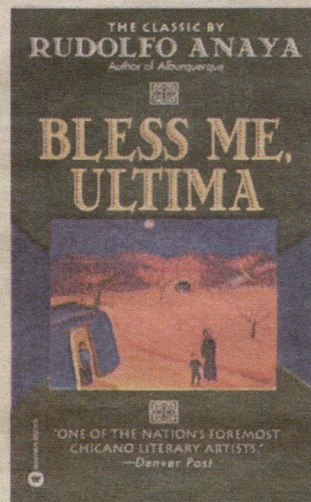


opera | albuquerque

# 'Heart & soul'



Rudolfo Anaya's 1972 novel "Bless Me, Ultima"

## 'BLESS ME, ULTIMA'

Presented by  
Opera Southwest

**WHEN:** 2 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 18; 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 21; 7:30 p.m. Feb. 23; 2 p.m. Feb. 24-25

**WHERE:** Albuquerque Journal Theatre at the National Hispanic Cultural Center, 1701 Fourth SW

**HOW MUCH:** Sold-out, though there is a waiting list at [operasouthwest.org](http://operasouthwest.org)

## 'Ultima' role in opera a 'thrill' for New Mexico native

BY ADRIAN GOMEZ  
JOURNAL ARTS EDITOR

Rudolfo Anaya's classic "Bless Me, Ultima" has reached generations since 1972. It's been translated into different languages. It's been put on banned books lists.

It's been adapted for the stage, as well as a feature film in 2012.

Beginning on Sunday, audiences will be able to see it as an opera.

Yes, an opera.

Opera Southwest and the National Hispanic Cultural Center have teamed up for the opera commission.

Hector Armienta, a California-based composer, wrote the opera with the guidance of Anaya.

The opera strummed up so much attention that the five shows at the NHCC are sold-out. There is a waiting list, though.

"Bless Me, Ultima," is set in the small town of Guadalupe, N.M., during World War II. The novel follows the story of Antonio Márez, and a curandera named Ultima who came to live with his family when he was 6.

The main plot line involves Ultima's struggle to stop the witchcraft of the three daughters of Tenorio Trementina, the book's main villain. Antonio, who witnesses several deaths, is forced to deal with religious and moral issues.



From left, Luke Gullickson, Javier Abreu, Carlos Archuleta, Cynthia Woods and Octavio Cardenas rehearse a scene from the "Bless Me, Ultima" opera.

Anaya's classic is one that New Mexico native Kirstin Chávez came to later in life.

In fact, she didn't read the novel until she was cast as Ultima.

"I have to say it's a thrill for me, for many reasons," Chávez says. "When I told my sisters that I would be playing Ultima, they kind of lost it. They grew

up reading the novel, and I didn't. I knew I had to read it."

Chávez has carved out a successful career in theater and opera. She is a mezzo-soprano who has played Carmen in nearly 40 productions throughout the United States and around the globe.

She's had roles in as Jo in Adamo's "Little Women" (Opera Pacific),

Albuquerque native Kirstin Chávez, le

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15-year-old Daisy Beltrán listens to Kirstin Chavez during a rehearsal for the opera "Bless Me, Ultima." The pair have built a relationship akin to that of the opera characters.

Thérèse, in Tobias Picker's "Thérèse Raquin" (San Diego Opera) and Sondra Finchley in Picker's "An American Tragedy," which was her Metropolitan Opera principal debut, in 2005.

Her recent engagements have taken her to the Sydney Opera House in Australia as Carmen, and she performed the same role at Opera Queensland, in Brisbane.

She also made a role debut as Lucretia in Britten's "The Rape of Lucretia," at Maggio Musicale in Florence, Italy. It's the latest role that has the New Mexico State University alum ready for the challenge.

"Opera Southwest contacted me about a year ago and asked me to sing a few pages from a new piece. I was in New York at the time, and I was working with my vocal coach. We recorded it together. When I get asked to sing in a modern opera, usually the concept is really out there. This one has heart and soul. The harmonies are glorious, and I'm excited to be playing Ultima."

Chávez says being involved in the opera is giving her a piece of her heritage, which she wasn't allowed to

bask in.

"I've played the role of Carmen all over the world," she says. "I've embraced that role. Part of the reason I've done both roles is to connect with my heritage. With Ultima, right off the bat, everyone expects her to be 77. It's much older than I am. Certainly the way Hector has written her, I find her to be quite timeless and ageless."

Chávez says working with stage director Octavio Cardenas helped her develop Ultima.

"Octavio told me he pictures Ultima as a female Gandalf," she says. "He's wise and an older being. But he's not hobbling around. I was overjoyed when he said that. That image speaks very loudly to me. The image has helped me in trying to personify her."

Chávez is also enjoying working with Daisy Beltrán, who plays the role of Tony. It is her opera debut.

"Working with Daisy, I've become a sort of mentor," she says. "We have a similar relationship to Ultima and Tony. It's really amazing to be part of this and being able to lend my knowledge to her. We're on this beautiful journey together."



ft, and Daisy Beltran play Ultima and Tony in Opera Southwest's "Bless Me, Ultima."

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