

'ULTIMA' BLESSES THE STAGE, TOO

A live performance of the critically acclaimed novel "Bless Me, Ultima" hits the stage the same night as the movie premiere in Albuquerque. And it's a complete accident, according to director Liz Chavez.

The Vortex Theatre produces an edited version of Rudolfo Anaya's script for stage at the KiMo Theatre this weekend, and Chavez said the production subtly differs from the book and film.

"That's the great thing about theater: it can bring to life different imagery that the book doesn't embody," Chavez said. "The book definitely captures the spirit of New Mexico, but you have a main character that in the book is literally an animal owl. In the play we bring her to life through dance, and it can really connect emotionally to the audience. It's so much more visually stimulating."

The play runs in conjunction with the Albuquerque/Bernalillo County Library System's Big Read program and features 10 cast members, many of whom play multiple roles. The play is only an hour long because Chavez wants it to tour through Albuquerque Public Schools.

Chavez said she hand-picked her cast and chose actors that she knew would care deeply about the project.

"New Mexicans view 'Bless me, Ultima' as a stepping stone for us — it began Chicano playwrights, Chicano authors — and Rudolfo Anaya gave us that step," she said. "The people I chose were people I knew would take pride in it. I didn't want people to just come in and get a paycheck."

Ben Silva, the 13-year-old who plays the main character, Tony, has played a munchkin in a production of "The Wizard of Oz" and Flick in a production of "A Christmas Story." But this is his first lead role.

"My two grandmothers were big fans of this play, and unfortunately



Adria Malcolm / Daily Lobo

Michelle Otero plays the part of Ultima at a rehearsal for "Bless Me, Ultima" at the North 4th Art Center on Tuesday. This year is the 40th anniversary of the award-winning novel's publication, and the play adaptation comes to the KiMo Theatre Friday and Saturday.

they passed away, so they couldn't see me, so I'm really honored to have this role in their memory," Silva said.

Michelle Otero plays Ultima, a *curandera*, or traditional healer, and she said she almost turned the part down.

"This was the one that I couldn't say no to," Otero said. "Every small town in New Mexico has an Ultima figure, every family has one, and it's maybe the *tia* who never got married or the woman who lives alone and you're kind of afraid to approach her, and yet she has all this wisdom. It's Ultima, she's a big deal."

Otero, who is also a writer and storyteller, said Anaya's work has shaped her in profound ways.

"Even if I had never read 'Bless Me, Ultima,' I would still be influenced by the book," she said. "Rudy gave all of us permission to write about our grandmothers and our families and to throw in those crazy nicknames the kids in our classes had and to write

about making your first holy communion in a small town in New Mexico."

She said she hopes New Mexicans see themselves in a new light after watching the play.

"I hope the play does what the book did, in that it gave a lot of New Mexicans an experience to see themselves reflected in all their complexity," she said. "It's not like every character in the book is virtuous and good, it's really like a portion of life in this town, post-World War II, the good the bad and the ugly."

"BLESS ME, ULTIMA"

Friday, 7:30 p.m. (sold out)
Saturday, 7:30 p.m.

KiMo Theatre

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\$5 general admission



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