

SEASON 35

FANTASY
FAIRY TALES
and folklore



**LA
SEGUA**
Study Guide

MILAGRO
AUTHENTIC • VIBRANT • PROVOCATIVE



Johanna Echavarría as Encarnación Sancho in *La Segua*. Photo by Russell J. Young.

La Segua takes a Central American legend and adapts it to 1700s Costa Rica, making us reflect on themes of beauty and vanity in our own times in the process.

In this study guide, we look at the legend of la Segua in Costa Rica and Central America as a whole, learn about some other legends from this culturally rich region, and contemplate beauty standards in our society.

We hope this study guide helps you appreciate the show, understand its historical context and the legend behind it, and prompt reflection on beauty and the complicated role we give it in our world, among other themes.

LA SEGUA

Written by
Alberto Cañas Escalante
Directed by **Roy Antonio Arauz**

Study guide research and writing
by **Dora Totoian**



La Cegua. Artist unknown.

The legend of la Segua

La Segua is a Costa Rican legend devised to scare men into being loyal and staying close to home at night. As men wander home, often drunk, a patch of fog appears, and in it stands a beautiful woman, with porcelain skin, long black hair, and big dark eyes.

Charmed by her beauty and forgetful of their relationships, the men offer to accompany her home. But when they turn to look at her, their dream is really a nightmare. The beautiful woman has disappeared and has been replaced by a monster with a horse's head, accompanied by burning red eyes and big yellow teeth, terrifying the men (sometimes to the point of killing them) and in some cases making them lose their minds.

La Segua has a variety of origin stories in Costa Rica. One version says that in colonial Cartago, a young woman fell in love with a Spanish officer who eventually left her, prompting her to wander the streets of the city forever, on the lookout for men

to torment as revenge. Another version relates that also in Cartago, the town's most beautiful young woman was invited to a dance by a wealthy Spaniard. However, her family refused to let her attend due to his "don Juan" (term for a man who seduces women) reputation. The young woman lashed out at her mother and was punished by an otherworldly force who made it so that men would always be drawn to her because of her body but would flee when they saw her horse face.

While the details of the story vary slightly in Costa Rica, there are even more versions of it in neighboring Central American countries, such as El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. It even has a variety of names and spellings, from *la Segua* to *la Cegua*, *la Tzegua*, and *la Siguanaba*; descended from her Pipil* name, *Sihuehuet*, meaning "beautiful woman." However, the story almost always involves a man being somewhere he's not supposed to be.

* The Pipils or Cuzcatlecs are an indigenous people who live in western El Salvador, which they call Cuzcatlan. Their language is called Nahuatl or Pipil, related to the Toltec people of the Nahuatl Nation.

Segua. Cegua. Zegua. Tsegua.

Playwright Alberto Cañas explains his decision to use an S to spell the name instead of a C or Z in the epilogue to the printed script. His reasoning was that the use of the S, C, and Z is based on sound, which is true for European Spanish. However, there is no such difference in American Spanish, where only the S sound is used. Since the word is an American word and indigenous people appear to have pronounced it tsegua, there was no need to use any other letter to represent the American S-sound. Over time, the spelling Segua has overcome the other spellings.

La Segua in Central America

El Salvador

La Segua has lots of names attached to her throughout Central America, especially in El Salvador, where she's sometimes closely connected to national identity. One common telling says that Sihuehuet had a son with the rain god Tlaloc and neglected



La Siguanaba by Orlando Callejas.

the baby. Tlaloc punished her by turning her into la Sihuanaba (“horrendous woman” and not a spelling error). Anthropologist Mirna Carrillo explains that she is relevant to Salvadoran national identity because of her complex role, “an undeniably Salvadoran icon bound to live in between the worlds of the Pipiles and the colonizer,” reflecting El Salvador’s history.

Guatemala

There are various legends in Guatemala of la Siguanaba being a beautiful woman with long hair who makes people, especially unfaithful and/or drunk men, feel like they’ve been dunked in freezing water when they look her way. Another version says that she is a mermaid who appears at midday and makes men lose their minds and die.

Honduras

In this country, she’s called *la Sucia* (the dirty woman). The legend usually says that a young woman couldn’t marry her love because she was not baptized. Because of the sadness, she lost her mind, her fiancé left her, and she ended her own life. Now, she walks around looking for drunk men, appearing to them as a beautiful woman before turning into a monster and scaring them.

Other Central American Legends

La Segua is only one of many legends in Costa Rica and Central America as a whole, a region rich with stories about otherworldly beings and animals with supernatural powers. Here’s a sampling.

La Llorona

There are many versions of la Llorona. Some say that she was a country girl charmed by the owner of the house she worked at in San José, while other accounts claim that she was an indigenous beauty seduced by a Spanish conqueror. In any case, she had a child out of wedlock and drowned it out of shame. Then, she realized her actions and turned into a ghost who wanders waterways in search of her child. La Llorona is sometimes seen as a warning to children to be careful near water and to not stray far from home to avoid becoming her next victim.



El Cadejos is a being that guards rural areas. (Photo Prensa Libre: <http://www.leyendas-urbanas.com>)

El Cadejos

An evil dog who prowls at night, dragging a chain behind him and searching for drunk people. He was once one of them, and his family tried in vain to convince him to change his partying ways, but nothing worked. So, his father cursed him by turning him into a dog. The story can be read as a warning to not be out too late drinking. Some versions also say that the dog is black and that it has a white, non-evil counterpart who protects people instead of scaring them.

La carreta sin bueyes (*the oxenless cart*)

In early 1700s San José, a man supposedly stole wood from the church's pile to make his own oxcart. A saint freed the oxen but punished the man by making him ride around in the cart forever as a ghost.

How and why do these stories and myths develop?

One clear interpretation of the legend of la Segua is that it serves a didactic (teaching) purpose. It's a cautionary tale that teaches people how to act by essentially telling them, "Be faithful to your lover when temptation strikes because if you're not, you'll be punished by la Segua." By using fear tactics, the legend can compel people to behave. One source interviewed for a journal article on the topic sees creatures like la Segua as spirits created by God to scare people into behaving morally given that some people don't believe in and are not scared by God himself. However, legends like these can serve many purposes beyond education.

It should be noted that a lot of these stories further misogynistic ideas, using women, such as la Segua and la Llorona, as warnings for men. We see this from the earliest Western stories, beginning with Eve in Genesis. In the case of la Segua, men are told to fear beautiful women, the weight of responsibility is placed on the woman and not the man.



Beauty and Vanity in *La Segua* and Society

Aerie's inclusive campaign features models with disabilities. Photo: Aerie

La Segua comments on and criticizes our societal obsession with beauty and youth. The characters in the play exist in a culture with narrow definitions of beauty to which they feel obligated to conform. Even though many of us can watch the play and recognize and not support these attitudes, our society has its own 21st-century versions of limited beauty standards.

Though in recent years we may have seen a growing and more inclusive definition of beauty, with moments like the brand Aerie deciding to not retouch its models and the rise of the body positive movement, there's likely at least one account advocating for a narrow definition of beauty for every @bodyposipanda (think of Kim Kardashian and her

"appetite-suppressant lollipops" that she marketed to her 113 million Instagram followers).

To go with the general lack of representation in the fashion industry and in the media as a whole for overweight people, discrimination toward them (specifically, women) can also have tangible consequences in the workplace. Heavier women make about \$9,000 less per year than average-weight women, and while half of male CEOs are overweight, only 5% of female CEOs are.

But one component of modern body ideals for women (despite the changing, more inclusive definition) that is perhaps especially frustrating is how often these expectations get framed as a "healthy" or "fit" image,



Models in Lane Bryant's "New Skinny" campaign.
Photo: Lane Bryant

especially on social media. Presenting them this way as an issue of health also makes it seem like you're a morally bad person for not working out.

For example, in a *Refinery 29* article, one woman relates how the popular Kayla Itsines' *Bikini Body Guide* fitness program is really a good workout that can make you stronger — but the program is also wildly focused on appearance and equates health to beauty, she argues. Itsines' Instagram page reinforces this message by posting "before and after" photos of the women who complete her program, showing how they have dropped a few pounds and now have abs. Wanting to be stronger can be an admirable goal, but programs like these can give women misguided ideas about why they should exercise and make the goal physical appearance, not strength, holding many of them to difficult and stressful standards.

In the world of beauty and fashion, as in every other corner of society, white and lighter skin is privileged and represented more. British journalist and author of *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About*

Race Reni Eddo-Lodge points out that the beauty industry and the makeup aisle are metaphors for the rest of society: If you don't see yourself represented, you don't exist. Moreover, she explains how not seeing shades that match your skin tone or colors that complement it sends the message that you're not an important consumer and in turn, person, who companies think they should cater to and make feel beautiful.

Whiteness is the default in the beauty world, and only later, if ever, do darker-skinned people get products tailored to them. *Jezebel* editor Clover Hope explains that mainstream companies didn't see black women as wealthy or sophisticated enough to deserve special attention or marketing for much of the 20th century. Even as some companies strive to be more inclusive in some ways, it's the profit they're missing out on, not their desire to embrace diversity, that's convincing most of them to create more shades.

Because of this history, it's easy to see why Rihanna's Fenty beauty line, with 40 shades of foundation, was so positively received by many people of color. In some stores, the darker shades sold out immediately, a rebuke to people who say that it's a waste to make darker shades because they won't sell well. While it's sad that this line only came out in 2017, it's a step in the right direction and could force other brands to create more inclusive shades to remain relevant.

Encarnación, the protagonist of *La Segua*, considered one of the most beautiful women in Cartago, is fixated on her own beauty and cannot perceive anybody else as beautiful because of her narrow beauty ideals and vanity. In some ways, people today act like Encarnación by glorifying a certain image as beautiful, especially for women — thin or "fit," white, blonde, able-bodied, young, etc. It's not that people who fit some or all of these definitions aren't beautiful. It's that upholding a certain image as the ideal leaves out a lot of people and makes it much harder for them to see their own beauty and for others to appreciate it.



The Five Colón bill, retired in 1986, with the painting "Allegory of Coffee and Bananas" by Italian artist Aleardo Villa, an homage to the two main exports from Costa Rica in the 19th Century. The original painting can be seen inside the Teatro Nacional in San José.

Costa Rica: Then and Now

People have lived in what is now the modern state of Costa Rica since around 12,000 B.C. Their highly organized societies were part of the reason that the Spanish found it difficult to conquer this territory, which they didn't achieve completely until the late 1600s. Around the same time, a Spanish conqueror illegally established *encomiendas* (systems collecting tribute from the local population, via goods and labor) in the region, which concentrated indigenous people in towns, such as Cartago, where *La Segua* occurs, so that they could be more easily exploited. By the late 17th to early 18th century though, the play's era, the *encomienda* system was on the decline.

A noteworthy event from the colonial era and a major figure in Costa Rican history is the 1635 apparition in Cartago of the Virgin of Los Ángeles, who is alluded to in the play. She is significant because though she is part of a European faith, she "appeared as a dark image, or a creole Virgin, to an Indian girl" and had skin a color similar to "that which the majority of the inhabitants of the province had acquired" (Mullenax 5).

In a colonial system where light skin was explicitly valued over darker skin, it was significant that such a

big figure in Catholicism would appear dark-skinned. By the 1700s, she had even come to be venerated by a majority of Spaniards in the region. Traditionally, her apparition to someone of "low status" with no religious training has been taken as a sign that she stands with and for the oppressed and so has been invoked at important political moments throughout Costa Rica's history.

Watching *La Segua* and being transported to the world of the 1700s in colonial Costa Rica, which in some ways was more unjust toward women and people of color than our own modern societies, it may be easy to wonder, "Has that much really changed?" While the world of the play and the world of the twenty-first century may seem to have more in common than we'd like to acknowledge at times, there have been a few small victories in terms of the representation of women and specifically women of color in Costa Rican politics.

The narrative of slavery in Costa Rica can sometimes become whitewashed, with some people insisting that slavery was not as big of an institution in the province and/or that Africans and their descendants were not as oppressed as they were in other places

in the Spanish Empire. But while there were fewer slaves in the province, and they started to be freed in the 1800s due to the economic stress they placed on their owners in a poorer country like Costa Rica, the institution nevertheless existed, until it was officially abolished in 1824.

In the late 1800s, as Costa Rica began to build its railroad and as the United Standard Fruit Company moved into the region, waves of Jamaican immigrants started going to Costa Rica. But even generations later, in the 1930s, they and their descendants could not have citizenship, so they didn't have legal rights to own land. Only after the 1948 Civil War were black Costa Ricans granted citizenship and full legal protections.

In the past decade though, there have been some noteworthy accomplishments for women politicians in

Costa Rica. The country had its first woman president, Laura Chinchilla, from 2010-2014. Since 2009, parties have also been required to run half male and half female candidates in an effort to elect more women. And in Costa Rica's latest national elections this last April, the country elected its first vice president who is a woman of African descent, Epsy Campbell. It's the first nation on the continent to do so.

But it's important to consider these events in the larger context of Costa Rica's history and politics. Electing one or some people from historically marginalized groups will not improve their status overnight, as there are many social and cultural changes that also have to happen, not to mention that it places an undue amount of pressure on those politicians. Campbell said in an interview that throughout her career she has received death threats and racist taunts, and she also stated bluntly that "women who open paths pay a price for being there."

In *La Segua*, we see how women are treated as objects to be conquered or gifted, but we also see how they themselves are capable and how some strive to take situations into their own hands as much as they can in their repressive society. While it's important to be cautious when celebrating the election of women and politicians from other marginalized groups, because their work has just begun, their representation in powerful spaces offers a glimpse of hope, especially juxtaposed with the world from a few centuries ago.



Epsy Campbell, current Vice President of Costa Rica.



About the playwright

Alberto Cañas Escalante

Recognitions and Awards

1951 Commander of the Order of Spanish Liberation

1957 Membership in the Order of Vasco Núñez de Balboa

1959 Order of the Star of Italian Solidarity

1964 García Monge Prize for the promotion of culture

1965 Aquileo Echeverría Story Prize for his book *Una Casa en el Barrio Carmen*

1976 Magón National Prize for Culture

2012 Pío Víquez Prize for Journalism for his long career as a journalist

Selected Books

OCHENTA AÑOS NO ES NADA. 2006

UVIETA. 1999

FELIZ AÑO, CHAVES CHAVES. 1975

LA EXTERMINACION DE LOS POBRES. 1974

LA SEGUA Y OTRAS PIEZAS. 1974

EN AGOSTO HIZO DOS AÑOS. 1968

AQUÍ Y AHORA. 1965

EL LUTO ROBADO. 1963

LOS 8 AÑOS. 1955

ELEGÍA INMOVIL. 1946

Alberto Cañas Escalante (1920 – 2014) was a Costa Rican writer and public intellectual. Cañas used his writing skills in various areas of his life — as a poet, playwright, professor, lawyer, reporter, editor, diplomat, and minister of various government departments. In these roles, he was part of a group of Costa Rican intellectuals who changed Costa Rican politics after the Revolution of 1948.

In 1971, he created the National Theater Company. Costa Rican philosopher Arnoldo Mora Rodríguez notes that this and the extraordinary number of plays and other works he composed have guaranteed Cañas' role as one of the most significant Costa Rican playwrights in recent history.

In *La Segua*, Cañas draws on Costa Rican folklore to criticize the country's attitudes toward beauty, a message impactful far beyond Costa Rica and long after the play's 1971 debut. In an epilogue to the play, Cañas explains that he wanted to play with mythology, and he found his chance while glancing through a history book. He stumbled upon the story of two women who were accused of being witches in colonial Costa Rica. In the account, Cañas saw the perfect moment for *la Segua* to appear. In the play, she doesn't actually make an appearance, but her presence is alluded to and feared.

Cañas' accomplishments in theater during the second half of the twentieth century occurred in the greater context of the Costa Rican theater scene of the era, which was forming its identity and arguably thriving at various points from the 1950s – 1970s. Costa Rican theater didn't properly start to flourish until the 1950s, when the Teatro Universitario was founded. Until then, theater had focused on religious themes (in the 1800s) and on

representing Costa Rican customs and manners on the stage (in the early 1900s), a phenomenon called *costumbrismo*.

In the 1950s and 1960s, many theater groups started popping up across Costa Rica, in part due to intellectuals seeing the need for national authors to display and promote their works. At the same time that theater groups were appearing across the country, foreign groups were on tour in Costa Rica, providing actors opportunities to learn from each other.

In the 1970s, the government also began to promote theater more intensely, and it greatly increased the number of theatergoers in the country. Another factor that improved Costa Rica's theater scene in the 1970s was the influx of political exiles from primarily Chile, but also Argentina and Uruguay. They wrote plays and also founded theater groups in the country. But the arts scene lost much of its vitality in the 1980s when conservative branches of Costa Rican society began criticizing and challenging the liberal ideas of the 1970s.

Apart from Cañas, other well-known Costa Rican playwrights of the last century include Samuel Rovinski and Carlos Luis Saénz. Rovinski's plays are full of political criticism, from calling out authoritarian politics to denouncing the upper middle class and its lifestyle. Saénz wrote many other works apart from plays, many of them focusing on childhood and youth, although they are enjoyed by adults as well.

Outside of theatre

Cañas stood out as a poet starting in high school, when he won several poetry competitions and wrote the poem to El Punto Guanacasteco about the traditional song.

After high school he graduated law school and went on to work for the newspaper Diario de Costa Rica. He was the founding editor of two newspapers: La República in 1950 and later Excelsior.

His political career began with his appointment as the Costa Rican ambassador to the United Nations from 1948 – 1949, during the writing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He was Vice Minister of International Relations from 1955 – 1956, deputy and party leader for Liberación Nacional from 1962 – 1966, and the first Minister of Culture, Youth, and Sports from 1970 – 1974, during this term he founded the National Theatre Company. He was president of the National Assembly in 1994, and was instrumental in the creation of the new political party, Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC) in 2002.

Other notable roles include being a theatre and communications professor, as well as the founder of the Communication Sciences School. He served as president of the Journalists Society, founder and president of the Editorial Costa Rica, president of the Writers Association, and president of the Language Academy of Costa Rica.

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Fuente Ovejuna, 2004

En español

Milagro first introduced Portland audiences to Spanish-language plays with a reading of *Te Llevo en La Sangre* by Monica Silver in 2002. The evening played to a full house.

This production was followed by a post-modern interpretation of Lope de Vega's *Fuente Ovejuna* in 2004, which performed to great acclaim and launched Milagro's commitment to present at least one production in Spanish every season.



Rosalba y los Llaveros, 2007



Photo: Russell J. Young

Ana en el trópico, 2011



Photo: Russell J. Young

La Celestina, 2012



Photo: Russell J. Young

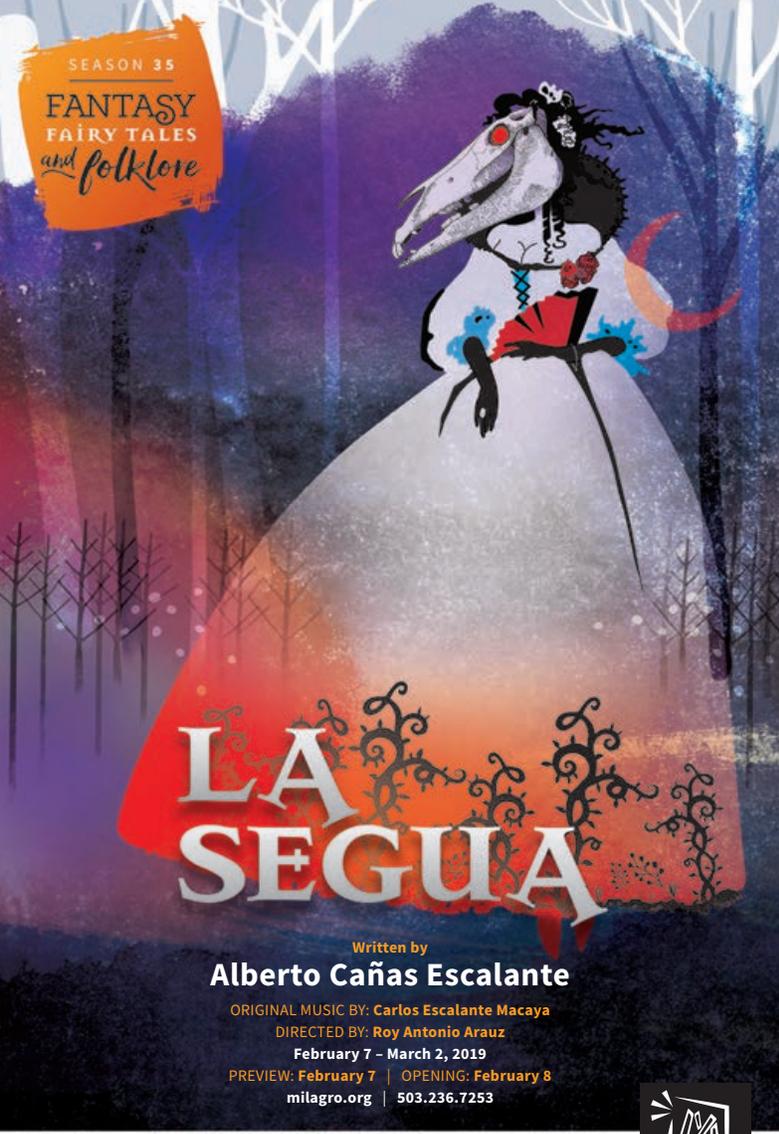
Óye Oyá, 2017



Photo: Russell J. Young

Astucias por heredar un sobrino a un tío (2018)

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LA SEGUA

Written by
Alberto Cañas Escalante

ORIGINAL MUSIC BY: **Carlos Escalante Macaya**
 DIRECTED BY: **Roy Antonio Arauz**
 February 7 – March 2, 2019
 PREVIEW: **February 7** | OPENING: **February 8**
 milagro.org | 503.236.7253

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Cast

Encarnación Sancho..... Johanna Echavarría
 Don José Manuel Sancho/
 Don Félix Fernandez..... Enrique Andrade
 Doña Baltasara de Sancho/
 María Francisca Portuguesa..... Laura Di Mare
 Manuela/Petronila Quesada..... Patricia Alvérez
 Camilo de Aguilar David Cabassa
 Ensemble Carlos Adrián Manzano
 Marián Méndez, Elizabeth Vizcaíno

LA SEGUA

Written by **Alberto Cañas Escalante**
 Original Music by **Carlos Escalante Macaya**
 Directed by **Roy Antonio Arauz**

February 7 – March 2, 2019
 Thursday–Saturday, 7:30 PM | Sunday, 2:00 PM
Milagro Theatre | 525 SE Stark Street, Portland

Tickets start at \$27
 Student, senior, and veteran discounts available
 For group sales/student matinees,
 contact Laurel Daniel
 at 503-236-7253 x 117

Preview

Thursday February 7 at 7:30 PM
 Wine tasting courtesy of Coopers Hall
 starting at 6:30 PM

Opening night

Friday February 8 at 7:30 PM
 followed by a reception in El Zócalo
 courtesy of **Pambiche**

Special Events

ENFOQUE: Conociendo Tiquicia
Folklore, music, and food from Costa Rica
 Tuesday January 22, 6:30 – 8:30 PM
 El Zócalo at El Centro Milagro
 Admission: FREE

Round Table:

**La Segua: A morality play on vanity,
 narcissism, and beauty expectations**
 Saturday February 2, 4 – 6 PM
 El Zócalo at El Centro Milagro
 Admission: FREE



The Northwest's premier Latino arts and culture organization
 Mailing: 425 SE 6th Avenue, Portland OR 97214
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Milagro has been dedicated to bringing the vibrancy of Latino theatre to the Northwest community and beyond since 1985. In addition to its national tours, Milagro provides a home for Latino arts and culture at El Centro Milagro, where it enriches the local community with a variety of community outreach projects and educational programs designed to share the diversity of Latino culture. For more information about Milagro, visit milagro.org or call 503-236-7253.