

SEASON 35

FANTASY
FAIRY TALES
and folklore



¡alebrijes!

día de muertos

Study Guide





Actor Robi Arce portrays Pedro Linares in *¡Alebrijes!* Photo by Russell J. Young.

¡Alebrijes! takes the story of real-life artist and alebrijes creator Pedro Linares, delves into his world, and fictionalizes it to create this Día de Muertos story. In *¡Alebrijes!*, playwright Georgina Escobar showcases their beauty and whimsy while also honoring a beloved holiday.

In this study guide, we look into the life of artist Pedro Linares and other artistic influences of the time, learn about Día de muertos origins, and explore some of the diverse ways the holiday is celebrated.

We hope this information helps you enjoy the show, learn about the many ways of acknowledging an important holiday, and lead to questions and discussions revolving around the world of the play.

¡alebrijes!

día de muertos

Written and directed by
Georgina Escobar

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Alebrijes and the artist who created them

Alebrijes are bright imaginary creatures made up of features from different animals, and you may have seen them in the movie *Coco*. One may have an owl's body and a dragon's wings, and another may have butterfly wings attached to the body of a bull. They were born out of the Mexican artist Pedro Linares' (1906-1992) fever dream during an extended illness.

He named them "alebrijes" because that's the word these creatures were screaming in his dream. Some of Linares' relatives insist that the word originated in the family — "alebrijar" — a verb they said meant "to adorn or decorate a papier-mâché object." Some people have also suggested that "alebrijar" comes from the real word "labrar," which means "to work or carve in wood, marble, stone, or metal, or to embroider."

Linares was a Mexico City *cartonero* (an artist who makes sculptures out of cardboard). After his dream, he began

selling cardboard alebrijes, and he quickly found they sold better than his other sculptures. However, he had to change the alebrijes a bit in order to sell them. They were "too ugly" in his dream and at first, people didn't want to buy them. So, he made them more colorful. In the 1975 documentary, *Pedro Linares: Artesano cartonero*, he explained that while some of the final alebrijes



An "alebrije" paper mache sculpture in the permanent collection of The Children's Museum of Indianapolis.

could still be considered “ugly” or even “gruesome,” they could be simultaneously very beautiful.

Linares also emphasized the creative, imaginative component of making alebrijes. “A donkey with wings? Well, they don’t exist!” he exclaimed in the film. “But you can imagine it as an alebrije, right?” Linares’ comments about dreaming up alebrijes underscore their highly whimsical, original nature. It’s their creativity and inventiveness that can connect them to Día de Muertos. While alebrijes are not a Día de muertos-specific tradition, they lend themselves to being incorporated into the holiday because of their supernatural origins.

Alebrijes art also took off in the Oaxaca region of Mexico, where artist Manuel Jiménez (1919-2005) adapted Linares’ alebrijes to wood carving. The material of the alebrijes is the main difference between Linares’ Mexico City alebrijes and the ones seen in Oaxaca. The Linares family makes theirs out of cardboard while Jiménez and other Oaxaca artists use a soft cedar called a copal.

Jiménez used a specific type of wood and worked with a variety of knives, from machetes to small kitchen knives, to create his masterpieces. He started by carving masks and small wood miniatures when he was young, and later he began carving alebrijes. He gained international acclaim in his small town of San Antonio Arrazola, and others in the town began to carve figures and also profit from the tourism he brought.

Wood carving has been a Oaxaca institution for thousands of years though, as the Zapotec people carved masks and intricately decorated religious totems. Wood carving died down in the 1800s, but some people still kept making mini animals as toys, and in the 1980s, tourism



Pedro Linares in his workshop.

to Oaxaca increased, which is when Jiménez started to get more acclaim, reviving an art form that continues strong in the region.

Oaxaca as a whole is a region rich in artisanship, with wood carving being only one of many trades practiced in the area. Certain towns in Oaxaca are generally known for one very specific type of art. For example, San Antonio Arrazola and San Martín Tilcajete are famous for alebrije carvings. Meanwhile, the town of San Bartolo Coyotepec specializes in black pottery, and the village of Teotitlán del Valle is famous for its woven wool rugs. The artisans in each town are highly specialized in their trades and are often keeping alive long family traditions.



Alebrije by Jacobo Angeles Ojeda of San Martín Tilcajete in the state of Oaxaca. (CC BY-ND 2.0)



Día de Muertos in Oaxaca. (photo by Cidades para Pessoas. (CC BY 2.0)).

Día de Muertos Explained

Origins

Día de Muertos is a holiday that blends Mesoamerican societies' cult of the dead with Catholic elements from the Spanish conquest. These societies showed special concern for the dead and devoted many rituals throughout the year to them as they considered them links between human beings and the supernatural. The celebrations in pre-Columbian times were also so extensive that there were different days throughout the year on which they would honor them. For example, in the Central Mexican highlands, the local Nahuatl-speaking population had seven days when it would celebrate the dead. But as Latino studies professor Regina Marchi explains, the missionaries that came with the Spanish crown changed and “tolerated” these celebrations by “relocat[ing] [them] to correspond with the Roman Catholic liturgical dates of November 1 and 2,” when All Saints’ and All Souls’ Days are celebrated.

Altars: their role and components

The altar is a center of Día de Muertos celebrations, with many symbolic components that each hold a special purpose. Like the holiday itself and many other aspects of Mexican culture, the altar is a fusion of pre-Hispanic and Spanish components, seen in elements like the copal incense and the cross on some altars. They can also vary from region to region, reflecting the diversity in celebrations and aspects of the holiday that are emphasized more or less in various regions.

All altars have more than one level, and they can range from two to seven. Each number of levels is symbolic in its own way. The two levels can simply represent heaven and Earth. Three levels can mean heaven, Earth, and the underworld. And seven levels can symbolize the seven steps it takes to get to heaven and achieve peace.



Cempasúchil. (photo by David Cabrera. (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)).



Ofrendas. (photo by UTE. (CC BY 2.0)).

The altar and the items placed on it are important because they're a way for the living to communicate and connect with the dead, and the things the living have set out show their care and attention for the deceased.

Some components that are present on altars are:

- **Water:** The souls are thirsty, of course, after their long journey, so like a good host, you offer them something to drink when they get to your house. Water can also symbolize the purity of the deceased's souls.
- **Salt:** For purifying the soul and for making sure the body stays in good shape for the journey.

- **Candles:** They guide the souls to and from your house.
- **Incense,** preferably of copal: Cleans evil spirits from your house and lets the dead know that it's safe.
- **Flowers,** preferably cempasúchil: Guide the souls to and from your house and also make your house smell nice.
- **Small bed mat:** So the deceased can rest.
- **Pan de muerto:** A sweet bread. Bread builds community in many other contexts, and it has a similar role here.
- **Their favorite foods:** As a way to honor and please the souls.



Day of the Dead altar in Ocotepéc (photo by Felicity Rainnie (CC BY-ND 2.0))



Music and flowers, the living and the dead. Santa Fe Oriente, San Luis Potosí. (Photo by Alejandro Orozco (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0))



"La Danza de los Viejitos" in Michoacán. (Photo by eperales (CC BY 2.0))

Music and Dance in Mexican Día de Muertos Celebrations

In her descriptions of the Día de Muertos celebrations of Mexico, journalist Mary Andrade touches on the role of music and dance in the festivities, especially in the cemeteries when families visit the graves of their loved ones. For example, in some towns in Michoacán, the festival of the dead begins with a celebration complete with *Purépecha* singing, music, and dancing, and in the town of Ihuatzio, people perform dances such as “Los Pescadores” (“The Fishermen”) “Las Mariposas” (“The Butterflies”), and “La Danza de los Viejitos” (“Dance of the Elderly”) to commemorate the day.

In the state of Morelos, the town band gets to the cemetery early on November 2nd and plays at the cemetery’s main altar, and other bands arrive to play songs the deceased enjoyed. In her Puebla book, Andrade explains the origins of Día de Muertos music and dance in Mexico in general and elaborates on the significance of these customs. It’s the ancient idea that life exists after death and that the two worlds are linked that contributes to “the belief that the music and dance of the moment will make a difference to those who have ‘crossed over to the life beyond’”.

Regional Diversity in Mexican Día de Muertos Celebrations

Journalist Mary Andrade has researched Día de Muertos celebrations across Mexico for over 30 years. Though her books showcase the regional variety in Día de muertos celebrations, she notes that some components are present almost everywhere, though they may look different. These include altars in the home, gravesite offerings, “cempasúchil,” certain foods such as pan de muerto, tamales, and mole poblano, and skull decorations.

Andrade’s first book focuses on the state of Michoacán, a region she says celebrates the holiday with especially strong traditions from pre-Hispanic times. Here, a special ceremony, the Vigil of the Little Angels, descended from the traditions of the Purépecha people, takes place on November 1st and allows children to honor the souls of those who have departed. The celebration is highly meaningful for people in the town of Janitzio as it teaches children to understand the tradition and the role of death in their culture.



Panteón in Michoacán. (Photo by Fany Sotelo (CC BY-SA 2.0))

Other Michoacán-specific traditions include leaving spiced duck as an offering to the dead on their graves and participating in the ritual of teruscan, a game in which young men “steal” food and then cook it with everyone in preparation for their walk to the cemetery. In the town of Ihuatzio in Michoacán, the celebration opens with a traditional dance and the tolling of the church bell at midnight. The souls of the

dead are said to be “in limbo” until the first bell tolls, and at midnight, they are judged by God. After, the residents leave to the cemetery to place offerings on the graves of their loved ones, a ritual that continues until the early morning.

In her Oaxaca book, Andrade notes that there too, pre-Hispanic Día de muertos traditions are more obvious and that in some ways, the celebrations are longer and more complex. They usually start several days before and last for several days after November 2nd. Though the celebrations are elaborate, Andrade explains that the holiday in Oaxaca is still a serious event.

In the Tehuantepec region of the state, altars may also look slightly different as some people keep alive a Zapotec tradition by having a biquie (“beeg”) instead of the pyramidal altar. The biquie is a cross-shaped offering composed of flowers and fruits and adorned with pan de muerto imprinted with the names of the dead.

Another one of Andrade’s books focuses on Día de muertos festivities in the capital of Mexico, Mexico City, where she observes that the celebration varies a lot depending on people’s social classes. While she explains that the holiday is still marked with cempasúchil, calavera candies (sugar skulls), and ofrendas, in some ways these traditions look a bit different. She notes that in Mexico City “‘death’ is intellectualized as part of exhibits in museums and art galleries” and that it essentially “dresses up for a night on the town.”



Oaxaca special events during the day of the dead. (Photo by Luisroj96 (CC BY-SA 3.0))



Playwright and director
**Georgina
Escobar**

Georgina Escobar is a New York City-based playwright from Ciudad Juárez, México, who has worked with Milagro on several other shows over the years, most recently, *Bi-*. Escobar began her career in the theater world by studying at the Stella Adler Studio in New York to become an actor. But she found that instead playwriting and creating the stories was her niche and eventually earned an M.F.A. in dramatic writing from the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque in 2011.

In her plays, this self-described “visual artist with a writing problem” examines themes of feminism, fantasy, and mythology, among other subjects. Her works often center on dynamic female characters, some with supernatural abilities, inspired by the strong, inquisitive women who surrounded her growing up. She enjoys analyzing myths and other origin stories, deconstructing their traditional meanings, and recreating them in her plays. Escobar also describes her work as “inherently Mexican without the obsession of identity” and explores border culture in much of her work.

Escobar’s plays have been produced and developed at INTAR, Dixon Place, New York Children’s Theatre,

Lincoln Center, Clubbed Thumb, Governor’s Island (NY), Milagro (OR), Aurora Theatre (GA), The Green House Theatre (IL), Duke City Rep, The Lensic (NM), Marfa Live Arts (TX), The Magic (CA), and others. Some of her awards for accomplishment in the arts include the Kennedy Center’s National Theatre for Young Audiences Award in 2011, an Outstanding Service to Women on the Border award for her production of the V-DAY Spotlight on the Women of Juárez symposium and event, and being a finalist for the 2016 National Latino Playwriting Award and semi-finalist at the O’Neill.

With *¡Alebrijes!*, Escobar has said she is excited to bring together many of her childhood memories, like the stories of Pedro Linares and María Sabina, animals in Día de Muertos, and Mexican music. You can read her interview with Milagro about the play on the [Milagro Blog](#).

You can also read more about Escobar, learn more about her plays, and read her essays and articles on [her website](#).

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Carpa Calavera, 2006



RAIZ, 2012

Milagro's Día de Muertos Celebration

For 23 years, Milagro has been presenting an original production in honor of this most Mexican holiday.

Always an evolving production, no two years have been the same or created in the same manner. What began as a series of skits and dances evolved into what is known as devised theatre: collaborative theatre that is created in the room with the director, actors, and designers. Content has ranged from music and dance, circus-inspired productions, to more narrative driven stories. From explorations of death in Shakespeare plays to the plight of the homeless in Portland. From family stories to the recent refugee crisis. Always with respect and honor with an eye towards the irreverent. The Milagro Día de Muertos Celebration is never the same.

This year we look towards an iconic figure in Mexican art, and with writer and director Georgina Escobar, embark on a magical and colorful journey.



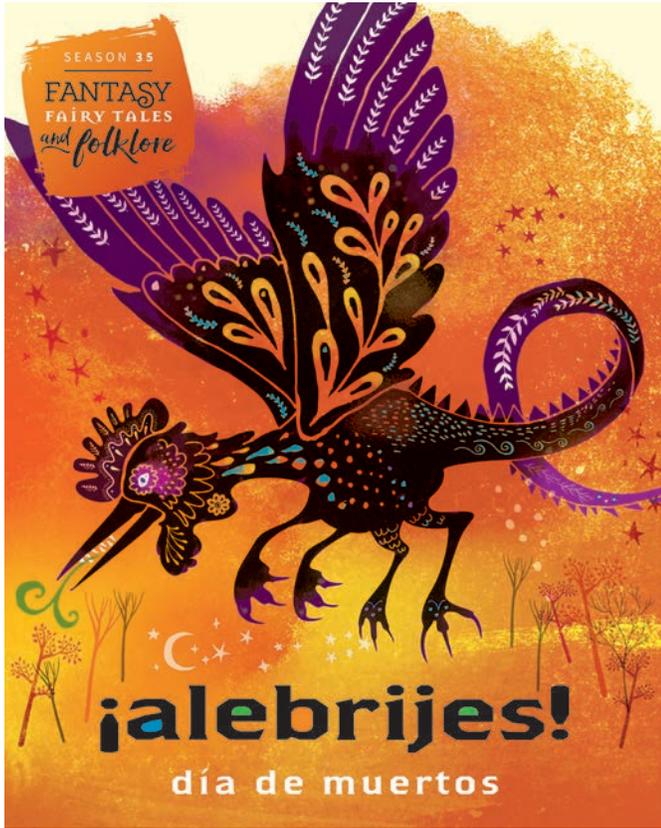
¡O Romeo!, 2014



El Muerto Vagabundo, 2016



Ofrenda al Cuerpo, 2003



Written and directed by
Georgina Escobar

Original music composition by
Luis Guerra

October 18 – November 11, 2018

Thursday–Saturday, 7:30 PM | Sunday, 2:00 PM

Milagro Theatre | 525 SE Stark Street, Portland

Tickets start at \$27

Student, senior, and veteran discounts available

For group sales, contact Laurel Daniel
at 503-236-7253 x 117

Preview

Thursday October 18 at 7:30 PM

Opening night

Friday October 19 at 7:30 PM

followed by a reception in El Zócalo
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Sept. 26 and Sept. 29

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At every performance, one hour before curtain
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To schedule a visit during regular business hours,
please contact Laurel Daniel at 503-236-7253 x 117

Cast

Robi Arce.....Pedro
Yesenia Lopez..... Lillian/Alejandra
Patricia Alvitez..... Ms. Obregon/La Muerte
Giovanni Alva.....Antonio/Felipe
Matthew Sepeda.....Manuel/Bartolomé
Tara Hershberger..... Florinda

For full cast and crew list and biographies, please refer
to the program or [the website](#).



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The Miracle Theatre Group (Milagro) has been dedicated to bringing the vibrancy of Latino theatre to the Northwest community and beyond since 1985. In addition to its national tours, Milagro provides a home for Latino arts and culture at El Centro Milagro, where it enriches the local community with a variety of community outreach projects and educational programs designed to share the diversity of Latino culture. For more information about Milagro, visit milagro.org or call 503-236-7253.