

## Meetings with a Dramaturge

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**M**aking a Fulbright entry into the United States was easier than meeting with a playwright in new York. Partly doubtful and considerably anxious I was waiting for Ms. Maria Irene, director on the New York's Off-Off-Broadway theater, involved in producing plays and conducting playwriting workshops. She has been active in theater since the 1960's, experimenting in the true spirit of the avant-garde artist. She came to the United States from Havana (Cuba) in 1945. After her brief career as a painter, she decided to concentrate on playwriting, being inspired by Roger Blin's 1954 production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*. She has written more than forty plays and has won seven Obie awards, especially one in 1982 for sustained achievement in theater and the rest for her plays - *The Successful Life Of 3* (1987), *Promenade* (1987), *Fefu And Her Friends* (1978), *The Danube* (1986), *The Conduct Of Life* (1986), and *Abingdon Square* (1988). She is best remembered for *Fefu And Her Friends*, a play that represents a day's events of eight women gathered in fefu's house. The play was interestingly housed in multiple stages in a studio apartment with the audience divided into groups and made to move from room to room, taking a glimpse of the woman's life in her own intimate space. Fornes's plays are best enjoyed for their zany, light-hearted humor that envelops the serious issues of her plays. One of my favourite plays is Fornes's '*Mud*', a story about a woman's aspiration to escape from the ordinariness of her life and her failure to make a compromise between the physical and the psychic. It is a play increasingly found to be the director's

delight, with its richness of visual/thematic representation. Fornes prefers to direct her plays. She does not entrust them to other directors especially till they are published.

This is because her scripts in their published form are created out of the playwrights' directing experience from the premiere productions. Other than the playwriting and directing achievements, she also has the credit of being a founding member of the 1972 New York Theater Strategy, which encouraged the productions of experimental American playwrights. She has also the credit of working in the most experimental theater groups of the Theater City. She teaches playwriting in one of the New York based Universities. Her active role as the Playwright-in Residence in the Inter Art Relations Hispanic Theater (Uptown New York City) is noteworthy. For she helped nurture the talents of some of the major Hispanic- American dramatists there through her playwriting workshops.

One could not expect an Obie winning director to make herself available for a scribbling research scholar, Her silence increased my enthusiasm for a discussion with her. I called the New Dramatists Guild in order to get former's telephone number, and they gave me the number after a funny question, "Is she alive ma'm?..." I called her and was happy to listen to her voice.. on the answering machine: "This is Irene..please leave your message." Even her voice seemed clean and precise, like her writing. It also carried no unnecessary promise of returning any calls.

Then I learnt about Caridad Svich's play (directed by Fornes) which was playing from September 13, in the Theater For The New City, on 1st avenue, Downtown Manhattan. Caridad Svich had developed her play ANY PLACE BUT HERE in the Inter Relations Arts' Playwrights-in-Residence Laboratory, headed by Fornes as its Director and Fornes had wanted to direct the play since its development at the writing lab. The play bill at the TNC introduced Irene Fornes as a playwright director whose work is the subject of several doctoral dissertations. As I entered the house of the Joyce and Seward Johnson Theater of TNC, what struck me immediately was the expressive nature of the set-- a double proscenium, one within the other, that suited the theme of the play. The play dramatised the troubles of two working class couples in New Jersey<sup>7</sup>. Fornes had divided the main proscenium into two with a novel idea of painting the floor in two different designs to represent the living rooms of the two couple. A couch placed in the middle of these two divisions helped to stage scenes of private talks between the two wives. The inner proscenium physicalised the bar and the alteractions between the two husbands. One could identify Irene Fornes's style of multiple staging in her use of the inner proscenium representing the subconscious life from which there was no escape for the wives. The silence between the dialogues and also certain gestural moments made the play more meaningful and shocking. The climax came after the play. I met Fornes at the lobby and she asked me straight away.. "Are you prepared..- (for the interview)?" The aging playwright looked even more beautiful in person than in the pictures. I was introduced to the actors, Joe Goodrich and Mary Forcade, who were full of praise for 'Irene'.

I met Irene Fornes again in November, before Thanksgiving at the Faffaela Cafe in Down New York. Over a cappuchino we talked about her life in theater. She was patient and tried to help me with my miserably failing tape recorder. From the unrecorded discussion with Irene I could gather the threads of the life of a writer who came to New York from Havana in a raft boat, lived a hard life, in an unknown land and established a career in theater out of the wilderness, after experimenting with several careers as a painter, costume designer, etc. While discussing Beckett's *Godot*, she remembered how the play in its totality, not just any particular element in it, moved her, and that too when she did not understand French. She reminisced the theater scene of the 1960s computing it with that of the 1990s. Lot of new things, she said, and lot of experimentation was going on in the 1960s : "Now also there is experimentation, but no more the spirit of adventure or excitement is there." I presume what she meant was that theater has become more dollar oriented. Probably, it is true.. It is not just the buck but the whole way of thinking that has changed. As one member of the Mabou Mines, the New York based experimental theater, put it, "In the '70's I worked for nothing. But now people aren't willing or able to do so that much. Then it was cool not to have money, but now people don't want to live like that." (Rachel Shteir, "70's, Going on '90's "VILLAGE VOICE, Jan 30, 1996 : 67). Theater in the '60s, according to Fornes, was more a community activity, with each member in the play personally involved and active in its production. Hence low budget productions with non-profit and experimental fervour were possible.

Fornes is allergic to labelling herself as feminist. Identification with a group or writing

for a particular group, she says, disrupts the true perception of the artist. She considers herself a feminist only in the sense of being an artist presenting a woman's point of view independently and boldly. When I asked her what she would expect a critic or a researcher on her work to focus on her theater, she honestly replied that she was not interested in reading her critics. For that would make her writing conscious and artificial. Fornes is an artist whose first concern is her art and nothing else, not the audience, not the critic nor the recognition of her art. It is her love and respect for art, I think, which has gone into the making of her sustained career as dramaturge. An artist, she said in one of her workshops, is better placed, if he is sincere to his art, rather than if he is motivated to win awards in the beginning of his career and lose his art.

The dichotomy of the Cuban and the American is disturbingly represented in her plays and she agrees that she still writes from the point of view of a Cuban, in the sense that she thinks like a Cuban. Her earlier plays like *Tangu Palace*, *Promenade*, etc., are not as expressive as the later plays like *Sarita*, *The Conduct Of Life*, etc., of the Cuban culture. Yet most of the plays refer to an alien culture, obviously Cuban, either in the form of language or time or situation. While Fornes writes in English, the characters switch over to Spanish in the most crucial and intimate scenes. The duality of the Cuban and the American is also expressed in terms of staging. A sort of dualistic stage is used by the director, one resembling the Cuban and the other a foreign one. The music and dance elements in her theater are also replete with the fusion of the Latin American and the North American. Some of her plays characterize the immigrant nostalgia which is

said to be a common feature of the plays of the post-Castro Cuban theater.

To my queries on her work as a director, she said that she always preferred to direct her plays. Though she was happy with some directors like Al Carmines (who directed her musical *PROMENADE*) she was not satisfied with a few. She mentioned Herbert Blau in particular as the director who had created wonderful sets and acting for one of her plays, but she disagreed with his style of lighting. Hence she preferred to direct her own plays. Her decision to direct her plays is not surprising to me since I find that she has been writing not merely as a playwright but the playwright as director. It is an increasingly interesting avenue to explore how she coordinates the various talents like painting, costume designing, scene setting, etc. to create a total theater.

Irene Fornes also mentioned her preoccupation with several projects for that year. Her earlier play *MDU*, was produced under the director of Mary Forcade in December 1995. Fornes's *Terra Incognita*, an opera that premiered in Sienna, Italy, in 1994 was to be commissioned by the INTAR and the Women's Project that year. She was also working on another opera, which she informed me, was based on the immigrants who came in rafts from Cuba to Florida. *The Summer In Gossensas* was another play of Fornes to be commissioned and produced at the end of 1996 by the Women's Theater Project. This play is about the first London production of *HEDDA GABBLER* performed by two American actors, Elizabeth Robbins and Marion Lee in 1981. Fornes left after waiting for a few photographic shots for me. My cappuccino had gotten cold.



I met Irene again in the "IRNE FORNES WRITERS' WORKSHOP" at Theater for the New City, on February 2, 1996. It was a strangely disturbing and valuable experience to be part of the playwriting workshop held in the evenings from 2 to 6 February. 'Disturbing' because she made us delve deep into the subconscious and that was frightening. The writer began her workshop with a brief note on the art of writing. She equated writing to a golf game--the golf player should project the "it" element in him to make himself play the game effectively. Every artist must allow this "it" element to make his writing a sincere and spontaneous effort. It helps him not to become conscious of his and thereby not to lose spontaneity in writing which, according to Fornes was necessary to make it fresh and new : "By allowing the mind to work in a spontaneous way there's a flavour, a resonance, quite different from what it is when it is prepared." Fornes has a unique style of writing, which she allows the budding playwrights to observe. She prefers to begin a play with a character rather than the story. She cited Shakespeare as an example of a classical writer known better for his exploration of character rather than story. For "putting structure before writing makes the play artificial, makes it a lie." She recommended the collage method or "abstract structuring" i. e., mixing all colors like in an abstract painting and then throwing away all that is 'delicious'. In other words, she basically follows an impressionist method of writing, that allows the writer to create all that he visualizes; and then come to the stage of editing/structuring , which follows the collage method.

Her playwriting workshop was directed towards a practice of her theater concept. She begins the classes with a set of physical exercises

to relax the nerves and the muscles. And it is followed by a set of new visualization exercises every day. She makes the class to draw or imagine a character--to feel every part of the character. Her commands are directed towards making the artist create his/her character in all dimensions - the color, texture and shape of the character, the space where the character stands or sits or sleeps, and so on. It was an enriching experience to work and create as a group. Fornes makes writing a sensorial activity. All her exercises are meant to help 'visualize' rather than 'verbalize' the character. The style of putting the image before the word is typical of Fornes's style of putting the image before the word is typical of Fornes's theater and reminds us of her experiences as a painter.

There was something solemn in the atmosphere of the workshop with the participants working in silence. With a few commands Irene could change the course of the creative process. She would flip through a book and read out lines of dialogue which we were free to incorporate in the writing. There sprung a sudden spark of creative energy ignited by the Fornes's commands for the writers to commute from the visual to the verbal plane. From time to time, Fornes would ask the participants to read their writing and give suggestions to improve/alter certain parts. "Vitality is very important in writing" she would say; a writer should grab the 'now' aspect of the situation and characterise it. "It gives more vitality to the play than to think of it and then write it". A writer, Fornes adds, should be more worried about the color, vitality, the sensitivity to what is happening than about the drama itself. She compares writing with the throwing back and forth of the ball; "...every time the ball bounces, you never know what's next...that adds a dynamic

quality to the dialogue..." Fornes added creative dynamics to the workshop through an exciting variation of exercises. A very interesting one was the writing of a 5-point description of a character. Each of the workshop participants wrote down this 5-point description. Then the papers were passed in a circle and we were made to write five scenes of period-piece dialogues out of them - to visualise the character in five different periods of his/her age and express our image in a few words. We then shared the papers among us and wrote scenes based on the descriptions that we found from any five different papers. The combined and shared creative energies of the group helped to further a new explosion of energies and make writing vibrant.

The final meeting I had with Maria Irene Fornes was on May 24, 1996, just a fortnight before my return to India. After waiting for an hour in a Downtown New York Cafe, I suddenly realized that I might have come to a wrong cafe or Irene must have missed the time. A quick telephone call revealed that the latter was true. She made a profuse apology and promise to reach there in ten minutes. This time I took a good taperecorder that would not make me miss the valuable interview. When I met Irene I found her suddenly ten years older. She had recently lost her hundred and two years old mother and companion. I had a really long and friendly chat with her. At the end of the interview Fornes commented that I had transformed from the school kid to an adult in a span of six months. I laughed thinking that life abroad and alone does make one transform overnight.

The long awaited discussion with Maria Irene Fornes proved very fruitful. It satisfied most of

my hypothetical contentions on Fornes's works. To me Fornes's philosophy of art seems to be connected to creative dynamics. She constantly finds ways and means (either through games or meditative exercises) to keep her creative impulses alive. In this context it is very interesting to study the creative process of her plays. Her first play *Tango Palace* was born out of the idea of an IBM machine taunting a human, but as the character grew she developed it into an androgynous clown. Fornes began writing *Fefu And Her Friends* for the six women's dresses she had bought from an old store. The exercises that she evolves in her playwriting workshops help to evoke her creative energies too-I observed that she also wrote her scenes along with us. I personally feel that everything - from art to life tends to stagnate, to become boring and dead but for the freshness and vitality one gives to it. I perceive Fornes's art as an expression of her extension of care, attention and sensitivity to art/life. I see her as an artist who finds means to perfect her art than only weigh upon its fruits. For example, when I viewed *ABINGDON SQUARE* in the Video and Tape Collection of the New York Public Library for Performing Arts on 26 Jan 1996, I was astounded by the disparity between the performance and the published play. The variation of the written text from the performed text only reveals the artist's consistent effort to modify and perfect her work. It is very easy to quip 'art of art's sake, but it takes a lot of determination and courage, to really LIVE up to it. And Irene Fornes has that courage, to say no to "isms, political identities, rewards and criticisms, in order to live up to her principles. It was certainly worth waiting to meet Maria Irene Fornes.