

CONTENTS

The Play
Meet the Playwright
Two Stories, One World
Migrant Workers in the United States
Escaping the Dust Bowl
The World of the Play
The Role of a Chorus
Three Big Questions
Resources

THE PLAY

In the classic American novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joad family packs their few possessions in a rickety truck and leaves behind their farm in Oklahoma, hoping to find a better life picking fruit in California. They are part of a migration of nearly half a million people, who fled the devastation of the Dust Bowl in the 1930s (see article *Escaping the Dust Bowl* on the inside).

However, in *Mother Road*, not all the Joads migrated west. Some stayed behind, holding on to what was left of their land.

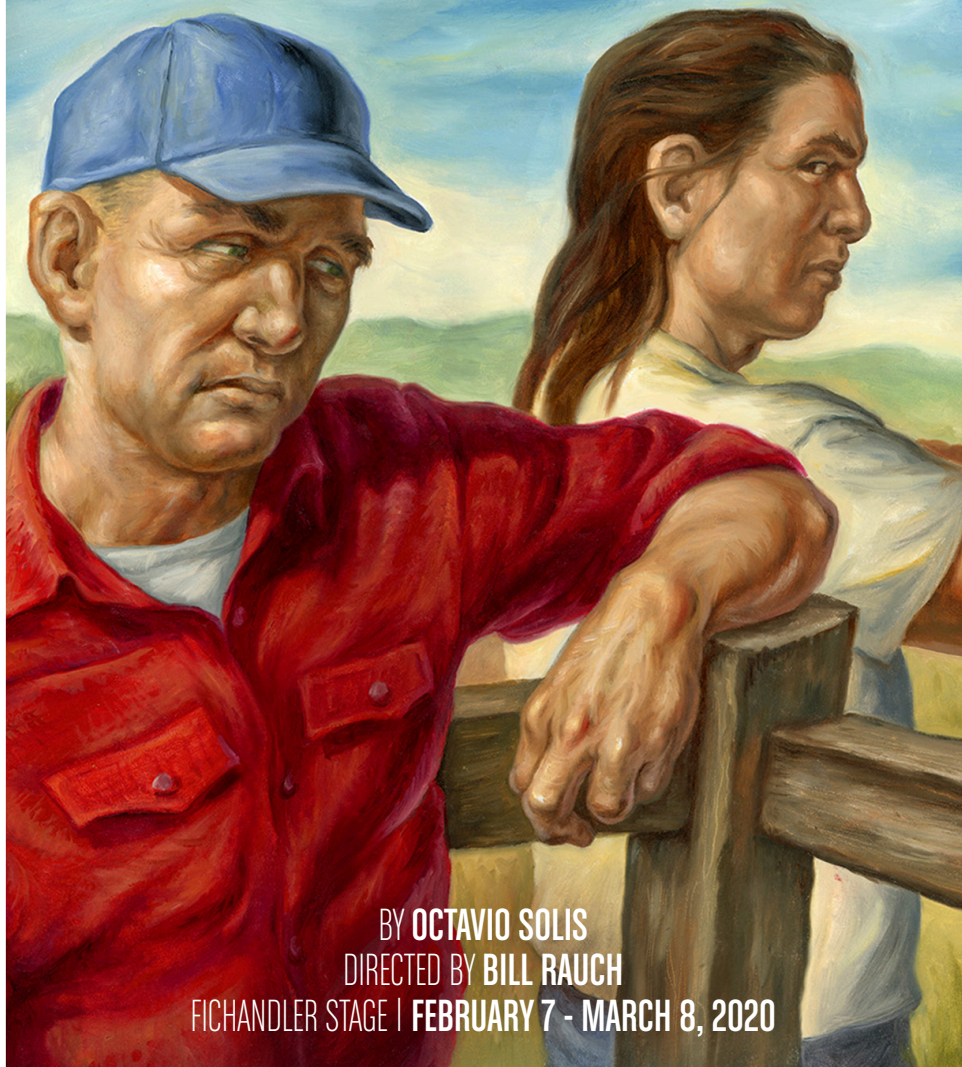
In the present day, an aging **William Joad** is searching for an heir to his family's farm in Sallisaw, Oklahoma. With the help of **Roger**, who is like a son to him, he discovers his last surviving relative is **Martín Jodes**, a Mexican American living in Southern California. Although he has never operated a farm or owned any land, Martín agrees to visit the Joad family farm on one condition: they drive there in his truck.

As they journey east on Route 66 — the “Mother Road” — the two pick up **Mo**, Martín's cousin, and **James**, Martín's long-time friend. Along the way, the group comes face-to-face with people and ideas that challenge their values and sense of belonging.

Despite their differences, the group learns to depend on each other in times of hardship. Through the roadblocks they face, will William and Martín learn what it means to be a family, or will what remains of the Joad legacy be lost forever?

THE OREGON SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL PRODUCTION OF

MOTHER ROAD



BY OCTAVIO SOLIS

DIRECTED BY BILL RAUCH

FICHANDLER STAGE | FEBRUARY 7 - MARCH 8, 2020

“The seeds you sow find a way to light.”

— James, *Mother Road*

Mother Road is generously sponsored by  Altria,  AARP
and the **David Bruce Smith Foundation**.

The D.C. Ticket Partnership is generously sponsored by the Paul M. Angell Family Foundation. Additional support is provided by the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, The Bay & Paul Foundations., Collins Aerospace, the Albert and Lillian Small Foundation, AT&T and Exelon.

MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



OCTAVIO SOLIS

Octavio Solis grew up in El Paso, Texas, in a Mexican-American family. He was introduced to theater when he was 14 after being cast in his high school play. From then on he was always involved in the arts. After college, he worked as an actor for a short period before deciding to become a playwright in his mid-twenties.

Over nearly 30 years, Solis has had 26 plays produced across the country including: *Lydia*, *Quixote*, *The Pastures of Heaven* and *Mother Road*. He has also worked as a high school teacher, college professor and director. Solis was hired by Disney as a cultural consultant for the 2017 film *Coco*. Solis also voiced the character of the Arrival Agent.

Solis is widely considered one of the most prominent Latino playwrights, but that is not how he defines himself. In an interview with *The Rumpus*, Solis says:

“That’s a label others place on me. I’m just writing for the theater. Because of my upbringing and my past, I inevitably delve into issues of my Latino heritage, but it’s not my Latino-ness that dictates what I write. There are stories that take place along the border near El Paso because that’s where I am from, and because I think that region is full of untold stories. But even as many of my characters are of Mexican descent, I feel that their tales are universal stories of love and betrayal and loss.”

FROM THE DIRECTOR’S NOTEBOOK

“Octavio’s work is rooted in the same moral outrage about economic injustice that makes *The Grapes of Wrath* a beloved American classic. The play proposes the inevitability of a diverse new American family that draws parallels between who we have been and who we are becoming.”

- Bill Rauch, Director



▶ WATCH

When playwright Octavio Solis was in high school, he fell in love with Shakespeare. He found the use of rhythm and metaphor in his plays inspiring. Shakespeare helped Solis discover that he was an artist. Listen to Solis tell the story in his own words by watching this video.

<https://bit.ly/2sAgffJ>

TWO STORIES, ONE WORLD

THE GRAPES OF WRATH

Mother Road extends the story of *The Grapes of Wrath*, which was written by John Steinbeck in 1939. The novel shows the experiences and hardships of migrant workers during the Dust Bowl. The book mixes telling the story of the Joad family with factual commentary on the time period.

Three generations of the Joad family decide to leave Oklahoma. They have been evicted from their farm due to the Dust Bowl and Great Depression. They may not survive if they stay in Oklahoma and they have been told there is work picking fruit in California. As they are preparing to leave, Tom Joad returns with his friend, Jim Casy, a former preacher. Tom has been in jail for four years for manslaughter. He has a strong sense of justice, but a terrible temper. His parole dictates he cannot leave Oklahoma, but he risks his new-found freedom to protect his family as they travel west. The Joads join a mass migration of workers, known by the disparaging term “Okies,” all of whom are desperate for a better life.

As they travel west on Route 66 and across the desert, the family faces sickness and death. When they arrive in California, they discover it is not the Promised Land they expected. People are still starving, jobs are scarce and workers are exploited. Tom tries to fight for his family and for justice for workers. At the end of the book, he is a fugitive and must leave his family. He says that wherever he is, he will be fighting for justice. The novel never tells where Tom goes.

The book has sold more than 14 million copies. Steinbeck won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and a Nobel Prize.

In *Mother Road*, Martín and William are the modern descendants of the Joads.

MOTHER ROAD

Octavio Solis was inspired to write *Mother Road* after a 12-day trek across Route 66, commemorating the 75th Anniversary of *The Grapes of Wrath*. He had been commissioned to write a piece for the inaugural Steinbeck Festival in 2014 but was unsure what to write about.

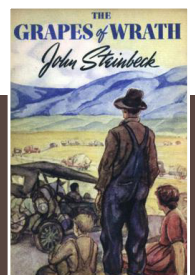
On the last day of the trip, Solis visited the Arvin Migrants Camp. The center was built by the federal government for displaced migrant workers fleeing the Dust Bowl and now it houses Mexican-American farmers. Although the center is featured in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Solis was surprised that most of the people there had never read or heard of the book.

After talking to a few of the residents there, Solis met a young man who lived at the center when he was a child and knew *The Grapes of Wrath* very well. He worked as a muralist and carpenter and told Solis, “I am Tom Joad. This is a story about me. We, the people that live here are the new Okies. We are the new Okies. And this novel is about me, my life.”

Hearing this, Solis knew that the story of the Joad family and the story of these migrants from Latin America were intersecting. Both groups want to provide a better life for their families. *Mother Road* explores how the stories and experiences of both groups help us understand the powers of family, legacy and dignity.

READ

The Grapes of Wrath
by John Steinbeck





Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection

MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE UNITED STATES

A migrant worker is a person who leaves their home or home country in order to find work. The work is often temporary and seasonal. In North America, most migrant workers are employed in agriculture, especially during harvests that require handpicking.

According to Eduardo González, Jr., State Diversity Specialist at Cornell University's Cooperative Extension, "Between 1 and 3 million migrant farm workers leave their homes every year to plant, cultivate, harvest, and pack fruits, vegetables and nuts in the U.S."

He writes, "Migrant farm workers are predominantly Mexican-born sons, husbands, and fathers who leave what is familiar and comfortable with the hopes and dreams of making enough money to support their families back home; feed themselves; purchase land and a home; and - like many immigrants who came before them - ultimately return to their homeland. While others come from countries such as Jamaica, Haiti, Guatemala, Honduras, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and other states in the United States, their aspirations remain the same. They are young, averaging about 31 years of age."

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, in the 2000s more than half of all farm workers were unauthorized workers with no legal status in the United States.

Migrant workers usually do not have unions to protect them. Because they move from place to place, it can be difficult for them to access social services. While some migrant workers are U.S. citizens and others are legal guest workers, migrant workers who don't have legal status are especially vulnerable to being exploited.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joads become migrant workers after losing their farm. In *Mother Road*, Martín's mother was a migrant worker.

ESCAPING THE DUST BOWL

In the 1930s, approximately 440,000 Americans from states like Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas and Oklahoma, left their homes after severe drought and soil erosion caused by poor farming practices led to dust storms, commonly referred to as "black blizzards." These dust storms were created by high winds and dry topsoil. They could stretch as high as two miles and travel as far as 2,000 miles. The storms stretched from the Great Plains all the way to the East Coast. The storms wreaked havoc on the farms, making it difficult for farmers to raise or sell their crops. The economic impact of this in the years following the Great Depression was catastrophic for families who relied on agriculture for their survival. Many people and livestock at the time died from respiratory illnesses, like dust pneumonia. The 125-million-acre area that was affected became known as the "Dust Bowl."



Kernodle, D. L., photographer. (1936) Dust storm. Baca County, Colorado. Baca County Baca County, Colorado United States, 1936.

One of the most famous quotes from *The Grapes of Wrath* is spoken by Tom Joad. How is it echoed in the play?

"I'll be all aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where - wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. ...I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an' - I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build - why, I'll be there."

ACTIVITY

In *Mother Road*, James uses gardening to get in touch with himself, God and the world around him. Washington, D.C., is home to many thriving community gardens. Follow the link below to find the closest garden to you. Find out how you can get involved.

<https://dpr.dc.gov/page/community-gardens>



The Marion Intergenerational Garden, Washington, D.C.

THE WORLD OF THE PLAY: ROUTE 66

U.S. Route 66, the “Mother Road,” is one of the longest and oldest highways in the country. It stretches 2,400 miles across eight states, starting in Chicago, Illinois, going through Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and stopping in Santa Monica, California.

Prior to official construction of Route 66 in 1926 by the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads, travel across the country was long and challenging. Many roads were unpaved and could be dangerous to travelers. Route 66 was a part of the country’s first federal highway system and relied on the connection of local, state and federal roads.

Route 66 was used as a migration route for Americans moving to California to escape the Dust Bowl and seek opportunity further west. The heavy traffic on the highway during this time helped to establish businesses, some of which are still in operation.

Today, the famous highway remains a popular road-trip destination for those seeking to learn more about American heritage. In 1990, the Congress passed a preservation law, asserting that Route 66 was “a symbol of the American people’s heritage of travel and their legacy of seeking a better life.”



EXPLORE

Follow the link below to explore the history of several iconic sights on Route 66.
<https://bit.ly/36k5xsk>

THE ROLE OF A CHORUS

In *Mother Road*, the playwright uses a chorus to help advance the plot and tell the story. The use of a chorus originated in ancient Greek theater and is seen in epic plays such as *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*. The members of the chorus help link the audience to the actors. At times they talk directly to the audience about the action on stage. At other times they become characters themselves in scenes with the main characters. A chorus often sings or chants in unison. With their voices and bodies, the chorus helps immerse the audience and the characters in the world of the play through their storytelling and interpretations.

In Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s *Illuminations* magazine, the chorus is described as “The Mother Road, the guides, the travelers, witnesses, interpreters, propellers, ghosts, memory keepers, singers, and soundscape creators; they birth the characters.”

THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1

How does your family history shape who you are?

2

What is justice, and who gets to define it?

3

What is the relationship between people and land?

HELPFUL HINTS FOR THEATER AUDIENCES

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- Arrive at least 15 minutes early.
- Visit the restroom before the show starts.
- Sit in the exact seat on your ticket. Ask the usher for help finding it.
- Before the show begins, turn off your phone, watch alarms and any other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, turn it off immediately.
- Do not use your phone for texts, calls, games or pictures.
- You cannot take pictures or make recordings in the theater, even before or after the play.
- There is no food allowed in the theater.
- Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum, unless invited by the performers to do so.
- Keep your feet on the floor and off the seat in front of you.
- Avoid getting up during a show. If you must leave, wait for a scene change and exit quietly and quickly.
- Respond to the show; you can laugh, cry and gasp. However, don’t repeat lines out loud or talk to the performers on stage.
- Be sure to applaud at the end!

RESOURCES

“Route 66 Overview”
– National Parks Service
<https://bit.ly/2YM7paf>

“Community Gardens”
- DC Department of Parks and Recreation
<https://bit.ly/2rx2JZL>

“The Rumpus Interview with Octavio Solis”
by Emily Wilson
<https://bit.ly/2stnrcP>

“NEA Big Read: The Grapes of Wrath”
– National Endowment for the Arts
<https://bit.ly/2RK49L4>

“Dust Bowl”
– The History Channel
<https://bit.ly/2skypBF>

“Mexican Immigrants in the United States” by Jie Zong and Jeanne Batalova
<https://bit.ly/38yMvQl>

“How Mexican Immigration to the U.S. Has Evolved”
– TIME Magazine
<https://bit.ly/2RNXdvw>

“Farm Labor” – United States Department of Agriculture
<https://bit.ly/37wDiGR>

“Without Immigrant Labor, the Economy Would Crumble” by Tamar Jacoby
<https://nyti.ms/39At6iv>

“Mother Road”
– Illuminations, Oregon Shakespeare Festival



the mead center
for american theater

1101 Sixth Street SW
Washington, DC 20024
Phone: 202-554-9066
Fax: 202-488-4056

Written by Trés McMichael
Edited by Rebecca Campana

Visit www.arenastage.org for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.