

Highway 47

by KJ Sanchez

Highway 47 was commissioned by Two River Theater Company, John Dias Artistic Director, with dramaturgy by Emily Ackerman and Jeremy Stoller.

It has been produced by Playmaker's Rep, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Frontera Rep, El Paso, Texas, Collaboration/Teatro Vista, Chicago, Illinois and HERE Arts Center, New York City.

All of the dates and events are factual and well-documented in government archives and state newspapers. Much of the dialogue was taken from interviews. Some dialogue was patched together from memory and family folklore... you know how that goes.

All the characters are played by one woman. When another character is noted, it's not a big transformation – no costumes, no lights change, think of it more like a quote than putting on a full character. The only difference is the accent – Tomesenos have thick New Mexican accents. These accents are less about grammar and all about melody.

The stage is rather bare but for a paper wall, comprised of faded documents (serves as a projection surface) and a small well-worn table.

PROJECTION: VIDEO OF DRIVING ON HIGHWAY 47, INTO TOME, NEW MEXICO

The woman enters, leans against the table.

WOMAN

My mom asked me not to tell you this story until she was dead. She wanted me to, for most of my adult life she asked me to, but not until she was gone.

Maria Teresa Tiofila Cipriana Sanchez de Baca, would say to me,

CIPRIANA

Honey. Somebody needs to. Somebody needs to talk about everything that happened. Eee. But not until I'm dead.

WOMAN

When I was young, I ran from this story. It wasn't me. I didn't want *this* to be who I was, so I ran. I was born on a ranch in Tome, New Mexico, one of twelve kids. The twelve kids of Maria Teresa Tiofila Cipriana Sanchez de Baca and her husband, Gilberto Sanchez.

PROJECTION: PHOTO OF PETEY AND GILLIE AS NEWLYWEDS

Here they are as newlyweds. She went by Cipriana but everybody called her Petey – no idea why - and they called him Gillie.

Cipriana ran the house, Gillie was a cowboy. *(she looks at the projected photo)* Well, not yet, not in this photo... When they took this picture, the the 40's – he must have been 19, she 18 - he was wasn't a real cowboy yet. Growing up, Gillie's family was super poor, they were sharecroppers. They couldn't afford cattle. As soon as he was old enough to work, he worked every job he could find – to get enough money to buy nice clothes, build a house for his new bride, and eventually, buy a herd of cattle. By the time I came along some twenty plus years later, Gillie had lots of cows. And lots of kids to take care of those cows!

I was the last of Gillie and Cipriana's kids. My given name is Karen. But I never felt like a Karen, was a terrible cowgirl and in the family was an alien dropped in from outer-space. So at seventeen I moved away, became a New York City girl, named myself KJ and decided I'd make my own history instead of grapple with the one I was given. Because that one scared the hell out of me.

PROJECTION OF CIPRIANA AND GILLIE FADES

Now that I'm older, over the years, I keep going back to it - my history, my family's history, and all the things that happened to us. For *decades* now, I've been going back through the research, through the archives, the microfiche, the newspaper clippings and the hundreds of court documents. I've become obsessed.

Because I can't figure it out.

I mean, on one hand, my mom *definitely* wanted someone to tell this story. She'd say,

CIPRIANA

Honey, Somebody needs to. Somebody needs to talk about everything that happened. But not until I'm dead.

WOMAN

She would say that. But then again, I'm not sure how *much* she wanted me to share. For example...

She takes out a photocopy of an old handbill.

WOMAN

This is a photocopy of an old handbill that was put up in the gas station, stapled to telephone poles and handed out around our little town. It was written in the late 60's, around the time I was born. It says, *(She reads)* "After 228 years of prudence, patience and non-violence – here in Tome – we are sick and tired of chiselers and malicious trouble makers and one of these days, if violence breaks out –it's gonna be too late. Beware this little square and eerie crook: conspicuously friendly and very gracious too – if he hasn't yet cut your throat!" The malicious trouble maker, the 'eerie crook' in here? That's my father. And it was written by one of my mom's first cousins.

And this is the story...

Music. Something festive and folkloric.

This story begins in 1734.

When the King of Spain gives a big piece of land to a little group of people.

This land is part of New Spain, which many years later becomes New Mexico. And our little town of Tome.

For hundreds of years this land is shared. By everyone. It's called a land grant.

Then the little group of people turn the Land Grant into a corporation.

And things are not fair.

Then a man comes along and fights to make things fair.

He fights and fights and fights.

To some he is a hero.

To others, he's the devil himself.

And I, his daughter, need to tell you his story.

Lights. Music's gone.

WOMAN

I started working on this story when my mom was still alive. I went back home with a tape recorder to interview everyone. (*chuckles*) That tells you how long I've been working on this – I was using a *tape recorder*!

I talked to my brother Charlie, who's 16 years older than me. When I told him I was doing something on the Tome Land Grant he yelled at me – Charlie always sounds like he's yelling, even when he's not – but this time he yelled,

CHARLIE

Karen! Why do you want to dig around in that whole mess? And why talk to mom about it? You know how she gets, like a dog with a bone, man. That woman won't ever forget about the damn land grant. She's still living it. Any chance she gets she'll get out the shoeboxes, pull out all the documents and go through the whole damn thing all over again! God! It makes me crazy! All the *viejitos* around here, they all have their shoeboxes full of documents.

Twelve kids and *no-se-que* how many grandkids, oh she's got plenty of things to worry about but what gets her going? The damn Land Grant!

WOMAN

My mom would just waive him off and say,

CIPRIANA

Eee, Honey, don't listen to him. He teases me all the time. Get me that shoebox, the one on top.

WOMAN

And she'd take a letter out of one of the shoeboxes and show me,

CIPRIANA

Mira Honey, this is a letter from their own attorney. You see the date? It proves they knew. They knew it wasn't right.

Eee... it was so long ago but when I look at these papers, eee *Mija* the feelings all come back so fast, like it was yesterday, *Que no?*

So many years your father has been gone. And I can't believe I'm still around!

I'm spending all the money your dad left because I keep on living! Eee Honey, I'm sorry.

WOMAN

My Mom apologized for being alive *all* the time. She apologized for everything. If you were sick, she said sorry, if you were sad, she said sorry. It was one of those things, you know, when you swear you'll never be like you parents?

And now? Every day I see more and more of them in me.

I looked down one day and I had my mom's hands and my grandmother's feet. I used to hate my mom's hands. They were always worrying some tea-towel. They were grabby, clutchy, nervous hands and one day I looked down and there they were. My mom's hands.

As for my dad. Well. I got a few things from Gillie Sanchez. One, I got his temper. I'm muuuch better now but used to be my motto was, "see a bridge, burn it." If I had a dollar for every time I've told someone to go fuck off. Not. Good. But like I said, I'm muuuuch better now.

The second thing I got from my dad is this: absolute and unbending righteous indignation.

My righteous indignation is out of control! I was riding my bike in Manhattan one day, riding up Sixth Avenue and some guy threw a gum wrapper out of his car? I followed that car for *thirty blocks* banging on the window screaming "litter bug! litter bug! This is my city you're trashing!" I will not let an injustice or slight or something like littering go by without launching a full-scale attack.

Gillie was the same way.

PROJECTION: A YOUNG GILLIE SANCHEZ

This picture of Gillie was when he was about twenty-two. He's got that 'up-to-something' smile, right? Everyone called him Gillie. But his kids called him Die. As in D-I-E. Once Die got it into his head that something was wrong, he was unstoppable. He pursued his own sense of justice like a madman.

She looks at the projection.

I didn't call him Die as much as my older brothers and sisters did. Me and my brother Allen, the youngest of the twelve kids, we called him Daddy. But to the older ones, he was Die.

It fit him. Die. It fit his larger-than-life-ness.

Once, a cow kicked him and broke his arm pretty bad. He comes home, a splintered bone jutting right through the skin, really, just sticking right out of his arm and in a perfectly calm voice he says to my mom, *(totally dead-pan)* "Hey. Look what the cow did." Something was wrong with the man's pain receptors! No matter what happened – a cow kick, or a blinding hangover after a mean *peda*, or a terrible beating that would put anyone else in the hospital – Gillie Sanchez didn't feel it.

He was a tough little nut. Tiny but tough. One time a horse bucked him off, nearly broke his back, and he got up, walked right up to the animal... and punched it's lights out!

Music. Something a little spooky. She moves to sit on the table and the lights dim to just a spot above her on the table.

THE PROJECTION OF GILLIE FADES.

WOMAN

My oldest memory is when I was around six. Most of what was before that is a blur so this's my oldest, most vivid memory. I'm six and we're having a *Matansa*. *Matar* means to kill and a *matanza* is the killing. It starts at sunrise when an animal is slaughtered – usually a lamb or pig. Someone lends you huge-ass cast iron pot – the kind witches brew in? The men are skinning the animal, butchering it into parts. The top layer of fat is thrown into the pot for *chicharones*, other parts are buried in a pit of coals, others roasted over an open fire. The women are making beans, red and green chili and fresh tortillas. You spend the whole day butchering and cooking and eating the entire animal.

I'm six and I'm eating a heart burrito. I'm sitting under a cottonwood tree next to the *quartito*...

PROJECTION: THE QUARTITO

The *quartito* was a really old building on our property. It used to be a chapel filled with hand-painted, carved from wood statues of saints, *Santos*, this is way back when New Mexico was New Spain, way, way back when Tomé was a stop on the *Camino Real*, way, way, way back when my great-great-great-and-then-some-grandparents founded Tomé.

THE PROJECTION DISAPPEARS

The music stops, the lights restore to full stage.

Tomé is where my family has lived for thirteen generations. That's why it's hard when people ask me what I am - Chicano, Mexican, Hispanic, what? And they think I'm trying to be clever when I say 'I'm New Mexican' - but what else am I supposed to say when my family has lived in the same place for nearly three hundred years?

It was a Spanish Territory, then part of Mexico for only thirty-four years, then a US territory, *then* a state.

We never crossed the border, the border crossed us!

And no one ever left Tomé - I mean *no one* ... When I was in high school I had this huge crush on Raymond Salazar and he asked me to homecoming. When he came to pick me up, my mom looked at him and said, "You look familiar. Who's your dad?" We were cousins! Everybody's a cousin. We're the Appalachia of the Southwest.

PROJECTION: THE QUARTITO

The spooky music returns, the lights dim once again.

So I'm six and I'm sitting next to the *quartito*, under a cottonwood tree, eating my heart burrito. When I see this little mouse. This little mouse walks up to me. Looks *right* at me! And he giggles. Then he points, he wants me to see something. From where he's pointing, these figures begin to rise up out of the ground. They're *Santos*, the *Santos* that used to live in the chapel back when it was New Spain, and they're floating right in front of me! Their mouths aren't moving but I can hear their voices. They're arguing. But I can't understand what they're saying because they're arguing in Spanish!

My older brothers and sisters – Lorenzo, Marta, Tomas – they grew up speaking Spanish first, but were punished in school, so the last three – Mary Frances Magdalene, Allen Kent and Karen June, we were raised speaking English only, so I can't understand what these *Santo* spirits are saying! But they're arguing. And their arguing is fierce! They're furiously spinning around, and flipping upside down to look at each other with their frozen painted eyes.

THE PROJECTION DISAPPEARS

The music stops, the lights restore to full stage.

WOMAN

Turns out I had a hundred and five fever that day.

I didn't have fever-induced hallucinations very often. For the most part, I was a pretty mellow kid. Didn't do much except wander around in the *llano*...

PROJECTION: BEAUTIFUL NEW MEXICO HIGH DESSERT. NOTHING BUT UNDEVELOPED LAND. YUCCAS, SAGE BRUSH AND A HUGE-ASS SKY.

She's downstage center, in one light, in front of this massive image

WOMAN

This is the *llano*. One big, open expanse of nothing but land. *Llano* means dessert – prairie – but I prefer *llano*. You can hear the wind in those vowels. This is the very land Spain gave my ancestors hundreds of years ago. This big chunk of undeveloped land was right in my backyard. Our corral opened up right onto the *llano*. I used to spend all afternoon out here, day

dreaming... I'd pretend to interview celebrities. I used to pretend to be Dick Cavett interviewing Dolly Pardon. And thirty years later I went back to interview the people of Tomé.

PROJECTION: THE LAND FADES.

I'll get to how this happened, but one thing you should know is that by the time I came along, our town was in an all-out feud. And remember, we're all cousins.

It was important to me to talk to people on both sides of the fight. I couldn't interview the cousin that wrote that handbill, he had already passed away, but I was able to talk to my mom's cousin Ramon, who was also one of my dad's enemies. We met out at the cemetery.

PROJECTION: THE TOME CEMETARY

WOMAN

He picked the place. And Ramon said to me,

RAMON

Yeah, you're mom called, told me you wanted to interview me. You're Petey's girl, so I'm gonna say yes, we're cousins through your mom's side - my father's mother's father-in law was your mother's father's grandfather - that's how we're cousins, but you know, Karen... I was on the other side, against your dad.

What your dad did... what happened ... was not good. He hurt a lot of people. For a long time.

But your mom and me, we knew each other all our lives so I'm gonna say yes...

So you wanna know about Tomé huh? Eee - You want something to drink? A coke maybe? I got a cooler in the truck, you want a coke?

I'm gonna give you 300 years of New Mexico history in five minutes, you sure you don't want a coke? Or some *biscochitos*? I've got some *biscochitos* in the truck, you want some cookies?

Bueno, pues... You know Karen, Tomé's one of the oldest communities in this country. It was settled in 1680, can you imagine? And the land grant was founded in 1734. By *Genizaros* and Sephardic Jews.

WOMAN

...*Genizaros* were Pueblo Indians taken by *Comanches* as slaves. The Spanish priests would buy them and give them their freedom if they were baptized and adopted Spanish surnames. The Sephardic Jews, they were the *Conversos* fleeing persecution in Spain, pretending to have converted but practicing Judaism in secret...

RAMON

So Karen, your ancestors are Sephardic Jews and Pueblo Indians all pretending to be Spanish Catholic! Can you imagine!

Have you got the DNA kit? The DNA kit everyone's getting? Eee, my cousin did it. You send in a q-tip with your spit and they send you a certificate that says you are Jewish and would you like to go to Israel and buy land.

PROJECTION: THE CEMETARY FADES

WOMAN

That DNA kit costs a hundred and fifty bucks. One of my brothers did it, and sure enough, you get a letter that says they found markers for the “Cohanim” tribe. *(With an eye roll)* Being a Jew is all the rage in New Mexico now. And before that it was all about being Spanish and every where you looked, there were cast-iron sculptures of Oñate popping up. Anything but acknowledge our real heritage, right? That most of our blood probably came from those dirt poor Indians the Spanish found when they came looking for promised cities of gold.

Whatever we were, Jews or Indians, The Spanish King wanted to reward us for converting. So Spain gave us property. And a lot of it: two hundred and fifty thousand acres.

And that is how the Tomé Land Grant was born. A land grant is just that – a gift of land given by the King of Spain to 34 families, my ancestors. And these families communally shared the land for hundreds of years.

Music. Something light and fun. She pulls out a large hand-drawn map of the Tome Land Grant.

WOMAN

When we got the land, in 1734, the boundaries were *(gestures to each)* the top of the Manzano Mountains to the Rio Grande River. From *El Cerro de Tome* to *El Cerro de Tuteurutu*. Two hundred and fifty thousand acres. Mountains, *llano* and *bosque*.

The first thing that happened, was that the patriarchs of the biggest families made themselves the trustees of the land. The second thing that happened was that these trustees chopped off some of the best land and gave it to themselves, as payment for taking care of the land grant. And just like that, good-bye fertile valley...

She tears off the lower section of the map.

Then, the Mexican-American War and the United States invades New Mexico. But Ulysses S Grant signs a treaty, promising to honor the land grants of New Mexico. So out comes the United States surveyor to draw a map of the Tomé Land Grant. But the surveyor's report to Congress leaves out the Manzano mountain range. Probably an honest mistake, right? Leaving out a whole mountain range? So good-bye mountains...

The mountain range is torn away.

In the 1920's, this part is sold, because when you belong to the United States, you now owe back-taxes! Good-bye Tuteurutu...

Tuteurutu is torn away.

By the nineteen forties, 47,000 acres remain in tact. Which is still a lot of land. If you don't know acres - Central Park is 840 acres. So imagine 55 Central Parks.

Most of the land is high desert. The only way to get real use from it was to graze cattle. If you could afford cattle, if you were a cowboy, then you could get something out of the land grant.

She gets little cow figures and sticks them onto the map.

WOMAN

Even though everyone's related in some way, Tomé had two very different classes: the rich cowboys who could graze their cattle on the land and the poor – and I mean *poor* - townspeople who couldn't get much use out of it. My dad came from the poor side, my mom from the rich cowboys. Well, rich being relative. Nobody was really rich but the Bacas – that's my mom's family - had cows.

Baca means cow in Spanish. And you want to hear something even better? Chewy is a common nickname for Jesus, right? Well, I have one uncle and a cousin - both named Chewy Baca!

She gets a Chew Baca figure and puts it on the map, he's herding the cows.

I actually had another uncle named Chewy too, but he was my dad's brother, so he was Chewy Sanchez. Oh. Poor Chewy Sanchez. He was a little bit crazy – had been in a terrible accident as a child and had some brain damage. Uncle Chewy loved the Kennedy's – I mean LOVED them – and so when JFK was killed, he officially changed his name to Chewy Chewy Kennedy. Why two Chewys? No idea, but everyone knew him as Chewy Chewy Kennedy. My dad would help him out – give him a little land, Chewy Chewy Kennedy would sell it, live off that money, in his little trailer nearby. He drove an old green Buick and he stenciled on the side of the car, "Chewy Chewy Kennedy Realty" Poor Chewy Chewy Kennedy. He drank himself to death on New Year's day. He was alone in his trailer and kept calling my dad, "Come over! Let's have a party!" And my dad said, "No! Go to sleep and I'll come over tomorrow!" Next day my dad went to check on him and found him. This was in the mid seventies. Chewy's death seemed to be just the beginning of many years of hardship for Gillie Sanchez. But hang on, I'm getting way ahead of myself.

Let's go back to 1947.

1947.

Here's the biggest thing to happen, since my ancestors got the land in the first place:

In 1947. "The Tomé Land Corporation" is formed.

From here out, I'm gonna refer to a group of people as the "cowboys" and when you hear me say cowboys I'm not talking cowboys like John Wayne.

WOMAN

I mean cowboys as in brown cowboys, as in my cousins, the ones in Tomé who could afford cows.

Music and lights.

She takes out a sack full of rocks and dumps the rocks on the table.

Let's say these rocks are the people of Tomé. The big rocks are the rich cowboy cousins and the small rocks are the poor townspeople cousins.

She divides the rocks by size.

The biggest rocks are the trustees of the land grant cousins – the patriarchs of some of the wealthier families. They oversaw the land grant-maintaining roads, putting up fences...that sort of thing.

She separates the biggest rocks from the others.

After hundreds of years as a communally shared land grant, in 1947 the trustees transfer the land grant into a corporation. And they make themselves the Board of Directors of the corporation. See, a corporation could do things that a land grant couldn't. A corporation could make a profit. And the fewer stockholders, the bigger the share of that profit.

So the board of directors made a list of rules, to decide which of the cousins were now stockholders, and which were not:

If you moved away from Tome, you didn't get a share.

She sets aside some of the small rocks.

If you weren't in town for the census, you didn't get a share.

She sets aside more small rocks.

If you married outside the culture, you lost your share.

More small rocks and even a few medium sized ones get set aside.

If you were poor and you needed money, you could sell your share, but only back to the corporation. For twenty five bucks.

More rocks out.

Now my father (*picking up a small but very tough looking rock*) a young Gillie Sanchez, he was ok, he got a share in the new Land Grant Corporation. But he started asking questions about those who didn't. He asked about my uncle Joty. and The Board's answer was:

BOARD

Joty wasn't here when we did the census.

WOMAN

Gillie's reply to that was:

GILLIE

Joty was in goddamn Korea, how's he gonna be here for your *pinche* census?!

WOMAN

Then Gillie asked about my Auntie Carmen, why did she lose her share?

BOARD

Pues, Carmen married a *Gringo*.

GILLIE

"Que chingadera. We're gonna see if that shit is legal"

WOMAN

Gillie kept pushing the board for answers and the board, kept pushing back. But that just encouraged Gillie's righteous indignation. He then asked about that rule, that if you needed to sell your share, you could only sell back to the corporation for 25 bucks? That's when the pushing turned to shoving. But that only added fuel to Gillie's fire. He got his own lawyer and sued. He led a public crusade, he cajoled, he bullied, he used every tactic he could until he strong-armed that board to change the rule. Now any cousin in Tome with a share could sell it to any other cousin in Tome for any price. Well. Guess who scrapped together the money to buy up shares for his own faction? Gillie Sanchez! That's when the shoving turned to beatings. He'd get a call about some guy wanting to buy a piece of land, or a cow, and Gillie would go out to the middle of nowhere to meet this guy and there would be his enemies. And they'd beat the crap out of him.

That didn't stop Gillie, that made him want to fight even more!

The board of directors, their seats were only temporary, by law the board had to be elected by the newly-made stockholders. So guess who ran for office? Gillie Sanchez! Most of the cowboys got re-elected, but they were now joined by that malicious trouble-maker, Gillie Sanchez!

PROJECTION: GILLIE OF THE FIFTIES, A CAMPAIGN POSTER

WOMAN

This is Gillie in the fifties, right after he won his seat on the board of the Tome Land Grant Corporation. This Tough nut. This force of nature! Was now a politician, with dreams of making things fair, he led his own faction, which he named The Progressive committee! Gillie and the progressive committee were going to help all the people of Tome!