

The ARTery

## ArtsEmerson Nails The World Premiere Of Melinda Lopez's 'Mala'

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By [Carolyn Clay](#)



Performer and playwright Melinda Lopez. (Courtesy Paul Marotta/ArtsEmerson)

"Mala" means "bad" in Spanish. Not, as playwright and performer Melinda Lopez explains in her solo play of the same name, "that you have done something bad, but that you are — in your core — bad."

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It is an epithet that Lopez's dying 92-year-old mother hurled at her more than once; hence the writer gives that name to the "composite character," based on herself, who's at the center of the end-of-life maelstrom that is "Mala," currently in its world premiere by ArtsEmerson.

But "Mala" is anything but bad. It is an exquisitely fashioned theater piece, brimming with humor, frustration and honesty as biting as the wind, snow and Arctic fantasy that blow through it. The focus is the winter of 2014-'15: the one that dropped blizzard after blizzard on all our heads as Lopez uneasily saw her mother out of this world just months after the death of her beloved father.

As the playwright and performer acknowledges, poets have for centuries had their lofty ways with death. In one of the most poignant scenes in "Mala," the

protagonist passes her last night with her dying father, watching him slowly breathe as she commits to memory parts of “Little Gidding,” T.S. Eliot’s fourth quartet. And the play proffers as a projected coda Sufi poet/seer Rumi’s “The Guest House.” But though Lopez’s memoir is not without a homespun lyricism, its mission is more primal and basic. Recreating her experience from terse notes taken on her iPhone, Lopez captures both the profundity and the mundanity of what is an overwhelming if commonplace experience.

“Plays,” observes Mala, “are about people who do extraordinary things. But the most ordinary thing you can do is to die. And the second most ordinary thing is to bear witness. I am trying to be ordinary.” But as anyone who has floundered and raged and agonized through the difficult death of a parent will attest, “Mala” succeeds at more than that. It bores into a messy, cataclysmic experience, “magical thinking,” warts and all. “I’m going to live through all this?” Mala wonders. “What kind of child would do that?”

This is not, of course, Lopez’s first rodeo. The Bedford-based writer and performer, who is the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Playwright-in-Residence with the Huntington Theatre Company, has premiered a number of works in Boston, beginning with her autobiographical solo “Midnight Sandwich/Medianoche.” Many of her plays, including “Sonia Flew” and “Becoming Cuba,” draw on her Cuban-American heritage, and “Mala” is not the first to incorporate her immigrant parents’ story.

Married in Caibarién, Cuba, in 1942, the couple fled Castro in 1959 and eventually settled in Bedford, where Lopez’s father worked as a mathematician and meteorologist for Mitre Corporation. These were not milquetoast people, as a couple of stories told in “Mala” make clear. The playwright and performer’s mother was passionate and tough. She was not going gentle into this good night.

Indeed, she was not going gentle into a hospital, preferring to upbraid anyone, from her two daughters to eight “huge” male EMTs who tried to bear her there. Thus Mala/Lopez relates a taxing series of crises that would fray the soul of any caregiver — to say nothing of one juggling work and motherhood with the tribulations of caring for an aged live-in parent. (Lopez’s parents occupied an apartment attached to her home, where every bump in the night signaled someone falling — or worse.)

Yet no matter the difficulties, “Mala” makes piercingly clear how deeply the speaker loved both her parents (not to mention her parents-in-law, her husband and their child, the generational rope tugging two ways). The emotion is so keenly felt that the performer must tamp it down rather than spew it out. As the playwright instructs the actor in the event that the performer might not be her: “Everything needs a light touch. Super, super light.” Otherwise, even when leavened by some anecdotes as comically absurd as “Waiting for Godot,” the mortal-coil-shuffling-off business of “Mala” might prove unbearable.



Melinda Lopez in "Mala" at ArtsEmerson's Paramount Center. (Courtesy Paul Marotta/ArtsEmerson)

“Mala” intersperses Lopez’s own story with those of friends and acquaintances in similar straits. There is also a meta-theatrical flippancy tucked into the interstices of the theater piece, as if to remind us that it is one. At one point, the performer even calls attention to her use of “acting” to induce both sympathy and urgency in the EMTs. And as if in defiance of the writer’s tropical origins, the imagery in “Mala” is stark and cold if not cold-blooded, taking its cue from that frazzling, endless winter of our collective discontent.

Pulling out her iPhone to consult Siri, Lopez delves into the allegation, true or false, that, in Eskimo or Inuit cultures, elders are pushed out to sea on ice floes

before they are irretrievably diminished or become a burden. This inquiry forms the basis for a later fantasia in which, shockingly, it is the caregiver rather than the moribund elder who seeks a send-off into the frozen sea. Also repeatedly invoked, in several striking series of images, is “one perfect clementine” — though there is a whole bowl of the late-season fruit onstage, alongside a single chair draped in a colorful blanket.

Not surprisingly, ArtsEmerson’s production, sensitively helmed by co-artistic director David Dower, is likewise chilly. Three soft screens, gathered at the bottom, shimmer with blue light, falling snow and even icebergs. (The projection design is by Garrett Herzig.) Along with placards dividing the play into parts, the Spanish sections of the bilingual script are also projected, followed by their translations. And Scott Pinkney’s lighting and Arshan Gailus’ sound, both subtle, add to the mystery underlying Lopez’s nuts-and-bolts tale of grief and loss.

As if to underline Mala’s effort to be ordinary, even in a crucible, Lopez appears onstage in long, loose pants and a simple knitted top, her dark hair, with its Susan Sontag-ish stripe, pulled back in a ponytail. And her performance, for all its meta-theatrical flourishes and ironical asides, is as candid, raw and exhilarating as her writing — which conveys just how impossible it is to make one’s way nobly through the wrenching experience of protracted parental demise. Those of us who have been there, and have our own sweet, agonizing tales to tell, will find both an elegy and a minefield in “Mala.” But surely the play’s searing veracity will be evident even to those who have yet to walk in its shoes.

*["Mala"](#) is showing at the Paramount Center through Nov. 20.*

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Carolyn Clay, a theater critic for The ARTery, was for many years theater editor and chief drama critic for the Boston Phoenix.

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