

Thinking About Maria Irene Fornes

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A week before we were preparing to send this issue to press, the sad news of the death of Maria Irene Fornes was announced. One of the most beloved of contemporary playwrights and a master teacher, the bohemian extraordinaire was an influential voice in the theatre who had spent her professional life mainly in Manhattan's "downtown" spaces and in universities and small theatres around the country. Over the years, I've noticed that the narratives of her professional life tend to characterize Fornes as an "unknown" or "invisible" figure, a perspective that can easily overlook certain important factors regarding her presence in the field. For instance, there has never been a time in the last three decades that her work has been out of print. In fact, the most recent of the five PAJ volumes of Fornes plays is an expanded version of her celebrated *Fefu and Her Friends* that now includes the original version, which was staged in five different environments, along with the one-set version she created in 1996.

In addition, Fornes is included in all the major anthologies of contemporary American drama and in the *Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*. There are tens of thousands of books in circulation that include a play (or plays) of hers. A substantial body of essays, reviews, and books by influential critics provides a solid foundation for scholarship on her work. The plays are widely taught in the curriculum, and library holdings include multiple volumes of them. Michelle Memran's new documentary of Fornes's life, *The Rest I Make Up*, is now available and showing in cinema festivals.

Nothing approaching the volume of play publications and scholarship, not to mention the films, festivals, and readings in recent years on her work, exists for any of her peers from Off-Off-Broadway, in particular, those who were attached to La MaMa or Judson Theatre or Caffé Cino, and who are or would be in their eighties now. Likewise, those playwrights who, along with Fornes, formed New York Theater Strategy to produce their work—Rochelle Owens, Julie Bovasso,

Megan Terry—are all but forgotten, or out of print, remaining unproduced with the exception of Adrienne Kennedy. Questions of whether Fornes is known enough or not, and known to whom, is the predicament of many artists of her generation and younger who have worked in dance, film, theatre, performance, and poetry outside the mainstream (mainly “downtown”).

Major theatre institutions in New York and across the country have failed to establish an ongoing repertoire for legacies of the broad spectrum of contemporary American drama. Most of Fornes’s work was seen at The American Place Theatre or Theatre for the New City or INTAR Theatre or Padua Hills Playwright’s Festival, and later, Signature Theatre. Yet, through all the decades I had known Fornes, she felt only gratitude that she was always working, and she never expressed any sense of entitlement. Now, in the years to come, it is up to heads of theatres and directors to bring new life to the exceptional body of work this fierce theatrical intelligence has left behind. In the future, her plays will live their own lives in the world.

Acknowledging legacy and tradition has always been essential to *PAJ*’s editorial focus. At this particular moment, it seems fitting to honor Maria Irene Fornes in her own voice by reprinting here a selection featured among the more than twenty other responses in *PAJ* 46 (1994) for our special issue entitled “Ages of the Avant-Garde.” For that issue, we contacted artists who had turned fifty or older in the eighteen years since we had been publishing the journal. They represented influential artists who were written about or were interviewed or who wrote about their own work in the pages of *PAJ* since 1976. The list included performers, writers, directors, and critics who created the new theatre, dance, cinema, and music, as well as the alternative spaces and organizations.

As we moved in that era toward the last decade of the twentieth century, fifty years since a truly American avant-garde began to evolve in the postwar era, we thought it might be an opportune time to ask the generations responsible for this remarkable period of innovation how the passage of time had altered their work and perceptions. We encouraged the artists to address the issue of “aging and the avant-garde.” Our inquiry carried a double theme—the obvious one of time and its implications, biologically, for the performing body; existentially, its impact on subject matter and artists’ relation to materials.

The Fornes commentary in this issue (which I’ve now titled, and had originally taped for the journal to speed up the author!) is vintage Fornes, manifesting the wisdom and integrity that radiate in the plays. Her work was always more about the soul than the self. For her, a character was not just a name in the cast

list; it referred to her deep understanding of a person's way of being in the world, looked at from a moral perspective. Her manner of judging characters was often at odds with others who looked at them as representing male and female points of view rather than sensibility. She loved the process of teaching and learning, on and off stage, which in this short piece offers a glimpse into her own thinking about writing. It's all about the energy.