

UNDERSTANDING MARIA IRENE
FORNES' THEATRE

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First published in Champaign, Illinois in 2010
by Common Ground Publishing LLC
at The Arts in Society
a series imprint of The University Press

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Renganathan, Mala.

Understanding Maria Irene Fornes' Theatre / Mala Renganathan

p. cm. -- (The arts in society)

Includes bibliographical references and index

ISBN 978-1-86335-749-4 (pbk : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-86335-750-0 (pdf : alk. paper)

1. Fornes, Maria Irene--Criticism and interpretation. 2. Fornes, Maria Irene--Dramatic production. 3. Feminism and theater--United States--History--20th century. 4. Women in the theater--United States--History--20th century. 5. Feminist drama--History and criticism. I. Title. II. Series.

PS3556.O7344Z82 2010

812'.54--dc22

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Chapter I

Introduction

Contribution as Playwright and Director

Maria Irene Fornes is one of the major voices in American drama and one of the most vibrant and creative women in American theatre. Fornes, born Cuban, reputable as American, infuses in her dramaturgy her various talents as a painter, costume designer, set designer, playwright, director and teacher. Her theatre work combines her versatile experiences in aesthetics into a woman's view of life and arts. Her prolific and sustained theatre writings are exceptionally lyrical in tone and strongly evocative in imagery. Fornes is known not only for her sustained creative plays but also for her long and creditable career as dramaturge¹ in the New York alternative theatre scene from the 1960s.

Maria Fornes has won the highest number of awards (nine Obie awards, i.e. off-Broadway awards given by *Village Voice* newspaper), next only to Samuel Beckett and Sam Shepard. Critics consider her one of the 'pioneering avant-garde dramatists who created the off-Broadway forum' (*Contemporary Literary Criticism*). Her fellow playwright Lanford Wilson views her as the most original of all playwrights. According to Susan Sontag, she is 'one of the best American writers' ('Preface', *Fornes' Plays*, 9) and Carolyn Karis comments on her 'amazing versatility as a playwright and director' (Robinson, Roberts and Barrangaer, 313). In her almost-four-decade career in the American theatre, Fornes has contributed to the development of

the American women's theatre, bringing fresh insights into the woman's point of view. Her unconventional use of performance spaces like warehouses, lofts, open grounds, terraces, and multiple-roomed studios, shows her experimental, avant-garde tendencies. Her contribution to the Hispanic theatre of America deserves special mention in terms of the dramaturge's guidance to young Latino-American playwrights through her playwriting workshops. Fornes' plays have been performed in Asia and Europe, apart from America. During her visit to India as a USIS visiting artist, Chennai-based Tamil theatre group Koothu-p-Pattrai translated, adapted and performed a staged reading of her two important plays, *The Conduct of Life* and *Mud* in March/April 1992.

Life, Works and Performance History

A Cuban immigrant (from Havana) settled in the US from 1945, Maria Irene Fornes took to several vocations including painting, textile designing and playing the violin before turning to playwriting at the age of 30. She often acknowledges her watching Roger Blin's (French) production of *Waiting for Godot* as the prime energy behind her decision to pursue a career in theatre. After a brief apprenticeship in playwriting/acting, Fornes started her theatre career with the Judson Memorial Poets' Theater. From 1968 onwards, she began directing at least the first productions of her plays, thereby integrating in them her approach to both playwriting and direction. In her long theatrical career she has grown with and given much to the development of several reputed American theatres, a few of them being the Open Theater, American Place Theater, Theater for the New City, INTAR (International Arts Relation), etc., all in New York. Her initial work with the Open Theater is a significant landmark in her aesthetic history, since her whole theatrical endeavour could be seen as the application of Joseph Chaikin's famous 'Open Theater' techniques to playwriting and directing. This aspect highlights Fornes' unique and creative response to the pioneering acting technique as playwright/director.

Her work (as production/artistic manager) at the New York Theater Strategy with contemporary playwrights like Sam Shepard, Megan Terry, Rosalyn Drexler, Julie Bovasso, Adrienne Kennedy and Rochelle Owens is remarkable. At INTAR, as playwright-in-residence, she made a tremendous contribution to the Latin American theatre by way of her playwriting workshops, out of which also came several of her plays, which are dominantly Hispanic in theme and content. Several of her well-known plays like *Fefu and her Friends*, *The Danube*, *The Conduct of Life*, *Mud* and *Abingdon Square* premiered at the Theater for the New City and American Place Theater. Other than nine Obie awards, Fornes has also been the recipient of several prestigious awards, grants and fellowship like the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) for two years, including a Distinguished Artists Award (1974); Rockefeller Foundation Grant (1971); the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (1985); and Guggenheim Foundation Grant

(1972); MACHA award (2003) for outstanding achievement in moulding the emerging Latina writers; and Theater Communications Award (2005) for a theatre artist with exceptional contributions in theatre.

Her repertoire of 42 plays, published and unpublished, fall into five decades depending on the year of their first performances. Her plays that premiered in the 1960s are 'La Viuda' ('The Widow', unpublished, 1961); *Tango Palace* (published, 1963); *The Successful Life of 3* (published, 1965); 'The Office' (unpublished, 1966); *Promenade* (published, 1967); *A Vietnamese Wedding* (published, 1967); 'The Annunciation' (unpublished, 1967); *Dr. Kbeal* (published, 1967); *The Red Burning Light Or: Mission XQ3* (published, 1968); and *Molly's Dream* (published, 1968). Most of these plays are Absurdist in tone and theme. Her 1970s plays, 'The Course of the Langston House' (unpublished, 1972), 'Aurora' (unpublished, 1974), 'Cap-a-Pie' (unpublished, 1975), 'Washing' (unpublished, 1976), *Fefu and Her Friends* (published, 1978), 'Lolita in the Garden' (unpublished, 1977), 'In Service' (unpublished, 1978) and 'Eyes in the Harem' (unpublished, 1979), are still Absurdist, and for the first time abandon the neutral authorial voice and deliberately represent an original female voice in the offing. Her 1980s plays, 'Evelyn Brown (A Diary)' (unpublished, 1980), 'A Visit' (unpublished, 1981), 'No Time' (unpublished, 1984), *The Danube* (published, 1986), *Drowning* (published, 1986), 'A Matter of Faith' (unpublished, 1986), 'Art (Box Plays)' (unpublished, 1986), 'The Mother' (unpublished, 1986), *Mud* (published, 1986), *Sarita* (published, 1986), *The Conduct of Life* (published, 1986), *Cold Air* (published, 1986), *Abingdon Square* (published, 1988), 'Hunger' (unpublished, 1988), *What of the Night?* (published, 1993), are more dynamic, lyrically evocative, and mostly centralize woman at the experience of life or theatre. Her 1990s plays, *Oscar and Bertha* (published, 1992), *Terra Incognita* (published, 1993), *Enter the Night* (published, 1993), 'Ibsen and the Actress' (unpublished, 1995), 'Manual for a Desperate Crossing' (Balseros/Rafters, unpublished, 1996), 'The Summer in Gossensas' (unpublished, 1997) and 'The Audition' (unpublished, 1998), continue the miniaturist or lyrical style, yet become more enlarged and globalized in vision. Her play 'Letters from Cuba' (unpublished, 2000) of the decade beginning from the year 2000 seems to bring in an even newer phenomenon of going back to one's cultural roots.

Maria Irene Fornes' plays display a variety of themes, issues and concerns. An introduction to her plays in the way of summary and also an evaluation of her plays' production history might reveal her experimental approach, and, thereby, the dynamic quality of her theatre. Beginning her theatre training with the Open Theater, Fornes saw her first play 'La Viuda' ('The Widow') performed in New York and then produced again and broadcast as a radio play by the Universidad de Mejico. *Tango Palace* (1963) is a wild intellectual parody of the learning-teaching situation. A burlesque on the search for truth, the play enacts two characters (Leopold, the creative student and Isidore the teacher who depends on a pack of cards for his knowledge) enmeshed in a tango that leads the student to finally kill the teacher. *Tango* was presented originally as *There! You Died!* by the San Francisco

Actors' Workshop in San Francisco (November 1963), directed by Herbert Blau. The play received many reviews on its close links with the Theatre of the Absurd. Two more productions were done, one at the Actor's Studio (N.Y.), and the other at Minneapolis under the auspices of the Office of Advanced Drama Research of the University of Minnesota in January 1965, as a double bill with *The Successful Life of 3*, both designed/directed by Fornes.

The premiere production of *Successful Life* on 22 January 1965 at the Firehouse Theater, Minneapolis, received much appreciation, leading to more productions. *Successful Life* also had two more productions: one directed by Joseph Chaikin and then re-directed by Richard Gilman for the Open Theater (Sheridan Square Playhouse, New York, March 1965); the other by Fornes (Judson Poets, April 1965) along with her Obie-winning musical *Promenade* directed by Lawrence Kornfield with music by Al Carmines. *Successful Life*, with its three characters (two men, 'He' and '3'; and a woman, 'She;') stages a weird parodic romantic comedy, which contains 'the interchangeable couples' in the style of Adamov's *La Parodie* 'going through motions of human existence without being recognizable individuals' (Esslin, 1976, 74). The triangular love relationship between the three characters ('He', 'She' and '3') is not conventional, for the two men only keep talking about rivalry between them on account of 'She', though it does not really exist. Fornes won her first Obie for both *Successful Life* and *Promenade* as 'Distinguished Plays'. The European premiere of the same play was on 11 March 1969 at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, Scotland, performed by the Freehold Company, directed by Nancy Meckler.

Other than the plays performed at the Open Theater, Irene Fornes' work received good response from New York theatres like Judson Theater (Washington Square, N.Y.), where *Promenade* was performed in 1967 for three weekends. *Promenade* is a parody on the quest or journey for truth. The play stages a journey of weird characters, like two convicts out of the prison, a mother who lost two infants, and a jailor. The play ends with a film-style discovery that the jailor and the mother are searching for the same persons. *Promenade* became Fornes' first and only commercial venture that ran 259 performances at the New Promenade Theater under the triadic combination of Irene Fornes, Lawrence Kornfield and Al Carmines. The play became the reviewers' delight. The Obie-winning play produced mixed responses from the *New York Times* and *Village Voice* critics, divided about defining the play's mystifying tragicomic blend.

While *Promenade* picked up the show, 'The Office' (1966), Fornes' first Broadway debut directed by Jerome Robbins, was withdrawn without opening the 10 shows meant for Broadway after the preview show at the Henry Miller Theater, N.Y. City on 21 April 1966.

The Vietnamese Wedding (1967) is not a play but a dramatic reading staged in protest against the American war in Vietnam. It premiered on 4 February 1967 at Washington Square Methodist Church, N.Y. City, as part of the anti-Vietnam war protests of Angry Arts Week. Fornes directed the first reading with its subsequent performances in 1967, 1968, and twice in 1969.

It is enacted with four readers functioning as hosts to invite seven members of the audience to help them conduct a Vietnamese wedding on-stage. These seven members serve to perform the roles of a matchmaker, two fathers, two mothers, a groom, a bride, and an elder and two youths from the groom's family. The four readers/hosts help them take their seats and use their props. They also explain the complex cultural and historical traditions of a Vietnamese wedding, including aspects like planning the wedding and the importance of drawing up horoscopes. The wedding rituals also include the narration of a tragic story about two brothers, Tan and Sung, who fall in love with the same woman, Luu. The volunteers, accompanied by Vietnamese music, are then led in a procession around the theatre and a reader/host explains the gifts, which the groom's family places upon the bride's family's ancestral altar. The Rose Silk Thread God is sent a message on red paper, which is burnt, marking the couple as married. A reader/host explains elements of the exuberant party which follows, and a noisy procession is led out of the theatre.

'The Annunciation' (1967), an adaptation, and *Dr. Kheal* (1968), an absurd monologue of a professor-figure resembling Adamov's and Ionesco's professor-figure, were also produced by the Judsons. The Open Theater also took up Fornes' *The Red Burning Light* (1968) as part of its European tour performances.

Fornes' plays became more and more woman-centred, with the founding of the New York Theater Strategy, which injected new blood into American theatre through its constant support to new plays and playwrights. *Molly's Dream* (performed in 1973), 'Aurora' (1974) and the best-remembered *Fefu and Her Friends* (produced in 1978) were the outcome of Fornes' work at the Theater Strategy. *Molly's Dream* is a fairy-tale parody that centres on Molly, a waitress in an ordinary saloon, and her meeting with a stranger that incites an inward journey where she meets some unusual characters. The drab, dull life of a barmaid makes her fantasize a romantic life with a young man, a visitor to the bar with his bandwagon of women. Yet, the young man is not a Don Juan but a sissy. Since, for Molly, it is a fantasy of love, not lust, that attracts her to the young man, it becomes impossible for Molly to join his class of women. Hence, fantasy leads her to the ugly realities of life. *Molly's Dream* was first performed as a workshop production directed by Fornes at the New Dramatists' Workshop in New York in December 1968. It was then performed under her direction at the New York Theater Strategy, N.Y. City, in 1973.

Her next play, 'The Course of the Langston House' (unpublished, 1972) was performed at the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, Cincinnati, Ohio in 1972 directed by Fornes. 'Aurora' (unpublished, 1974), presented by New York Theater Strategy deals with the story of a sensitive youth, William, and his spirit, Bill, discussing their struggles amongst the aristocratic society of Duke Denzo's castle. It is a parody of film and theatre staged in a fencing duel between William and Duke, in which the Duke is mortally wounded.

'Cap-a-Pie' (unpublished, 1975) is a bilingual dramatic piece created in INTAR playwriting workshops and was performed and directed thrice by Fornes at INTAR. 'Washing' (unpublished, 1976) was performed at the Theater for the New City, N.Y. City under Fornes' direction.

Fornes is still remembered by feminist critics for her *Fefu and her Friends* (1978). It is an all-women play, with eight women meeting to rehearse a project on theatre education in Fefu's and her husband Philip's home. Their interaction at the professional level slowly turns personal, with these women revealing their private lives, woes and relationships. The play ends with the death of a woman. Fornes makes use of a multiple staging method, with different scenes staged in different spaces like the living room, study, etc., with the audience literally moving from one space to another in order to see them in their personal, natural environments. Within the four walls of Fefu's home, the rehearsing women express their feelings of sisterhood and their hopes of doing something valuable together. Yet, within these women's community exists a deep crisis, which leads to Fefu's mock killing of Julia.

Fefu created a sensation when it premiered in 1978 as a New York Theater Strategy production at the Relativity Media Lab, wherein Fornes created extraordinary theatre spaces, with the audience made to move around from one space to another. The transition from the conventional proscenium staging in the first act to the environmental staging in the second act brought in both favourable and unfavourable criticism (the *New York Times* criticizing the attempt with a pun as a 'moving' play). *Fefu* has made its indelible mark on Fornes' theatre career and America's off-off-Broadway history.

Fefu was produced again at the American Place Theater (January 1978), securing Fornes two Obies, as playwright and director. Memorable productions of *Fefu* were done again at the Padua Hills Festival (of 1979); the University of Kenosha, Kenosha, Wisconsin (1979); Pasadena Playhouse, Pasadena, California (1979); Eureka Theater in San Francisco (1981); Empty Space Theater in Seattle (1981); 'At the Foot of the Mountain' Theater at Minneapolis (1986, 1987); and at New City Theater, Seattle, Washington (1990), all directed by Fornes. Even a Spanish translation was done and directed by Fornes at INTAR in the summer of 1981. *Fefu* is still theatrically alive, with the play once again performed under Fornes' direction in 1999 at Santa Fe Stages, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

In 'Lolita' (unpublished, 1977), a fairy-tale Bildungsroman is staged. The story deals with an 11-year girl blessed with three wishes granted to her by her grandmother, and its consequences. This 'Alice-in-the-Wonderland' kind of play was performed by INTAR. In 'Eyes in the Harem' (unpublished, 1979), Fornes stages a subversion of the authority and power of empires. The flight of the last sultan of the Ottoman Empire and the confusion of the women in his harem sets the tone of the play, which concerns itself with imprisonment, murder, castration, and violent repression that dominate the lives of these victims and victimizers. The play won an Obie for Fornes' direction when it was performed at INTAR in 1979.

With the national acclaim that *Fefu* won, Fornes was back at the off-off-Broadway front with her ever-proliferating dramaturgy. During this very productive decade, a number of other plays, 'Evelyn Brown (A Diary)', 'A Visit', and 'The Trial of Joan of Arc on a Matter of Faith', were also produced, all written and directed by Fornes. The most aesthetically satisfying plays created by her were also the outcome of the 1980s: *Sarita*, *Mud*, *The Conduct of Life*, and *Lovers and Keepers*. Many of the plays of this era reflect Fornes' interests in sexual politics, sometimes using historical settings and source materials (as seen in 'Evelyn'). In several of the 1980s plays, Fornes evinces a dramatic interest in the reading of prewritten records or materials like diaries or travelogues. For example, 'Evelyn Brown (A Diary)' is a staged extract from the diary of a New Hampshire maid. *The Trial* makes use of selections from the records of Saint Joan's enquiry by the bishop of Beauvais on charges of heresy. *Sarita*, *Mud*, *Conduct* were much-produced plays, uniformly noted for Fornes' familiar style of film technique—staging drama in short, staccato scenes divided by visually effective stage freezes. Also, women's characters in these plays are rendered with a sense of passion and even of violence.

Fornes dramatized 'Evelyn Brown (A Diary)' (unpublished, 1980), which is about a woman's diary entries on her repetitive tasks as domestic worker in the year 1909, when she happened to read a copy of the diary of Evelyn Brown, born on 20 May 1854 in Melvin Village, New Hampshire, and died on 18 November 1934.

Fornes directed 'A Visit' (unpublished, 1981) twice, once at the Fourth Padua Hills Festival, Los Angeles, California, and then at the Theater for the New City, N.Y. City. She wrote and directed two more new plays at the American Place, *The Danube* (1982), and *Abingdon Square* (1987). *Danube*, written for a Nuclear-Free Festival, is a play of lovers, set in Hungary, echoing the degeneration of civilization, culture and language in a holocaust-ridden city, Budapest. Paul, an American youth, meets a Hungarian, Mr Sandor. He falls in love with Sandor's daughter, Eve. Their story of love and marriage is seen in a background of war-torn, holocaust-ridden Hungary, with lives gradually disintegrating and becoming dehumanized and puppets taking over. The attempts by Paul and Eve to escape from Hungary fail with the flash of nuclear explosions, in which they seem to be caught.

This play was first performed in the American Place in 1984 after being developed in parts at the Theater for the New City, N.Y. (1981) and at the Padua Hills (July 1982), and also a longer version done at the Theater for the New City (February 1983). Once again, the reviewers were divided in their views: Frank Rich called the play 'trivial', and Michael Feingold appreciated it as 'most startlingly original'. The play received an Obie for Playwriting and Direction.

The first draft of *Mud* (1983) was created and performed at the Sixth Padua Hills Festival (California, July 1983). The second version was presented at TNC (New York, November 1983), and the Omaha Magic Theater produced the play for the 1986 Boston Women in Theater Festival. In a

panel discussion with Fornes, Megan Terry and Jo Ann Schmidman following the performance, audience representatives discussed the relevance of the play in the context of feminist theatre to the American society and also questioned Fornes' presentation of woman as victim. But Fornes warned of the danger of taking the play literally, and entreated them not to miss the fact that the play was about 'learning', 'human nature', and 'lack of alternative'.

The story of *Mud* in brief is that Mae's father brought up Mae and Lloyd, an abandoned child, together. After the father's death, Mae and Lloyd stay together in considerable poverty but somehow manage, with Lloyd minding the pigs and Mae becoming the breadwinner. The illiterate Mae dreams of educating herself and making herself literate. The stage of *Mud* always gives way to an entrance and exit beyond the world of mud and leads to a starry sky. Her dream of going beyond the world of mud seems to come true with her new friend, Henry. She invites Henry to stay with her, and over time allows him to share her bed too. There is initially rivalry between the two men. Yet, she continues to keep Henry in the house, as she is deeply moved by Henry's ability to say grace before a meal and his ability to read, which she does not have. For some time, Henry seems to quench her thirst for knowledge and self-improvement. All these come to an end with an accident that makes Henry an invalid to be supported. After some time, Henry also becomes dependent on Mae the way Lloyd is. They degenerate, with Henry going to the extent of stealing Mae's money. Mae decides to leave both the men, as she feels that they are holding her back. As she tries to leave, Lloyd shoots her and carries her back to the stage, with Mae dreaming of her escape into the starry sky.

Fornes first produced *Sarita*, a musical, at INTAR in 1984, with music by Leon Odenz. The production received very good reviews from critics like Erika Munk. So did *Conduct*, presented at TNC (New York, 1985) in multiple stages like the living room, dining room, cellar, hall and warehouse. The story deals with a tyrannical army lieutenant in a Latin American country, a ruthless powermonger, who continually rapes a young girl, Nena. The three women in the play, Orlando's wife Leticia, Nena, and the servant Olimpia are helpless victims. Towards the end, when Orlando interrogates Leticia on her illicit affair with Alejo, his childhood friend, Leticia shoots him and places the revolver in Nena's hand. The setting of a Latin American country is something which recurs in many Fornes' plays of this period. Special note should be made here of her unique style of developing plays from a character, allowing her imagination to follow the character. Hence, the visual presence of her characters is emphasized in her writings.

'A Matter of Faith' (1986) is an adaptation of the story of Joan of Arc, beginning from the trial of Joan and ending with her execution.

'Art' (Box Plays, unpublished, 1986) was one of eight one-act plays staged as Box Plays in 1986, produced by the Theater for the New City and at INTAR (International Arts Relations), Hispanic American Arts Center, N.Y. City. Donald Squires directed it. The play opens with a business trans-

action between two men in suits engaged in an argument on what is to be done with a body of a woman, which is being eaten up by a third man. The play brings out the apathy of the spectators watching the whole thing nonchalantly.

Abingdon Square (1987) builds a miniature female Bildungsroman that deals with a teenage bride's tensions of growing up and her adjustment to the incompatible relationship with her much older husband. In a series of 31 linear scenes, the play covers the exciting period between 1908 and 1917, a period of economic and social upheavals surrounding wartime. The story of the teenaged Marion's marriage with the 50-year-old Juster meanders onto difficult roads, when Marion develops an adulterous relationship that leads to her pregnancy and her separation from Juster. Juster refuses to give her baby to her. Later, her lover too is tired of her. Then, towards the end, Marion matures into a wise woman, returning to Juster on his deathbed to tend him. The play first opened at the American Place in October 1987 under Fornes' direction and produced by the Women's Theater Project. It first grew as a workshop production by the Women's Theater Project; it then developed as a play in another workshop production at Seattle Theater (1984); and finally saw the light as a staged reading at the American Place (April 1984). After its premiere at the American Place, Fornes staged it again at the Studio Arena Theater in Buffalo. The play received much appreciation for its set design and lighting that gave a special emotional tone to the story.

Another musical that Fornes presented was *Lovers and Keepers* (INTAR 1986; Pittsburgh's New City Theater, 1986), a tri-musical characterized by frivolous, good-humoured ruminations of love relationships. *Drowning* (directed by Robert Falls) was a play presented along with six other playwrights' productions performed together as *Orchards*, a presentation of short stories by Chekhov, performed at the Lucille Lortel Theater (N.Y. City, April/May 1986).

Fornes's notable productions of the turn of the 1980s and of the 1990s are *Oscar and Bertha*, *Terra Incognita* and *What of the Night?* *Oscar and Bertha* (1991) is a play about an invalid brother and a middle-aged sister, and their relationships and quarrels with each other. The play was worked at the Guthrie Theater Lab in 1987 and later included as a workshop production in July 1989, where it was presented outdoors in the Courtyard of the Art and Design Center. It premiered at the Magic Theater in San Francisco in March 1992 on a double bill with *Drowning*. *Terra Incognita* developed as a libretto in a workshop at Storm King Arts Center, New York, with music by Roberts Sierra (summer 1991). As a play form, it was developed at the Dionysia Playwrights' World Festival, Sienna, Italy (summer 1992). In spring 1993 it was produced at the Yale Cabaret (Yale School of Drama) directed by Jonathan Moscone. *Night* is a quadruple play in the canvas of an epic play that covers a span beginning from World War II leading to a futuristic era. Each playlet was performed as an individual play in the 1980s: 'Nadine' and 'Mothers' at Padua Hills Festival (California, July 1986); 'Hunger' by Engarde Arts (N.Y. City, March 1986). 'Springtime' and 'Lust' and

the rest of the four playlets together as a single unit were first performed as *Night* (March 1989).

When this author met Fornes in the autumn of 1995, the dramatist was developing her next play, 'The Summer in Gossensas' (Consortium Books in *What of the Night?: Selected Plays*, 2008) commissioned by the Women's Theater Project. Fornes directed the first developmental production named 'Ibsen and the Actress' in February 1995 at the University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa. This play is the first production of *Hedda Gabbler* in English in London, performed by two American actors, Elizabeth Robbins and Marione Lee in 1981. This play gradually developed full form in 1997 by the name 'The Summer in Gossensas'. The play offers an interesting interpretation in the dramatics of performing Ibsen from a woman's perspective, acknowledging *Hedda* as a complex character, and also trying to understand Ibsen's inspirations in composing this play.

Fornes teaches playwriting in a New York-based university. When this author met her in New York in May 1996, she was reworking *Terra Incognita* to be commissioned by INTAR and the Women's Theater Project the same year. Again, when this author met Fornes in February 1996, she was also working on another opera, which is about people who came in rafts from Cuba to Florida. 'Manual for a Desperate Crossing' is dedicated to 'Horacio, and to thousands of men, women and children who perished crossing the Florida straights [sic] on rickety rafts' (<http://www.mariairenefornes.com>).

'Letters from Cuba' (Fornes, 2007) is a play about a young Cuban dancer in Manhattan exchanging letters with her brother in Cuba. Their letters detail their everyday experiences and help to mitigate the physical separation from each other. She was awarded a special Obie citation for her direction at the Signature Theatre in New York City (2000).

During this decade, Maria Irene Fornes worked a lot at the Theater for the New City and INTAR and the Annual Padua Hills Festival in California. An observation of her best productions during this period reveals her frequent and successful work with designers Donald Eastman (sets), Gabriel Berry (costumes), and Anne Militello (lights). Sheila Dabney, Margaret Harrington and Mary Forcade are the actresses associated with Fornes' productions. Dabney made her debut in *Sarita* and worked in *Conduct*, 'The Trial' and *Lovers and Keepers*. Margaret Harrington acted in *Fefu*, 'Evelyn Brown', *Life is a Dream* and *Danube*. Mary Forcade, a playwright in Fornes's playwriting workshops, acted in Fornes' directorial works (*Mud*, 'Any Place But Here'), and has also directed *Mud* in N.Y. City in 1996. A recent trend in the ageing dramaturge's theatre is a turning to direction of her students' plays and her own translations/adaptations of classics. This trend begins with her translation/adaptation/direction of Virgilio Pinera's *Cold Air* (*Aire Frio*), presented at INTAR in March 1985. Fornes made similar attempts with Calderon's *Life is a Dream* (INTAR, 1985), Ibsen's *Hedda Gabbler* (Milwaukee Rep., 1987), *Chekhov's Uncle Vanya* (CSC Rep., N.Y., 1987). She has directed her students' plays also: Ana Mario Simo's 'Going to New England' (INTAR, 1990) and Caridad Svich's 'Any Place But Here' (TNC, N.Y.,

1995). This author watched the latter play in Downtown New York City, which retells the violent tale of the woes of two New England working couples. The grotesque comic drama is set in an American environ of economic misery, where two sets of verbally aggressive couples struggle to find value in a valueless world. The play dramatised a surrealistic and terrifying narrative of disintegrating relationships.

Fornes' direction of others' plays can also be described here as follows. She translated and adapted Garcia Lorca's *Blood Wedding* for an INTAR production directed by Max Ferra in 1980. Fornes also translated, adapted and directed Pinera's *Aire Frio* as *Cold Air* in 1985 at INTAR. The play, set in pre-revolutionary Havana, projects the domestic woes of a poverty-ridden family in Havana. Fornes also directed Cherrie Morrago's *Shadow of a Man* in 1990. The play stages the family woes of Chicanos living in 1960s Los Angeles.

Fornes' Playwriting Methods

While attending the Irene Fornes' Playwriting Workshop at TNC, New York, during 2–6 January 1996, this author observed the dramaturge involved in writing her own script along with the workshop participants. A study of Fornes' theatre is incomplete without the study of her creative style, which the author finds central to Fornes' playwriting/directorial process. For this purpose, a brief observation of Fornes' playwriting workshop methods would be undertaken. The 'image' is at the centre of Irene Fornes' theatre. Whether in writing the script or directing the actor or contemplating the design, she closes in on this 'image', expressing the 'messages that come' out of it. This particular style denotes a unique selection of the Method, basically an acting technique, emphasizing a visceral quality being put to a new use here, i.e. of playwriting. How Fornes does this could be studied by observing her workshop methods of playwriting. In the January 1996 workshop at TNC, Fornes equates writing to a golf game where the golf player discovers the 'it' element in him/her in order to play the game with ease. The 'it' element might mean 'spontaneity' or 'the flower of creativity'. 'Spontaneity', the writer says, is necessary to make writing fresh and new: 'By allowing the mind to work in a spontaneous way there's a flavor, a resonance, quite different from what it is when it is prepared.'

In other words, 'Writing a play is an investigation', hence, it requires the playwright to go 'inside' himself. All her concentration/relaxation exercises are directed towards helping the student playwrights create a tranquil environment conducive to spontaneity. The whole group then settles down to proceed to a new set of writing exercises. But the creative energy is basically directed towards a visual environment. She would begin with a directive: 'Imagine a character, a man or a woman. Feel the person's physique—from toes to head. Put him in a place....' The dramaturge gives further scope for constructing this image through the incorporation of excerpts from a play/novel read aloud to the group. Following the exercises, the whole group sets

to writing, electrified with a new burst of creative zeal. Individual reading of the half-finished script follows it, with suggestions pouring in from the dramaturge. Vitality, to Fornes, is elemental to writing. Hence, she prefers to begin with a character rather than a story, for 'putting structure before writing makes the play artificial, makes it a lie'. A writer, Fornes adds, should be more worried about the colour, the vitality, and the sensitivity to what happens around than about the play itself. She compares writing with the throwing back and forth of a ball: '...every time the ball bounces, you never know what's next...that adds dynamic quality to the dialogue...'.²

Fornes' theory of dramaturgy, therefore, underlies the notion of creative dynamics, i.e. the psychic state of the writer, director and actor is more important than the product itself. How well one prepares oneself for 'word making' finally compels telling consequences on the word itself. The whole process of the workshop is aimed at preparing the artist discover the inner core of creativity in him/herself both individually and collectively. Hence, Fornes' playwriting style could be considered as an attempt to make writing a sensorial process, i.e. a process that marks a movement from the *visualization* to the *verbalization* of the character, the character seen and imagined in all dimensions of colour, texture and shape.

Fornes' Critics

In spite of the national acclaim that Maria Irene Fornes has received, she did not win recognition like Sam Shepard or Megan Terry for many years. It is only from the 1980s that serious reviews and studies on Fornes' theatre have been undertaken. Bonnie Marranca, Gayle Austin, Susan Sontag, Helene Keyssar, Marc Robinson, Scott T. Cummings and Erika Munk (the reviewer) are some significant Fornes' critics. Fornes' theatre is also recently the material for several doctoral dissertations. Some of the significant research themes undertaken could be briefly focused upon here.

While full-length studies of her plays have only recently been attempted, early critical endeavours focused on text-oriented criticism or critical surveys of Fornes' plays. Sontag and Marranca offer very good insights on the central aspects of her theatre, i.e. Marranca studies Fornes' theatre as theatre of the 'miniaturist', thereby highlighting the 'theatre of images' characteristic of Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson. Sontag makes an accurate and impressive assessment of Fornes, highlighting her theatre as 'theatre about utterance', and also observing her theatre as 'not less a theatre of fantasy than it was, nor more now a species of dramatic realism' (7). Philip Lopate focuses on Fornes' themes as the 'process of disappointment and hardening'(13). His description of her theatre, thus, is quite impressive: like a cross between Brecht and *Midsummer Night's Dream*, with Von Sternberg and Gertrude Stein standing in the wings. Fornes' theatre from the 1990s onwards has been analysed for its Absurdist features by Toby Silverman Zinman and Rosette C. Lamont. Lamont particularly considers Fornes as a "gentle feminist with roots in French avant-garde drama" ("Introduction", xxiv).

Fornes' theatre is recurrently being interpreted in the feminist light with focus on individual plays like *Mud*, *Fefu*, *Conduct*, etc. Keyssar and Judith Olausson include Fornes among a host of American feminist playwrights 'recognized on a different artistic level than the work coming out of the feminist theatre groups'. The increasing feminist interpretations in the recent decades examine Fornes' women characters, themes/issues relevant to feminism, and also her language. Keyssar, Gayle Austin, Lurana Donnels O'Malley, Catherine A. Schuler, Linda Kitz and Deborah Geis are some of the feminist critics. Keyssar's feminist outlook of Fornes' *Fefu* and Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* on the platform of Bakhtinian 'dialogic imagination' opens up vital questions on Fornes as a postmodernist. Schuler offers an interesting perspective of gender and violence in Fornes and Shepard, with the observation on Fornes' plays as not 'ideological feminist diatribes', but simple reintroduction of popular themes of male authors from an alternative point of view. O'Malley points to Fornes' 'somewhat contrary, though not antifeminist, representation of the female attitude' towards the lifestyle of woman destined to do women's work and deemed unfit otherwise. She observes Fornes' women trapped in this lifestyle of stringing beans and pressing clothes. Linda Kitz makes a reading of *Conduct* based on gender, politics and poetics. Deborah Geis studies the gestic monologues of Fornes' plays to prove the feminist attempt at 'playing ironically, like Schneeman, off the notion that language originates from the body of the speaking subject'. Roz Currier's study of *Fefu* once again marks the gestic nature of representing women with the *gestus* of the traditional feminine set against that of the violent female.

With Fornes gaining reputation as director, performance criticism on her theatre is gaining ground. Cummings includes in his criticism discussions of set design and acting style, particularly *Oscar and Bertha*. Stephanie K. Arnold computes a detailed analysis of Fornes' use of space in *Fefu*, and views the change in the actor-audience relationship as effected through the change in the fixed nature of the audience-acting spaces. Susan L. Cole devotes an entire chapter to observe Fornes as director in the rehearsals of *Uncle Vanya* and *Abingdon*, characterizing Fornes as Wilsonian/Chekhovian in her directorial emphasis on 'stillness on stage'.

Recent criticism of Fornes' theatre shows a new trend, that of studying the Cuban characteristics in her plays and also studying her playwriting techniques along with her exercises. Maida Watson analyses *Sarita* as a Hispanic play in terms of its use of Afro-Cuban rites, and also considers Fornes as evincing a trend in Cuban Exile Theater found in pre-Castro island Cuban theatre. Though Fornes' theatre is very often characterized as 'spatializing the imagination', and as 'pictorial'/'miniaturist', no systematic analysis or linkage has been made between her dramaturgy and her early career in painting.

Books Published on Fornes

In this book Fornes' theatre would be viewed as a unique blend of the Absurd and the post-Absurd, observing her plays as the woman's experiment with the Beckettian Absurd. Fornes' denial of categorization as seen between the Absurd and the post-Absurd is also a trend that deepens in her concern for women's issues. Chapter II, 'Theatre of the Absurd: A Feminist's/Woman's Experiment', highlights the above concerns. The single-minded pursuit of the image heightens aesthetics above feminist ideology. Chapter III, 'Fornes' Idea of a Woman's Theatre' contends her theatre as a woman's—and not necessarily a feminist—experience of theatre. Also, her preoccupation with the image—the central concern of her theatre—makes her play's text and performance fluid/flexible, once again obscuring the roles of the playwrighting/directorial personalities. The fourth chapter, 'The Playwright as Director', hopes to view Fornes' role as playwright-director, giving due regard to her directorial methods. The roots of Fornes' blurring boundaries in her theatre could be traced to her cross-cultural influences, i.e. of her Cuban background and her Americanized setting and life. Hence, the discussion of Fornes' cross-culturalism as a postmodern phenomenon, is an issue highlighted in the fifth chapter, 'Cross-Cultural Influences'. The concluding section of this book analyses and presents a finale with the findings of the five chapters. The book strives to bring out the highlights of Fornes' artistic achievement so far. Attempts are also made to identify viable and prospective areas of further research on Fornes' dramatic art.

There have been four books published on Fornes' theatre so far. The first (Assunta Bartolomucci Kent, *Maria Irene Fornes and Her Critics*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publications, 1996) discusses the critical responses to Fornes' plays. It presents a cogent theoretical, historical and production-oriented study of Fornes' plays, and lays emphasis on the feminist perspective. This perspective is only one of the multifaceted aspects of Fornes' theatre, and, therefore, the book leaves out most other essential discussions on Fornes. The second book (Diane Lynn Moroff, *Fornes: Theatre in the Present Tense*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996) lays greater focus on her middle plays and discusses their contemporaneity. But there is a wide gap left as no effort has been made to link her middle plays to her early or later plays. The third book (Marc Robinson, ed., *The Theatre of Maria Irene Fornes*, Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1999) is an illustrious collection of critical essays by important critics and theatre practitioners like Herbert Blau, Erika Munk, Susan Sontag, Tony Kushner and Bonnie Marranca. The strength of Robinson's book lies in the fact that it presents the critical responses to Fornes from the 1960s to the present times together. The fourth book (Maria M. Delgado and Caridad Svich, Smith and Kraus, eds., *Conducting a Life: Reflections on the Theatre of Maria Irene Fornes*, New Hampshire: Smith and Kraus, 1999) is a collection of critical articles on Fornes comprising reminiscences, homages, tributes, and work journals tracing the life and work of master playwright-director-teacher Maria Irene Fornes presented by performers, designers, and produ-

cers who have collaborated directly with Fornes on her productions over the years, playwrights who have studied with Fornes who describe writing exercises and master classes, as well as critics and scholars who provide contextual narratives about Fornes' impact and influence on generations of American and world theatre.