By Mike Boehm

Reclining high in the Getty Villa’s outdoor theater, waiting for the actors below to begin rehearsing his latest drama, Luis Alfaro looked nothing like an artist wrestling with tragic mysteries.

He was more like a giant panda — large, round and relaxed, sporting a wrinkled, bright white shirt and a trilby hat, greeting the world with a naturally gentle and welcoming mien.

“I’m pretty much a softy,” Alfaro, a veteran leader among Los Angeles playwrights, had confessed a few minutes earlier.

But over the past 11 years, Alfaro persistently has plunged into some of the most primordially disturbing crannies of Western culture by adapting a series of ancient Greek tragedies. Their purpose, Aristotle tells us, is to instill “pity and terror” in the audience, who’ll feel cathartic relief at having tunneled through darkness and come out the other side.

Alfaro began with “Electricidad” in 2004. He transferred Euripides’ tale of vengeful slaughter in the family of the legendary King Agamemnon to the household of a contemporary Latino drug boss in the Southern California desert. In 2010 came “Oedipus el Rey,” in which Sophocles’ born-to-lose hero morphed into a charismatic Mexican American fated to a life of recidivist crime and imprisonment.

Now, at 53, Alfaro is tackling “Medea.” In the 2,446-year-old play by Euripides, the deepest, most blindly self-sacrificing kind of spousal devotion turns into a horrifying torrent of vengeful rage.

“Mojada: A Medea in Los Angeles” spares none of the original’s horror and, if anything, deepens it with a nightmarish depiction of the clandestine journeys today’s immigrants may attempt to get to the United States.

Like Euripides’ uncanny protagonist, Alfaro’s Medea lives in near isolation. She clings to rural values and folkways from her home in the Mexican state of Michoacan while her husband, Hason (Alfaro’s spelling), looks only forward. Bedazzled by the chance to seize the good life in Boyle Heights, Hason assimilates quickly as he seeks the right connections and sacrifices home life on the altar of career. He tells Medea it’s all for her and for their son.

Alfaro says he was drawn to the story not by its horrible outcome but by the intensity of the ill-fated love between Jason and Medea, who cross borders together in Euripides’ version as well as his own.

Tragedy, he assures us, is not a lens through which he habitually looks at life. “I’m very happy,” Alfaro said.

Certified as exceptional in 1997 when he won a MacArthur Foundation “genius grant,” he’s juggling multiple commissions to write new plays, along with a day job as a tenure-track professor of dramatic writing at USC.

Alfaro said he starts each day with an adult equivalent of the prayers of gratitude he learned growing up in a devout household in L.A.’s Pico-Union district — “Pentecostal with a bit of Catholicism.”
“I wake up and think, ‘Thank you, God, I have a job to go to and everything is happy,’” he said. “I don’t usually dwell on the negative, but maybe theater is where I act out the dark part of myself. Theater is the human condition.”

When the MacArthur Foundation tapped him, Alfaro had made his mark not just as the playwright of dramas such as “Straight as a Line,” about a Chinese British woman and her son living in Las Vegas in the shadow of the AIDS crisis, but as a poet, performance artist, arts educator and social activist who championed creative opportunities for gay Latinos such as himself.

Genius or not, Alfaro says, the ancient Greek tragedians in fact were Greek to him well into his playwriting career. A product of the Los Angeles Unified School District, he said his only early exposure to classic drama had come from a teacher in junior high school who’d play audio versions of Shakespeare plays.

In the 2000s, Alfaro forged extended connections with regional theaters around the country, spending up to a year affiliated with companies in Tucson, Hartford, Conn., and Ashland, Ore., so he could get to know and write about their communities.

He owes his plunge into ancient tragedy to a 13-year-old girl he taught in a poetry workshop for young felons in Tucson. The girl's father, a drug dealer, had been murdered in a killing set up by his own wife. The teen killed her mother to avenge him.

“She looked like the sweetest, most innocent young girl,” Alfaro recalled.

Soon afterward, he was browsing a book rack at the Arizona Theatre Company, and was drawn by a special offer: “10 Greeks for $10”—a little collection you could buy as a box set. ‘Electra’ was the first one I read, at random. A young girl who murders her mother to avenge her father’s death.”

The former Pentecostalist concluded, of course, that some mysterious tongue was speaking to him and should not be ignored. “Electricidad” was the result, and ancient tragedy became a regular and prominent thread in his diverse oeuvre.

“Medea” may be the hardest Greek tragedy for modern audiences to understand, and “Mojada: A Medea in Los Angeles” is Alfaro’s third attempt to grapple with it. First came “Bruja” (“Witch”), which premiered at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco in 2012. Alfaro said he focused on the black-magic aspects of the Medea story, making her a curandera — a folk healer.

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Alfaro wrote “Mojada,” a new play rather than a refinement of “Bruja,” imagining Medea as a magically gifted seamstress instead of a healer, and setting it in Chicago's Mexican American immigrant community.

“If you know the original tragedy well, you’ll be struck by how well Alfaro has adapted the various plot points,” wrote Chris Jones of the Chicago Tribune in his 2013 review of the show. He applauded Alfaro for weaving in humorous relief and for keeping the tone “unpretentious and entertaining” en route to a payoff that was “more than enough to instill ... some reasonable approximation of tragic pity and fear.”

The Los Angeles version of “Mojada” will be very different — not just in its Boyle Heights setting but in its forced economy. Alfaro has whittled it from 135 minutes in Chicago to 90 in Pacific Palisades to meet the Getty Villa's 10 p.m. curfew.

The process of paring, Alfaro said, is the latest of many instances in which adapting ancient Greek texts — which typically are compressed — has forced him to sharpen his skills.

“I’m really in love with it,” Alfaro said of his latest take on “Medea.” “I’ve had to get to the essence and not get too flowery. In 90 minutes, can I create a love story, can I see it fall apart, and come to this
their life better,” said Sabina Zuniga Varela, who’s playing the title role and has now acted the female lead in all four of Alfaro’s Greek tragedies. “When have we sacrificed our personal beliefs [to get ahead]? When have we gone too far? It’ll be interesting to see what [audiences] are going to take away. It depends a lot on the lens they come in with.”

Tragedy isn’t Alfaro’s only mode. In 2013 he adapted a more kid-friendly ancient Greek, Aesop, for Mainstreet Theatre Company in Rancho Cucamonga. The show, “Aesop in Rancho Cucamonga,” starred an orphaned bear cub who learns life lessons from the area’s plants and animals. In the works is a trilogy of original stories about contemporary California called “The Golden State,” commissioned by the Magic Theatre and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. “The Golden State — Part One: Delano,” recently staged by the Magic, focused on the theme of faith, represented by a Pentecostal minister and his flock in the agricultural Central Valley.

He envisions additional plays about politics, centering on an aide to an elected official in a small city, and on the nature of identity, as embodied by an aged brother and sister whose relationship has to be recalibrated when the man finally learns that his sibling is a lesbian.

Alfaro said that “Mojada” probably won’t be the end of his road through ancient tragedy. He’s had feelers from theater companies that would like him to adapt Euripides’ “The Bacchae.”

“At first I said, ‘Oh, no, three is a good number’ to have adapted — “Electra,” “Oedipus Rex” and “Medea.”

“But I’m drawn to it. Every time I write these very naturalistic plays [such as ‘The Golden State’], something draws me back to something fantastic, something magical. That brings me back to the Greeks.”