



stacie chaiken

work for performance 2019

Writer-performer Stacie Chaiken's solo play *The Dig, death, Genesis + the double helix* (set in the Middle East) received the 2017 Los Angeles Stage Raw Theatre Award for Solo Performance. Other solo plays include *Looking for Louie* (about immigrant family secrets), *What She Left* (based on Holocaust narratives), and *Saint Vibiana Pray4US* (in which she implores the intervention of the patron saint of Los Angeles, about whom little is known).

Saint Vibiana Pray4US is the first installment of what will be a large-scale, site-specific performance project about Downtown LA, called *Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles de la Porciuncula* (*Our Lady of the Angels of the Small Portion*).

Devised-theatre projects include the *Home Project: El Proyecto Mi Tierra* with immigrant residents of South LA (LA Department of Cultural Affairs Artist in Residence); the Armenian community in Glendale; and *Getting Off the Fence*, with Gateways Beit T'Shuvah, a residential treatment center for addicts. With Fringe Benefits: *90210 Goes Queer/Family Dinner*, with LGBTQ youth, *The Golden Rule*, with interfaith youth, *Clothes Minded*, with Orthodox women in Crown Heights, Brooklyn.

From 2013 to 2014, Chaiken served as International Creative Director of *Kwibuka20*, the 20th commemoration of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, where she designed and produced national events that comprised the commemoration, and facilitated story workshops with students survivors.

Currently, she facilitates story workshops for Fellows of *New Ground: a Muslim-Jewish Partnership for Change*, whose work is based on the premise that conflict, faced head-on, is an open door to building relationship.

A Fulbright Senior Specialist in the field of Performance and Story, she was formerly on the performance faculty of the University of Southern California School of Dramatic Arts. She facilitates the Los Angeles-based *What's the Story?* workshop for writers and performers making powerful stuff based on personal story, and teaches Master Classes in performance and autobiographical story-making all over the place.

Currently, she is a *2019 LA Department of Cultural Affairs Trailblazer*, and an artist-member of the 2018-2019 *Helix Project Fellowship*.


She is grateful for the generous support of the Center for Cultural Innovation, the Durfee Foundation; the Fulbright Foundation; University of Southern California Visions & Voices program; the California Arts Council; Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs; the USC Arts Initiative; Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture; the Center for Jewish Culture and Creativity; and the Hebrew Union College Artist in Residency program.

Chaiken holds a Bachelor's degree in Theatre and Religion from the University of Minnesota, a Master of the Arts degree in Dramatic Art from UC Berkeley, and an MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University Los Angeles.

staciechaiken.com



write perform play
walk around
teach travel dig
take the bus take the train
try to figure out how to
frame things in such a way
that people other people
might listen
 strutting the razor's edge
 in los angeles



What luck to have
caught this very
special theater artist
in her courageous,
fierce, tender and
intelligent
performance
of the DIG.

a seasoned and
thrilling
artist of the
theatre . . .

**2017 Los Angeles Stage Raw Theatre Award
for Solo Performance**

directed by Pamela Berlin; production design by Yael Pardess

the DIG

death, Genesis +
the double helix

An American archaeologist
is summoned to a dig in Jaffa,
Israel. They found something
that could change everything.

She's the only one who
can tell them what it is.
And her mother just died.
And there's a lizard in her bathtub.



PREMIERE LATINO THEATER COMPANY AT LOS ANGELES THEATRE CENTER



**The Dig
at Los Angeles Theatre Center
Reviewed by Neal Weaver
for STAGE RAW**

In her intriguing solo-drama, writer-performer Stacie Chaiken plays archeologist Sally Jenkins, who specializes in the study of ancient DNA. As she says, "It's easy to extract the whole gene from soft tissue, but there is never soft tissue in ancient burials. I've managed to replicate the material I need from infinitesimal bits of really old bone."

Sally has just been summoned back to Pittsburgh and the bedside of her dying mother, who was a close-mouthed Holocaust survivor. Mother-daughter relations are, to put it mildly, strained. But 20 minutes after the death of her mother, Sally receives a call from Israel Antiquities summoning her to a dig in Jaffa, south of Tel Aviv, to examine the bones of some 4,000 year old horses. Initially, she turns down the request, but it's sweetened with promises of large cash rewards, a suite in a luxury hotel, and a chauffeured Mercedes. So she sets out for Israel.

In Jaffa Sally soon learns that it's not horses she's called upon to examine, but a 4,000 year old sealed sarcophagus, of a kind never before seen in Israel. Because Jewish orthodox laws forbid conducting scientific tests on human remains, there's a necessary pretense that the case involves animals rather than humans. And when the sarcophagus is unsealed and opened, it contains a 4,000 year-old, perfectly preserved woman.

Sally's work is slowed by the urgent necessity of taking steps to preserve the remains, now that they have been exposed to air. The crypt must be sealed in plastic, and its temperature reduced to below freezing. After enduring the heat of Jaffa, she must now work in sub-zero temperatures while wearing a parka.

Gradually Sally's co-workers — David, an Israeli colonel and Rashid, her Arab-Israeli driver — reveal the real nature of her task. It seems that, based on various pieces of evidence, this may or may not be the tomb of Sarah, the wife of the Biblical patriarch Abraham and the mother of Isaac. Sally becomes increasingly intrigued with the Biblical accounts of Sarah's life, and begins to feel a personal kinship with the ancient corpse. She herself is half-Jewish and her middle name is Sarah. Her work and her personal life become inextricably entwined, leading her to personal insights and a greater understanding of her thorny, unforgiving mother.

Sally's next task is to determine whether there is a genetic match between the corpse and the bones in Abraham's tomb. This provides an even greater challenge, since the bones are revered by both Jews and Palestinians and must not be tampered with. Sally must analyze them by examining and testing only the dust of the decaying bones, not the bones themselves.

CHAIKEN HAS CREATED AN INTRICATE, MULTI-LAYERED TALE THAT COMBINES ARCHEOLOGY, RELIGION, ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN POLITICS AND PERSONAL ISSUES, WITH EACH STRAND OF THE NARRATIVE REFLECTING BACK ON THE OTHERS.

Her play deals with the complexities of Israel during the Second Intifada, her relations with her co-workers David and Rashid, and her growing relationship with the lizard she found in the bathtub of her luxury hotel: She names him/her Mo, and adopts the critter as a pet, who must be smuggled — with the help of her Israeli colleagues — back to her home in Los Angeles.

CHAIKEN HAS RESEARCHED HER SUBJECT DEEPLY AND METICULOUSLY, AND PERFORMS HER MATERIAL WITH A BRISK, HUMOROUS, NON-NONSENSE ATTITUDE THAT COMPELS BELIEF. I HAD TO KEEP REMINDING MYSELF THAT THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION, NOT A FACTUAL ACCOUNT, THOUGH THE SCIENCE IS APPARENTLY REAL. THE COMPLICATED GENETICS INVOLVED ARE NOT ONLY MADE CLEAR, BUT DRAMATIC AS WELL; THE GRADUAL UNRAVELLING OF THE DNA EVIDENCE IS RENDERED ALMOST MAGICAL, WHILE THE UNDERLYING EMOTIONAL ISSUES MAKE THE NARRATIVE MOVING, AND DEEPLY SATISFYING.

Director Pamela Berlin has skillfully shaped the tale, weaving together seemingly unrelated elements and working closely with Chaiken and the design and technical crew to produce a seamless piece of work. Set designer Yael Pardess has utilized the architectural features of the intimate theatre deep in the bowels of the Los Angeles Theatre Center (which are augmented with huge simulated stone arches) to create a credible and beautiful underground vault.

The Dig Review
Dark Secrets of the Heart
By Elaine L. Mura

Playwright and actor Stacie Chaiken stars in this unusual and riveting one-woman play about genetics, archaeology, and how the past affects the present — and even the future. Chaiken began work on this piece in 2003, when she made her first trip to Israel and became intrigued by the findings of archaeologists who were digging everywhere in the country attempting to link DNA and history. What made the process even more challenging was that, rather than the soft tissue normally used when studying genes, geneticists were forced to trace DNA from mere bone fragments found in ancient sites.

The Dig tells the story of Sarah Jenkins (who changed her name to Sally after she left home), an American archaeologist who specializes in ancient DNA. Just after her mother's death, Sally is summoned by the Israeli government to become part of a top secret project. Even though she is struggling with the death of her mother from cancer only days before — and dealing with her mother's obvious disapproval of her isolated lifestyle — the offer is one which she cannot refuse. So off she goes to Israel — the land of equal-opportunity massacres over the millennia — where she is thrown into the company of rigid Jewish government coordinator David and Arab-Israeli scientist Rashid. The trio arrives in Jaffa and goes deep through tunnels hidden underground until they are confronted with a room empty except for a huge stone sarcophagus — in the style of an Egyptian burial but not with the traditional

mummy inside. The burial is easily at least 4,000 years old. Who can this be? And why is the burial such a secret?

In her hotel suite, Sally encounters a mysterious gecko which has taken up residence — even though luxury hotel is notoriously bug-free. Tradition has it that geckos are good luck and sought after — and so Sally and a hotel employee secretly feed the little bugger and nurture him (or is it her? — hard to tell with a lizard). This cold-blooded little reptile may be the key to Sally's frozen heart. Especially after Sally follows Jewish tradition and names the minuscule gecko after her mother.

DIRECTOR PAMELA BERLIN HELMS A BRILLIANT PERFORMANCE BY STACIE CHAIKEN, WHO IS ONSTAGE EVERY MOMENT.

Yael Pardess's set design makes the most of the oddly shaped space, and Dmitry Kmelnitsky's video and projection expand the small area into an arena. The entire production team does a creative job of simulating a dig deep in the earth. The Dig is a little gem and will both enlighten and entertain audiences.

I WAS COMPLETELY RIVETED. [THIS IS] AN EXTRAORDINARILY PERSONAL, EVOCATIVE, AND PROVOCATIVE PLAY. CHAIKEN MANAGES TO CAPTIVATE IN A WAY THAT OPENS US UP NEW ANGLES AND TAKES DEEPER DIVES INTO REALLY IMPORTANT POLITICAL, PROFESSIONAL, AND PERSONAL ISSUES.

— Reuven Firestone, Professor of Medieval Judaism and Islam, Hebrew Union College



photo: Grettel Cortes

Looking for Louie

A second-generation Russian-Jewish American
(sometimes) redhead goes off in search of
the mysterious great-grandfather,
about whom nobody would ever speak

CHAIKEN'S BEAUTIFUL WRITING STRATEGICALLY
PROFFERS UP PIECES OF BONE AND TOOTH IN A
SCINTILLATING ANTHROPOLOGICAL DIG...

—Steven Leigh Morris, LA Weekly

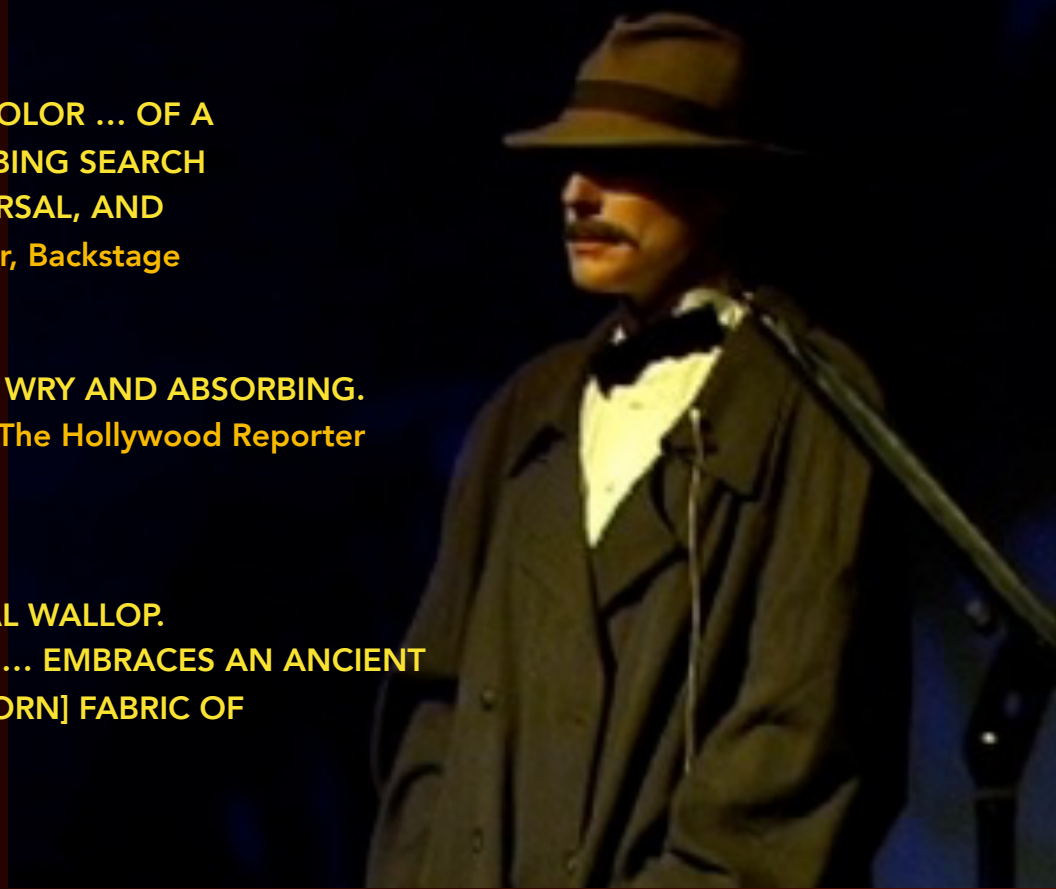


...A REVEALING X-RAY, IN LIVING COLOR ... OF A LIFETIME DEVOTED TO AN ABSORBING SEARCH FOR TRUTH ... DEEPLY FELT, UNIVERSAL, AND VERY MOVING. — Madeleine Shaner, *Backstage*

... SHREWD, WRY AND ABSORBING.
—Ed Kaufman, *The Hollywood Reporter*

...THE PIECE PACKS AN EMOTIONAL WALLOP. A PARTICULARLY ELEGANT FINALE ... EMBRACES AN ANCIENT HEBREW REMEDY TO HEAL THE [TORN] FABRIC OF RELATIONSHIPS ...

—Philip Brandes, *LA Times*



FROM LOOKING FOR LOUIE: Grandpa Irving was a tool and die maker, a machinist. He was apprenticed at age twelve. He made a fortune through the Depression inventing the tools with which they made gold watchcases “They never saw a Jew,” he’d say, “with hands like these.”

I once watched him repair one of those fancy wooden Father’s Day shoehorns with a brass lion on one end and the shoe horn thing on the other. would have just stuck some glue in the thing. But Grandpa Irving used this micrometer to measure drill bits, so he could make holes the perfect size for the long skinny brass screws. Then he measured the threads on the screws to make sure they matched the threads on the tiny brass nuts he used at either end of the screw, which he cut to fit, which put the brass lion back where it belonged.

And I say to him: “Grandpa, do you think it would maybe be okay if, like — once you no longer need these tools — if maybe I could have them?”

And Grandpa looks at me: “What in God’s name do you want from them, these tools?”

“They’re beautiful. They’re a treasure. You could teach me to use them. They’re you.”

A month later, Grandpa sold his tools. To a collector in Newark, New Jersey. For \$250.

So I call the guy who bought the tools, I arrange to visit him in Newark, New Jersey. And I buy them back. Two thousand, seven hundred thirty-seven dollars. Cash.

That’s a pretty penny.

What She Left is the fruit of a 2011 commission to write a performance piece based on materials in the then recently acquired Holocaust and Genocide-Related Research Collection. It included books original typescripts of the Nuremberg trials, and what they call ephemera: pamphlets; how-to uniform guides for SS officers, a belt buckle.

I spent hundreds of hours in the library basement room I called the cave. The librarian for the collection, called it the hole, short for Holocaust.

What She Left is a fictional amalgamation of stories from women who served as resistance fighters in the Polish forest during World War Two.

FROM WHAT SHE LEFT: *She was smaller than me, thinner than me, at that time much younger than me, though she looked older than me because the moment she saw the child—sometimes she said it was “her daughter,” sometimes “her little sister, who knows? It could have been the neighbor’s child. It’s never been clear. The story is the moment she saw the little girl take the candy from the man standing at the door of the bus, the brightly colored bus the Germans drove through the streets to collect children because taking children, the strategists say, is the best way to destroy the body politic, the fabric of the community. Without children there is no tomorrow.*

Accordion music from the open door, a handsome, smiling man waves, welcomes children onto the bus, promises a day of parks and pleasure and candy. She is peeling a potato, hears the music on the street, sees the child through the window take the candy, take the man's hand, step up onto the bus.

She runs from the house, down the stairs to the street. The door slams, the bus lurches. The woman jumps, clings to the back of the bus bumping through cobblestoned streets. The guard at the gate pries her off, throws her to the ground. Or maybe she throws herself at the feet of the man with the candy, clings to his trousers, pleads to take the child's place on the bus.

Don't worry,” he says, “your turn will come.”

WHAT SHE LEFT

WHAT ARE WE CAPABLE
OF WHEN WE HAVE A
FIERCE DRIVE TO LIVE
AND THERE IS NOTHING
LEFT TO LOSE?

PREMIERE RAY STARK THEATRE, USC





SAINT VIBIANA PRAY4US

PART ONE • NUESTRA SENORA DE LOS ANGELES DE LA PORCIUNCULA (see back page)

FROM SAINT VIBIANA PRAY4US:

I live Downtown, at the corner of Second and Main, a block away from City Hall, in the hundred year-old Higgins Building. Across the street from the old Saint Vibiana Cathedral, which is now a fabulous event space, called Vibiana !!

Still, Saint Vibiana is the patron saint of the City of Los Angeles.

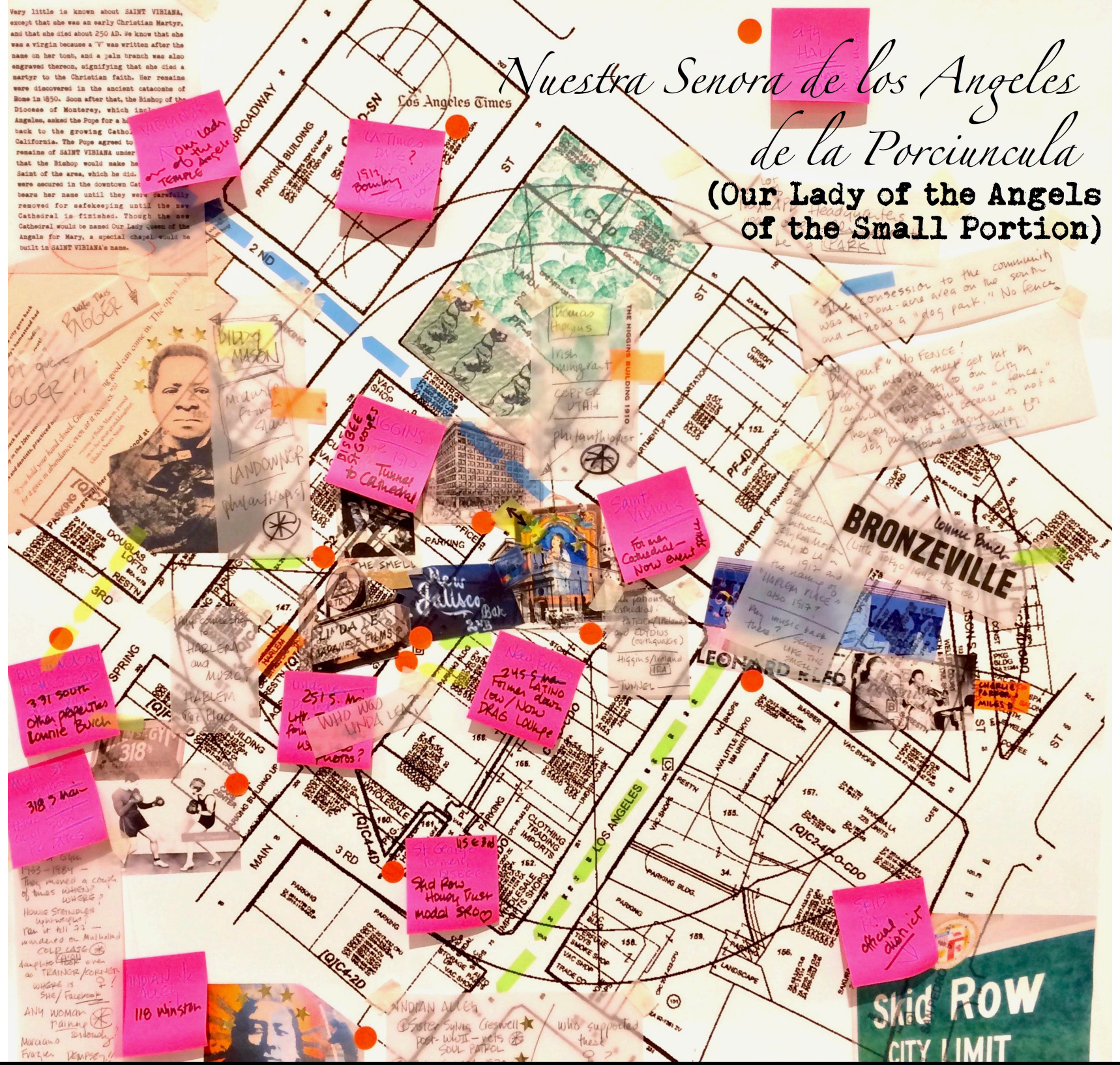
Which means she is the heavenly advocate for this City and its people. Meaning, she—whoever she is or was—has now transcended to the metaphysical, and is therefore able to intercede effectively for our needs.

Meaning it's her job to take care of us. All of us. Like it's the job of the Mayor, the City Council. Eric Garcetti, Jose Huizar. I call, I write, I knock on their doors. They're busy.

However, you, my dear Vibiana, you are dead, and therefore you have all the time in the world.

So where are you?

PREMIERE SON OF SEMELE SOLO CREATION FESTIVAL



IN PROGRESS: NUESTRA SENORA DE LOS ANGELES DE LA PORCIUNCULA (OUR LADY OF THE ANGELS OF THE SMALL PORTION)

Above is a mind map of what I imagine will be a large-scale, site-specific performance piece with video and sound scores, based on an excavation/exhumation of generous, courageous and powerful women who, over the past 150 years, forged the foundation of the heart of our City, around the square block between Second and Third, Main and Spring.

EXHIBITED AT THE BETA MAIN MUSEUM, 2017