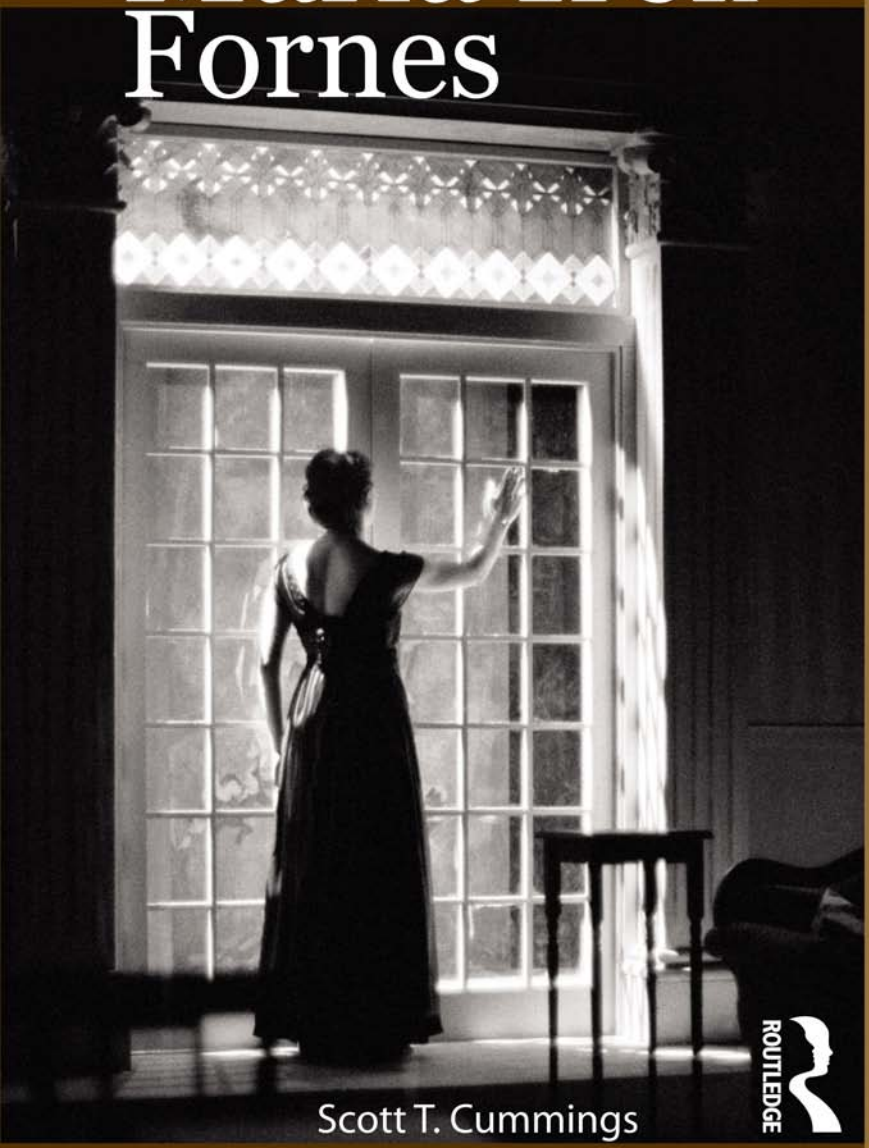
Maria Iren Fornes



Scott T. Cummings

ROUTLEDGE

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Maria Irene Fornes

Maria Irene Fornes is the most influential female American dramatist of the twentieth century. That is the argument of this important new study, the first to assess Fornes's complete body of work.

Scott T. Cummings considers comic sketches, opera libretti and unpublished pieces, as well as her best-known plays, in order to trace the evolution of her dramaturgy from the whimsical Off-Off Broadway plays of the 1960s to the sober, meditative work of the 1990s. The book also reflects on her practice as an inspirational teacher of playwriting and the primary director of her own plays.

Drawing on the latest scholarship and his own personal research and interviews with Fornes over two decades, Cummings examines Fornes's unique significance and outlines strategies for understanding her fragmentary, enigmatic, highly demanding theater.

Scott T. Cummings is Chair of the Theatre Department of Boston College, where he directs plays and teaches courses in playwriting and dramatic literature. He is the author of *Remaking American Theater: Charles Mee, Anne Bogart and the SITI Company*, as well as numerous performance reviews, journal articles, and essays on contemporary American theater and drama.

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Scott T. Cummings

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for Peter Ferran
(he knows why)

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Figure 1 Maria Irene Fornes in her Sheridan Square apartment with her mother Carmen (1990).

Overview

Maria Irene Fornes pioneered a new American playwriting. Between 1960 and 2000, she created more than fifty works for the stage, including comic sketches, one-act plays, full-length dramas, musical plays, site-specific pieces, devised works, libretti for opera, and adaptations of modernist classics. This volume is the first book to examine the full range of Fornes's work, including unpublished plays and later works that have received little critical attention. Breadth of discussion has taken precedence over a narrow-but-deep focus on the best-known plays, a decision that stems from the conviction that Fornes is best understood in the context of her complete oeuvre. One of the hallmarks of her playwriting is her perpetual experimentation with different tones, styles, and subjects. The focus of most scholarship on a few major plays – *Fefu and Her Friends*, *Mud*, *The Conduct of Life*, *The Danube* – has inadvertently narrowed the perception of her work. A mild corrective is offered here.

This study takes a developmental approach in two different senses. First, it traces the trajectory of Fornes's career and the evolution of her techniques and themes over the last four decades of the twentieth century. Each decade commands one of the book's four parts. Her 1960s plays are rooted in the explosion of Off-Off Broadway theater that took place in and around Greenwich Village at that time. They are playfully absurdist, full of logic and language games, whimsical ironies, zany transformations, and fanciful incongruities. Her 1970s plays suggest a discomfiting period of growth and a search for a more personal voice, one which was signaled by her pivotal, groundbreaking *Fefu and Her Friends* (1977).

This is the decade in which she honed her skills as a director, in part by creating devised pieces from documentary sources. The plays of the 1980s, the period of her most enduring work, achieve a crystalline balance of lyricism, emotionalism, and formalism that reflected "an increasingly expressive relation to dread, to grief and to passion" (Sontag 1986: 9). This is also when she emerged as an influential teacher of playwriting, celebrated for her innovative exercises designed to release a writer's creative spirit. Her 1990s plays focus more explicitly on themes of survival and friendship, even as they revive a metatheatrical self-consciousness evident in the early work. These plays are ruminative, more personal, questioning, and sometimes tentative. They yearn for better days even as they manifest Fornes's resilient love and respect for life itself.

The approach here is also developmental in its attention to the origins of specific Fornes plays and to her creative process in general. Her playwriting cannot be understood independent of two collateral practices that also defined her career: teaching and directing. Early on, Fornes learned that she could not tolerate somebody other than her directing the first production of her plays. Over time, she developed a directing style that was praised for its compositional rigor and choreographic precision. Even when critics were befuddled or alienated by her latest play, they often commented on the sure-handedness of her staging. Fornes also began teaching early in her career; her eventual affiliation with INTAR in New York and the Padua Hills Playwrights Festival outside of Los Angeles led her to refine a pedagogy of playwriting – what she called "the anatomy of inspiration" – that had widespread influence. She developed a popular series of exercises designed to help a novice playwright gain access to the imagination, and in teaching those exercises, she wrote along with her students, generating raw material that often provided the seeds for a new play. As an extension of her creative process, teaching and directing enabled Fornes to construct her own idiosyncratic system for taking a play from initial conception to opening night.

In this she benefitted from sustained relationships with a number of theater artists and producing organizations: Al Carmines, Lawrence Kornfeld, and the Judson Poets' Theater; Max Ferra and INTAR; Crystal Field and Theater for the New City; Murray Mednick and Padua Hills Playwrights Festival; Julia Miles and the Women's

Project; the designers Donald Eastman, Anne Millitello, and Gabriel Berry; and a parade of actors over the years that included Florence Tarlow, Crystal Field, Aileen Passloff, Margaret Harrington, Sheila Dabney, and Patricia Mattick, among many others. This community assured that Fornes always had sympathetic collaborators and a supportive place to work, and she went on to receive numerous prizes, awards, and fellowships, most famously a total of nine Obie awards (for achievement in Off and Off-Off Broadway theater), more than anybody other than Sam Shepard.

The Fornes canon is bookended by two projects – *La viuda* (1961) and *Letters from Cuba* (2000) – based on letters written in Spanish by members of her family in Cuba. This coincidence draws attention not only to her Latina background but also to the importance in her plays of the reciprocal acts of writing and reading – "steps towards personhood" (Sofer 2006: 441) – and the operation of language in general. She came to New York City from Havana at age 15; when she took up writing fifteen years later, she wrote in English rather than her native Spanish. "My writing," she later remarked, "has an off-center quality that is not exactly deliberate, but that I have not tried to change because I know its origin lies in the temperament and language of my birth" (Delgado and Svich 1999: 268). Fornes's painstaking syntax, as well as her use of rhythm and repetition and a limited vocabulary, produces a dramatic idiom that is lyrical and deceptively simple. Her characters recognize that language has the power to transform. The erudite Dr. Kheal observes, "Words change the nature of things. A thing not named and the same thing named are two different things" (Fornes 1971: 68). In *Lust* (1989), the neurasthenic Helena dislikes a play she saw because of "the words the author used … Words that are not real words. Like 'likewise.' False words that have nothing behind them … No thinking goes into words like that … People feel good using them, but they feel a little cheated later, debilitated. If you speak without meaning, you feel debilitated" (Fornes 2008: 137).

Fornes's characters speak with meaning, knowing that to name something is to change it, but the process is delicate and often difficult. Fornes described it metaphorically:

> It is as if the words are dampness in a porous substance – a dampness which becomes liquid and condenses. As if there is a

> condensation that is really the forming of words. I want to catch the process of the forming of thought into words.
>
> (Cummings 1985: 55)

This "struggle to translate thought into language, writing into speech, speech into action, action into coherent being" (Sofer 2006: 441) shapes the action of many plays. "Character is revealed through catechism" (Sontag 1986: 8), and tropes of literacy, language, and learning abound as part of the effort to capture the process of coming to thought. For her characters, this is tantamount to bringing self into being, which for some means vanquishing an existential vagueness. In that effort they demonstrate a rare combination of fragility and resilience, determination and helplessness, dignity and shame. They aspire to a purity that approaches the divine, yet they are subject to carnal impulses and adverse social conditions that seem to doom them to failure or at least to a profound frustration. If her characters suffer, they also benefit from Fornes's signature compassion for them.

For Fornes, life itself is so precious that her theater, in effect, wants to prolong life by slowing down time and zeroing in on stillness. Her plays are not concerned with the forward thrust of a narrative action or the strategic rush of a character towards some prized goal. Leading Fornes critic Bonnie Marranca (1984: 30) was among the first to credit her with lifting "the burden of psychology, declamation, morality, and sentimentality from the concept of character," freeing her figures from definition by intention or motivation and instead depicting them in "scenes that create a single emotive moment, as precise in what it does not articulate as in what does get said." These isolated moments of being – what this study will call "emotigraphs" – are the building blocks of Fornes's unique dramaturgy, juxtaposed one to the next without transition in a manner that asks the spectator to "bridge the gap" or "connect the dots" in order to complete the theatrical picture.

Fornes's depiction of isolated moments when the sensuous and the spiritual collide is informed by the social and demographic profile of her characters. They are defined as much by gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality as they are by inner struggle. The personal and the political are radically intertwined, but at a moment when multiculturalism and identity politics came to play

an increasing role in critical discourse, Fornes herself was wary about being categorized strictly as a woman or a Latina or a lesbian playwright. She neither proclaimed nor denied these identities. Despite her advocacy for Hispanic playwrights, her connection to feminist dramaturgy, her use of Catholic imagery and themes, her focus on the lumpenproletariat, and the sustained critique of heteronormative relationships in her plays, Fornes resisted classification by orthodoxy. Ethnography, queer theory, feminism, Marxist criticism, and other modes of analysis have much to reveal about her drama, but in the moment of performance Fornes sought a more visceral than ideological connection to events onstage.

To this day, Fornes's plays continue to be widely produced around the United States by small professional theaters, fringe companies, and university groups. Her work has always been revered by a coterie of in-the-know theater artists, critics, scholars, and students. But after a fleeting moment on Broadway in 1966 and the successful Off Broadway run of *Promenade* in 1969, she had no commercial productions and only a smattering of appearances at the growing network of not-for-profit resident regional theaters around the United States. Over the decades, she became more and more conspicuous as an outsider artist, a holdover from the 1960s whose work was ignored by the mainstream theater establishment. The average theatergoer has never heard of her. In a 1992 *Village Voice* essay titled "The Aging Playwright and the American Theater," Bonnie Marranca (1992a: 94) expressed outrage that "at the age of 62, after three decades of a richly committed life in the theater, Maria Irene Fornes is still working on the margins."

There is no simple explanation for this neglect. American philistinism is certainly a part of it. Marranca blamed the preoccupation with "new" playwrights and the failure of mainstream institutions to integrate proven experimentalists. The symbiosis between her playwriting and directing makes the merits of the texts themselves less apparent to directors and producers "shopping around" for an interesting play. There is also an economy of scale at work: most Fornes plays are shorter than a conventional full-length play and better suited to smaller studio theaters than large mainstage houses. This poses programming challenges for producers who need to round out a full evening's entertainment or fill more than a hundred

seats a night. Still, the single biggest reason for Fornes's marginal status is the seemingly esoteric nature of the work itself:

> If Fornes remains on the periphery of the mainstream, it is because large, popular audiences come to the theater to have their most cherished beliefs reinforced, not challenged. They do not want to examine the implications of gender hierarchy or the dynamics of patriarchy too closely. Fornes's refusal to compromise, her refusal to write to please men, her rejection of romantic sentimentality ensures that she will remain on the fringe.
>
> (Schuler 1990: 227)

> The diversity of Fornes's plays, which makes them almost impossible to collectively "brand" by theme or milieu, is perhaps one reason why her work – though certainly fit to stand alongside that of Albee, Shepard, and others – has often been overlooked or underappreciated by critics. Another is simply the continuing, prejudicial tendency to assume that Fornes's own, multiply-othered status as a woman, a lesbian, and a Latina must somehow render her a playwright with "minority" appeal.
>
> (Bottoms 2004b: 22)

> Could it be that Fornes is underproduced (for a writer of her stature) precisely because her characters rebel with willful opacity against American theatrical notions about the clarity of intention?
>
> (Ruhl 2001: 194)

In short, a Fornes play insists on being taken on its own terms.

The main objective of this study is to make clear what those terms are by chronicling the transformation of her Off-Off Broadway ethic beyond its early communal preoccupations into a highly personal artistic vision. In performance, a Fornes play makes specific demands on a spectator, which include:

> a particular attentiveness or receptivity, a readiness to engage with the performance in ways which cannot be understood as