michelle Hossle. It was performed by Melinda Lopez.

MALA was developed with the support of the Crossing Borders Theatre Festival, Red Bank, New Jersey, and the Mellon Foundation.

CHARACTERS

MALA

...a note about the production

It would be great to see the Spanish translated. It would also be great to see the scene titles and cell phone notes projected.

Everything needs a light touch. Super super light. Mala is by nature a story-teller, and knows when people need to laugh. Mala does not feel self-pity. She is as smart as the smartest person watching the show. Her metabolism is fast, and she never really settles anywhere until the last moment of the play. If it's longer than 75 minutes, that's too slow.

One final note. Mala is a first-generation child. Mala could be Greek. Or Polish. Or Mexican. The foreign language spoken is flexible, depending on the heritage of the performer, as are the references to Cuba... If you have a rockstar bilingual actress and are interested in tweaking the script to represent a different linguistic heritage, please feel free to be in touch with DPS regarding those changes.

MALA

A bare stage. Maybe screens. Maybe an opportunity for beauty that surprises—arctic light and icebergs, the warmth of a Pendleton blanket. A bowl of clementines.

But mostly, a woman, Mala, speaks directly to us.

MALA. So this is the part where you normally turn off your phones. But some of you might have someone you are taking care of, like a kid or an old person, or maybe your dog has diabetes, and every time you have to turn the phone off you panic a little bit and spend the whole time wondering if they fell or died while you were at the theatre.

So let's not turn them off. And if your phone rings, don't be embarrassed, I'll just stop and wait, and you can see if it's an emergency. And if it isn't, then just, you know, give me a thumbs up and I'll keep going.

And if it is an emergency, then, I don't know, I guess we'll just figure it out.

THE BEGINNING

What I wrote on the iPhone note-taking app, afternoon, February 23

She won't rest until I am dead.

Earlier that day.

I am at work.

My mother is at home.

She is alone, waiting for Annie the Aide, who comes every day for a few hours, to help with old lady stuff. My mother calls her "the girl."

If I try to clean up a spill, she'll say, "oh let the muchacha do that."

But this morning when Annie arrives, she sees my mom through the glass slider lying on the floor, and before she even opens the door, she calls 911. Then she calls me.

I'm in the car making the same drive I have made so many times—from my office to my house—the same white-knuckle drive, sinking-stomach drive. The trapped-behind-mini-vans-and-passing-on-the-parkway-despite-the-double-yellow-line drive. On the phone with Annie. The EMT. My sister. My husband. A thirty-minute drive in eighteen minutes.

But my mother refuses to go to the emergency room. Eight huge men, huge EMTs, can't get her into the ambulance. No one knows how long she has been on the floor or how she fell. "I esslip on the cher" is what she repeats and no one—not even me—is sure what that means. "You slept on the chair?" "I esslip in the cher." "You slipped off the chair?"

My daughter has come over—home from school, hearing the commotion through the wall in her grandmother's apartment—"—what's going on?"

"Nothing. Everything is fine."

Everything is not fine. When a person slides out of a chair, lands on the floor and cannot get up again, they are not fine. They need to go to the emergency room. I mean, some things are obvious.

My father died from slipping off the bed. Just seven months ago he died. Well, he didn't die from slipping, he died from—I am actually not sure which specific thing he died from—but he slipped off the bed, broke his hip, had surgery, was never able to walk on his own again, went to a facility, which means a nice place for old people who can't do anything and costs fifteen thousand dollars a month—which is incidental, and I'm not talking about money, because when you are desperate, you find it somewhere—and my father, who fortunately never knew how much the place cost or where the money came from, eventually died after he fell at the facility, aspirated food, couldn't breathe, and died from not breathing—and on his death

certificate it actually says *hypoxia*, which means “not breathing,” which, you know, of course, would lead to...that.

but I’m getting off the subject.

I just want to clarify that my father died from not breathing, not because he fell off a piece of furniture. I don’t want to misrepresent things.

My sister has come over. She’s in the bedroom playing Bad Cop with my mother.

Well, she IS the bad cop.

Not actually a cop.

“Tú tienes que ir al hospital, Mami.

Estás muy mal...

bueno pues sí, te vamos a meter en el ambulance y eso es todo...tú no vas a formar un scene con toda esta gente aquí. Ya ha llegado la hora. Sí. Que Sí. Que sí.”

And my mother is screaming “¡No! ¡Que no! ¡Que No me voy! ¡Tú eres Mala!”

Mala means bad. But more than bad, it means your essential self is bad—not that you have done something bad, but that you are—in your core—bad.

“Tú eres mala!”

My sister comes out of the room white with rage, “you have to tell the EMTs that she hit her head and is acting crazy.”

Now they can’t take a person against her will. They explain it to me. And I say, “I’m really worried about her. She’s just not herself. I just don’t think that she can make a decision like that and I’m scared—(Good Cop) don’t you think you can help us out?”

And my sister—“¡tranquílate!” and my mother—“Mala! Siempre lo fuiste! I hate you!” And my daughter, her eyes big as saucers—“What’s going on?”

And in that moment, I just can’t anymore, and I sit in a chair and

pull out my phone and check my email. Because, you know. Something important might have happened.

And then I write on the iPhone note-taking app: she won't rest until I am dead.

And they strap my mother onto a stiff board stretcher, and the sirens sound again, and the neighbors gather again and take her to the hospital— (*As the car pulls away.*) “Mala! Mala!!”

And I'm just so tempted to stand in the driveway and wave goodbye.

But I'm not Mala. I'm not. So I get in my car and follow.

ABUSADORA

Two days before, I went over to check on her.

I check in on her three or nineteen times a day. I bring meals, I make sure she has what she needs. Sometimes Annie is with her, sometimes she has just left.

Or sometimes I have five minutes, between caring for my daughter, walking the dog, working from home, working from the office, getting dinner on the table—and I'm not complaining—I'm just saying—I'm just painting a picture, sometimes I have five minutes, and I think, Maybe I will pop in on a 92-year-old lady and see how I can ruin the rest of my day—and let me just acknowledge right off the bat, some of you might be wondering, how did it come to be that my 92-year-old mother lives with me instead of being in a nursing home, where, obviously, she belongs, and I'll just say, we're Cuban, which in a way explains everything—but if you are still wondering, I'll add, I guess, I'm the Younger Daughter, and it's not like it's the Middle Ages, I mean we break with tradition all the time, I mean we live in Massachusetts, they left behind their families in the Old Country, but in life sometimes you have to choose your battles, and in my life, I've had a lot of battles with my parents, to start, over the course of my adulthood I brought home four different guys all of whom were *the one*, three were Jewish and one was a Ginger which, the less said about that the better... but in the end,

this particular battle just seemed...inevitable. No. Welcome. I'm ready. I signed on. It's not like I didn't sign on. That's what the Good Daughter does.

So. Two days before, and my mother is up, standing at the radio, trying to turn it off. My sister brought her a new Bose radio that doesn't have any buttons. You just have to touch it, dainty, and it does what you want. It's a magic radio.

But my mother is whacking at it—whack whack—and I watch her for a minute before I say

“What's going on?”

“esta mierda no funciona—”

whack whack

“You just have to touch the top.”

But she's whacking at it. Frustrated, she turns the walker in disgust and starts to walk away.

“No, no, like this—” and I place my hands on top of hers—on the walker—just lightly on her hands to show her how to do the radio—

And she pulls away like I am on fire and raises both fists in my face and screams “¡NO ME TOQUES! ¡NO ME TOQUES! ¡ABUSADORA! ¡DÉJAME EN PAZ!”

“I'm just trying to show you—”

“ABUSADORA! VETE DE MI CASA”

And she throws me out of her house. “MALA!”

And I say, “OKAY—WHY DON'T YOU CALL YOUR OTHER DAUGHTER AND SEE IF SHE'LL BRING YOU DINNER. SEE IF SHE COMES WHEN YOU CALL. SEE IF SHE EVEN PICKS UP THE PHONE. GO AHEAD AND CALL HER!”

And I leave.

It doesn't even occur to me that she's never done that before.

The next morning I'm still sulking like a baby and I send my daughter to see how she is and that's when she tells me her grandmother can't get out of bed. She's weak. She's confused. And we spend all day together, and I bring her soup and eggs, and later she walks to the toilet and sits in her chair, and we watch the telenovela and she is

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“Mala means bad. But more than that—it means your essential self is bad. Not that you have done something bad, but that you are...in your core...bad.”

MALA is a darkly funny tale about what it means to put our loved ones first, right to the very end, and what happens when we strive to be good but don't always succeed. It is a comical and brutally honest look at family dynamics, including stubborn parents and unequipped children, and explores the unsentimental poetry of everyday life. A one-woman tour-de-force for a powerful actress, MALA careens from comedy to deep pathos, while having the toughest conversation about the most common of events—the end of life.

“Piercingly honest, exquisitely moving...”

—The Boston Globe

“...deeply affecting and personal... Lopez...fashion[s] her language to create images that not only convey her feelings, but that stand alone as metaphors for the universality of her experience.”

—TheaterMania.com

“...an exquisitely fashioned theater piece, brimming with humor, frustration and honesty as biting as the wind, snow and Arctic fantasy that blow through it.”

—WBUR (Boston)

“Sometimes a play pulls a Muhammad Ali on an unsuspecting viewer. It knocks you out... MALA also provokes candid introspection about our relationships with our parents and children, and bigger questions of death and faith.”

—Star Tribune (Minneapolis)

Also by Melinda Lopez
SONIA FLEW

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