

An immigrant Latina's experience is transformed into a high-tech dance show

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A still from *Metamorphosis: Phase One*. Photo by Robbie Sweeney.

When she was just 25 years old, Mabel Valdiviezo had to make one of the most difficult choices of her life: leave her native Peru or stay and risk her life during a time of political repression. Fearing the violence that gripped Peru in the 1990s, Valdiviezo applied for a travel visa and fled, alone, to the United States.

"I came here with big dreams, and naively thought that I'd find a humane society," Valdiviezo said. "Over the next couple of years I remember asking myself, 'Where is that humane society?'"

Her experience as an immigrant, living largely in the shadows and fearing deportation for more than 15 years, took an emotional toll. Since 2009, she's been exploring these feelings through art and film, and is about to present her latest show called *Metamorphosis: Phase One*.

The show is an interpretive dance performance that runs for three nights beginning on Thursday, Sept. 19, at Counterpulse, at 80 Turk St. in the Tenderloin. The performance is a combination of interpretive dance with high-tech production that uses projectors and motion cameras to produce a visually gripping experience. Produced with the help of choreographer Juliana Mendoca and technology artist Travis Bennett, *Metamorphosis: Phase One* explores the immigrant experience of a woman migrating to another country. The narrative follows the woman leaving her home, traversing a desert and suffering a traumatic experience. Only two characters are on stage, the woman and a shaman.

With *Metamorphosis*, Valdiviezo wanted the dance performance to combine indigenous clothing, music and dance with contemporary style, or as she calls it a “techno-shamanistic” piece because it incorporates shaman ideas from native groups in South America.

The performance runs for a total of 31 minutes.

Valdiviezo said the inspiration for the piece came years after she received her green card and was on a path towards legal residency and citizenship. For 16 years, she lived as an undocumented immigrant in constant fear of expulsion.

“I have post-traumatic stress syndrome — it was real. I was scared of being found out, and I had nightmares of being arrested,” Valdiviezo said.

Valdiviezo said she took odd jobs here and there and struggled to make a living while dealing with the fear of being reported to immigration officials, experienced wage theft while trying to survive in a new country. In 2009, she started filming a documentary called *Prodigal Daughter* that dealt with her return to Peru after 16 years.

Then, shortly after the trip, she was diagnosed with cancer.

Valdiviezo said while recovering from treatments, she took up dancing classes at hospitals and found it to be therapeutic, allowing her to release pent-up emotions that had been building up since she left Peru in 1993.

The performance’s choreographer, Juliana Mendoca, said she was interested in the themes of *Metamorphosis* because she’s also a South American immigrant. Mendoca was a dance professor in Caracas, Venezuela, but had to leave with her family four years ago due to the current economic and political crises. Her family migrated to the Bay Area because her husband, who has dual citizenship and is originally from the Bay, had family here.

Mendoca and Valdiviezo lean on the visual artistry of Travis Bennett to employ cameras and projectors that shine images onto a backdrop and the dance floor. A Microsoft Kinect camera hooked up to Bennett’s computer allows the software in his computer to detect and capture the silhouettes of people moving in front of it, and manipulate them in real time.

Together, all three have spent the past six months balancing the combination of dance, outfits, music and visuals to create the piece. Their composer, Ronald Sanchez, has been creating the music by working remotely in Peru and uses indigenous sounds mixed with contemporary effects.

The team hopes to be able to create more "Phase 2" and beyond in the future.

Metamorphosis: Phase One *runs from Thursday, Sep. 19 to Saturday, Sep. 21 at 7:30 p.m. at Counterpulse.*

Tickets are \$25.